

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

**This month, we are kicking off a mini-series about sidekicks. You could even say that the month of May is the sidekick to summer. No one has said that before, but we can make that a thing. Hashtag sidekick to summer.**

**Sidekicks are often taken for granted as a trope, but looking at sidekicks brings up a lot of questions about who is put in those roles, why a sidekick needs to be in a story, and what they reflect back on to our own experience as we're absorbing these adventures.**

**Sancho Panza is considered the first sidekick in Western literature from Don Quixote. But Sancho Panza is not exactly iconic in pop culture. And we thought about starting with Robin, but there's been a half dozen characters who have taken up the mantle of Robin since Batman keeps burning through them.**

**But there is one sidekick who has appeared in every form of media: literature, film, TV, comics, anime, plays, musicals, puppetry, opera. Wherever fictional characters have existed over the last 130 years, you will find John Watson, forever loyal to Sherlock Holmes.**

**And Watson was invented in the Victorian era – when Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show was the height of entertainment, when Thomas Edison was experimenting with electricity. And yet today the character of Watson is more popular and more widely represented in media than ever. So why is Watson the quintessential sidekick? Why has this character appealed to generations of people across the globe?**

**Let's start with the beginning – the canon -- the 56 short stories and 4 novels written by Arthur Conan Doyle.**

**Neil McCaw teaches Victorian Literature & Culture at the University of Winchester in the UK, and he says John Watson was not invented completely from scratch. Conan Doyle had some real life inspiration.**

**NEIL: There was a man called Dr. James Watson who was a friend of Conan Doyle's when he lived in Portsmouth on the south coast of England. But I also think that there's a lot of Conan Doyle himself in Watson. For example that sense of chivalry, that sense of traditionalism and respect and duty, those quite old fashioned values that were very**

current in England in the 19th century, less so now, but I think there's there are there are a number of facets of Watson's own personality that are almost an example of Conan Doyle or as an author writing himself into the character.

**Pam Bedore teaches literature at the University of Connecticut, and she says Sherlock Holmes was also based a real person.**

PAM: So Holmes is apparently modeled on Joseph Bell, a doctor that Conan Doyle worked with who had this very rational approach to solving problems and who had these really incredible observational skills. So in that sense also it does make sense to think of and Doyle as sort of analogous to Holmes and Watson.

**But that's where the similarities end. When we first meet Watson, he's lost. He's living on a pension in a hotel. He doesn't really have friends or family to support him. And he's a veteran. There's been some debate as to how seriously Doyle took Watson's war experiences.**

PAM: It's actually almost a joke within the Sherlock Holmes fan community because Doyle doesn't make too many mistakes across the 60 stories. But one of the places he does make a mistake is with the war wound. So in one of the stories the very first one Watson was sent home from the front. He fought in the English of the Anglo Afghan war. He's sent home with an injury to his leg and then it'll later story the injury moves to his shoulder.

NEIL: Remember those initial Sherlock Holmes stories were written before the works of Freud had been translated into English. They weren't translated into English until the early 20th century. I suspect, even if I had had the degree of scientific and medical knowledge that would have been required to understand something like PTSD, the codes of gender and gender identity were such that it would have seemed as an anathema to masculinity at that particular time.

**Although some people look at the canon and see clear signs that Watson had PTSD.**

**Lyndsay Faye is a mystery novelist who specializes in historical fiction. She's also part of the Sherlockian society The Baker Street Irregulars, and she co-hosts the podcast Baker Street Babes.**

**She says all you have to do is look at the way Watson describes himself in the first story, after he's come back from Afghanistan.**

LYNDSAY: When he goes back to England he says he's brown as a nut and thin as a rake and he is skinny he's easily startled Watson when he first meets Holmes. They're talking about what qualities as a roommate do you have that I should know about? I mean we ought to know things about each other, we're perfect strangers before we moved together. And Watson says well I object to any sort of fights because my nerves are all in shreds -- this is a fine upstanding British gentleman who was saying to a complete stranger. My nerves are in shreds. If that's not a description of PTSD then I don't know what for that time period.

