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# WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

## Gender & Relationships

And Other Topics

With **Joshua Lorimer**, Actual Play Podcast Host,  
and **Martha Wells**, New York Times Bestselling Author

## World Showcase

Susan Stradiotto's *Caetera*  
— interviewed by Aaryan Balu

## Marriage

An Expression of Cultural Values  
— by Adam Bassett

## World of Wick

The Continental Hotel  
— by Ianara Natividad



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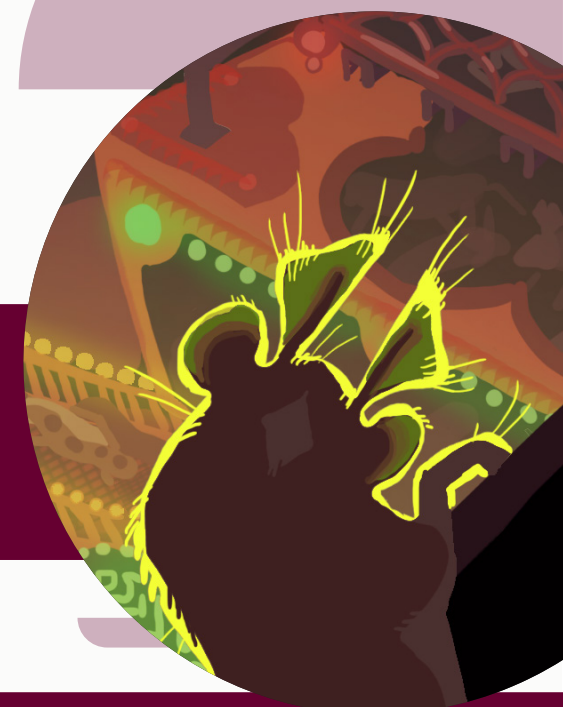
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# WORLD SHOWCASE: SUSAN STRADIOTTO'S CAETERA

INTERVIEW

WRITING



*Interviewed by Aaryan Balu*

*Susan Stradiotto is an author who has been chronicling the world of Caetera through her Caeteran Tales novels, which follow the story of an alternate world that draws its population from Earth. We got a chance to discuss her world, its customs, and some unique relationship paradigms that have developed. Read on to find out more.*

My passion is creation, worldbuilding, good stories, and great characters. I've lived all around the country, but I settled in Minnesota and had three wonderful (and also creative) children who are well on their journeys to leaving the nest. We play DnD (Dungeons & Dragons) every week as a family, and I'm co-authoring a steampunk YA (young adult) fantasy with my son. I've developed a long career in software, but truly look forward to the days that I can write and create more frequently.

Caetera is an alternate Earth with a single sun, similar seasonality, and similar climate. There are, however, four moons which affect the tides greatly between the seasons, and as a result, the main city in which the story takes place is coastal but sometimes feels like it is much further inland.

The people native to Caetera have different features that are adapted to their lifestyles within the world. Natural resources are different, which limits the ability to have some common Earthly items of convenience. For example, there are no concentrations of metal. Therefore, the people rely on fire and other natural sources of light. There are bioluminescent flora that allow people to extend their days into the evening. Time is also relative to the world, and human lives are extended. Some humans (over extended periods of time) have learned how to travel between Earth and Caetera. This serves as a footing for a blend of cultures within the stories from different Earth periods.

*To a new reader coming into Caetera for the first time, what would be your broad pitch overall? What kind of stories and themes do you try to explore?*

Those are two vastly different questions.

For a reader coming into Caetera for the first time: one story follows a character who is on the same journey. It explores how a person with a type-A personality, someone who prides herself in her Ivy League college education, adjusts when her very foundation of her knowledge is shaken to the core. One key theme explored through the journey into Caetera questions the fast-paced corporate lifestyle by reminding us of historical cultures and simpler times. However, there are undercurrents of intrigue and a society that has formed blended system of politics. The focus drifts back to social interaction as opposed to technological advancement.

Also, I worked hard to make the Caeteran cultures free of many of the bonds and labels we put on ourselves in society today. Bisexuality is the norm. Genders are still present, but there are some gender-neutral characters as well. Love (in all forms) is celebrated and presided over by one of the Nine Holy Unities.

Another aspect of the stories involves servitude, indentured or otherwise, and questions relationships that involve power over one another in various forms.

*I definitely want to get to the relationships you mentioned because there's a lot there to unpack. But first, what's the origin of Caetera, in-world? Where does it come from, and why did humans arrive there?*

There isn't a special creation story, and if I were forced to pin one down, I'd say it would align with a scientific theory such as another place that

resulted from something like the big-bang. There are religious beliefs that have been melded over extensive periods of time to develop something that celebrates balance. There are teachings and writings within Caetera that point to a single creator of the Unities, but it's not explored in that manner.

The transition between worlds could be considered alternate dimensions.

Humans live in Caetera because there are some with innate abilities (called Flares). Centuries ago, these people found and traveled through the rifts between the dimensions. From there, they brought others and reproduction occurred, resulting in a combination of humans born in Caetera and on Earth. At one point, there was a disease that wiped out a great number of people and restricted reproduction. After this, the society of humans in Terrin   (the main city) began actively recruiting others from Earth.

*How many civilizations exist beyond Terrin  ?*

At this point in the stories, I've only introduced a series of tribes that exist in the mountains surrounding Terrin   and the plains to the west. There are three tribes who are related biologically: Suebhi, J'thungi, and Nekhar are nomadic and are loosely based on ancient Germanic tribes. The N'jari live in the northern mountains, and the Tehruingi live in the mountains to the south. As far as these other cultures on Caetera are concerned, the naming of cities is a "Terrinian" custom, and they simply refer to their settlements as the [tribe's name] Stahm, e.g. the Suebhan Stahm.

There are other civilizations I have yet to explore. One that I have in mind for a future work is another human civilization across the Penrairie Sea to the east.

*How developed are these people in Terrin   and beyond?*

The Suebhi, J'thungi, and Nekhar have evolved to the lives they live. They're taller than humans by more than a head. They live closely and have a symbiotic/telepathic connection with an oversized horse-like species called the cavali. They serve as steeds but also companions, and there is one baked

into my stories who forms a connection with Elle (one of the main characters). The N'jari are the least developed. Their features are geared toward warmth. They have fur instead of hair, as well as a mane. Their arms are extended, and they're mostly bipedal, but they can run on all fours. Those are the ones I've developed far enough to play a significant role in the story.

Technology isn't a "thing" in Caetera. Evolution and innovation has been more natural than technological. Flares (the aforementioned innate abilities), however, allow humans to accomplish many tasks that allow for better comforts among the humans. The Flares are based in various forms of science. They're categorized after Physical, Chemical, Biological, and Psychological sciences. Each person is unique, and they have to practice/develop Flares once they're in Caetera.

They might show signs of Flare on Earth, but they usually don't know the extent. They may have felt





like they had a special talent in one area or another but attribute it to aptitude. In Caetera, those abilities are amplified.

