

You're listening to Suspension of Disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky

Do you remember the names of these guys?

MUM: Well, I know some of them. R2D2. Oh this guy – the storm troopers, is that the storm troopers? Yoda of course. Chewbacca of course. Who's this guy? Oh these guys. (Laughs) Oh, this is the bad father! This is Yobi-Kenobi or whatever his name is.

Obi Wan Kenobi.

MUM: Yeah.

No he was good.

That is my mother. When I was a kid, I would go into like a catatonic state with these action figures. I'd start bouncing them around, but then when my imagination kicked in, all I had to do was hold the figures and space out. And apparently I looked like I was tripping on LSD. Or as my parents would say, I was Luking Out.

MUM: Which is Luke Skywalker. And Luking out means you were in another world with Luke.

DAD: The silverware in the restaurant would become Luke.

That's my Dad. And yes, if Luke was not around, anything could be Luke.

DAD: It was actually the knife and the spoon fighting with each other. That happened very often.

Yeah but I feel like I can't get in touch with that world like I used to.

DAD: I would hope not.

Really?

DAD: Why? You're an adult now. I don't think you need that world anymore.

Yeah but I do though. I feel like creatively I'd like to tap into that as much as I used to.

DAD: Oh I think you can tap into creativity without holding a little figure in your hand and ignoring other people and getting into this little other world.

Well, I'm certainly an adult now. My hair looks like Reed Richards from the Fantastic Four with a patch of grey above my ears. I should have grown out of this stuff a long time ago. But I'm not alone. There's billions of dollars at stake in Hollywood betting that adults are still flocking fantasy, science fiction, fairy tales and other genres that used to be for kids. And this podcast is for anyone – particularly adults -- who still enjoys visiting

imaginary worlds – whether its Westeros, Wonderland, Tatooine or Gotham. I want to look at how these worlds reflect the people who created them, and the people who dream of going there.

So, if I'm doing a show about fantasy science fiction characters, my first episode really has to be about the origin story – Issue Number One. You heard my origin, or at least the story that explains why I want to do this podcast. All the great characters have origin stories.

Actually, all characters have origin stories. Only some of them are great.

So what makes a great origin story?

BS: You can shoot Bruce Wayne's parents last year and have him grow up to be Batman over next 20 years and it all still works.

Ben Saunders is a professor of English at the University of Oregon. He's written a lot about superheroes as mythology. He's amazed that anyone can remember the origin of a comic book character that was created before many of us were born.

BS: Between 1938 and the first appearance of Superman in Action Comics #1, and 1946 when the superhero craze starts to really fade, there are 700 costumed crime fighters that appears in comics from that periods, 700 different superheroes who are usually the hopeful flagship character for a new comic books. That's a phenomenal number! Of whom I think it's maybe seven there are still around, and familiar, that we know.

Talk about survival of the fittest – or most marketable.

Superhero stories are designed to capture the imagination of children. For a character to be successful, their story needs to tap into our primal hopes and fears.

BS: There are things you encounter for the first time as a child and the first time you experience something is always the first time you experienced it! You know the first time you hear a particular piece of music, the first time you witness your parents having a fight, these are events we never forget. So that for me is maybe one of the reasons we're drawing to the origin stories we want to recreate for

ourselves that experience when the fantasy was new and fresh and really exciting, and not something we take for granted.

I love talking to my nephew about this. He's seven, and he can rattle off every superhero's origin stories. But he can't explain why he likes them. I can't remember why I loved certain characters at his age. For that, I need to see a shrink.

RR: I'm Robin S. Rosenberg, I'm a clinical psychologist.

Her books include, "Superhero Origins: What Makes Superheroes Tick and Why We Care."

RR: What's The Matter with Batman: An Unauthorized Clinical Look Under the Mask of the Caped Crusader.

She takes superheroes seriously because many of her patients do. In fact, she has broken down superhero origin stories into three major categories: trauma, destiny and chance.

RR: And there's a difference between the origin of the power vs. the origin of the mission. The super is the power and the hero is the mission.

Take Superman. The origin of his power is destiny. His father sends him to Earth, knowing that he'll grow up to be like a god. But the origin of his mission is chance. He happens to land in Kansas where he's lucky to be raised by Ma and Pa Kent, who teach him how to power responsibly.

For Spider-Man, the origin of his power is chance -- he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Which is the fun part of his story, he's a scrawny nerd asking -- why me? The origin of his mission is trauma.

RR: And in fact, up until his Uncle Ben's death, he was using his power in selfish teenage way.

BS: The things that the characters can't outgrow do get written in the origin. Peter can't come to terms with the guilt of the death of Uncle Ben because it would take away one of the main reason for his neurotic, obsession compulsive, entirely guilt driven version of what it means to be a superhero.

Ben Saunders says, the best origin stories are tapped over and over again.

BS: Is the death of Gwen Stacy part of Spider-Man's origin? Not really. But is it part of -- indelibly part of his mythology? At this point, I think absolutely. It's the one death they can't take back.

The best origin stories also transform the characters, and keep transforming them. That's why it's hard to remember the origin of a character like Green Lantern, who is chosen by the ring because he had great bravery and willpower.