**At first, Holmes and Watson need something very practical from each other – a roommate. But their relationship quickly takes on a life of its own.**

LYNDSAY: On his own he's not fascinating as a character but the magic that happens when you set him next to Sherlock Holmes is so dynamic it's absolutely undeniable. So genius needs an audience is a great line in BBC Sherlock and it's absolutely true. Sherlock Holmes preens when Watson is watching. As their relationship continues later. It has moments where it becomes a bit more cantankerous a little grumpier in their later years as they just know each other intimately. They sort of quarrel like an old married couple which is very very cute. And then there are occasional glimpses and just glimpses but in two or three cases there are these moments where Watson is in really bad danger and Holmes loses his shit over it and is just absolutely not, this is this is my person like this person is everything to me.

**Watson's loyalty is tested when he discovers that Holmes has a drug addiction. Although Neil says we need to think about drugs in the world of Arthur Conan Doyle.**

NEIL: I've done quite a lot of work research on what we might call drug culture in the 19th century and in the UK and the prevalence of opium of what we would now call heroin and cocaine, and they were easily accessible from your local pharmacist and things like opium were readily available in children's medicines and cough tinctures et cetera et cetera et cetera. So I think in the original stories, it seems to me that what Conan Doyle was trying to do was mark out not someone who was a lawbreaker or someone who ignored entirely society's rules and conventions, but someone who was different through that behavior.

**And Pam says the important thing to note is how Watson reacts to all this.**

PAM: It's interesting because cocaine was not illegal in Victorian England but Watson was really really against it. And so Watson was constantly telling Holmes look you're killing yourself don't do cocaine. There are other ways you know and he played the violin and he had these other activities. But there are other ways to keep yourself engaged.

LYNDSAY: He says this is this game is not worth the candle. He says you need to count the cost. You live by your wits like your brain is beautiful. What are you doing? Like shooting up when your mind is everything that you hold dear to you and is everything that makes you who you are in your career?

**So Watson is more than just a friend. He's an anchor for Holmes, stopping him from going too far in a lot of way, bringing him back to sobriety and responsibility.**

NEIL: And what's interesting is that you would imagine that Holmes is the sort of person who would find those, who would find the values that Watson represents tedious in the way that he sometimes is rather dismissive of police constables or his brother or government officials. You would imagine that he would feel equally bored by some of the things that Watson represents. But that almost never happens. There's a definition, or a level of definition of friendship that was offered by Aristotle in which he talks about the ideal friendship as the one in which no one party takes from the other and they both give to each other and they both support and believe in each other.

**Although it is an imbalanced friendship. Holmes is the star. Watson is there to bear witness. But Neil thinks that actually speaks to the strength of Watson's character.**

NEIL: It's the absence of ego, that there is a sense of selflessness to the Watson character there is a supportive-ness that is that sort of transcends individual self-interest, being willing to put his marriage and his own professional career to one side in order to support the others the other. But it's also a sense of the greater good because really Watson's his primary motivation is that he thinks that if he can help Holmes be the best that he can be, it will be better for everybody, that he will solve crimes that he will unravel government problems that he will pacify aggressive military foreign nations et cetera et cetera et cetera. So there's a there's a real defined sense of the common good in him.

***Yeah that's a great point about the lack of ego and also the word that popped to my mind when you're talking just now especially given that he's a soldier is the mission. You know that he feels like he and Holmes have a mission that takes precedence over everything else in Watson's life.***

NEIL: Yeah I think that's right. The absolute is that sense of I guess most not all but most missions have that element of the selfless achievement of that wider great good thing that comes up, yeah.

**The biggest test of their partnership is when Holmes fakes his own death. Of course, that was not the original plan. In 1893, Arthur Conan Doyle was already tired of Sherlock Holmes, so he killed him off. But he eventually brought him back due to popular demand, and well, money.**

**In fact, here is Arthur Conan Doyle from a 1927 interview and you can hear how much he's sick of talking about Sherlock Homes.**

*CONAN DOYLE: I've written a good deal more about him than I intended to do, but my hand has been rather forced by kind friends who continually wanted to know more and so it is that this monstrous growth has come out of what was a comparative small seed. But the curious thing is how many people around the world are perfectly convinced that he is a living human being. I get letters addressed to him. I get letters addressed to his rather stupid friend, Watson.*

**I assume that's his frustration coming through because he didn't write Watson as stupid. In fact, after Holmes as supposed died, Pam found it quite touching how Watson is still committed to his mission.**

PAM: When Holmes is dead Watson goes out there and tries to do the detective work that is missing in the city because Holmes is dead. He definitely wants to make the world a better place for us as a soldier than as a doctor than as a detective sidekick.