*How long have Caeteran civilizations had to develop? From the sound of the evolution, it seems like quite a while.*

Centuries or more. I consider it a mirror to Earth, so there would be history that people have long since forgotten.

*How many generations did it take to develop the height/telepathy/fur?*

Oh geez. I haven't worked that out in detail. I would assume hundreds of generations.

*How long does the recorded history stretch?*

My current recorded "cycle" is 3,683. A cycle is roughly six months. So history has only been recorded for what humans would count as 1800 years or so. But the people native to Caetera would have diverged and developed long before that.

*How do they go about actively recruiting from Earth? Do Earthlings know about the process?*

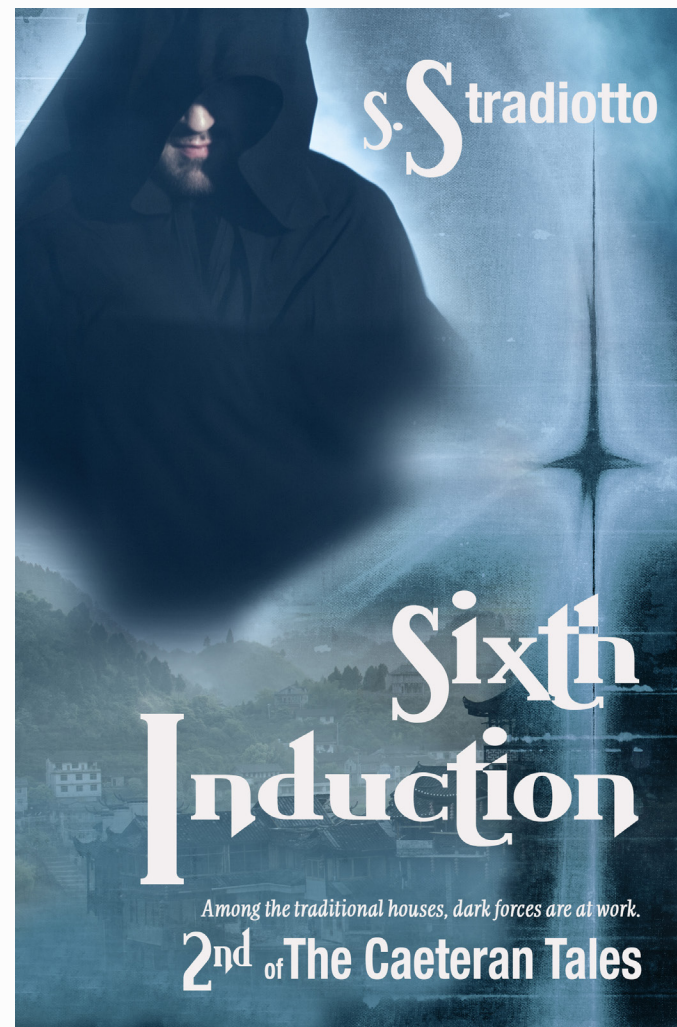
My first book, [Open Season](#), is all about this. One of the primary characters actually considers it a hunt, thus the book's title. There are people who, through a physical Flare, have the ability to see potential by the colors in Earthlings' auras. Earthlings do not know about this process, and the ones who arrive in Caetera have a decision to make once they are "recruited."

*How exactly does that process work? What exactly can you say about the process and the effects on the person's life? Do they pull children or adults, and what are the repercussions on Earth?*

The process gives away the story. Biologically speaking, their eyesight is overly sensitive, and certain colors lead them to believe the Earthling will have a specific Flare. I leave it mysterious how each one further develops once they land in Caetera.

They only pull adults. Children wouldn't have enough time to have developed their aptitudes to the extent that would be noticeable, and they would still have a great deal of time to change and develop new talents. When looking for people, they are searching for young adults and those who have come to a point in life where they have mostly discovered themselves. The stories also emphasize that self-discovery that happens after people first feel like they are settling into life. It's almost a second coming of age opportunity for the people they select.

In the stories, we don't see the repercussions on Earth – yet. That's something I might one day explore, but I'm not finished exploring the first part of the question just yet.



*I want to touch on something you mentioned earlier – the planet has no metals? How did that come about, and what's the effect?*

I've put together a sampling of different minerals and elements, not as extensively as I could have, but metal is simply something the world does not produce naturally. I think some of this idea was inspired by my business life and a question, "What if there was no metal in the world?" It has pretty broad impact in making the world different. I've had to consider everything down to a zipper. However, since there is a Flare that involves chemistry, there are some people who have developed a harder form of glass from the black sands natural to the world. Weapons consist of staves mostly, and blades are made from this hardened glass or from gemstones.

*Now that's fascinating. Could you explain how Flares work in a bit more detail?*

That's mostly magic. It's innate to the person. For example, I have one character whose Flare is Biological in nature. Through touch, she is able to control some bodily functions, e.g. the flow of hormones. It gives her the ability to relax or excite in various ways through a person's biology. There are some that are telepathic, and various flavors of that. Some are empathic.

Physical Flares typically enhance strength and agility and potentially some other senses, making them appear superhuman. Chemical Flares range anywhere from strong skills in the kitchen to pharmaceutical production. There are limitations on everyone, though. Typically, there are one or two enhancements to something that would otherwise seem natural.

It's probably also a theme in my world. Flare is also more honed than learned. So, as you try new things, you extend yourself and learn what you are really capable of.

Flares are as extensible as one's imagination. That being said, I always try to instill some limitation or negative effect to a person's abilities as to not introduce too many MacGuffins.<sup>1</sup> They play a part

in everyone's role in society. Physical Flares are the most common. Dressmakers have a physical Flare that deals with the tiny details necessary to put together certain garments. Sailors might have a physical Flare that involves balance so that they feel more at home at sea. Biology typically goes with medical applications or healing. I try to tie Flares to the science side to keep them somewhat grounded.

*What can you tell me about some of the ways Terrinde has developed socially, as a civilization?*

I'd almost call it blending rather than developing. As I mentioned before, time is relative, so people don't age as fast in Caetera. As a result, it's a blend of people from different Earth periods of time—mostly from the Renaissance through present day. Religions have merged and the concept of balance further developed within the Unities. Where there is war, there is also peace. Where there is love, there is also violence. Where there is chaos, there is also order. And so on...

The religious leaders take part in ruling the people along with the concept of the Benefactory Houses and the king and queen (who are always twins). The Benefactory Houses are run by benefactors who are charged with caring for the people brought into Caetera from Earth in addition to tending to the business within society.

*So are the Benefactory houses akin to noble households?*

Yes. Each benefactor has patronage to some factor within society.

The king and queen are mostly ceremonial throughout the majority of the series. But, as I mentioned above, the royalty are twins. They are not in a romantic relationship. My main benefactor character holds an open relationship with the queen.

*How are the king and queen chosen, when one or both dies?*

When one dies, the other is relieved of their duties and a new set of twins is brought to Caetera from Earth. Traditionally, that is.

