

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

Tiana Armstrong co-runs a company called Hero Prop. They buy and sell props to collectors, so she can afford the props she wants for herself. In her personal collection includes props from Alien, Gremlins, Jaws – and a lot of Star Wars stuff.

TIANA: I've got an Obi Wan light saber. I think one of my favorite pieces is my Jawa, I've got a Jawa from Episode II. And then I have Tauntaun from Empire Strikes Back and Tauntaun is just – he's just absolutely amazing and when you think about it, I can walk up and I can touch him and when I think about both Han Solo and Luke being right here with that Tauntaun gives me chills.

Okay you can't see me, but the minute you said Tauntaun my mouth dropped open and it's been open from that point on!

TIANA: (LAUGHS) Yes!

So where is the Tauntaun exactly, what else is, what's the room that these things are in?

TIANA: (LAUGHS) The props are everywhere, I keep them out of the guest rooms, they're out of the bedrooms, but the living room area and the dining room.

Wait, so where is the Tauntaun? What room is it in?

TIANA: The living room

Wow, see I was imagining this extra garage or something

TIANA: No!

Oh, so it's in the living room. That is wild!

TIANA: And the Alien, the pool table is in between them.

In case you can't tell, I love hearing about movie prop collections. I've every episodes of the Adam Savage show Tested and Mark Hamill's Pop Culture Quest, where the hosts will geek out by sitting in Captain Kirk's chair or holding Deckard's gun from Blade Runner.

I talked with another prop collector, Wesley Cannon. His company called Hollywood History. He started collecting props when he was serving Iraq. He was deployed there for seven years.

WESLEY: You know I started learning that in the midst of the war and trying to get your mind of that for a while, movies can whisk you away to a different land and get your mind on what you've gotten on or what it's been in, and kind of de-escalate and at that point is when props became more of a purely passion.

He may have been buying props in Iraq, but he wasn't shipping them to a war zone. He had a business partner back home in North Carolina. Now he has two rooms full of props from Edward Scissorhands to The Dark Crystal. And he recently bought the book from The Neverending Story, which is one of his favorite movies.

CLIP: NEVERENDING STORY

WESLEY: And that's probably one of my most sentimental items because the guy who played the part, Noah Hathaway, and he is a very close friend of mine and has become a very close a friend of mine, almost like family, ever since I got that prop.

Wait, you met Noah Hathaway because you bought that prop, like that's how you came into contact with him?

WESLEY: Actually it is, he had a friend of his, his friend had the book and he was in the process of trying to sell it, and one of the stipulations he said was is whoever buys this book, Noah wants to stay in contact with them, he wants to know where this book went. And he asked me if that was okay and obviously I was like sure. I would say about 4 months after that, somewhere in that time range, we always have a really, really big Christmas party, Noah and I spoke a few times over the phone and we ended up just deciding that he would fly in and visit me and have a really good Christmas with my family. So he stayed here for a week and actually hand delivered the book to me.

When you're in the business of movie props, you're in the business of stories. In fact, it's like a Russian doll of stories. There's the story of who made the prop. Then there's the story of how that prop was used in that movie or TV show. Then there's the story of what seeing that prop meant to you – whether you were a kid, or an adult needing a moment of escapism. And you're making a new story about how you got the prop, and where it sits in your house.

Now imagine you discover that one of those stories is a lie.

The business of prop collecting is booming, but so is the shady underbelly of scammers who create fake props to fool people into giving them thousand of dollars. Collectors are getting better at spotting fakes, but the forgers are getting better at making them.

What really bothers me is that these con men are exploiting people who are sci-fi fantasy fans, and want to own that prop because it made them believe in another world. But that yearning to suspend their disbelief also means they're sometimes willing to suspend their suspicion, skepticism or cynicism. They're dreamers, which can make them an easy mark.

So how do you outsmart the swindlers? That's after the break.

BREAK

Before we get to the dark side of prop collecting, let's stay in the light for a little longer.

In my last episode, I talked about how geek culture has transformed the art of burlesque. Movie prop collecting is obviously a very different entity but it's going through a similar transition.

