

20.01.02 Shondaland Revolution Hour.wav

SM: Sarah McConnell

AS: Audio Sample

MM: Michaela Meyer

IO: Imelda O'Reilly

NS: Nancy Schoenberger

[00:00:00]

SM This is an encore presentation of an episode that first aired in 2013. The ABC drama "Grey's Anatomy" is in its 17th season. That's a long run. Its popularity helped launch an empire for the show's director and writer and executive producer, Shonda Rhimes. The shows in her universe, including "Private Practice", "Scandal" and "How to Get Away with Murder" are known to fans as Shondaland.

AS She chose the term Shondaland to brand her production company as a play-off of Disneyland. Right. She wanted it to be fun and poppy and some place that you would go to escape.

SM From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today in the show, how Shonda Rhimes changed television. Later, filmmaker Imelda O'Reilly joins us to talk family, home, and the Irish gift of the gab.

AS Oh, brilliant. Of course I can, no problem at all.

SM But first, early in her career, Michaela Meyer saw lessons in "Grey's Anatomy" about how to be a good teacher. Now she's a professor of communications at Christopher Newport University and has coedited a book all about Shonda Rhimes called "Adventures in Shondaland: Identity Politics and the Power of Representation". Michaela, who is Shonda Rhimes? For people who haven't already heard of her, what do they need to know?

MM Well, Shonda Rhimes is just quite possibly one of the biggest players in contemporary American television today, there used to be a very clear line and distinction between those who produced and financed television, versus those who were actually writing and controlling the creative content. And because what you're seeing is that overlap in the technology and the broadcast systems are sort of changing, you have people like Shonda Rhimes branding their own production company and running with it and saying, I'm going to be both my own producer and showrunner. And she was very bold about that. She branded her own production company immediately upon getting her, sort of, first show, "Grey's Anatomy", which most television show runners wouldn't have done. They probably would have waited for a couple more hits before they moved on to that. But she said, no, I'm going to take control of my career from the get-go and make sure I know that it's going the direction that I want it to.

SM And it's called Shondaland. Her body of work is widely known. Whereas I simply watch a TV series, enjoy it and don't realize who's behind the production, you're very aware and so are other fans.

MM Right. And in particular, she chose the term Shondaland to brand her production company as a play-off of Disneyland. Right. She wanted it to be fun, and poppy, in some

place that you would go to escape kind of the everyday realities of life, into these kinds of fantastical worlds. And I think that that really shines through, that she really has a gift for that kind of melodramatic storytelling.

SM And she doesn't just cast diverse actors. She also deals with tough conversations about marginalized people who we don't always see on TV.

MM Absolutely. Shonda Rhimes has really established herself as an ally to pretty much all identity politics causes. And so, in "Grey's Anatomy" in particular, one of the famous sort of precursors that everyone was kind of talking about was that Bailey's character on the show is played by sort of a short African-American woman. And when it was originally kind of written and conceptualized, it was supposed to be this sort of tall, blond, white woman. And Shonda Rhimes came out in defense of that, saying, I don't actually write characters by type, although that is the predominant way that Hollywood tends to script things. I tend to prefer blind casting, as she called it, and to say, here's a part and I don't know what that person looks like yet. I'm going to let everybody read and see what they bring to it. And that really shifted some of the discourses that were happening in television at the time because most show runners were writing things like this Asian character number one, and this is black character number two. And she said no, instead, I'm just going to write the characters and then see what actors come in and bring those characters to life. And it's something then that was so successful with "Grey's Anatomy" and then also with Private Practice that you started to see other networks then pick up on the same concept for launching some of their own shows to be competitors.

SM Not only are her shows incredibly diverse, she really doesn't make an issue out of it. The characters are simply from a variety of backgrounds and then the show goes on. It's not about diversity.

MM I think that that's definitely a critique of her early work. And there are a lot of scholars that have critiqued her early work as being almost colorblind in orientation and saying that that's not necessarily a good thing. But she has taken on more sort of specific identity politics in the actual scripting of the shows. "Grey's Anatomy" in particular, is very well known for not addressing race or dealing with it in any particular way. But a more recent episode really had a situation where one of the white doctors was then asking her female coworkers of color, what is this that you're experiencing? And they're like, that's just normal for us. I mean, of course, we're going to get patients in here who are going to look at us and subtly ask for the white doctor. And so bringing an awareness to those sorts of identity politics and identity capital issues are something that I think that she's developing more of a voice for.

