

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

Long time listeners might remember my friend Patrick O'Connor. In one episode, he forced me to watch the Walking Dead. In another episode, we talked about D&D character alignments. He's also my Comic Con buddy, we go every year – except this year of course.

Patrick and I grew up in the same era of comics, which were dominated by writers like Frank Miller, who turned Batman and Daredevil into brutal street level vigilantes that would break the bones of muggers or drug dealers – which I thought was totally cool when I was a teenage boy. But I was living in the suburbs. Patrick grew up in a neighborhood in Queens that was an infamous hot spot for the drug wars.

PATRICK: There were shootings going on left and right there were muggings in the subway. It was a very dangerous time. So those heroes that, uh, you read about in the comic books, Daredevil, Batman, that whole vigilante ethos was in full effect.

You loved those characters.

PATRICK: Yes. And I, when I was, uh, when I was growing up, I loved Batman and I actually really had a particular liking of the Punisher.

I'll never get over the fact that Patrick loves The Punisher – the Marvel superhero who uses guns and violates the superhero no-kill policy – because today Patrick works in the district attorney's office, where he runs the gun violence suppression bureau. Before that, he ran the law enforcement accountability bureau, which prosecutes police brutality and corrupt cops.

A lot of what fuels the fantasy of street level vigilantes is the idea that cops in Gotham or Daredevil's Hell's Kitchen are overwhelmed or easily corruptible. But Patrick says there used to be another factor in the zeitgeist.

PATRICK: If I remember correctly when I was growing, not that the police were corrupt. It's just that the legalities of the time, the technicalities, if you will, that the police were handcuffed by the, uh, expansion of, um, individual rights defendant's rights, it's the same thing that motivated Dirty Harry and Death Wish.

Those frustrations didn't only play out in comics or movies. They lead to changes in law enforcement and mass incarceration. But one of the things I've noticed about those vigilante characters is that the fictionalized cities they patrol are

very, very white. Although sometimes they'll fight multi-racial gangs, which Patrick finds particularly absurd since he used to prosecute gangs.

PATRICK: You're watching the Punisher beat up a group of a multicultural group with Asians and blacks and whites like equal opportunity attacking him and him having to take them out. You know why they're doing it right? That's because they don't want to bring in that element in of the white, usually it is the white vigilante that's beating up on minorities.

I was thinking about this after I saw the trailer for the new Batman movie, which reboots the franchise – yet again – with Robert Pattinson as Batman. This new movie is apparently going to emphasize the detective side of the character, which I'm really looking forward to. But from the trailer, it looks like they're trying to have it both ways. There's a scene where Batman confronts a gang of thugs.

THUG: What the hell are you supposed to be?!

(SFX: BEATING UP THUG)

BATMAN: I'm vengeance!

These characters have always evolved with the times. The reimagining of Batman as a Dark Knight may have resonated in the '80s, but in a year when we're engaging in a nationwide debate over the role of law enforcement, suddenly that moment in the trailer felt strangely tone deaf and off-key. I've been wondering, is it time to reimagine the super-cops in our fictional worlds? And what would that change look like?

Patrick's next-door neighbor is a police officer named Henry Wong. He's also a huge comic book fan. When Patrick told him about this episode, Henry said he wanted to chime in because he's been thinking about this too.

HENRY: Batman, he's a, you know, Caucasian character, right? You know, what if he was in a situation where there's like a, you know, a crime happening, but that a perpetrator was, you know, a black person and that was all recorded. How would that go over, you know, with, you know, the way things are now? I don't think it would go over very well.

It wouldn't go over well with him either.

HENRY: And to me, it's, uh, you know, it's at a point where do I really want to see like a masked vigilante, beating up on like, you know, people out of, if I would buy that comic book.

Putting on a uniform can change a person. It's supposed to turn a cop or a superhero into a symbol of justice. That's what Henry wanted.

HENRY: For me, it was just the, you know, more opportunity to see if, uh, I could be a positive influence in my community.

He grew up in New York's Chinatown. That's the neighborhood he patrols -- which was on purpose. But becoming a cop was a fairly recent decision.

HENRY: My background isn't necessarily in like law enforcement, like, uh, before I even got on the, uh, the force I was in finance and accounting, for over 10 years. But, uh, you know, at the age of like 31, 32, I made a decision with my family to, you know, maybe it's a good time to look into becoming a police officer because like, uh, after age 35, you age out.

