

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

In 2016, Ben Dever was working as a music festival organizer in the UK.

BEN: Did that for about 15 years. It was becoming a bit like Groundhog Day and I was looking for something else to do.

Around that time his father, Joe Dever, was struggling with medical issues. They thought his condition was manageable. But all of the sudden:

BEN: This is going to sound like total nonsense, but I had a feeling something was wrong, and I called his half-sister, um, and asked her to go check on him, which I've never done, never had a feeling like that. And she kind of saw this shape through the frosted glass and called an ambulance. And they said that he would've died within a few minutes if they hadn't got there. And without that, I wouldn't have had, we wouldn't have had that month in the hospital.

And it was during that month his father made a request which seemed to come out of nowhere.

BEN: So, it was a death, actual deathbed request, which is pretty nuts. I think the exact words were take the gold fly to Poitiers, find Vincent and finish the saga, which I thought was the most Indiana Jones thing he'd ever said. And how can you turn that down?

As cryptic as that sounded, Ben knew what his father meant.

"Take the gold" was not a metaphor. His father actually had gold in a safe for currency. "Fly to Poitier, find Vincent" meant get in touch with Vincent Lazzari – a French paleontologist who was a huge fan of his father's work.

Joe Dever was a writer. He wrote a series of fantasy books called Lone Wolf. Vincent had an encyclopedic knowledge of the Lone Wolf universe and all of the lore. "Finish the saga" meant that Joe wanted his son to collaborate with Vincent to write the last three books in the series which Joe realized at that moment he would not be able to finish.

BEN: We spent the last few days of his life taking notes, taking dictation from him to get the finish of the story out with Vincent on one end of Skype, me at his bedside taking

probably 20 hours of dictation, how he wanted the story to end, the final three books, so that me and Vincent could do it.

So, the content of the message made sense. But Ben didn't understand why his father asked him to do this. They did not have a close relationship. And Ben was not familiar with father's books.

BEN: I never really read them. He never pushed it on me. He never gave me any of his books to read and I just never really found them as a kid.

I mean, did you have any thoughts about them?

BEN: Yeah, I think there's a kind of, there's a magnetic repulsion sometimes with your parents' business, like their private business, which is I guess how he presented it because he would disappear into his room for weeks and then he was in there writing books, obviously. And when he came out, we just wanted to spend time with him and not talk about work. And I guess he didn't want to talk about work either, so he just never did.

Ben had dabbled in screenwriting before, but he had never written a book. Now he had to write three books set in a richly imagined fantasy universe that he knew very little about. His father had legions of fans around the world who had been waiting decades to read the final books in this series. Could he wing it? Would the fans accept what he wrote? And why had Joe asked him to do this?

Ben is still trying to figure out some of those questions. But he found some answers – answers which surprised him.

HENSON RAZOR AD

I listened to several interviews with Joe Dever. My favorite one was his appearance on The Fantasy Podcast hosted by Oliver McNeil. Joe went on the show a year before he died.

In that interview, Joe said the inspiration for the Lone Wolf books began in 1977. Back then, he was into tabletop battle games. They were a big influence on Dungeons & Dragons. But D&D had not taken off in the UK yet. Joe was working in California and he came across a very early version of D&D.

JOE: And I still remember vividly that eureka moment when I flick through it and suddenly it dawned on me what I had in my hands here, how absolutely amazing this thing was.

Joe became such an avid D&D player; in 1982, he won the Advanced D&D Championship of America -- even though he was British. And he did it by killing all the other players! Although that was not his plan from the start.

JOE: You pick the character at random before it started. And I chose a 13th level, uh, mercenary thief. So, it was pretty clear to me from, you know, <laugh> a nanosecond after I'd read the brief, what I had to do. And that was to look out for number one and try and, you know, get out there alive and with all the loot. And the situation was that I managed to do the dirty on the other players. It was like Indiana Jones. I grabbed the loot, got out of the tomb, fantastic, and set off all tracks behind me. It was a fait accompli, who else could they award it to? I was the only survivor, <laugh> and I played my part perfectly!

That perfectly sums up the way that Joe was a game master at heart. He could adjust on the fly and set up things which would pay off way down the road.

He wanted to develop his own role playing game but he had serious competition. A lot of people were trying to create the next D&D.

JOE: So, I thought, I don't really want to get lost in the mix. And then I had that another wonderful eureka moment when I realized that there are an awful lot more bookshops in the world than there are game shops. And then I decided, yeah, what I need to do is a solo role playing campaign in book form. Uh, and my unique selling point as the jargon goes these days, is the fact that nobody had done it before.