SM What about her wildly popular series, "Scandal"? Did she deliberately cast Kerry Washington as a strong, impeccably dressed, brilliant African-American woman?

MM The show is mirrored off of a real-life political adviser that was in George Bush's administration, a real political fixer who was an African-American woman. And so that was always going to be part of that particular show. And I think Kerry Washington sort of read the script and was like, please, please, please give me this part - is sort of how they talked about it. And her signing on to the show actually gave it quite a bit of legitimacy because prior to Scandal's debut, the last debut that you had of a television series with an African-American female protagonist was 1974.

SM In your recently released book, you wrote a chapter about the way Shonda Rhimes uses music and her shows. Give me examples of the different kind of music that she employs, depending on the show series and what she's trying to get across.

MM Well, the signature of each show is a little bit different, so they all have different tones. So "Grey's Anatomy" premiered in 2005 and so it had a very indie pop vibe to the soundtrack that sound sort of like this.

AS (Clip from "Grey's Anatomy") I can't think of any one reason why I want to be a surgeon, but I can think of a thousand reasons why I should quit.

MM And then in the show itself, although most of the soundtrack tends to be that kind of indie pop, it's fairly serious, weepy, you know, it's connecting to that emotional component of Grey's. They also have moments where they use this little breakout music that sounds kind of like this.

(music).

MM That is an indication that you're not supposed to take that scene very seriously. My partner and I call it sort of the funny music. It's this is - this is your cue that this is a place where you can laugh in this very serious show. And we want you to know that this is - this is not the serious part of the drama. And then when they want to move back to the drama, they'll revert to the more kind of indie pop music. On "Scandal" it's a little bit different because "Scandal" is almost entirely sourced by - heavily sourced with 1960s and 70s blues and funk music by artists of color. And so you've got lots of different kind of funky, trendy blues themes that kind of underscore Olivia as she's kind of walking and - and chasing the white hat. It sounds something like this.

AS [Clip from "Scandal"]

You to shut her down.

I need to see him.

Well, that's not possible.

You want me to shut her down, then I need to look him in the eye and know he's not lying.

He's not - Look at that schedule is insane, saying he has no time to see -.

He wants the favor, he wants my services, I do not work for him anymore. So you tell the president of the United States to make time.

MM In "How to Get Away with Murder", the signature changes because Shonda Rhimes isn't actually the showrunner, Peter Nowak is the showrunner. But Shonda Rhimes produces it - it's part of her production landscape. And in particular, I think the thing that you really sort of hear is very dark, deep techno, twisty sort of vibe that really frames Viola Davis and her students in this very dark manner and those kinds of riffs or themes sounds something like this.

AS [Clip from "How to Get Away with Murder"]

These poor parents.

I bet you the boyfriend did it.

I guess we'll see.

MM So a lot of times when you have those undertones, I mean, in one of the opening scenes of the series, they're hacking up a body and disposing of it. And the - and the music that plays under that obviously underscores that this is kind of dark, treacherous, you know, territory where we have literally crossed all lines of ethics and morality. It's just more of a mood enhancement - a kind of tone that it sets for the show overall.

SM It does feel like these days so many of the new series have terrific music as opposed to what we might have heard in more sort of cookie-cutter series of the past. What is Shonda Rhimes bring to it? Is she's sort of channeling someone else in music or is she leading the way?

MM So in some sense, is she absolutely is leading the way. She was one of the first to kind of embrace online musical content in terms of ABC just in general as a production company embraced kind of the online app, music stores, the iTunes, all of that, faster than other networks did. In "Grey's Anatomy", in particular, several artists that Shonda Rhimes picked a song of theirs that she just happened to like, became overnight sensations as a result of it premiering on the show. Or with "Scandal", for example, by the time she got to that, she had so much clout that some of the major recording artists and labels were willing to kind of sign over the rights that maybe they wouldn't have given her earlier in her career. She talks at length in her book about her ongoing kind of collaboration with Stevie Wonder, because Stevie Wonder songs are featured quite often in "Scandal". And she said in particular, when she asks, she'll send Stevie Wonder a scene and say, here's - here's what song I want to use. And he would come back and say, "OK, yes, you can absolutely use that" or "no, you can't. And here's why. Because what you're trying to match up here doesn't go with what I think that my music means". And so really developed conversation with Shonda Rhimes - and not just Stevie Wonder, but a lot of the other artists that are featured.