**And when he discovers Holmes is not dead.**

PAM: That's the first and only time in his life that Watson faints dead away when Holmes appears and that's a really tricky moment because Holmes has to explain where he's been and why he didn't tell Watson, right. His brother Mycroft has known all along that he's alive. And so why didn't he tell Watson? And the answer to that is Holmes didn't think that Watson could actually be a good enough actor to make it seem that he was dead so that Holmes could do all of his undercover work. That's a hard moment.

**Of course they get through it. Watson and Holmes were so good for each other – they couldn't stay confined to the page for very long. But having a flesh and**

**blood actor portray Watson put to the test all the qualities that defined this character, and why we even need Watson in the story. That's after the break.**

**> BREAK**

**John Watson is a perfect literary device. He's a good guide for readers because he's solid, dependable, and smart. We trust him. So if a man like Watson is impressed by Holmes, then Holmes must be doing something impressive.**

**I asked Pam Bedore what would happen if Holmes were the narrator. It turns out, I'm not as familiar with the canon as I thought I was.**

PAM: Well my friend, Holmes did it. Holmes narrated two of the stories so, I can tell you right now The Lion's mane and the Blanched Soldier. Have you heard of either one of them? Tell me honestly.

***I haven't...actually.***

PAM: They're not the best stories. They narrated by Holmes and it's so funny because I think it's in The Blanched Soldier that Holmes actually says, Wow I haven't been giving Watson enough credit for doing the right thing here. This is hard. So the sidekick character the sidekick narrator actually makes a ton of sense because one of the pleasures of detective fiction is that when you're reading it like you wanna guess what is the answer to this mystery. And so when Sherlock Holmes is narrating, how does he give you that experience as a reader? You already know what's in his head.

**But that's exactly what happened when Sherlock Holmes took to the stage.**

**The first actor to truly embody Holmes was William Gillette. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Gillette toured North America and the UK. He also made the first Sherlock Holmes silent film. And it was Gillette who gave the character his iconic deerstalker cap and his curved pipe.**

**Who played his Watson? A dozen men over the years. Lynsday Faye says, it didn't really matter, because Watson didn't get much stage time.**

LYNDSAY: And in performance, Watson was negligible. You didn't need to see things through Watson's eyes, you could just watch Sherlock Holmes being amazing instead of seeing it through secondary eyes of some superfluous guy who also happens to be on the stage.

**Watson did become a full co-star in the films of the 1930s and '40s, with Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce foiling plots by Nazis. But the filmmakers didn't know what to do with Watson either, so he ended being comic relief.**

NEIL: But one of the things that marks that series out is what a buffoon Watson is. He's a sweet old man. He's kind he's good he's all of those positive human qualities but he's a bit of an ignoramus and I'd never thought Watson in that way at all, and it jarred with my understanding of Watson's role.

*WATSON: That's all very well but making a fool of me!*

*HOLMES: Do sit down, Watson! Do sit down. Perhaps a little supper will let you get over your huff.*

*WATSON: Huff?! I'm in no huff!*

*HOLMES: Here, try some of these sardines. It's a pity I didn't know you were coming, I would've surprised a brace of pheasant.*

*WATSON: (sarcastic) Pity you didn't think of brining down that infernal violin of yours! To regail me with your enchanting music!*

*HOLMES: I did, my dear, Watson. Anything to oblique!*  
*(PLAYS VIOLIN.)*

**Watson finally emerged in a more fleshed out form in the 1970s. There were a series of TV shows and films took a very classical approach of the characters, set in the Victorian age.**

**The most well regarded series was in the '80s and '90s featuring Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke.**

*HOLMES: There's money in this case, Watson, if nothing else.*

*WATSON: Holmes, I think your visitor will want me out of the way.*

*HOLMES: Hold on, Doctor. Stay where you are! I am lost without my Boswell.*

*WATSON: But he seemed to secretive!*

*HOLMES: I may need your help, and so may he. Now give me your full attention, here he comes.*

LYNDSAY: Every generation of people get the Sherlock Holmes needs. The version of Sherlock Holmes that we needed in the 1940s was the perfectly pristine urbane man who fights Nazis and punches them in the face. In the '70s we started needing a bit of a grittier Holmes. And now we need a Holmes who whether he set in the Victorian era or whether he is set in the modern era is a Holmes who's a much more human person or at least we see facets of that.