What he meant was that he took the format of a choose-your-own-adventure book and he added game mechanics to it.

Jonathan Stark is the co-host of the official Lone Wolf podcast, which is called Journeys Through Magnamund. And Jonathan says before you even start reading the first Lone Wolf book.

JONATHAN: You actually pick numbers to set up your, your strength and your, your endurance, your health. You pick abilities that are going to help you through the book. Some are combative abilities, some are more neutral, like sixth sense, which actually gives you hints throughout the book of hints of danger or paths you might want to take. At the end of every description, every page, there's going to be a choice. Sometimes it's as simple as you're at a fork in the road, do you go left or right? Sometimes it's much more complicated.

For instance, in the first book, the narrator says: “You turn away from the ruins and carefully descend the steep track. At the foot of the hill, the path splits into two directions, both leading into a large wood. If you wish to use your Kai Discipline of Sixth Sense, turn to 141. If you wish to take the right path into the wood, turn to 85. If you wish to follow the left track, turn to 275”.

In a traditional choose-your-own-adventure book, if you went to pages 85, 141 or 275 -- the book has already decided what’s going to happen to you. But in the Lone Wolf series, you’re more than a passive reader. You’re a player with statistics. You’ve got a fighting chance.

JONATHAN: You have combat, so you're going to fight monsters and, and other creatures as you go, go along face dangers and you can die. You can actually die before you make it to the end. And then you have to start over and try new paths, try new character abilities, see if you can make it this time.

It was really innovative. Reading the books was like playing a D&D campaign by yourself. And Joe wanted to build out the lore of the world. He didn’t want to write a D&D knock off or a run of the mill fantasy adventure.

The land of Magnamund, where Lone Wolf takes place, originally started as a world that Joe created to run his own D&D campaigns. So, there are similarities. But he threw in other influences like King Arthur, Norse mythology, and Lord of the Rings. Other people have compared it to Star Wars.

The main character is called Lone Wolf. He’s part of a sect of magical warrior monks called Kai Lords.

JONATHAN: The Kai Lords are these like almost, you know, fantasy Jedi. They have all these powers. They, they protect the land. And here you are, you’re 14-year-old, years old, and the book begins with you being sent into the woods to chop firewood because you weren't paying attention in class. You couldn't sit still in class. And as it turns out, because you are sent off into the woods, you're the only Kai Lord not present when the Dark Lords descend and murder all of the Kai, you're the sole survivor. But he doesn't become a hero right away. The next thing that happens is you spend a lot of time running from trauma. and the arc that you experience is over the course of 20 books, the first 20 in the series, you're playing this same character and growing this character both mechanically, but also you start switching from fleeing from, from trauma to facing trauma and facing your fears.

Jonathan discovered the books when he was a kid. At that age, he was struggling in school. He felt like an outcast. And the way the character Lone Wolf would methodically work through trauma and level up felt very empowering to Jonathan.

JONATHAN: In life while we do, you know, change and, and hopefully improve and, and gain experience. We, we rarely get to look back at a roadmap of our life and say, oh, this is the tangible change. Or it's very hard to do that at least. And so, this simplifies that process. And I think especially for a child that was exceptionally comforting.

There's another element which helped him identify with the main character. The story is told in the second person. You are Lone Wolf.

JONATHAN: This was like virtual reality before we had that. So, these books, these weren't just books we read, these were stories we lived and the choices we made mattered. So, there are stories, you know, my story might be a little different from somebody else's, but we both know the bones of the story. So, we get to come together and it's not just a, "oh, I read this book," but I lived this. It's like we all went on this road trip together.

And he thinks that's why the fan base grew so quickly. The first few books were released in 1984.

JONATHAN: And those sold in their first week, each book sold over 100,000 copies. Joe was quickly assigned for more books and initially he had a plan for 12 books, but eventually this grew into the plan to do 32.

Joe had a good run for about 10 years. The books were translated in over a dozen languages. But in the mid-1990s, the market for game books hit a rough patch.

JONATHAN: It was a time when game books were seeing as these niche things that was no longer profitable. The publishers that had them actually kind of started degrading them. They would sell them for cheaper and cheaper. They were making cuts, for instance, uh, in, in the US we got books 13 through 20 of the Lone Wolf series abridged, and they didn't even do a good job of abridging them. There are sections that they never, that go to nowhere because they forgot to fix the pathing when they made these cuts.

The Lone Wolf series was canceled by its publisher in 1998. At that point, Joe had reached book 28 out of a planned 32 book series.

JONATHAN: Honestly, Lone Wolf probably would've disappeared then.