SM Shonda Rhimes and her world known as Shondaland, are absolutely beloved by fans. How did the show's come to reach that cult status with fans? What prompted it?

With "Scandal" in particular, you saw some changes because the "Scandal" crew very early on decided that they were going to storm Twitter and do it together, where they would live tweet during the broadcast of the show. And would actually have conversations with fans back and forth on Twitter about different plotlines, storylines, kind of interact with the conversation of what was going on. The thing that was really revolutionary about that is that first, no one else was doing it at the time. And number two, it's happening at a time where the broadcast industry is desperately trying to hold on to its older commercial model, where they want you to sit and watch the commercials. But with DVR technology and streaming, now you've got all these ways that you can kind of get around not watching the commercials. But if you're live tweeting with Shonda Rhimes and the cast of "Scandal", you're going to be doing it while the show is happening or in between the commercials. Right. So chances are you're going to watch it real time. You're going to be sitting there, like, glued to your TV and your screen and you're sort of second screening during it. And that really changed the game. If you noticed then when "Scandal" premiered in 2012, there weren't shows that had hashtags. And now literally every show at the bottom of the screen

has hashtag whatever. So it really changed the way that people thought about interacting with fans during real time program content.

SM Why do you think Shonda Rhimes has made such a splash in this genre? What about her past or her career path has sort of led her to be a breakout star in this regard?

MM Well, honestly, I think television has been monolithic for a very long time. And when you have an industry where 90 percent of the writers and show runners are white, straight men, you get a certain kind of narrative repeated and recycled over and over. So I think that's part of why people really embraced Shonda Rhimes, that she was willing to write stories for those of us who don't often see ourselves in media represented and not only to write us in, but to write us in real human ways.

SM Michaela Meyers is a professor of communications at Christopher Newport University and coeditor of "Adventure's in Shondaland: Identity Politics and the Power of Representation". Coming up next, one story of an Irish-American Christmas.

[00:15:22]

SM Imelda O'Reilly published her first poem when she was just seven years old. Now she's a filmmaker and a professor at James Madison University. Her short film, "Eggs and Soldiers", examines a single father and son struggling to adjust to life in New York after immigrating from Ireland. Imelda, your short film, titled "Eggs and Soldiers", went to 50 festivals - give me a brief summary of it.

IO "Eggs and Soldiers" is about a single Irish dad, first generation Irish immigrant who is living in New York, and he has two sons with two different mothers and he's a carpenter. So he's sort of a complex character in that he made the moral decision to raise his older son Ned on his own. And then he has a younger son who is biracial, that he has shared custody with - with his mother. And it's set on Christmas Eve and Christian drops off the two brothers and he's going to the pub to cash his construction check and also to buy the tree. But then he comes home without the tree slightly inebriated and everything goes south.

SM I love the opening scene with the father and sons driving to where he's going to cashes check. Let me play a little bit from that.

AS [Clip from "Eggs and Soldiers"]

[Singing] Devil is dead, devil is dead, some say the devil is dead and buried in Killarney. More say he rose again, more say he rose again, more say he rose again and joined the British army.

I like that. Say Bri-ish. Instead of British, because British people are Bri-ish.

Son, take your brother upstairs. I'm going to cash a construction check to buy the tree.

I want to go get the tree.

You know, I got a bag of coal once for Christmas.

SM I love the little boy, saying "Bri-ish, not British".

IO Actually, he - Jomil Robinson improv-ed that moment and I ended up using it in the film. And after my film "Eggs and Soldiers", he ended up getting cast on the Broadway tour of Kinky Boots.

SM Huh. I can see what a marvelous young actor he is. I also - I think the father is an interesting character in the short film. He's very likable and he starts out very likable. And you could see why both mothers would have been drawn to him. But at some point when the son confronts him in the bar and says, "I got to buy a Christmas present for my girlfriend", the father says "women love to complain, treat 'em mean, keep em keen". Where'd you get that?