Movie props collecting used to be a rarified hobby. But the boom of sci-fi fantasy movies has created all these unique, otherworldly props that are hot commodities. And the obsessional nature of fan culture is transforming the entire business of prop collecting.

Jacob McMurray is actually happy about that. He's the Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Museum of Pop Culture in Seattle. He's always felt that movie props should be seen as works of material art to celebrate.

At his museum they have props and costumes from Star Trek, Ghostbusters, The Terminator – all given the full museum treatment, behind glass cases.

JACOB: There's a lot of resonance and mojo to these piece. These stories are part and parcel to people's lives, they're part of people's personal narratives. You know when you think of Luke's severed hand from Empire Strikes Back, it takes you back to when you were a kid and saw it for the first time. I mean see every day when we go to the museum, visitors will find that thing that is their passion, and I've seen people cry in front of artifacts before. I mean we have Luke's severed hand on display in our Hall of Fame exhibit and I've seen people have verklempt emotional moments. These pieces mean a whole lot to people.

How did you acquire Luke's severed hand? Was it floating beneath Cloud City?

JACOB: (Laughs) Yeah, it was, we just happen to have a museum ship flying by underneath and caught it, but uh, that piece is from a lender of ours and I remember opening up that box for the first time and you know, oh my God, that's Luke's severed hand. And to some people it's like, a severed hand? That's kind of gruesome but no (whispers) it's Luke's severed hand!

CLIP: EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

And the studios are getting in on the act.

JACOB: Going back 10-15 years ago, none of the studios really cared about what happened to the props afterwards because there wasn't so much of an aftermarket for that stuff but I think the studios have gotten really savvy now where they're keeping that stuff for their own exhibitions or they have their own auctions where they can make money off of that.

And that's changing what ends up in auction catalogs. Laura Woolley is an appraiser. You might have seen on the PBS series Antique Roadshow. She specializes in pop culture.

LAURA: What makes people sit up and take it very seriously are all the seven figure sales we've had in the last five years. Legitimacy is fantastic coming from a time when I remember standing on an elevator with one of the higher-level executives at Sotheby's and them looking over and saying we could hire monkeys to do what you do. So that's kind of how they've always looked at us from the major brick and mortar houses and now that you have people spending multiple millions of dollars on key props, I don't think they're laughing at the business anymore.

Not when Robby the Robot from Forbidden Planet goes for \$5 million dollars. There's been a trickle down effect to online sales, where Wesley Cannon gets most of his props.

WESLEY: I remember I was offered an Ewok mask from Return of the Jedi and I remember I was offered it 18 or 20 grand. And 10 years ago, 15 years ago, I was like oh my God! There's no way in the world! Now I'm kicking myself every day because that's like \$80,000, \$100,000 item.

The sci-fi fantasy boom has even raised the price of set decorations, which used to be the bottom of the barrel for collectors.

LAURA: That's not true necessarily with sci-fi because within sci-fi you're creating new worlds, most often futuristic so you can't decorate a room in a house like a sitcom and it's not just normal every day objects. And like the set dec takes on more character and it's more identifiable. For instance a woman came into Antiques Roadshow in New Orleans, and had a painting that was hanging on the wall of Rick Deckard's apartment in Blade Runner, and you can see it when he's kissing her in the scene you see this painting right behind their head, and pretty much anything from Deckard's apartment sells for a ton of money.

CLIP: BLADE RUNNER

You know on Antiques Roadshow when someone like Laura tells you if your item is authentic? The key word they use is provenance. In other words, what is the backstory behind this thing?

Auction houses are well versed in the provenance of fine art, but Tiana says they don't always have the same expertise when it comes to movie props.

Recently the auction house Bonhams made headlines because they had acquired a rare, fully in tact Darth Vader costume that was supposedly screen-used from the original trilogy.

TIANA: It was stated as used and then the description changed to, well possibly it was a touring version, okay? And ultimately they removed the Darth Vader costume completely from the auction, and this was a piece, the first estimates were one to two million dollars. Now when they changed the estimate, when they changed the description then suddenly the estimate was \$500,000 to \$1 million. Now can you imagine? If someone spent over \$2 million on a costume that wasn't what it was described to be.