But always the game master, Joe figured out another solve. He gave permission to put the Lone Wolf books online for free with hyperlinks so you can jump to whatever section you need. And the fan forum became a gathering place for people around the world.

JONATHAN: And because of that, Joe was able to go to other publishers and say, there's still a Lone Wolf market, maybe we can do something through this.

But publishing continued to be a challenge. He went through several different publishers to get the series reprinted with new editions. And he finally got book 29 published in 2015 -- 17 years after the original series had been canceled. He was also able to expand Lone Wolf to other markets. He licensed the books to be adapted into video games and tabletop role-playing games.

JONATHAN: Joe was never someone who was going to give up. If there was a win condition, he was going to do everything in his power to make that win condition come true for him.

And then Joe Dever died at the age of 60. The fans were mourning the loss of their favorite author, and probably the end of the Lone Wolf series. Joe had made it to book 29 before died, with three left to go. Then the fans learned Joe had figured out a way for it to keep it going. And that's where his son Ben came in.

MAGIC SPOON

It's interesting to hear Jonathan Stark talk about Joe Dever. He never met him, but he was a fan, and Joe gave a lot of love back to his fan base.

Ben has a different perspective on his father. Their relationship was cordial but strained.

BEN: So yeah, it was fine, all go so far as fine.

He says the Lone Wolf books were part of the reason why he felt a distance from his father. They were more than just a passion project.

BEN: Yeah, beyond a passion project. It was a world that he wanted to be in, I think more than he wanted to be in the real world is the impression we got. He was quite a, he was a very private, insular person, even with his family. I think it's a generational difference as well, especially in England. Men in that generation don't really talk about their feelings. But it was his safe place and that came from his childhood. His dad died when he was nine. And then when my grandmother remarried, his stepdad died very quickly after the wedding of a heart attack. And so, he got used to just dealing with stuff himself, being very, he was very self-reliant emotionally. He, apparently, my grandma told me he disappeared into the shed after his dad died for three days and didn't come out. But when he came out, she said he came out a man, which I just thought, I think she was trying to pay him a compliment, but I thought that was incredibly sad. So, he found it very difficult to relate to me as a child. And his work was where he would disappear off to. And so there, there is still a little bit of a resentment to his work that I have, I think.

That's interesting given that you ended up taking over.

BEN: Yeah. Isn't it? He got the last laugh.

Hmm.

BEN: Sorry, I haven't read any of your books, Dad. Well, here you go, son. <laugh>. Thanks dude!

Yeah, I mean, was there, did you have moments where you tried to avoid it or say like, you know what, even though my Dad told me this, maybe I should just hire somebody to do this?

BEN: A hundred percent. That's the first thing I thought was, get a ghost writer. I can't do this. Who am I to think that I can write a book, let alone a book set in a universe that's got dozens of published works and really, really keen fans, you know, everything about it. I'm going to just stand up like a sore thumb. Talk about imposter syndrome. So, I did, I tried, I tried having other people write them, but it just never, it never felt right. And I think it was Vincent that said that the stuff I wrote sounded much more like his tone of voice, just naturally.

Once you started reading the books and getting into it, did you start to get to know your father better through reading his books?

BEN: Yeah, that's been the nicest part of it, was getting to know his inner universe and a side of him that I didn't appreciate. So, I knew that he was successful. I knew that his fans were into it, but like I said, I had never brushed up against the world proper. And then I had to dive in at the deep end, and I had to go to a big conference in Italy and meet all of these people who kind of hero worshiped him, which was really hard. But I really got to appreciate firsthand how much he meant to people, which was incredibly lovely. And when we announced that he'd died on Facebook, the kind of outpouring of love and respect from all the fans was pretty overwhelming. Crashed the computer that I

was on because there were so many comments coming in. It's tough when you read a comment, oh, you, what I would've given for Joe Dever to be my father.

Have you ever thought about, what would, if you had been co-writing this with your dad, how that would've been different?

BEN: Oh God. Yeah. Kidding. <laugh>. I wish I could talk to him about it because it would be a lot easier, especially dialogue because I haven't lived with the characters so long. I find it really hard to write true dialogue for the characters. And I want to say, does this sound like Grey Star? You know, is this something he would say? That's where I struggle most. Oh God. I'd have, I'd have the thing, the questions would stop me writing and then he'd just write it. <laugh>. Yeah, I think he would, he would struggle more than me.

Is there ever, was there ever a moment that you decided to make a choice that you're like, you know what? I don't think my dad would choose this, but I'm going to make this choice.

BEN: Oh God, yeah.