IO You know, Irish people, I think, are natural born storytellers. It's part of the culture, you know, and then also there's a lot of great vernacular in the language. Treat them mean, keep them keen. When you create a story, it doesn't all come at once. I - I'm quoting David Lynch here, but it sort of comes in fragments. So the first image that sort of came to mind to me was of a - of a teenage boy who was a first, you know, the son of a first generation Irish immigrants in New York who couldn't afford a tree on Christmas Eve. And then another image I had was from growing up in Ireland, sort of going over to other people's houses around Christmas time. And oftentimes people would, you know, have quite a bit to drink because they're celebrating and it's Christmas. So I've always been interested in how joyful moments like that can turn sour and become more emotional and switch. So it was sort of inspired from stories that I heard growing up from friends.

SM How young were you when you came to America?

IO I was 18.

SM Was it hard to forge your new identity here or reclaim your old identity in Ireland?

IO Yes, I think being an immigrant can be very challenging, especially in the first year. I think that was probably one of the most challenging years of my life, moving from the countryside in Ireland to a big metropolis like New York City. But I think this idea of dualism in identities is a very complex one, and it's sort of something that I was scratching the surface of in "Eggs and Soldiers". Oftentimes when people emigrate, there can be a long gap before they return. And that was sort of what I had imagined for this character, Christia - that he'd left Ireland, you know, when he was 18 and then he didn't return, you know, for 10 years. And it creates this kind of arrested development. So you have this relationship where you romanticize the homeland, but then when you return, it's like - it's not the same anymore and everybody's lives have moved on. So it creates this gap of expectation on both sides, both the person who's left and then when you return, the people that - that are part of your life, your friends and family, have - their lives have moved on to. When you travel between two cultures, you sort of have to shift roles. Oftentimes when I go back, I get told that I have an American accent. So there is ways that you try to adjust so that you fit into both cultures.

SM Can you deepen your Irish accent for me for a second just so I can hear -

IO [in deeper Irish accent] Oh, brilliant. Of course I can. No problem at all.

SM You know, I - I think often about what it must be like for people who immigrate here. I've never heard someone say, as you have, that it's almost inevitably leads to a kind of arrested development, but I think that's very good. Did you have that also?

IO I think that I avoided that because of my pursuit in being an artist. So it's interesting to bring up the idea of what people call home. When you think about home, the years that you spend growing up in your homeland are sort of formative years, but then you have to create homes elsewhere, right? If you have to move for a job or move country. It's interesting what ties you to a place. Like I always remember growing up, my grandfather had this - these lilac bushes outside the house. So whenever - whenever I see lilacs or daffodils, it reminds me of, you know, my grandfather and growing up in Ireland. So it can be a scent, it can be an image that sort of makes you have that wanderlust of, you know, oh, I miss home. But then you also have the challenge of - of creating a home wherever you move to. And I think for me, the writing has always been where I felt at home like that was something that sort of - I started doing very young and maintained through my life, so, you know, if you have room of your own and are able to write, then for me, I can - I can function.

SM Tell me about the film in the works you have now. This is a longer adaptation of "Eggs and Soldiers". This one is called "We're the Kids in America", about three generations of Irish fathers.

IO Yes, it's a triptych. So it's three generations of Irish fathers and sons. So it's Ireland in 1957 and 1984 and New York in 2016. And it basically sort of details the cycle of dysfunction that's handed down from one generation to another within families.

SM Did your family experience any of that dysfunction? Did you see it up close?

IO I mean, I think growing up in Ireland, it was a colonized nation. And I feel that the culture is still - I think it takes a long time for a country to heal from colonization. And I've often heard people refer to, you know, alcoholism as the Irish flu. And then you also have the church and state. I think Catholicism and also the state can play a role in how a country heals from colonization. So it's not only just the fact that the country has been colonized. So I would say that how I grew up was in the context of that during that time, there wasn't a lot of economic wealth in Ireland. So I also think that the economics put a stress on the culture as well. You know, in Ireland in the 80s, there was a huge amount of immigration to the U.S. because the young people who were coming out of school, there were no jobs for them, you know, so everybody kind of most of the people from my secondary school, most of them emigrated to the U.S., at least my immediate circle of friends. Whereas my younger sister, her generation, all of her - her friends stayed in Ireland because it was sort of going through the Celtic Tiger and there was plenty of work for the younger generation coming out of schools.

SM Had you seen close friends sort of endure that family dysfunction?

IO I mean, I think it's not just specific to Ireland, I think, you know, it's based more broadly on trying to understand why dysfunction is handed down from one generation to another, you know? Raising a family is a very difficult job and raising, you know, being a parent is probably one of the most difficult jobs, so it's more just to explore the dynamic of human behavior.