<sup>1</sup> Something which serves merely as a trigger for the plot.



*Why has balance become such an important part of the world? You've mentioned the Unities as the pantheon; what does that look like?*

Yes, the Unities are a pantheon (the “Ennead”) nine pairs of deities, each pair representing one thing that is worshiped. For each Unity, there is a priest and priestess who also serve as companions in their faith and guidance for their followers. Who a person worships is a matter of choice but might be well aligned with their Flare. For instance, Yster, my character with a biological Flare worships the Sixth Holy Unity: Vaenar and Vaena, the god and goddess of wisdom, medicine, and healing. I did research on several different pantheons and worked the concepts into pairs that I used to create my own.

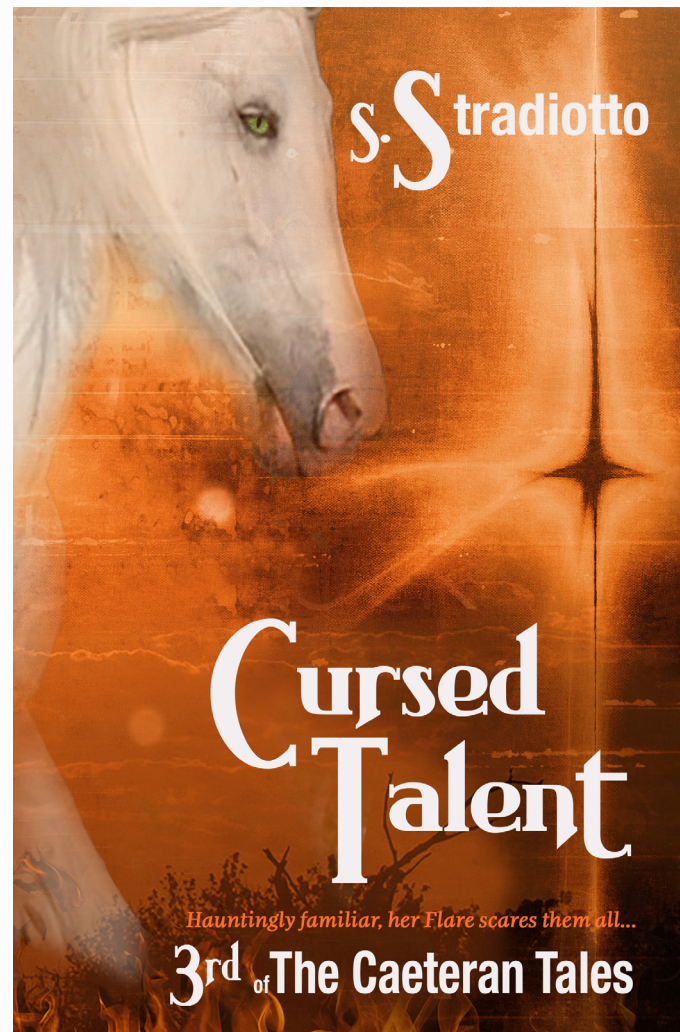
*What's the motivation for the choice of pairs, and how does that faith express itself in daily life?*

The choice is somewhat philosophical. I believe that for people to be harmonious together, there needs to be complementary and, often, opposite strengths and weaknesses. The expression in everyday life is a bit more complicated. I'd say the biggest area where I have explored the reflection in daily life is with the Ehrosi (people trained and honored in love and sexual arts of any chosen flavor). Though the Ehrosi's practice is blessed by the Second Holy Unity, it is a fine balance between healthy and dark desires. In my series, I explore some of those boundaries—including turning toward the Ehrosi's practice for reasons other than natural desire and affection. One theme I explore here is addiction to something that is so pleasurable and how one might recover from that and still exist in a society that sanctions it.

There are many other expressions, though they are pretty subtle. Typically, the values in two characters that are attracted to one another will reflect some of these principles anywhere I bring them together. They serve more as undercurrents to the character interactions and plotlines.

*Can you describe how Ehrosi society work some more? And what exactly is the Second Holy Unity?*

I'll answer the second question first. It's the easy one.



The Second Holy Unity is the pairing of love. Alphinus (the god) represents the harsh forms of love, including punishment, disapproval for the sake of seeing your loved one grow, command, and many of the demanding expectations that people have as a part of Love. Alphiné represents all things gentle and sweet about love—the tendency to touch and show affection, comforting someone when they're struggling, acts that heal one's soul.

People enter into the Ehrosi society by choice but are invited in because of their psychological Flare. They tend toward empathetic and have an affinity in one way or another for understanding how to behave or what to do in order to reflect the values of either Alphinus or Alphiné. I have one character who, through the series becomes, the priestess for Alphiné (called Votara d'Alphiné). She comes to this position as a part of her recovery from some very traumatic sexual experiences in her past.

*Speaking of love and sexuality, you mentioned that they differ a bit from Earth. How and why did these changes, like the bisexual norm, come about, and what effect do they have on social relations?*

This may not be a popular opinion, I think that to some extent, most people have had some bisexual tendency. When Earthlings come to Caetera in their early adulthood, all the changes they face allow them to be open to more than just differences in places, creatures, and other things that can be seen. The world itself as well as the presence of the Ehrosi and the Unity that teaches such things strips away some inhibitions that, I believe, are natural within modern cultures.

In my stories, the first real vocalized expression of this difference happens in Book 4 (yet to be released). Elle is feeling an attraction to another woman that she can't reconcile because she's never had a relationship with a woman before. This character questions why Elle feels so nervous and comments on how new she must be to Caetera.

Another thing I've included is the fact that marriages are absent in Caetera, not necessarily by plan, but because there doesn't seem to be a need for such a construct in a society where people discover themselves and others regularly. Relationships in general tend to be driven by mutual desire and balance for as long as they would naturally run.

*So it's mostly unmarried pairs (or more) of any combination?*

Yes.

*How does property get passed on? Or, is that less of a concern with the extended lifespans?*

It is less of a concern. Tradespeople live and work in their homes and would pass it on to their apprentices. People who serve at public institutions are granted property, typically a cottage in which to live. On the surface, it seems very peaceful. For many, it is. Benefactor houses are slightly different. Since a benefactor's duty to society is to grow and develop people new to Caetera, he or she would also groom a successor. The houses themselves

aren't really owned by the person though. They are considered government property (albeit an odd one).

They are also very unmaterialistic. For example, if there is a ceremony that requires everyone to dress fancy, the clothing that would never be worn again is returned to the dressmakers to be recycled.

*Are there any other aspects of your world that you might consider your favorite?*

I thoroughly enjoyed the process of blending concepts from different historical time periods to come up with a different answer than what we experience in reality today. If pressed, the eccentricity of the people and the Flare would probably be the two things I'd pick.