Because the police don't accept new recruits over the age 35 -- unlike superheroes, who get to be 35 forever. He used to walk his beat feeling a sense of pride. But now:

HENRY: At this very moment kind of feels like the opposite instead of feel like a sense of like a, you know, empowerment or a sense of like, you know, you know, I'm putting on this uniform and go out there and, uh, doing positive things for the community. It's more like I'm putting on this uniform and I'm becoming a target to everyone in a sense.

This is a complicated situation because he's a member of a marginalized community. But when he puts on the uniform, he is no longer Henry Wong. He's a symbol of whatever experiences people have had with the NYPD. And lately when he thinks of superheroes, they're not an escapist fantasy. He's been thinking about the burden that characters like Batman have to live with.

HENRY: Sometimes you go through some like rough nights and it's kind of the same. I feel like for superheroes sometimes it's like, you know, they grew, they put themselves out there and again, they put themselves in a bad situation and they had to come back home. And then how do you kind of like disconnect from that?

Lately, a lot of vigilante superhero movies and TV shows have been asking similar questions, except they're wondering how much they can disconnect from the way we understand policing and crime today while still giving us that "gritty, realistic" appeal.

The Batman comics have gone in the opposite direction. They've sent Batman into sci-fi alternative universes, where he's battling evil doppelgangers of himself – which are cool stories, but they're avoiding reality. And Patrick says:

PATRICK: Even the Punisher comic books, he's always going after some really, really international foe, I think they had like one, one series recent series, he was going against a Baron Zemo.

Super villain.

PATRICK: Yeah, super villains that just beyond the pale that you know, that you need somebody who's uniquely skilled to deal with.

Does it feel right with the times with you or is there a part of you that's like, I still miss the part where he beats up a bunch of thugs?

PATRICK: Nah, I don't miss the thug beating up anymore. You know, you read those Punisher comic books, and it makes, you know, he was going after drug dealers, like big time. And the drug dealers were just portrayed as being like these evil, like, you know, just chaotic evil characters when the reality of the situation is, as we know when a deal, when we've been like living with this problem of narcotics and narcotics addiction, like a lot of the drug dealers in real life are drug addicts themselves. And they're just trying to make money to get to their next high.

Although there is a live action superhero show that's picked up on the current zeitgeist: The Umbrella Academy on Netflix. They're a team of sibling superheroes who are trying and sometimes failing to save the world. Diego is the brooding vigilante in the group, but everyone makes fun of him. And I've never seen that type of character played for laughs.

PATRICK: That is a perfect analogy to what we're talking about. Right. I mean, Diego is completely like, he's completely out of his depth. He's completely out of step with everybody else in the Academy, in the Umbrella Academy, all his mates when they're going out and dealing with the situation. Right.

Yeah. It's, it's, it's almost like he is the fan boy who grew up reading Frank Miller and wants to be the Frank Miller vigilante and all the other characters, just like, dude, give it like,

PATRICK: What is your issue?! Like calm down! Let's look at the look at the big picture, what we really have to deal with.

DIEGO: Look I know you, you like playing by the rules, but you live for putting the scumbags away. So why don't you put that badge down for one night and come out of the streets with me, without all this bullshit.

COP: You're right, this sounds super fun. But I think you missed some things when you got thrown out of the police academy. This bullshit is what gets convictions in a court of law. What you do is a fantasy.

There's one more important vigilante character we need to unpack: Daredevil. He's been one of my favorite characters since I was a kid because he's a living contradiction. By day, he's a lawyer named Matt Murdoch, who defends criminals in court. By night he beats them to a pulp as Daredevil. And he justifies what he's doing because he never takes a life.

MATTHEW: Matt Murdoch should be disbarred almost every day for what he does unfortunately.

Matthew Westfox co-hosts the podcast Superhero Ethics.

MATTHEW: I love Daredevil. He's probably my favorite character in the sort of the ones that are on TV right now or used to be. But the idea that you can say, I will never kill someone. I'm just going to hit them in the head with a metal pipe is utterly ridiculous. I say that not just as a joke about bad writing, but that the, the entire idea that you can practice non-lethal violence is ridiculous. People are going to die, even when you don't intend it.

The Daredevil comics have always wrestled with the morality of street-level justice because Matt Murdoch is a devout Catholic, who spends a lot of time in confession booths. So, I'm glad the comics have been delving into messy questions.