SM What do you think that you have gleaned from taking this broader look at the three generations, that - that so much stays with us from one to the next?

IO Well, I'm a female writer writing a male story, and I'm coming from an empathetic place, you know. Really when I think about what I'm trying to explore is culpability. So where does culpability lie? You know, in terms of human behavior, it's not always on the individual. You have to sort of look at society in the church, in the state, in the culture and most definitely colonization, you know. So for me, it's a way to understand my history. And also, in - to some extent, it's not a fully documented history, so storytelling as a way of understanding it on a deeper level.

SM Why do you think that you are a female writing about a man's world? Why did you choose that rather than your own?

IO Well, people say, write what you know, but I think it's also write what you don't know. And it's my attempt at understanding, you know, the behavior of men more so that I can be empathetic to it and have a deeper understanding, not - not just of men, but I think in a way, if we as women want the behavior of men to change, we have to change, too. And so it's interesting to think about how one can be active and sort of create change in the world. And I think powerful stories can make people think about their behavior, create self-reflexive moments on life, and can be transcendental in a way to make us think about the philosophical aspects of our lives or the moral aspects of our lives, or why we behave the way we behave.

SM Imelda O'Reilly is a filmmaker and professor James Madison University. This was an encore presentation of an episode that originally aired in 2018. This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back.

[00:28:14]

SM Welcome back. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. John Wayne is the American cowboy. From that walk to that distinctive drawl, here he is in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

AS [Clip from "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"]

Valance couldn't make the Runaway. What is it now, Pilgrim? Your conscience?

Isn't good enough to kill a man. What - When I'm trying to build a life on it?

You talk too much. Think too much. Besides, you didn't kill Liberty Valance.

What?

Think back Pilgrim.

SM Liberty Valance was one of more than a dozen films John Wayne appeared in that was directed by John Ford. Those two classic Hollywood titans worked together for decades and they helped shape the American myth of the West. William and Mary Professor Emeritus Nancy Schoenberger tells their story in her book "Wayne and Ford: The Films, The Friendship and the Forging of an American Hero". Nancy, tell me first a little about John Wayne, where he grew up and how he first got into acting.

NS John Wayne was born Marion Morrison in Winterset, Iowa, in 1917. His father kind of didn't really make a great living. He worked as a pharmacist assistant, moved his family to a hardscrabble farm, a ranch in Southern California that didn't go so well. But Marion, a.k.a. John Duke Wayne, went to USC on a football scholarship and spent his summers working part-time to make some money as a third assistant property boy at Fox Studios and other studios. And that's how he met John Ford. So, he originally didn't think about being an actor. If anything, he was studying to be a lawyer. But he was struck by John Ford's mastery on the set. And this was the first true artist he'd met. And he thought, well, you know, I would like to be a director like this John Ford guy. But of course, as we know, his fate took a different turn.

SM It's so interesting also to learn that John Wayne, which is such an iconic name, was really a screen name. Did he give it to himself?

NS Well, no. He was kind of poached right from under John Ford's nose by the director, Raoul Walsh, to have a costarring role in a wonderful epic called "The Big Trail", 1930. And he plays a wagon train scout, you know, in buckskins and fringed jacket. And he's just charming in this early movie. It's his first big screen role. And it was Raoul Walsh who gave him that name.

SM What do you think John Wayne brought to the screen, even without the elaborate coaching of directors like John Ford?

NS You know, that's such a good question, because I'm a baby boomer. And for me, growing up, I did not like him at all. And I didn't really like his acting style. It always seemed kind of wooden to me. I didn't like his politics, but I came about it slowly over the decades, in part because my father always greatly admired John Wayne, as did many men in his generation. And so just on a lark, my husband and I decided to have a John Wayne film festival at home and we watched about 50 of his films. And, you know, very quickly on, we thought, well, you know, what he has is this incredible presence.

SM It's so funny to hear you say your father liked him, but you didn't necessarily. I remember my mother wasn't crazy about him, though she loved lots of other stars of his era. I wonder if he was more of a man's man than a lady's man.