*What are some examples of these "different answers," to help fuel people who might want to try that style of worldbuilding?*

I don't think these are anything profound. It's mostly a matter of cause and effect. One example would be the lack of marriage as a result of the more open religious beliefs. Another might be the logic of mentoring young adults into a further level of maturity and self-actualization. In the governing of society, I also blended some political theories: Theocracy + Oligarcy + a tid bit of Socialism, choosing aspects that worked for my society. 🌌

*You can find Susan's work on her [website](#) and on Amazon; her first book in the **Caeteran Tales** is called "Open Season." She can also be found on [twitter](#).*

*This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.*

*Special thanks to Susan for taking the time to speak with us and share a bit about her work. If you have a world of your own that you would like to share, [apply](#) for one of our future world showcases for a chance to appear in Worldbuilding Magazine.*



# GLOSSARY OF SEX AND GENDER

RESOURCE 

*Cathy, the Overprepared GM and M. E. White*

A few articles in this issue discuss sex and gender. Rather than explain it multiple times, we created this brief glossary for those who may need a crash course in these topics and how we define the terms.

- **Agender:** Lacking gender; identifying as having no gender.
- **Androgyne:** An individual who lacks distinguishing sex or gender characteristics, especially in a species that has sexual reproduction.
- **Asexual:** Not experiencing sexual attraction. Some asexuals still desire a romantic relationship, while others are uninterested in a romantic relationship.
- **Asexual Reproduction:** A type of reproduction wherein the offspring are genetic clones of the original. One benefit of asexual reproduction includes an exponential population growth curve, though there is less genetic variation in a species that reproduces this way.
- **Fertilization:** In sexual reproduction (below), the process of creating offspring by combining genetic material.
  - **Dioecious:** The quality of needing more than one parent to fertilize, also known as outcrossing, cross-fertilization, or allogamy.
  - **Autogamous:** The quality of being able to self-fertilize.
- **Gender:** Social and psychological categories associated with biological sexes but defined by culture and composed of multiple components.

- **Gender Identity:** The feeling of belonging to a gender. For example, a person may feel like a woman, connecting with the meaning femininity is given within her culture and feeling drawn to roles women undertake.
- **Gender Expression:** A person's performance and display of gender identity using gender signifiers and taking on gender roles. For example, a person may use masculine mannerisms or dress in ways that men of the society often do. This is also known as gender presentation.
- **Gender Role:** Professional or relational roles associated with gender within a culture. For example, a person of the traditional Samoan third gender, *fā'afafine*, may be expected to help the mother with regular household chores whereas in western culture, a comparable child might be treated as a boy and typically assigned more solitary weekly chores involving taking out trash or doing yard work.
- **Gender Signifiers:** The cues by which people signal gender within a particular culture. For example, modern-day Western culture views the hosiery-covered calf as a feminine signifier. However, in the court of Louis XIV of France, it was a hallmark of male fashion. Signifiers may change depending on place and time, for example in modern-day Western culture, the same hosiery-covered calf is seen as neutral for male ballet dancers or superheroes in costume.
- **Gender Binary:** A system defined by a cultural belief in exactly two opposite and disjunct genders—male and female.

- **Gender-neutral:** Not aligning with a specific gender; applicable to any gender.
- **Hermaphrodite:** An individual who has reproductive organs and characteristics of both sexes. For example, banana slugs are natural hermaphrodites.
- **Intersex:** Being a sex which does not fall neatly and consistently into one of the main reproductive categories. For example, humans with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome might be genetically male but develop female genitalia.<sup>1</sup>
- **Neuter:** Lacking reproductive organs or the capacity to reproduce sexually.
- **Non-binary:** A system that is not gender binary.
- **Sex:** Biological categorization based on reproduction. In humans, this is usually decided by reproductive functions, genetics, or both. For example, a human may be classed as male, female, or intersex based on some combination of their chromosomes or genitalia. Also a term for sexual intercourse.
- **Sexual Behavior:** The display of sexuality; ranging from the psychological and physiological, such as arousal, to the physical, such as intercourse, to the social, such as courtship.
- **Sexual Dimorphism:** Differences in size or shape that characterize different sexes.
- **Sexual Orientation:** What someone is attracted to sexually<sup>2</sup>. Some cultures merge sexual orientation with gender identity.
- **Sexual Reproduction:** The process of creating offspring by combining genetic material from different sources. One benefit of sexual reproduction is greater genetic variance in the gene pool, which grants a species a greater likelihood of adapting to changes. The tradeoff is that it requires two parents for each offspring, slowing reproduction, and also introducing the difficulty of finding a sexually compatible partner.
- **Transgender:** Relating to a person whose gender identity does not match the gender they were assigned at birth based on visible genitalia<sup>3</sup>. With visibly intersex babies (for example, babies born with both penis and vulva), western doctors have traditionally assigned a gender based on their own judgement and recommended early surgery to align the body to match the assigned gender, but this becoming less common. 🦋

<sup>1</sup> Hida. About 1-2% of people are naturally intersex. "Intersex Campaign for Equality." *Intersex Campaign for Equality*, 1 April 2015, [www.intersexequality.com/how-common-is-intersex-in-humans/](http://www.intersexequality.com/how-common-is-intersex-in-humans/). Accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Most cultures have concepts of appropriate sexual behavior, but sexual orientation was not seen an important trait until the rise of psychiatry. Modern Western culture predominantly organizes orientation into hetero-, homo-, and bisexual categories, but be careful when applying these categories to other cultures which may have different categories or contexts for sexual orientation. "Sexual Behavior." *Sexual Behavior Definition | Psychology Glossary*, <https://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.php?term=Sexual+Behavior>.

<sup>3</sup> This is a term and concept applicable to modern Western culture. However, be careful when applying it to other cultures which may have different categories or contexts for gender.



# XENO BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

*Cathy, the Overprepared GM*  
Art by Anna Hannon

In 1969, Ursula K. LeGuin published the landmark novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. The protagonist is a human diplomat living in a world of very human-like aliens. Unlike us, however, they're androgynes who develop sexual characteristics only when they're in their equivalent of heat or rut. Crucially, LeGuin explored how this biological difference would influence the aliens' culture. Her book examines the links between sex and gender, as well as between biology, society, and culture. The book was a revelation. It fueled a wave of feminist, sci-fi, and sociological thought experiments that continue to this day.

One strain of this discourse leads to examinations of human gender in works like Margaret Atwood's feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, or the investigative thriller *Orphan Black*. However, another strain of science fiction focuses on creating sentient species with different reproductive biology and exploring the societies which could arise as a result. For example, in her *Xenogenesis* series, Octavia Butler imagines a race of Oankali who have three sexes—male, female, and ooloi. The ooloi can manipulate genetic material and are biologically compelled to interbreed in this way with other species rather than reproduce with their own species. As another example, in *The Books of the Raksura* series, Martha Wells imagines a fantasy world where two species, Aerial flyers and Abora climbers, have merged to create a culture with six genders. Their society lacks the concepts of heterosexuality, monogamy, and chastity, although they do have firm, yet non-human, gender roles.