***I think also to the Holmes we need now is one that needs Watson more than ever.***

LYNDSAY: Absolutely!

***That needs Watson emotionally, needs Watson..***

LYNDSAY: Yes!

***Yeah, like...***

LYNDSAY: Preach!

***(laughs) Yeah I know I feel like they really need Watson to ground them. They're much more vulnerable and their genius is kind of a curse and a blessing in a way that I think the earlier Holmes didn't need Watson so badly.***

LYNDSAY: I think that that is a fantastic characterization and I think that the marvelous thing about these incarnations is that when you go back to the original stories Sherlock Holmes needs John Watson like air.

**Of course the first big reboot was the 2009 film with Jude Law and Robert Downey Jr. Holmes and Watson became badass action heroes, although in this case, Holmes is the more comical character.**

*HOLMES: You've never complained about my methods before.*

*WATSON: I'm not complaining.*

*HOLMES: You're not? What do you call this?*

*WATSON: I never complain! How am I complaining? When do I ever complain about you practicing the violin at three in the morning, or your mess, your general lack of hygiene, or the fact that you steal my clothes?*

*HOLMES: Uh, we have a barter system...*

*WATSON: When have I ever complained about you setting fire to my rooms?*

*HOLMES: Our rooms...*

*WATSON: The rooms! Or, or, the fact that you experiment on my dog?*

*HOLMES: Our dog...*

*WATSON: The dog!*

**But the modern version that is probably most beloved by fans is the BBC series called Sherlock, starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman, which is set in modern day. This is the first version to put his wartime experiences front and center. It's actually Sherlock's brother Mycroft, played by Mark Gatiss, who put it best:**

*MYCROFT: Remarkable.*

*WATSON: What is?*

*MYCROFT: Most people blunder around this city and all they see are streets and shops and cars. When you walk with Sherlock Holmes you see the battlefield. You've seen it already, haven't you.*

*WATSON: What's wrong with my hand?*

*MYCROFT: You have an intermittent tremor in your left hand. Your therapist thinks it's posttraumatic stress disorder. She thinks you're haunted by memories of your military service.*

*WATSON: Who the hell are you? How do you know that?*

*MYCROFT: Fire her. She's got it the wrong way around. You're under stress right now and your hand is perfectly steady. You're not haunted by the war, Dr. Watson. You miss it. Welcome back.*

**A few year later, CBS launched Elementary starring Johny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu, set in current day New York. Joan Watson is not a veteran but their partnership relied heavily on the story of Watson helping Holmes work through his drug addiction.**

*WATSON: What's going on? You're skipping meetings. What's going on? Okay, well, I can't force you to talk to me, but I wish you would. (WALKS AWAY)*

*HOLMES: If you must know, Watson, I've been feeling a little bit down of late. It's the process of maintaining my sobriety. It's repetitive. And it's relentless. And above all, it's tedious..*

**Neil McCaw was particularly fascinated by the casting of Lucy Liu as Watson.**

NEIL: The Watson has been explored through the lens of different identity politics entirely legitimately exploring the character and asking those what if questions. Okay so what if Watson was a woman? What if Watson was a young woman with these personality traits? How would that change things? What has been absolutely lately clear is that when you change one of those features you changed the Watson character, so if you make the Watson character female all of different ethnicity or move the historical period, then what's become clear that everything else moves around it, and that Watson is much more influential and focal to the whole thing than we might originally thought. We might have imagined that we could lose Watson from the events and everything would pretty much remain the same. But both obviously in the canon that isn't the case because the narrator as Watson turns out to be very significant, but in these adaptations by making Watson in Elementary an American Asian woman, so much else changed around the plot. So for example we suddenly have a woman at the heart of the narrative who is, who has other relationships of her own and they intersect with her central relationship with Holmes and so everything is in, we've got lots of moving pieces

suddenly and it's what it's done is it's energized the wider Sherlock Holmes franchise by allowing different points of view and different perspectives to coexist.