Like in the current storyline, Daredevil has accidentally killed a henchman -- who was not white. At first, Daredevil was in denial until he talked to a doctor who treated the henchmen. Suddenly he realized there's someone who has to clean up after him and heal those broken bones. Then he went through a defensive stage, until he learned that the henchmen had a sympathetic back story. Finally, in the end, Daredevil turned himself over to the police.

I've been riveted by that storyline. For once, I have no idea how it's going to turn out. I'd love to see more characters go through a similar evolution.

MATTHEW: I think that one of the things, the superhero genre genres really having to wrestle with is that our understanding of crime is fundamentally changing. To me, one of the questions I think is most interesting is, okay, let's say Joker or Kingpin is doing these terrible things. And you can say, okay, whatever race they are, they're making active decision. But in order to get to them, our hero has to beat up probably 20 or 30 henchmen, but who the henchman, the henchman, aren't all people who agree with the villain. The henchmen are probably people who are taking the job they can take because that's where they can get money because they're in situations where they don't have access to jobs. So, they don't have access to other things or whatever circumstances has led them to that.

The big question with superheroes and law enforcement is accountability. Once they put on the costume or the uniform, does that embolden them to make violent choices they wouldn't otherwise in civilian clothes?

MATTHEW: There's the old adage that when you are a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. I think superheroes are the best example of that I've ever seen. You know, if you are of the belief that you solve problems by punching them. I think one of the things that's so powerful about the Daredevil story is, and maybe this is a reason why he goes more and more into that vengeance side is when you try to use the law to fix something, that's a slow process. It's hard to do it. It's gradual. It's hard to see the change happen when you punch someone, they hit the floor. It's immediate, it's visceral. And so, it's really easy to start going more and more in that direction, and I think cops in the real world do that. I think military can do that all the time. I think anytime you take on this identity of, I am a fighter, I am allowed to use violence to do good. Of course, that's going to become the thing you default to all the time and heroes, I think are a perfect metaphor for that in our own world.

Although vigilante heroes may be more than just a metaphor.

NEWS REPORT #1: We're going to show you some masked men that patrol Seattle looking for crime, they say they're part of a growing nationwide movement aimed at making the streets safer but are they for real?

NEWS REPORT #2: New tonight, one local man came within seconds of having his car being broken into, perhaps stolen, until a superhero came to his rescue.

NEWS REPORT #3: Some of these vigilantes do indeed put on skintight costumes and wear masks.

After the break, we'll look at a movement of real-life superheroes who are actually taking to the streets to fight crime. And they might be showing a positive example of how we could re-imagine costumed crusaders for justice.

BREAK

Peter Nowak is the author of the book, *The Rise of Real-Life Superheroes*. It's a really interesting book, and full disclosure, I actually a blurb on the jacket cover.

Real-life superheroes aren't dressed as licensed characters from comics. They create their own superhero identifies with make-shift costumes with armor, capes or masks. And some them don't want to punch criminals. They dress up as a form of charitable work.

PETER: So, they'll do a homeless handout missions, what they call missions. Uh, so they'll, again, they'll get together in groups and they'll go to where the, you know, usually the homeless people are camped out and they'll bring them, uh, things like sleeping bags, toiletries, uh, socks are actually a very popular thing apparently, among the biggest needs that homeless people have are for clean dry socks.

Of course, they could do that in civilian clothes, but Peter says they wear costumes to draw visibility to the problem of homelessness.

And there are plenty of real-life superheroes who only want to fight crime and keep the peace, like the Xtreme Justice League, which patrols San Diego. And many of their members are ex-military.

PETER: And I think one of the reasons why they do this is because, uh, they were stationed overseas, and they would do these kind of community patrols in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. And they would be essentially peacekeepers there. And, uh, I think they sort of kind of almost miss it. So, they come back to the U.S. and the, they figured they want to keep doing this, uh, but they want to do it in a nonthreatening way. So, that's why they put on the, the superhero costumes to kind of give people an idea that they're not, you know, some sort of militia or something like that. But then others are that there's some who aren't actually military types. There's some that are, uh, you know, they have some form of martial arts training. And so, you know, they go out there and they, uh, they look for these altercations happening fights brewing and, and they'll get involved. They'll intercede, they have trained in, um, you know, de-escalation techniques and that sort of thing. So they actually try to diffuse the situation before they actually evolve into something violent.