If we want to do something similar as worldbuilders and create a new species whose differing reproductive biology results in very different societies, we should first start by

understanding what options exist in terms of reproduction.

## SEXUAL REPRODUCTION

Humans have two biological sexes necessary for procreation. Across all human cultures, this distinction between male and female is important, which is why societies develop the concept of gender. Now, each society conceptualizes gender differently. Many have two genders, while others recognize three or more. Gender roles may be tight or loose, and the roles themselves may differ from society to society. However, if we change the number of sexes necessary for reproduction, we can create cultures with greatly different concepts of gender and relationships.

**Asexual reproduction** is uncommon in multicellular organisms. Scientists think it may be more beneficial in extremely stable environments, but sexual reproduction is generally more useful in changing environments because it promotes greater diversity. So, we could imagine a complex asexual species that mutates and gains diversity in other ways—perhaps through an ability to more actively control their genetic inheritance or perhaps through a symbiotic virus that transfers genetic material among species. Such a species would have no concept of gender at all, and probably no need for romantic relationships or anything similar. However, their tribalism may be even stronger than that of humans because they don't have our intrinsic need to mate outside of family.

**Hermaphrodites** would probably also not develop genders as we know them; however, they would still have sexual reproduction, so they may very well develop the concept of romantic relationships.

BIOLOGY 

CULTURE 

GENDER & RELATIONSHIPS 

Most corals, earthworms, slugs, and snails are hermaphroditic, as are many flowering plants. One interesting twist is that not all hermaphroditic species have all sexual characteristics at the same time. For example, some may be biologically male or female depending on the environment. They may switch from one to the other if all the community members are currently expressing the same sex. Among species that do this (for example, clown fish, parrot fish, goby, and wrasse), it's often the largest or most dominant member that switches, although whether the switch goes from male to female or female to male depends on the species. Alternatively, we could imagine hermaphroditic species who change sexual expression as part of their life cycles. So for example, they may be neuter as a youngling, then become male as an adult, and then transition to female in old age (or some other ordering). In this case, gender and age/cohort concepts may be intertwined in a way they aren't with humans. Inheritance in this case might be a little different with matrilineal societies being the default.

**More reproductive sexes** are also theoretically possible. Two reproductive sexes make sense on earth because we have double helix DNA, so each parent can contribute one strand. However, the alien equivalent of DNA might follow very different patterns. Perhaps they could have something like a triple helix design with three strands of a DNA analog, in which case they could have three or more sexes. In this case, I could imagine that they would still develop a concept of gender, but their understanding of genders would probably assume a trichotomy rather than a dichotomy. Presumably, relationships would revolve around triples rather than couples, although I could also imagine a situation where there are stable couples and a promiscuous third sex.

**Neuter** sexes would also significantly affect the development of the concept of gender. Many human societies develop the idea of a third gender to describe people who don't neatly fit into the pattern of one of the two primary genders. However, if there were a true neuter sex that was not involved in reproduction (for example, worker ants), then it would redefine the other genders by their contrast

with the neuter, rather than solely by their contrast with each other. In some ways, both reproductive sexes would be in contrast to the neuter sex. Evolutionarily, neuters would be predisposed to help their siblings' families in the same way mothers and fathers do their children. If the species develops clear gender roles, the neuters may be the servant, leader, warrior, or long-distance traveler, but they likely wouldn't be a protected, cosseted class. Also, neuters would only work in species that had large numbers of children, enough to offset the potential children that are lost due to the neuters' sterility by increasing the likelihood that the sibling children live.

## DIMORPHISM

Humans have some sexual dimorphism, but this dimorphism doesn't clearly differentiate the two sexes. Although men are larger and heavier than women on average, a particular man may be smaller and lighter than a particular woman. Similarly, there may be subtle differences in shape, fat level, and bone structure, but a particular woman may have a lower fat percentage, stronger muscles, broader shoulders, slimmer hips, or heavier facial structures than a particular male. But imagine a society where dimorphism is much different than in humans.

**Size** differentiation is very great in some animals. Mandrill males, for example, are typically close to three times the size of mandrill females. Many people assume that this difference is the logical way for species to be dimorphic, with a smaller, weaker child-bearer and a bigger, stronger impregnator that can defend the mother. However the greatest dimorphism often goes in the other direction. Larger females have better nutritional reserves to supply healthy children, so many species naturally select for larger females. Angler fish are an extreme case of this, with the male angler fish being as much as 500,000 times lighter than the female angler fish.<sup>1</sup> They have a parasitic sexuality where the male angler fish permanently attaches to the female, merging their circulatory systems, living off her nutrition, and supplying sperm in return. Societies of species with this sort of extreme dimorphism would likely have much firmer and more consistent gender roles. Gender would probably be tied to specific roles;

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/49330-animal-sex-anglerfish.html>



there might be little flexibility in adopting roles outside one's gender. On the other hand, species with little or no dimorphism would likely have less consistent gender roles than human societies, even if they have a consistent understanding of gender.

Decoration differences between the genders can be another aspect of dimorphism. Usually, this occurs in species that have one sex choosing or withholding approval of the other, more flamboyantly adorned sex. Peacocks and their much less glamorous counterparts, peahens, are a perfect example of this dynamic. Likely, species with significant dimorphism in decoration would have clearly defined genders and social dynamics with obvious pursuer vs chooser roles.

**Mobility** differences are less common between genders in a species but can result in strong gender role differences. If one of the genders is sedentary and the other is mobile, then they'd naturally develop societies with major differences in profession and stereotypical personality. For example, perhaps large, rooted females create eggs and mobile males travel around to fertilize them, or perhaps one gender has wings and the other lacks them. Regardless of the type of mobility, one sex being more mobile than the other would substantially affect gender roles, especially regarding property ownership, professional opportunities, and how courtship works.

## CHILDBEARING

The third major sex-based difference is childbearing. Among humans, pregnancy requires the female to undergo significant risk and puts a heavy toll on her body. Then, human females need to nurture their babies through infancy, which draws further on their reserves. After weaning, the human children still have a long dependent period where adults care for their needs.

Our big, flexible brains need all that time to develop and then learn to survive, but this extended maturation time comes with significant costs: caretakers must put considerable time and energy into raising and protecting the child, and the mother is vulnerable during pregnancy and recovery. To compensate, evolution has molded us into social

animals who are rewarded by taking care of each other, predisposed to particularly care for infants, and motivated to care about our families' welfare. This leads humans to combine procreation with the formation of social bonds in order to promote the survival and success of their offspring. The constraints of our biology pressure our cultures and societies to develop solutions, such as the institution of marriage.

However, other changes in childbearing and social framework could result in very different arrangements.

**Egg-laying** species might not have the same physical draining and vulnerability as childbearers do during birth, but whichever gender or genders typically care for the eggs would likely be predisposed to develop skills in defense or protection. The need to develop complex social bonds specifically to nurture gravid mothers would be much lower. Sentient egg-layers would more likely develop large social groups if they were prey species. However, societies with sentient egg-layers at the top of the food chain may be predisposed to form nuclear families or to live solitary lifestyles and less likely to develop a tribal mentality. If this is the case, then in worldbuilding, we have to take special care to consider how culture gets transmitted and how societal institutions form when members are less likely to live in adult groups.