NS Oh, absolutely. I think for a particularly our father's generation, he was the model of how to be a man, what it meant to be a man and a certain kind of American male - John Wayne was the model. And the writer, Garry Wills, who's written very intelligently about John Wayne and his influence on American politics, wrote that John Wayne's character did not really appeal to women, he appealed to men. However, that said, I was really delighted to see that a wonderful film critic like Molly Haskell was a huge John Wayne fan. And part of what she admired about him was, she saw him as more of a paternal figure who didn't go after every cute young thing and didn't, you know, didn't prey on women in his film roles or in life. Another big fan is Joan Didion, who is a huge John Wayne fan. And so that was interesting to me that there are some women writers who respond to that presence that John Wayne had, even though, yes, I agree, John Wayne is just the prototype for that kind of, you know, tough guy, man of my word, my way or the highway - a role that I think he actually became almost a caricature. But I wrote this book in part because I felt that with John Ford, the early John Wayne and the very late John Wayne, I think we see some really beautiful, nuanced performances and a very beautifully shaped idea of what it meant to be an American hero.

SM So what do you think John Ford saw in him? Initially, he saw a young, handsome, strapping actor who he saw play a character in a Western. What do you think John Ford wanted to shape him into?

NS Well, John Ford was known to be attracted to somewhat burly actors, so he liked that kind of physical type. And he immediately saw - when young Marion Morrison wandered into a scene that he was not supposed to be in - saw the impact he had on camera. So he knew that this guy had potential, but he didn't use him for a very long time. Later, he said, "I thought about casting the Duke" - or Duke Wayne because his nickname was Duke - "I thought about casting Duke, but I wanted to wait until his face got a little more character, a little more experience and lost some of that innocence". I think he found in John Wayne an actor who could be taught and molded. And John Ford, I believe, really set out to define that American hero. And he saw that John Wayne could embody it. And we see it with the first film that he really put John Wayne in, in "Stagecoach", 1939, where you had this incredible introduction of John Wayne, the actor, the character - he plays an outlaw, the Ringo kid who has broken out of prison. And the camera just swoops in on him and sort of pauses on his face. And it's just an amazing introduction of an actor that tells us this is somebody that we should pay attention to.

SM So the first one was in 1939. How long did they work together and how many Westerns did they make?

NS From 1939 to 1962, they made just under a dozen Westerns.

SM And what are some of the names of those Westerns?

NS Well, after "Stagecoach", I guess Ford is very well known for what's become known as "The Cavalry Trilogy". And that includes three films about the United States cavalry during the Indian Wars, "Fort Apache", "She wore a Yellow Ribbon" and "Rio Grande". So "The Man who Shot Liberty Valance", very important film made in 1962, as I mentioned, but I think probably the greatest Western that they made and one of America's great seminal films, everybody should know this film. And that's "The Searchers" 1956. It's ranked 12th by the American Film Institute, you know, top 100 American films of all time. And it is a searing, beautiful drama. Ford is at the height of his powers. It's probably John Wayne's greatest role. And he plays really a bad guy. He really plays he's the hero, but he plays a vengeful racist and very much going against the grain of the kind of reluctant hero that we see in some of the earlier films.

SM Do you think between the two of them, they created an image of dominance over the Native American that is hard for us to erase now?

NS That's a very good question. It's - it was something that John Ford himself was very aware of and was regretful about. He once said, "I've killed more Indians than Custer" in his films. Although I do think that he tried to somewhat balance the equation. Finally, in 1965, he made a movie called "Cheyenne Autumn", he did not use John Wayne, but he set out to make a film telling the story from the point of view of the Cheyenne. So John Ford, who really tried to, like any great artist, tried to show you the humanity of all the characters, came around to the realization that he really did show the Native Americans only in the light of a nation to be conquered.

SM You have a quote from John Wayne at the start of your book where he says, I've played the kind of man I'd like to have been. What was he actually like?

NS John Wayne was actually quite humble in real life. I think he knew that he owed his career to John Ford and remained just a great admirer of Ford his whole life, despite some very cruel treatment by Ford on the set of many of their films. And he was always quite honest about the fact that that character, the John Wayne character, was the character he created. He said that he learned how to walk from some of the stuntmen that he worked with when he was back making B-Westerns for the kiddy trade. He - he said he had to teach himself to say "ain't". He was very conscious that this was a construction, but like a lot of great actors, he sort of became that role, the man and the role just fuzzed. And so we always think of him - I mean, I think we think of John Wayne really in his Western garb, even though he made a lot of military films as well.