Yeah. Like what?

BEN: I don't know, it's, it's interesting, isn't it? I often think, is this what Dad would do or what he would he think of this choice? because he was so playful, he was very playful and, and could be incredibly childish. So, whenever I think maybe I'm making something too silly when I'm going back and reading his stuff for reference, I'm reminded that he did so many, still made so many silly choices. And what I found now weirdly, is that I'll go back, and I'll read his books and I've started editing them in my head and thinking, I wouldn't have made that decision, or that sounds a bit rusty or, or this is dragging. He was the ultimate fanboy of his own universe, I guess. So, he, there are times in his books where, you know, you get into a tavern and you're supposed to be searching for some murderer or something, and you get distracted and start playing dice and there's this whole long section where you're playing a dice game and I'm like, dad, what happened to the murderer <laugh>? You know what I mean? I'd be like, screw the dice game, let's get on with it!

It's possible that in writing the Lone Wolf books, Joe Dever was looking for a child-like sense of wonder that he had denied himself in the real world after his father and his step-father died and he had to become the man of the house.

And as Ben went through this process of reading his father's books and working with Vincent to write the next one, he kept mulling over that deathbed request.

BEN: He made it sound like he had always planned for me to take over but had never vocalized that we'd never talked about. It makes me wonder, maybe it wasn't all planned.

Maybe it was another improved move -- a sudden a shift in strategy. I mean there is a history of sons taking over their father's literary work. Brian Herbert continued writing Frank Herbert's Dune series. Christopher Tolkien edited J.R.R. Tolkien's notes into The Silmarillion book.

BEN: I tell when people ask what I do, I tell them I'm the Christopher Tolkien of game books <laugh> and I, I met with, um, Luke Gyax recently,

The son of Gary Gyax, co-creator of D&D.

BEN: There are a very select band of people who are in a similar position. I think me and um, Luke, we both agreed that it was a net positive. That's as far as we would go. <laugh>.

I have another theory, which I ran by Ben. What his father put him through reflected the hero's journey – the classic template made famous by Joseph Campbell and used in countless fantasy stories. This was probably not intentional on Joe's part, but everything that happened to Ben followed the hero's journey almost beat for beat.

There's the call to adventure – in this case, you must finish my quest. The next step is the refusal of the call, in this case trying to figure out if he could get a ghost writer. There's the stage where he gathers allies and meets with a mentor, in this case it was his father's apprentice, Vincent, who encouraged Ben to keep going because his style sounded like his father. Then after that the hero goes into the cave of innermost doubt.

To get even more meta, in the books, once the character Lone Wolf has completed his story arc about two thirds of the way through the series, he takes on an apprentice who becomes the main character for the rest of the books.

BEN: I wouldn't put it past him if that was subliminally what was happening. Yeah, yeah. Makes sense. Right?

I mean, especially if he lived in that world.

BEN: Yeah. Yeah. It does make sense.

Near the climax of the hero's journey, the hero must go through an ordeal. In real life that's when Ben released the book that he wrote with Vincent into the world.

Will the fans accept him as the new Supreme Master of Kai or see him as a pretender to the throne – a throne he wasn't even sure he wanted?

MAGIC SPOON

Let's go back to the perspective of the fans because I can imagine if I was a fan of Lone Wolf, there would've been a part of me that would've wished, somehow, I was chosen to write the last few books. I know what it's like to invite a fantasy world so deeply into your mind that you're creating your own fan fiction and head canon that you would love so much to see put out there. Ben Devere may be Joe's son, but in this world, he's an outsider. Jonathan Stark says among the fans:

JONATHAN: I will say when it first started, there was skepticism until we saw the first of the definitive edition books, which are a reprinting of the entire series from book one, and it's going to be finished by book 32. There were new rules that the community had been asked to be a part of crafting. There were new maps, beautiful hand drawn maps. There were sections at the back that taught you how to speak Giak, the dark spawn language. There were lore appendices, it was like this whole product that had been put together in this beautiful hardback version of the adventures. And we looked at that and said, okay, this is a publisher who's not just trying to make a quick buck on this series. This is somebody who understands the legacy.

The publisher he's talking about is Holmgard Press. Not long before Joe Dever died, he set up Holmgard Press to publish the 29th Lone Book book. That was the first book he was able to publish after the series was canceled in 1998. He was always on top of new technology, and he realized this was the best way to distribute his books directly to fans. So, Ben didn't just inherit the mantle of writing the books, he also took over Holmgard Press.