**Large litter-bearing** species would likely invest less in individual children. Humans greatly prize children, and harm done to children is seen as more egregious than comparable harm done to adults. Having young born in large litters might invert that relationship. They may invest little in children or not consider them family until they pass a developmental threshold. Advanced sentients that have large litters could quickly run into population problems, so worldbuilders using that trope would either need to have them deal with constant population problems, make litters relatively rare, or have a high mortality rate.

**Harem** species are those where the core social group is a single male, many females, and various children. Unmated males may form their own, separate societies. Lions are the classic example of this. Sentient harem species have some of the

same evolutionary pressures that humans do, but one key difference is that they essentially develop two disjunct societies. Many human cultures have distinct male and female spheres; however, the spheres exist within the same political framework. On the other hand, the male and female societies in harem species tend to have overlapping yet distinct boundaries, so their concept of territorial and political boundaries would be necessarily more complex. They might claim territory but also accept others' claim on the same territory.

## BUILDING YOUR OWN SPECIES

Developing a new sentient species is hard. To my knowledge, none of us have first or even third-hand knowledge of an actual alien. The only tools at our disposal are observation of non-aliens, logical reasoning, and imagination. Fortunately, the failure state of doing this hard work looks very much like the original *Star Trek* TV show, full of alien species that are just variations of humans. That's not bad as failure states go. *Star Trek* still did tremendous work in telling interesting stories, building inspiring worlds, and tackling thorny themes about identity and society.

However, thinly disguised humans aren't the only option available to worldbuilders. If you're reading this, then you're ready to challenge yourself to think about what truly alien aliens would be like. You'll need to identify ways you want your aliens to differ from humans. Then, ask yourself hard questions. With respect to sex and gender, ask yourself whether they have the same sexes as humans. Do they have the same reproductive cycle? Do they fertilize through sexual intercourse or in some other way? How do they bear offspring, and what sort of pressures does this put on the parents? How does this change the development of their concept of gender? How about their gender roles? How does this culture develop social bonds? You'll need to think about concepts you take for granted and reevaluate whether they make sense for this new species. Would they have the concept of marriage? How about parents? How about love? We usually divide love into romantic, platonic, and maybe familial. Do those categories make sense, or would they divide things differently?

Good luck in continuing the conversation. LeGuin would be proud. 🐙



Photo by Milos Prelevic on Unsplash



# THINKING SIDEWAYS ABOUT OTHERNESS

Robert Meegan  
Art by Anna Hannon

Despite a carefully cultivated reputation for being carefree drifters, the truth is that most worldbuilders are actually upstanding members of their communities. Although they have an undeniable level of eccentricity, the overwhelming majority quite prefer to find themselves sleeping with a roof over their heads and at least a fair idea of where the next day's meals will come from. A certain measure of social stability is characteristic of humanity, a category into which most worldbuilders fall.

As a practical measure, most of the societies that we create have these characteristics as well. Our settlements are civilized and our civilizations are settled. The nature of the civilization and the settlement may vary with the setting and some might stretch the definitions a bit, but most are marked by the senses of place and of belonging.

The sense of the “other” provides the corollary to place and belonging. Those who are not part of our culture stand out, and standing out often breeds fear and hatred. These are deeply rooted instincts, extending far into the animal parts of our brain. It takes conscious effort to overcome them and to welcome strangers. Using this *otherness* can enrich a world.

Science fiction and, in particular, space opera (defined here as an interstellar setting with grand themes) lend themselves particularly well to the addition of otherness, as it balances upon the edge of the relatable and the novel. For our purposes, we'll assume a culture spanning anywhere from dozens to hundreds of star systems. Everything else, including the existence of faster-than-light drives and the nature of the interstellar government, if any, is irrelevant at this point.

SCIENCE FICTION (SOFT) 

CULTURE 

THEORY & ANALYSIS 

## I AM THE PAST, COME BACK TO HAUNT YOU

The individual as an outsider is a characteristic of literature stretching back deep into mythology. Hephaestus, an example of the loner god in Greek mythology, often worked independently and against the plans of Olympian leadership. Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, shows up later in Chinese literature but plays a similar role in defying the order of heaven.

More recent narratives also make use of the iconic loner. Three genres of film are largely dependent upon them: the American Western, Chinese Wuxia, and the Japanese Chanbara (or samurai). In all of these, a stranger with a mysterious past shows up in a community and serves to right some wrong, which may or may not connect to his or her own history. The stranger often acts in ways that violate the norms of society, either subtly or overtly. A common example involves either avoiding providing a name or using an obvious pseudonym, usually laden with multiple meanings. They often subvert simple activities, such as grooming, arranging for lodging, and dining and/or drinking, in small ways—all intended to enhance the feeling of otherness.

The lone stranger is not unknown in science fiction. Rick Deckard from *Blade Runner* and Max Rockatansky from the *Mad Max* series serve as examples from iconic movies. Max fits the classic mode of a drifter pulled back into society to correct an injustice. Deckard is also removed from society, presumably by events in his past, but he too gets drawn back into events. Notably, both of these are characters in dystopian science fiction. The space opera genre hasn't really spawned the same type of loner characters. Han Solo may be a scruffy-looking

scoundrel, but he is far too integrated into the community to fill the role of outsider. The rare examples where this type of character appears are often cases of appropriation, such as the movie *Battle Beyond the Stars*, which is Roger Corman's blatant rehash of *The Magnificent Seven*, which is, of course, stolen directly from Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*. The nature of space opera likely provides one key reason for this disparity. The sweeping themes and grand scope mean that even when a mysterious outsider is written into an environment, they remain more of a character archetype. This approach works well for building a noir story or a thriller, but as a lone person in an epic story, they don't create a feeling of otherness.

## THE WORLD IS MINE TO WANDER

When worldbuilding, we're looking for more than an iconoclastic individual—we want an entire culture of them, allowing us to spawn such characters whenever the need arises as well as providing the opportunities for collisions between the cultures. We're looking for individuals who live just outside of society.

As it happens, a culture of wanderers that generally meets our need already existed. Many Americans know them by name but understand little about them. They are the *hobos*. Common misconceptions stereotype a hobo as beggars or criminals of some sort, but the story is more complicated.

In the years after the American Civil War, a large number of men who had served in one army or the other had returned home to discover that the war had permanently altered either their home or themselves. Many of these men suffered from what would now be called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and they found it difficult to return to their former lives. Others found their homes destroyed, leaving them with little to return to.

In any case, there was a world of opportunity opening up in the American West. Many of these people made their way to this new frontier where they could find a level of civilization with which they were comfortable. While some ended up in cities large and small, others found a life working on a cattle ranch, prospecting for gold or silver,

or simply living in the wilderness as a hunter and trapper.