When you get down to the level of online collectors – fraudulent props are rampant. It's no surprise given how much demand there is for these items, are how much collectors are paying for them.

Tiana once bought what she thought was an original Gremlin from someone she trusted.

TIANA: And when the items arrived, I immediately knew. Number one, I have Gremlins in my collection and this didn't look anything like any Gremlin that I'd ever seen, it certainly wasn't anything that came out of Rick Baker's workshop. And the dress? The dress was wrong. It didn't match anything on screen. The buttons were wrong. The collar was off, and when I contacted the seller, that's when I realized the company had sold, so this was an entirely person I didn't realize I was dealing with. I was really worried because I had spent thousands of dollars, I mean thousands and he said to return the items and if he was happy with the condition they were in, he'd do a refund. Well luckily I realized that I had put it on my AmEx, so I immediately contacted AmEx – like immediately. Got my refund and sent him his items back. It was really gut wrenching experience, you know you worry because it's a lot of money, and I hate to think there's a lot of people this happens to.

There are a lot of ways that forgers can fool people. They can simply show a picture of the prop that's inaccurate. That's what happened with Tiana and her Gremlin.

Another is to claim you've got a hero prop when it was in fact a stunt prop. The term "hero prop" refers to any prop that was used in a close-up. For instance, the hero prop of Thor's original hammer is made of high-carbon steel alloy. It has all these intricate carving. It goes for about \$50,000. The stunt prop he threw around is less detailed. It's made of foam rubber. And it goes for about \$5,000.

Most collectors would prefer the hero piece – if they can afford it. But Tiana feels the opposite.

TIANA: I would rather have a stunt than a hero beauty piece because for all I know the hero never held the hero piece, they just zoomed in on a close up, I want the stunt, I want what he was running around the set with.

If an actor held a prop on screen, it takes on a magical quality that raises the price enormously. Laura says the same thing is true for costumes – but costumes can be manipulated.

LAURA: Any time you have uniforms and many sci-fi films do because you have people who are part of a unified group wearing uniforms, Battlestar Galactica, Buck Rogers, they're all in similar clothing so if there's 300 background costumes made, you know the V costumes that are still floating around, you might suddenly

upgrade the ranking patches and add the name of an actor that maybe isn't the hero, you're not going to gun for the biggest guy.

Like you could buy an old red shirt from Star Trek -- add a few stripes and say, "this was worn by Scotty." In fact, props from the original Star Trek are the easiest to fake because they had such a low budget back then. Everything was cheaply made.

So how does this affect the people who make props?

A few of them have turned to the dark side. I read in the Hollywood Reporter some prop designers are secretly been making extra props, from the original molds, claiming they were screen used. Unless you've got the inventory list from that movie, who's going to know?

But for the majority of prop designers, dealing with this black market can be a drain.

Ross MacDonald makes props out of his home in Connecticut. He owns the designs of his props, and then sells them to the studio. For instance, he designed the Book of Secrets for National Treasure 2.

CLIP: NATIONAL TREASURE 2

Disney owns the prop that Nicholas Cage held the movie, but during production, Ross made extra copies as back ups, which he can sell at a discount. He can make exact replicas, which he sells to collectors at a lower price.

SFX: RIFLING THROUGH

ROSS: In the book of secrets, I have samples of almost every president's writing (FADE DOWN.)

This prop became a hot commodity because it's so intricate. The Book of Secrets is leather bound, packed with authentic looking documents from the Kennedy assassination to an alien autopsy.

ROSS: I don't do blank pages ever in prop books, and I do as many pages as I can because there's also something a prop friend of mine calls the actor factor,

you don't know in advance what's going to happen on set, and if you give an actor – and I've seen this happen – if you give them a prop book with blank pages, they're disappointed to. They'll flip through it and go, oh. I've worked on several shows where the actors are method actors and they want things to be as real as possible and they'll often complain if something has blank pages or is missing something.

It took him three months to make The Book of Secrets. He also made a John Wilkes Booth diary for the film. So when he makes replicas for the fans, it's just as time consuming as making the originals. He's happy to do it but then he found out one of his clients was a scammer.