RR: In Green Lantern, there was no transformation. He was a hero already as a test pilot, in the sense that someone risks their lives every day for some greater good, I mean he got great adrenaline rushes from it, but he already was heroic and he just became sort of cop, an inter galactic cop.

Wonder Woman has the same problem. From the beginning, she's strong, good, brave -- almost perfect. The only thing she's missing is a costume.

When it comes to female superheroes, Dr. Rosenberg prefers a character that didn't start out in the comics: Buffy The Vampire Slayer. If you haven't watched the show basically the premise is every time a vampire slayer is killed, another one is chosen by this very old magic. There's a long illustrious line of vampire slayers going back millennia. And then there's Buffy, the California cheerleader.

RR: It's a reluctant superhero. She just doesn't have a costume. So she ---
Right, except red leather pants.

RR: Right. And it's her transformation from what would be appear to be a ditzy non academic, very superficial character who has no mission really, her mission to have an MRS in the old jokey way.

The interesting thing with her transformation is all she wants it to be regular girl, and she keeps getting drawn away by her destiny as a Slayer, better she gets at being the slayer the worse she gets at being Buffy and so by season 7, she's lost touch with who Buffy was, she feels like she is just the slayer and doesn't even know if can have friends any more because of the responsibility that weighs on her as the Slayer, I think and that is a fascinating part of her transformation that happens with her as well.

RR: Really good fiction writers are mirroring real life things and I think that's true of police officers, cover ops, it takes over your life, they have been transformed by their job, whatever altruistic motive that they had, it feels very remote. And so why do they continue to do what they do, and they have to ask themselves that question. And they have to have an answer. And so they may then come back to their origin story about what lead them to do that.

But you don't need to be a cop or a vampire slayer to wonder how you ended up where you ended up, says Ben Saunders.

BS: The inability to sort of create a coherent narrative of your own life would be one sign of mental illness. It's a sign of relative psychological health that you can produce a narrative of how you got from A to B. But it also means that we're very good at rewriting history and telling our stories in self-aggrandizing ways and having our own heroes and villains in our own origin stories. You know, that's the temptation of narration -- the temptation of narration is always to write things that suit our sense of outcome better. I'm telling a different origin story probably every day of the week from that point of the view to explain why it's unfair that I didn't get this or it is fair that I do have that.

Dr. Rosenberg has a more positive spin.

RR: In the same way that superheroes will have an origin story about their power, and an origin story about being a hero, we have origin stories for personal relationships, our family relationships, our personal relationships and professional lives, as any of those change our origin stories of necessary change.

EM: But there's a strange dissonance to some extent that we love superheroes -- well we do reboot their origin stories but there are certain elements that you can't change but in our lives we don't do that, why do we love these character origin stories that will be the same for 75 years but if were to do that ourselves it would be psychologically unhealthy to not acknowledge that we do change?

RR: For any time they've done a reboot, the stories change. I mean Spider-Man was bitten by a radioactive spider, which was a product of that time. And with the Tobey Maguire character it was a genetically mutated spider and that's in keeping with the times. I mean we change, we grow, life's challenges transform us -- that's the whole point right? You learn things. Once would hope that you learn things from the events in life.

Okay so here's why I'm so interested in origin stories. My origin story changed. A lot.

I used to work as a storyboard artist on the Rugrats and a bunch of other shows in L.A. My dream was to work for Pixar.

After a few years working in the industry, I was getting really restless. I was dying to get out of my cubicle and talk to people. I felt like I was living vicariously through the people I listened to on public radio.

When our crew got laid off, I decided that being a public radio reporter might be a better fit for me. So I moved to New York, got a job at WNYC. Every time I was on a first date -- I had to explain why it was my destiny to be here doing this, and not be there doing that. I had it down pat.

I love my work – but I've had some moments of doubt. I even had sort of a panic attack after I saw Toy Story 3 because it was so amazing. On the subway home, I was just spiraling. Should I have stuck with animation? Is my origin story just a totally contrived piece of fiction?

RR: You're really a social person, and you may have loved drawing but drawing alone for 40 hours a week wasn't a good fit for you, and so you were transformed by that knowledge, and of course origin story has to change, and of course you're going to pick up dots that weren't there before because you were so focused on the drawing dots that you weren't focused on social dots. I have a coaching business, a superhero coaching and part of what I focus on is in fact people rewriting their origin story because --

You have a superhero coaching business?

RR: Yeah!

Tell me more!

RR: Starting from scratch with your origin story is a way of really figuring out first, what is your power? Once you have sense of what your powers and talents, you can decide how you want to use them. It gives people an opportunity to reboot, if you will.

I guess this podcast is another reboot. And those action figures I found at my parents' house in Boston – they're dots that connect me from the Rugrats to NPR to....to you. It all makes sense, right? At least it does to me.

That's it for today's inaugural episode. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Robin Rosenberg, Ben Saunders, Jonathan Mitchell, and AIR: The Association of Independents and Radio. Also, thanks to Mum and Dad.

You can like the show on Facebook or leave a comment in iTunes. I tweet at emolinsky. The show's website is Suspension of Disbelief dot net. I know dot net sounds very 1990s but dot org and dot com were taken. You can listen to it using Real Player, if it's not buffering.