This was all well and good, but by the 1890s, this lifestyle began to disappear, first slowly and then at an ever-faster pace. The particularly cold winter of 1887–1888 literally froze many of the northern open-range ranches out of business, and the expansion of the railroads eliminated the need for long cattle drives. These factors combined to put many of the cowboys out of work. The great Panic of 1893 lasted four years and added hundreds of thousands of men to the ranks of the jobless. The ranks swelled as soldiers returned from the Great War in 1919 and yet again when the Great Depression struck ten years later. With employment scarce, many of these men had little choice but to wander the country looking for work. Somehow, the name “hobo” became attached to them, although there is no clear understanding of the word's etymology. At this point, it's necessary to clearly define who was and wasn't a hobo. One of the great American men of letters, H. L. Mencken, specified that a hobo was a “migrant worker,” as opposed to a “tramp” or “bum” who was simply a beggar or layabout. Although, to be fair, few hobos were constitutionally opposed to enjoying some leisure time when conditions would support it.

This isn't to say that hobos were above accepting charity or even encouraging the locals' better nature by “panhandling” for a few coins or a meal. Some also eliminated the necessity for members of polite society to plumb the depth of their charity by engaging in a measure of crime, ranging from petty theft to outright murder. These actions were not considered out of bounds so long as the victims could afford the loss. In general, though, crime was discouraged, as it reflected badly upon the entire population of hobos, and those passing through a community later would suffer for the acts committed by others. Many of the most serious crimes victimized their fellows, and a hobo who robbed or assaulted another hobo became known as a *yegg*.

Hobos had some additional characteristics that distinguished them. As implied by the above, they had an extensive code of ethics. Most also suffered

from wanderlust, finding themselves uncomfortable when settled too long in any one place. While numerous theories explain this need to remain on the move, most center upon the idea that, once uprooted, it became reflexive to avoid the creation of ties that might be severed again. This notion is reflected in the advice often given by more experienced hobos to those new to the lifestyle, which strongly encouraged them to return to their former lives before they were “ruined forever.”

## THIS IS ONE OF THE DIRTY SECRETS OF WORLDBUILDING: NEVER SET THE GROUND RULES TO BE SO STRICT THAT YOU CAN'T HAVE ANY FUN.

As it was, the life of a hobo was no treat. They lived lives of deprivation, bordering on starvation, and were at the mercy of the elements (death by freezing was a common way to end a career). They risked great physical injury or death from their primary means of transportation: illegally riding trains. These rides might be “bought” by bribing train crews or by shoveling coal, but most were taken as surreptitiously as possible as most crews took personal offense at the idea of someone freeloading on their train. There were also railroad police to deal with around railyards and stations, and neither the crews nor the police felt restrained from the use of violence to enforce the law.

Even boarding and riding the train was fraught with peril—a staggering number of hobos were crippled or killed in the act of boarding or disembarking a moving train. One slip could mean falling under the wheels and having a limb amputated or suffering a complete bifurcation. While inclement weather was the hobo’s friend, keeping those who would stop them inside and out of sight, it also made handholds rain-slick or icy.

On the train, the options for riding ranged from bad to terrible. Hobos preferred empty boxcars, but those were the first places checked by the crew. Even these could be freezing cold, miserably wet, or suffocatingly hot. In those days before refrigeration, some cars had boxes on the end for carrying ice to keep produce cool. These were often unlocked, but in the winter, the temperature of the box matched that of the outside, and the walls were thin metal sheets that swiftly drained away body heat.

Riding on the sides or top of the cars risked being seen and carried the additional hazards of being swept off by anything that might brush close along the train. Of course, falling asleep while clinging to the train was almost certainly the last nap a hobo might ever have. A risky but easily accessible option involved lying on the truss rods that some cars had beneath the floors. These were steel bars that suspended the rider just a foot or so above the track. They had the advantage of being easy to get into and out of when the train was stationary, but if it was moving, the rider would need to dive in front of the wheels to get on or off.

### THE ARCHING SKY IS CALLING SPACEMEN BACK

You may be wondering how this lesson in the historical sociology of migrant labor relates to space opera, but Robert Heinlein knew. In his short story “The Green Hills of Earth,” he wrote of “Noisy” Rhysling, a spaceship engineering room technician turned troubadour after being blinded by radiation. Rhysling travelled the solar system, bumming rides on ships in return for stories and songs.

So how shall we add space hobos into our worldbuilding? Well, it’s not hard to imagine the same circumstances that allowed the development of the American hobo. After all, space is just another frontier. Perhaps some veterans of interstellar wars have seen a bit too much to ever feel comfortable at home again. Asteroid miners or ice harvesters might be put out of work by changes in technology or the economy. It also seems unlikely anyone will ever find a cure for the urge to see what’s over the horizon.

We’re a little more egalitarian than our predecessors, so we’ll have hobos of all genders.

They’ll also have a rather broad range of education, ranging from barely-literate rockhoppers to engineers and scientists with advanced degrees.

The basic problems will remain the same, though. They’ll still need to get from one place to another to try to grab some of the remaining jobs requiring their specific expertise. It’s easy to imagine someone spending their last credits to ride a ship to a system where mining still requires a keen eye and a delicate touch, only to find that they arrived after the last slots were filled. They’ll hang around the main station for a while, finding places to catch a few hours sleep and checking in every day to see if anything new has opened up. At first, they can find some kind souls willing to provide a meal or two, but soon, the people willing to spare a few credits dry up, and it’s clear that the space hobos have no choice but to try the next system. Some might get lucky and find a ship needing someone with their skills or, at least, willing to do the really nasty jobs. These will be few and far between, though, and some of the offers might make even the most jaded blanch. The rest will need to find some way to get themselves on board a ship heading where they want to go.

At this point, we need to pause and calibrate our thinking. If this were a hard science fiction world, our wanderers would be out of luck. Face scanning, universal monitoring, and artificial intelligence tracking every hatch opening would make security rock solid. Fortunately, we chose space opera as our genre, which gives us some maneuvering room. This is one of the dirty secrets of worldbuilding: never set the ground rules to be so strict that you can’t have any fun.

Sneaking on board and hiding somewhere offers the advantage of climate control. However, this approach runs the highest risk of getting caught, not only in the embarking and debarking process but during the transit as well. Depending upon the nature of the ship, being caught could result in being locked up for the duration of the trip before being turned over to the authorities at the destination. Alternately, it could result in being shown the exit, mid-journey. Depending upon whether or not they took the time to let the stowaway pull on a space suit, the chances of being

picked up by another ship range from zero to zero, to any reasonable number of decimal places.

The best option would be to somehow get into a pressurized cargo pod. This would allow the rider to climb out of their space suit (assuming that they had one to begin with). Details such as thermal control and lighting are more likely to be taken care of, but the smart traveler is going to want to bring sufficient food and water for the trip. Trying to pry open shipping containers looking for sustenance is likely to be challenging at best. Additionally, some sealable containers for the byproducts of whatever they’ve eaten and drank will definitely improve the overall atmosphere of the quarters in several ways.