**In 2013, there was a comic book series set in Harlem called, “Watson and Holmes: A Study in Black,” where both characters are African-American. And in 2018, there was a Japanese TV show called Miss Sherlock where both characters are Japanese women. Watson is now Dr. Wato Tachibana.**

*CLIP IN JAPANESE*

**There’s also a Russian TV series, where Watson is the macho counterpart to the very cerebral and therefore un-manly Holmes.**

*CLIP IN RUSSIAN*

**Although fanfiction has taken them in a much more intimate direction, where Holmes and Watson are known by their couple name as JohnLock.**

**Now in canon, John Watson has married women. And, Pam Bedore says Conan Doyle was very speciifc about Watson’s viriility.**

PAM: And so one of the very famous quotes from Watson is that he has an experience of women, which extends over many nations and three separate continents. But we don't see that part of him he just mentions that in passing whereas Holmes is like bigger than life but has no experience with women at all.

**Except for Irene Adler, but that’s one story, and it was pure infatuation.**

PAM: So you do wonder like what is Sherlock Holmes celibate. Does he have no sexual desire. If so where does he place it? We never really see him in or act in any friendships other than with Watson and so it is an easy story to think about them as having this sort of subversive hidden relationship. I mean there's no way that Doyle put that in there for us to find. But for fans to enjoy exploring that I think it makes a lot of sense.

**Lyndsay Faye agrees – Holmes’ sexuality is a tabula rasa.**

LYNDSAY: He ostensibly threw out the entire canon is asexual which is fine if you want to make the argument that he was ace. He certainly had a very intimate and longstanding relationship with Dr. Watson so he wanted to make the queer argument, there's a lot of material for you.

***Do you ever get the feeling when you're reading the canon that Watson is not always the most reliable narrator – not that...***

LYNDSAY: Sure!

***Not that Watson would like but, yeah, what were you thinking?***

LYNDSAY: Oh absolutely yeah. He's particularly unreliable when it comes to talking about himself. I think that I think that we're all like that. So yes, he is absolutely an unreliable narrator, which makes him even more fun to play with because if we take into account that homosexuality was completely illegal at the time, then he would have to be an unreliable narrator.

**So who is Watson if Watson is not white, or male, or straight, or middle aged, or a verteran, or British, or even speaking English?**

**Lyndsay says Watson has a soul, and a role to play. That's why being a doctor is the one aspect of Watson's biography that almost always stays.**

LYNDSAY: He's courageous. He can't he can't shy away from danger. He's honest. He's loyal. And he's devoted and to Sherlock Holmes. That is absolutely essential. But all of those qualities that I just described they sound boring but when they're in the right hands they're really not because they're not common. We don't every day meet people who are unfailingly loyal. We don't everyday people who are unflinchingly honest certainly it's hard to find people who are absolutely devoted to another person. And it's hard to find people who are you know always going to in a difficult situation do the right thing and do the brave thing even if it's physically dangerous for them.

**In life, most of us are not a unique genius like Sherlock Holmes. We don't get to be Steve Jobs, or Meryl Streep, or LaBron James. Most of us dedicate our lives in the service of someone else, or we dedicate ourselves towards larger goal or a mission. Lyndsay says that's why people have always related to Watson.**

LYNDSAY: How can you still be heroic? How can you still be meaningful? How can you still be essential? How can you still be essential to this story, and not be the person who's got the bright glaring spotlight, you know, and the unmistakable profile? And the answer is by being Watson.

**That's it for this week, thank you for listneing. Special thanks to Lyndsay Faye, Pamela Bedore and Neil McCaw.**

**Next time, we'll be looking at two sidekicks that are the opposite of Watson. Rather than transcening race and gender, these characters were constricted to a white person's idea of their race and gender – which put a burden on the real**

**actors who had to play them. We'll be looking at the parallel histories of Tonto and Kato.**

**My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. The show's website is imaginary world podcast dot org. And if you want to get the full back catalog of Imaginary Worlds, and listen to the show ad-free by subscribing to Stitcher Premium. And you get the first days of binging for free if you use the promo code Imaginary.**