ROSS: There was a case of a guy who claimed to have a screen used John Wilkes Booth diary from National Treasure 2 that he was offering for sale and his story was that he and I were friends and I had sold him a screen used copy. I had actually sold him a replica copy that I made for him. You know we were not friends, we had communicating by email for the transaction but that was basically so he was trying to resell his diary as a screen used diary.

Does affect your business in terms of people contact you, ask for replicas and then they turn around and lie, and lie, and how do you feel about that?

ROSS: When you find out something like that, like when you someone buys a prop from you, there's an introductory process where you get to know the person a little bit, and then to find out later from somebody else that they've turned around and done something really sleazy behind your back, you know it's kind of like finding out your girlfriend cheated on you or something, it's a bit of a shock. I just feel angry for the fans too. I'm like, God, what else has this guy done this with? And I've had some really sleazy transactions I had a guy who called me, he emailed and said that he was from the make a wish foundation and he wanted to, that a child who was dying of cancer, the child's last wish was to have a Book of Secrets and a John Wilkes Booth diary, and would I consider donating one? So I did some research on him and it didn't seem 100% above board, so told him I'd consider giving him a discount if he would give me an official request on the letter head. And then I got an explanation from him that it wasn't actually THE make a wish foundation, it was a similar thing, the name kind of changed, and it was an unofficial group of doctors and nurses at this hospital out in Los Angeles who were doing this for children in the cancer ward.

He did some digging. The guy was not listed on the hospital staff. And the address of this foundation was just an apartment building in Los Angeles. He eventually tracked the guy down to a prop-collecting site called The

RPF, where people there were complaining because they had paid him for props but he had never delivered them.

ROSS: At some point the guy actually responded angrily saying that he had been unable to respond he was enraged at everyone that they were doubting him, that he had a sick relative who was dying of cancer and he was taking care of her and he would fulfill their orders whenever he had the time.

Ross actually helped to get this guy banned from the RPF. But it's kind of like whack-a-mole. These guys always show up somewhere else.

So what are some techniques for catching fakes before you click that buy button? Well, you have to play detective. In fact, Wesley says:

WESLEY: EBay now, I would almost tell everybody until you have a few years under your belt, if you don't have enough time under your belt to where you can get on eBay and ask those questions, I would not buy anything on eBay.

Even for a pro like him, investigating the provenance of a prop can be tricky.

WESLEY: You know if this person has a contact that they're tight with and you reach out to that contact and say hey, I'm getting offered this; can you give me your word that it's authentic? You have to be careful and walk on thin ice because if that person has a relationship with this person and you're calling them up, you're doing a number of things. One, you're questioning the person that's trying to sell it to you, so they get defensive. And then the person that's offering to you can get mad, thinking you're trying the back door. So there's so many different dynamics to it but one of the things I do is that I go to the people I know who worked on the film, and I say, hey can you give me any insight on this piece? People I know that when I talked to them, it is between us, it doesn't go any further.

Laura Woolley actually asks people for their ID to prove they worked on the lot when the production was made.

LAURA: I hate to say it but you have to be a little bit of an asshole (laughs) to you have to be a bit of a skeptic and really question people and it's not because you're just this cynical it's because everyone in this business is guilty until proven

innocent and until you can prove and show me paperwork to back up everything you're telling me, it's really difficult to believe it.

Another technique is called screen matching, which is to look really carefully at the props on screen to make sure it matches to the thing you're about to buy. But Tiana says that can be misleading too, especially with an older props. Like if the laser rifle you're about to buy looks exactly like it did on Buck Rogers in the 25th Century – it really shouldn't.

TIANA: Say, a piece that's 40 years old. And it's foam latex. Well if it's a 40 year old piece of foam latex, it should be pretty much crumbling, rotting, it should just be crispy crumbles, if you show me a piece that's 40 years old and it's in relatively spongy nice condition – no way!

Another tip off: forgers often use modern materials that weren't invented when the props were made. Or for example, Laura says it's common to see Superman costumes that were allegedly worn by Christopher Reeve, but they're made of spandex. Spandex existed in 1978, but it was not widely used until the '80s.