SM It's so surprising to learn from you that Ford would be cruel to Wayne on the set, but he really was. Give us some examples, and why do you think that was.

NS Well, the wonderful character actor Harry Carey Jr., son of the great early Western Star, Harry Carey, he was a part of John Ford's stock acting company. So he was in many of these Westerns. He once said John Ford was the only man who could make John Wayne cry. And it is true, he was - he really rode him mercilessly and humiliated him on the sets. And there were lots of complicated reasons, John Wade himself excused it by saying, well, I was the new kid, I was the novice. He was often acting as in stagecoach with really very accomplished actors like Thomas Mitchell and Claire Trevor, the great John Carradine. So he interpreted that cruel behavior as John Ford wanting to say, I'm not going to go soft on the new kid. That was John Wayne's interpretation. But John Ford was cruel often to many of his actors. It's not that unusual for directors to be really hard on the actors, first of all. But I think he took it a lot further, particularly after the Second World War, when John Wayne did not serve, whereas John Ford did quite with distinction as a photographer and his costar in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance", James Stewart really was a war hero. He would humiliate John Wayne and tell him "you don't even know how to salute". He would tell him he was a lousy actor. And as an example of his cruelty to other actors, when Harry Carey showed up, hung over on a set, John Ford knelt on his chest and cracked one of his ribs. So this was just part of this really tough, mean streak that John Ford had. Lots of reasons - he was an alcoholic. He did not drink while he was making a film, but he was a huge binge drinker as soon as filming was over. And he was also very conflicted in himself, in my opinion, about his own sexuality. So not everyone agrees with that interpretation, but I do go into that in the book. So I think there were a lot of reasons that Ford expressed some of that hostility on his sets.

[00:41:10]

SM Tell me about the greatness of John Ford as a film creator. What did he bring? And how early was it seen in his work?

NS Well, John Ford is credited, among other things, with bringing the Western sort of rescuing it from the matinee kiddy world, the world of, you know, serials and making it a genre suitable for adults and adult themes. But if you go back and see any of his films, particularly some of the early films, first of all, they're physically beautiful. He had a fabulous eye for composition. He even admitted that, although he did not like talking about his work. They're just stunning to watch. The acting is wonderful. He also set out to kind of define the mythic idea of America, American expansion, the ideal American hero, and also

a lot of strong women. Women are in the minority in his films, but when they do appear, they're very tough and strong. Maureen O'Hara being the best example, perhaps. So his ideal male, in my opinion, was Abraham Lincoln. And you see that in "Young Mr. Lincoln", you know, the Henry Fonda film. And Lincoln appears in "The Iron Horse", his early, silent film. So the fact that he was really obsessed with American history and wanted to tell a mythic tale of America, that's part of the great expanse of his work. He also just figured out how to tell stories visually. Martin Scorsese once said that every filmmaker worth his salt or her salt today owes a huge debt to John Ford, whether he knows it or not. And you see a lot of quotations in other films. You see the influence of "The Searchers", for example, on "Star Wars", that threshold image of John Wayne framed against the wilderness through the doorway of a prairie home - famous threshold image. You see that repeated in various forms in other films. So he kind of created a language of film that has been quoted and that has influenced many other filmmakers since then.

SM At the beginning of his career, he made socially progressive films like "The Grapes of Wrath" about the Dust Bowl migrants and "How Green Was My Valley" about Welsh coal miners.

NS Yes, in fact, so much so that those early films had him branded as a socialist in Hollywood, which is interesting because we think of him later in life, certainly with the 60s and the Vietnam War era, he became much more conservative, although he never was as conservative as John Wayne. But yes, he always had a feel for the - the working man, the underdog, and you see that definitely in the films you mentioned, "Grapes of Wrath" and "How Green Was My Valley". He identified - he was very proud of his Irish immigrant roots. And another thing I admire about his work is in this great telling of America's history, he recognized that this is a nation of immigrants and his early films particularly - I mean, given his latest 1962 of "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance", this little prairie town, there's a Swede, you know, there's Italian, there's African-American, you know, Black soldiers, there's Mexicans. You really see America as a melting pot. And that was something he embraced in his movies.

SM He collaborated with John Wayne on a really great non-Western film, "The Quiet Man", a story, a sort of love story of Ireland.