The Xtreme Justice League works with the San Diego Police Department. In fact, I read one officer describe the group positively as a “force multiplier.” But that’s not the case in every city. Like in Seattle, there’s a controversial real-life superhero named Phoenix Jones who’s part of the Rain City Superhero Movement.

PETER: Phoenix Jones actually ended up in court cause the, the cops brought him in. They said that he ran into the situation where he started to pepper spraying everybody. Uh, the police they're not fans of him, not fans of his group. And there's a bit of a contrast there too. In San Diego, the Xtreme Justice League would actually cooperate in situations where they would need to give evidence. They would give the real names. They would actually appear in court and provide that evidence. Whereas in Seattle, they basically refused to do that.

With the real-life superheroes who are not adversaries with the cops, how do they justify why they're doing it costumes? I mean, why not just become cops?

PETER: Yeah. There's a couple of reasons for that. I think, um, so one is, uh, there's definitely a certain, a number of them that do believe the cops are corrupt in the media is corrupt and all that. And, uh, it's sort of almost comic book issue and why they do this. The other part of it too, is that they, you know, they, they want to contribute in some small way, but they don't want to go through the whole process of, of training as a police officer and having to be told what to do. You have to go out and give parking tickets. You can't go and, and, uh, you know, bust up the muggers or whatever.

I mean, I assume they must have support from their family. I mean, how many of them, I mean, it would lead to divorces pretty quickly otherwise.

PETER: Yeah. It's funny too, hearing those stories. Uh, you know, I think in a lot of cases, I heard stories about how they were, they would, uh, go out and do this sort of thing and, and kind of hide it from their spouses or their girlfriends. Some of them once they revealed it, uh, their spouse said, no, no way in hell, are you doing this? You have to retire. In a few cases, the spouse actually joined them. A great story was there's a couple in San Francisco slash Oakland, the Bay area rock and roll in night bug. So, Night Bug was, he was doing this real-life superhero thing. And, uh, there was an HBO doc current documentary back in 2011, simply called superheroes about this phenomenon. And they went to a screening of this documentary in a theater and the director was there. And so Night Bug in his real identity, took his significant other to the screening and they watched it in the audience. And then he, at the end of the film, he said, uh, excuse me, I've got to go to the bathroom. He went to the bathroom, he suited up into his night bug costume, went out on stage and started, you know, answering questions and talking to the audience. Meanwhile, his significant other is sitting in the, in the crowd thinking, well, this guy sounds really familiar.

Wait that actually worked. That's like the common trope that people laugh at that like, you know, he puts on a costume and how she could, how could you not recognize it's her husband right away or her boyfriend right away?

PETER: Well, I mean his costume Night Bug he's, uh, he's one of these guys who wears all black, but he's got this like really, uh, he's got this red face mask. That's kind of like a Wolverine and Venom or something like that, you know, they're very, they're both skilled at martial arts. And so, she was telling me that she's like, well, if he can do it, if he's capable of doing this, I'm like, I'm actually way better than him and these things. So I certainly can do this as well. So, she got into it.

At this point, I really wanted to talk with some real-life superheroes. So, Peter connected me with The Grim who patrols San Diego, particularly an area called the Gaslamp Quarter, which is full of bars and clubs, where drunken altercations break out.

GRIM: I wear a blue skull helmet and then body armor that's covered with generally a hoodie and some sort of pants.

And this is Violet Valkyrie. Her costume has gone through changes.

VIOLET: But there's some things that are consistent and always wearing the color. Violet that's always happened. I usually have some type of head piece that has, is Valkyrie -esque theme.

And they said unlike the movies, most real-life superheroes don't wear all black.

GRIM: So, we're trying not to look like robbers. (CHUCKLE) I mean, basically I just don't want to be mistaken for the bad guys.

VIOLET: I would add that like all the, all the black thing kind of fetish fetishizes, what we are, um, everyone wants to be the Batman. Everyone wants to be this dark mysterious person, but we're going out there to actively help people and wearing all black is going to is not going to help our cause

I mean, are they surprised when you, you, you show up and you're wearing superhero costumes. I mean, are they just confused and be like, wait, what is going on?

GRIM: It'd probably be weird if they were expecting it. (LAUGH) If they're upset with someone else and then superheroes enter the fray, then it's like, wait, now I'm dealing with this. Like it's definitely helped to sidetrack them and not keep focused on what they were so intently focused on in the first place

Have there ever been times that it hasn't worked where, you know, where you get caught up in an actual physical fight?