LAURA: So they used a material that would spring to form that was custom loomed on a loom that was in Germany, and it create very particular stitch pattern when you do a super zoom on the actual fabric itself, and that was the first thing a lot of the fakes had wrong, like it wasn't clearly the right pattern of stitching in the fabric itself and if you do a super zoom on it, immediately you know it's fake.

Part of me is, when you talk about Superman, I mean it's interesting to learn about the loom in Germany, but when you look at the inside of a Superman costume, and you talk about how it was stitched in the bottom, there's a part of me that thinks, oh no, no, no, I don't want to see that. I don't want to see it and think it as just a piece of clothing that somebody stitched together.

LAURA: Yeah, I hear you and sadly that is one of the parts of this business that makes it a business is that it's wonderful to look at it and think it's wonderful and pretty and cool. But once you start tearing into these things and looking inside and putting the whole I believe you can fly on the sidebar over here, but I need to figure out if this was really worn by him. And that's where you have to protect yourself.

CLIP: SUPERMAN

LAURA: The S logo on the chest, cover your ears if you don't want to hear this because it ruins it, but that is constructed of different pieces of fabric, the yellow, the red, and those are inset in the blue. Well the curve and shape of that S is so hard to get and when you put something through a sewing machine if you very slightly are off, it warps the shape of the S slightly, its' really not easy to do and I think that's one of the hardest things for them to fake. But when you see the professional ones that were done, they're so perfect and they're so precise and it's so obvious that it's someone very skilled creating this and only the most highly skilled people make it in this business. They should look like they're very professionally done, not like some guy in his garage. (Laughs)

Researching this episode has changed the way I watch movies and TV shows. Like I was watching Good Omens on Amazon. And there's a very important book of prophecies all the characters are trying to get a hold of. Suddenly it occurred to me. That's a cool prop. Somebody is going to buy that, and they're going to have that in their home. I mean, it would be way beyond my price range but theoretically I could own that book. That's wild.

But when I see a prop in real life, it's often kind of a let down. You go through all this effort to make sure it's real – a real thing from a make-believe world. Then you see it up close and it's made from every day materials. It wasn't forged in Middle Earth or another planet. Also, some of the old props from my childhood haven't aged very well. If the foam rubber is crumbling you can see the wires underneath. And they're totally out of context -- surrounded by all the mundane things in the real world. Its like you're staring in the face of the disbelief.

But maybe that's the point. That disconnect of seeing something you saw in a movie right there in front of you makes real life disappear for just a moment. It's like a magic trick you can pull on yourself, over and over again.

LAURA: You know the first time we saw these films we were children, and we were so wide eyed and innocent and happy to go along with the ride into the world of make believe and I think as you grow up and life starts to chip away at you, and you become slightly more cynical it's very difficult to recapture that childlike innocence of seeing these things for the first time, you just wish you could watch some of the films as they're coming out with the eyes of a child and not the critical eye of an adult where we can't overlook the issues these films

have had. But I feel like these pieces kind of are a little bit like a time travel, they're a little bit of a transporter to take you back to a time when these franchises meant everything to you and it was this wonderful world of make-believe. It's something when you look at a piece from that film now, I'm sure, everybody who has them you're flooded with memories of the first time you saw that and what that meant to you as a child. There's something special about having those pieces in your hand.

For some people having that feeling is worth any price.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Laura Woolley, Wesley Cannon, Ross MacDonald, Jacob McMurray and Tiana Armstrong, who says don't let all this talk about forgeries turn you off. She runs a Facebook group for people who want to buy props that they don't have mortgage their home to afford. I actually saw Mulder's tie from The X-Files on sale in her group.

TIANA: I mean people have had real props for sale in our group for \$10-20. So don't think you can't afford it, and if you're looking for a special gift for someone, that person who has everything? Trust me, they don't have everything. Find them something from one of their favorite movies. It's just -- it's fun!

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman, who – with a little help from Tiana -- bought a prop replica from Deep Space Nine that she gave to her husband on his birthday.

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. I have a slideshow of cool movie props, including Ross MacDonald's Book of Secrets on the show's Instagram page. 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.