And they may have won over the fans with the way they reprinted the older books. But now it was time to publish the first new book written by Ben and Vincent. Book number 30 was called Dead in the Deep, and it came out in 2019 -- three years after Joe had died.

BEN: Our first book, we were, as you know, you can imagine we'd be terrified to publish it, the first posthumous book. Um, I was convinced everyone was going to hate it and the reaction was amazing. Everybody loved it and they voted it their second favorite Lone Wolf book, which thank God it wasn't number one that would've been embarrassing.

Jonathan was blown away.

JONATHAN: It's incredible. It's so good. The scenario is exciting. There's a deep central mystery characters come back that you don't expect to come back, and the writing was really good. So, and it felt like Joe, it really felt like, like having Joe back among us.

Ben has now settled into his new career as a caretaker of his father's legacy. Right now, he and Vincent are currently working on the final book that Joe Dever had planned in the series. In fact, it's going so well:

BEN: We were in the middle of writing it when we realized that it, it was going to be way too big, and we had too much story to fit into one book. So, we've split it into two volumes and we're about halfway through volume one.

At the end of the hero's journey comes the reward. But this is not the point where Ben realizes he was destined to be a fiction writer.

BEN: The actual day-to-day business of being a writer, of putting in the hours and the word count every morning is as lonely and difficult as writers like to tell people that it is. And I, it's not like I have stories burning a hole in my head that need to be told. That said, we do have some really cool ideas of what to do with the world when we finish the last book.

Can you talk about what those ideas are, the kinds of things you'd like to do?

BEN: One of them is a prologue, um, a prequel series. We're doing a junior edition as well this year, which means that the rules are much more simplified. So, all you need is a dice. And instead of there being 20 pages of preamble of stats to fill in, it's just two pages. It maintains the integrity of the stories and the writing and the game, but makes, just makes it much more accessible for people who aren't gamers. It does need to be broadened out though that it is quite inaccessible. I found game books in the English speaking world are still regarded with a kind of slightly snooty down the nose air from the literary community. Um, they're not really considered real books, whereas in France or Italy that you will find them in a petrol station, there'll be a game book section. But even when I go into Forbidden Planet, which is supposedly a, you know, it's like the ultimate geek base, they even, they don't stock them. So, we've really got a job to do to bring them back into the mainstream. They seem to have been a flash in the pan for the publishing industry. So, we're kind of out there on our own, which I like.

When Ben talks about the writing process, he sounds like a knight on a solemn quest. But when he talks about building the business, he seems much more

comfortable. He's in his element, working on brand awareness, forging partnerships. He'd also like to develop an animated series. His father took on this aspect of the job with enthusiasm, but it didn't come as naturally to him as writing.

BEN: Well, I was a promoter. So yeah, it comes more naturally to me than the creation of the stories. But we have, like I said, we've got amazing writers on our staff who that's, that's what they do.

One of those writers is Jonathan Stark. Besides working on the Lone Wolf podcast, Jonathan was hired by Ben to write a spin-off series – a trilogy of game books set in the same universe as Lone Wolf. It's called The Huntress series, and as you can imagine, this was a pretty big deal for Jonathan.

JONATHAN: It still is a little bit like being in a dream. This is a world that took me in when I did not feel safe or like I belonged in our world, and now here I am coming in as an excavator or a builder.

But it was meaningful in another way. In some ways, Jonathan's father was the opposite of Joe Dever. His dad wanted to be a fiction writer, but he gave it up to focus on his family. The only time he got to be a storyteller was when he made up stories to tell his kids. Jonathan once asked his father if he regretted that decision. His dad said no. But:

JONATHAN: I also knew just personally that there had been this dream of publishing for him, and I kind of took that on, not as an obligation. Uh, I just thought it would be really cool if one day I could bring my Dad a book that I've published and said, your stories have come through me and influenced me. And a bit of you is in this book. A bit of you is here. So, look, you've been published in a way.

Stories can be powerful tools to make sense of our lives and our families. But they're not solid. You may have a very clear idea of what your story is. And then it gets bombarded with life events. And suddenly your story has to be revised with a new beginning, middle and end point. When that happens, our stories can feel surprisingly malleable. You may wonder, am I just trying to make sense out of random events and circumstances? Is this all in my head?

Every one of us is a lone wolf in that regard. But in nature, a lone wolf isn't alone for very long. And they're not outcasts. Lone wolves break away from the pack

and wander into the woods so they can form a new pack. It's a way that they can declare this is who I am. This is now going to be my community.

We choose our own adventures. We tell our own stories. The flexibility of our stories isn't a weakness. It's a strength.

That's it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Ben DeVere and Jonathan Stark.

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