GRIM: Yes, it's happened. Sometimes people are just trying to fight someone. I don't know. I guess it's never really been an issue because most of the time when people divert their attention away from someone else and then turn it towards us, we are actually prepared to deal with that.

Or are they? That's the big question. When I talked with the NYPD officer Henry Wong, I asked him what he thought of real-life superheroes.

HENRY: These guys are putting themselves putting themselves in a very potentially dangerous situation. It might get them seriously hurt, or they miss usually hurts someone. Cause like, as a police officer, you're going through like the Academy you're going to do like, you know, continuous training where you have to either deescalate your situation, you know, basically using verbal judo or, you know, like, uh, control the perpetrator in a way where it doesn't hurt them or you. They don't necessarily have that training or mental reaction. It might get done in a, again in a situation where it really may not be good for either parties.

Grim says that's a fair criticism of real-life superheroes who don't have a military background or first responder training or mental health training. The real-life superheroes he's worked with have each some part of that training. But he thinks it's hypocritical when police tell him he can't have the same kind of judgement that they do.

GRIM: When they talk about sometimes people are passionate, but don't use the best judgment. I'm like, you obviously have not Googled cop using bad judgment because that is going to show you what happens. And people die a lot from cops showing up and not knowing what they're doing.

Grim was one of the few Black members of the Xtreme Justice League, or the XJL for short. And he recently split from the XJL because they disagreed on how to respond to the Black Lives Matter movement.

GRIM: When I was protesting because black lives apparent had not mattered before, I kind of was looking to the rest of the group for like support something to stand for the injustices that had been going on, I felt like I was just kind of left out in the wind and it was kind of heartbreaking. I need to stand up for injustice. You're not going to do it with me. I'm going to do it by myself.

When he was part of the XJL, Grim had a good relationship with the police. They knew his secret identity. Now he says at protests, the same cops give him dirty looks, like he's betrayed them. And Grim feels equally let down. He was hoping they'd have his back.

GRIM: Yeah, it's definitely different. Like the relationship now between, uh, me and the police is, is broken. It is unrepairable.

But he's not alone. Violet has joined him in this new mission.

VIOLET: I'm such an advocate for black lives and black lives mattering, and I just felt the XJL's focus is just different than what I want to focus on. We are still real-life superheroes. And when we, we have changed our focus by focusing more on protesting. So, we have begun to engage more in protest safety, protestor, safety, and being visible at protests in our superhero garb out there on the streets.

In this case, trying to de-escalate situations and protect people from the police.

“Defund the police” is a common slogan you'll see on protest signs or social media. Advocates of reform argue that police should only focus on higher levels crimes, and funds should be diverted to social service professionals who can handle lower level misdemeanors and disputes before they escalate. I would bet a lot of people pushing for a new type of community policing are not thinking of real-life superheroes – but Violet says, why not?

VIOLET: When I first finally put on my, my costume or put on my gear, it is with the thought that people need to see us. People need to be, to know us there's brand recognition, going back to the theory, police, you know, what a police person or man woman looks like because of their outfit. You know what they're wearing? You know, that is them. So when we were in a group, it was, it was more or less the same reason, you know who we are, you know, why we're there, we're there to help you with out, getting you in trouble without throwing you in the drunk take, you know, we're, we're there to help you through their, your mental health crisis. And we're there to do it as this group of people wearing these colorful color outfits.

I've been trying to figure out how putting on a costume, or a uniform, changes the way you see yourself, and what you're capable of. But I'm realizing it's more about changing the way other people see you.

For The Grim and Violet Valkyrie, wearing a superhero costume is a way of saying, I'm not the bad guy. Look at me, I'm clearly on the side of good. In the comics and in real life, superheroes – and law enforcement -- figured out a long ago that in the fight for justice, symbols can be the most effective weapons – so long as we can all agree on what those symbols mean.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Patrick O'Connor, Henry Wong, Matthew Westfox, Peter Nowak, The Grim and Violet Valkyrie. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman.

By the way, if you'd like to hear about the history of Black superheroes, check out my episode from earlier this year called Truth, Justice and The American Way, which was inspired by the HBO series Watchmen.

I put a slideshow of real-life superheroes on the show's Instagram page. You can also like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you really like the show, please do a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover the show.

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