NS Yes, indeed. A much beloved film, even though there are some scenes that are - kind of make you cringe today when John Wayne's character, Sean Thornton, a retired boxer, kind of practically drags Maureen O'Hara by her hair. At that point in their career, John Ford needed John Wayne to make that movie. It was a project he'd wanted to do for years, very close to his heart because of his love of Irish culture, and he identified with that character. So John Ford needed John Wayne to help him get the - get the movie made. They went to John Wayne's old B-movie studio, Republic, and he had to promise to do another cavalry picture, making it the trilogy, in order to get the green light, to make "The Quiet Man".

SM Did John Wayne go on to be a greater pop culture figure than John Ford, would you say?

NS Yes. In terms of the movie-going public - just because actors, usually, famous actors are usually better known than famous directors or filmmakers. The filmmakers are known among cineastes. And I think John - John Ford is recognized as one of the great directors of the last century. But in terms of popular culture and, you know, most Americans, John Wayne would be more identified because we - we see him, we see his face, we see his

image on the screen in countless films. John Wayne made 150 movies and only won one Academy Award for "True Grit", which was not a Ford movie. John Ford made about 140 films and almost half of those were silent films.

SM You were telling me before the interview that you talked about these Westerns with a class of your college students and they'd never seen a Western.

NS Well, that really surprised me. I taught a course on many of these Westerns to a freshman seminar at William and Mary. And I think I had 13 students. 11 of them had never even seen a Western. Now, a few of them were quite knowledgeable and knew these works very well. But the rest of them, it was a new genre. They did not know Westerns. And for my generation, as a baby boomer, we grew up on Westerns. And I think that the generation that grew up on Westerns learned a lot of important lessons from watching them. I mean, in 1959, there were 26 Westerns on TV. So that tells you something. But most of those Western heroes and most of the themes, many themes that emerged from those TV westerns were anti-racist, pro-immigrant, anti-mistreatment of women. I mean, a whole group of what we would call progressive values, you see wrapped up in this package of these tough, you know, heroic guys, men of few words. But they often sought to do the right thing.

SM Yeah. But they also were violent and racist in themselves and anti-Native American and all kinds of other values that probably seeped in.

NS I think you see that more in later films. I'm a big fan of Clint Eastwood, but I think with Clint Eastwood there was a movement away from those kind of core values. But if you go back and watch episodes of "Bonanza", you know, the bad guys were the guys who are out shooting up the Indian villages. The bad guys are the racists. And the good guys try to come to terms with how to live with other people and other, you know, nationalities in a community. So if you go back and you see those early TV westerns, you will find a lot of progressive values expressed in those Westerns.

SM So if those of us who really have not been John Wayne fans or seen such a movie and you could recommend one, what should we look for?

NS It's almost impossible to do just one. Can I do four?

SM Yeah, yeah.

NS All right. Let's start with "Stagecoach", because it was his reintroduction to the - he'd already been in "The Big Trail", but that did not make any money and then he disappeared into B-Westerns for almost ten years. But "Stagecoach" reintroduces him and he's wonderful in it. And "The Searchers", 1956, probably his best film, and arguably Ford or one of Ford's greatest films. And he plays a really tough guy, a really mean son of a gun. But who is humanized in interesting ways. "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance", another great film in which, as John Ford once said, "the hero doesn't win and the winner is heroic". So those are among his great John Ford Westerns. But I would also - in my book, I talk about three Westerns he made that were not done with John Ford, and that's "True Grit", he won his only Academy Award for True Grit, but also "The Shootist", which was John Wayne's last film, 1976. And it's an incredibly moving film with a marvelous performance. Everyone - but John Wayne really stands out. And it's moving because he plays a gunslinger, a shootist, dying of cancer. And John Wayne had already beaten lung cancer but a few years later, he would die of stomach cancer. So he was facing his own

mortality when he played this famous gunslinger facing his own mortality. And it's a wonderful movie. Don Siegel was the director and made more poignant that it was John Wayne's last film. So I would say, put that on your list.

SM Well, Nancy, "Wayne and Ford: The Films, the Friendships and the Forging of an American Hero", great work. Thank you for talking with me.

NS Thank you, Sarah, I appreciate it.

SM Nancy Schoenberger is a Professor Emeritus at William and Mary. Support for With Good Reason comes from the University of Virginia Health System, a National Cancer Institute designated cancer center, researching and developing the treatments of tomorrow, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason, is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis, Jamal Millner and Aiden Carroll. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.