The last two options definitely require a spacesuit. Unpressurized cargo pods are probably far more common. We can reasonably assume that an asteroid miner’s suit is designed for fairly extended wearing time with the ability to refill food and water dispensers and to handle waste removal. The arrangements are definitely “bring your own oxygen,” and it’s likely that a number of people who use this method end up dead when arrival is delayed for some reason.

A last resort would be the equivalent of “riding the rods” by clinging to the outside of the ship. We can make the assumption that the ship has receptacles for plugging in an umbilical hose to refill the oxygen tank and power pack. This fare does not include in-flight meals and beverages, so packing wisely is advisable. Depending upon the nature of the ship’s drive, the opportunity for mind-altering effects is certainly available if the worldbuilder desires, for adding a touch of space-madness to those who choose this method.

In either case, there is certain to be a maximum design period for wearing the suit. Even assuming that the wearer is a hardened spacehand, the combination of the stench, dermatitis, and claustrophobia sets an upper bound on how long anyone can hold out. When arriving at the next stop, cracking open the suit will trigger every hazardous gas sensor in the vicinity.

The potential for epic journeys that enter into legend is quite literally ripe.



## FREE IS THE DEER IN THE FOREST

The next step is to think truly sideways. We've created a culture of space itinerants, so what would an itinerant culture look like in space? One good way to start creating a culture is to find a real-world example that can serve as a guide. The idea is not to duplicate or appropriate a real people but rather to see what characteristics a culture might have that meets your goals. This provides a richness that completely imaginary solutions often lack. The real world is often stranger and more interesting than anything that you're probably giving it credit for.

A little poking around using Google and Wikipedia provides several good examples of itinerant peoples. Los Vaqueiros d'alzada of Spain and the Irish Travellers are both interesting possibilities, and we'll use some characteristics of their cultures. For a base though we'll stick with the better known (and better documented) Romani. Again, digging around in the Internet Archive and Project Gutenberg gives access to considerable information.

Here we will stop to consider a sensitive topic. The term Gypsy (or Gypsy), when capitalized, is used as a name for the Romani people by outsiders (and occasionally within the community). Much of the literature that you will find uses this term, but it has become somewhat laden with hints of criminality and racial stereotypes. The words in lowercase are used generically to describe wandering people. To avoid the possibility of offense, we'll avoid either use.

The earliest history of the Romani is literally lost in time. It's known that they descended from residents of the Indian subcontinent who began migrating westward sometime between roughly 500 and 800 CE. They appear to have spent long periods in Mesopotamia and the Middle East before moving into Europe via the Balkans and the Iberian Peninsula sometime early in the second millennium. What caused this initial and subsequent migration is unknown. What is certain is that the Romani claim no homeland. They are a landless people.

After more than a thousand years of residency among others, how could they avoid assimilation? The answer is through an intense focus upon the

commune and a cultural code. For the Romani, this is the *Romanipenit* is a way of thinking, a tradition, and a code of law. Those found guilty of breaking the Romanipen are cast out to be become *Gadjo*, no longer Romani. There are also strong traditions that encourage Romani to marry within the community and to use the traditional language when among their people. The Romani also rely upon cultural styles of dress, food, and music to set themselves apart. These distinctions make it easy for the people to identify their own, but it also makes them easy for outsiders to spot as well.

The Romani have survived without their own land by making use of the commons—parks and other communal spaces where they had once grazed their horses and cattle and where, even today, they set up their campsites. In the past, they were craftsmen: carpenters, metalworkers, seamstresses, and jewelers. With time, these occupations have become less valuable, particularly for people with no fixed place of business, and the community has become more dependent upon social services.

Although the topic is unpleasant, the connection of crime to the Romani must be mentioned. This connection works both ways. There has always been a reputation of the Romani as tricksters and con artists. The phrase "I've been gypped!" meaning that the speaker has been conned in some way directly relates to this perception—a measure of which is fairly earned. The stereotype of the fortune teller reading tarot cards, crystal balls, or, most especially, the palm of the hand is well grounded in reality, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There have also been outright scams, such as when defective livestock or fake jewelry have been sold, which are much more easily managed when the entire community will be moving hundreds of miles away in a matter of days. Finally, the opportunity for smuggling and fencing stolen goods is also present in a migratory population. Of course, some of their reputation for questionable dealing stems from buyers hearing what they want to believe. None of this should be taken as an indictment of all or even most Romani, but as noted above in the section on hobos, even a few bad actors can ruin the reputation for everyone.

On the other side of the coin, the Romani have been victims of much racial hatred, including being



Anna Hannon

some of the primary victims of the Nazi Holocaust. Individuals are often beaten, robbed, or sexually assaulted with their attackers knowing that the police will side with the locals, rather than with the outsiders. In European television and movies, they are often used as stereotypes to represent mysterious and dangerous characters.

## TILL RISING AND GLIDING OUT I WANDER'D OFF BY MYSELF

With all of this background, it's time to develop our space traveler culture. Our travelers will no longer have a homeworld either. We're going to say that it was rendered uninhabitable somehow by a catastrophe committed by themselves. We don't want them running around nursing a grudge because that's a totally different scenario. What's more, all records of the nature of the catastrophe and the location of the world have been deleted or destroyed. Any who might have known died generations ago, and the knowledge was never passed on, so it's not even a matter of lore. The opportunities for plot threads and story arcs are endless.

The travelers now live in a vast diaspora of hundreds of small fleets consisting of a dozen or so ships each. These vary in sizes and ages, sometimes with vastly different technologies. The

crews that operate them have all learned through apprenticeship; the people do not send their young away to schools. Parts that fail are replaced by components crafted in shipboard workshops. Even the best-maintained ships would terrify any experienced spacer. Creaking hulls well past their design life might have entire sections that can no longer hold pressure. Drives and power plants balance on the edge of self-destruction.

Arriving in a star system, some of the ships will adopt a high profile, making their presence known and engaging in whatever trade might be appropriate. Other ships, cloaked in various stealth technologies of varying effectiveness will scoop fuel and atmospheric gases or head off to engage in mining operations on asteroids and comets. Of course, none of these activities will have the appropriate paperwork or permits. After all, the heavens are there for those who can take them.

Those ships that dock will engage in commerce, selling craft items made on the fleet as well as items that they had picked up in other systems. It might be the case that the buying, selling, or even possession of some of the merchandise bends or even breaks the law of one system or another, or even of the stellar federation, but the travelers are their own people and answer to their own laws. What right

does one people have to rule another?

Each fleet is independent with its own name and colors, the ships each with their own captain. One captain is designated as the “prince” of the fleet. This is an elected office and is unisex, despite the title. It’s not always the most experienced captain—that person often handles the “black” stealth ships—but rather the captain best suited for dealing with the outsiders.

When fleets happen to meet, whether by intent or accident, it is usually time for a celebration. Most of this occurs within the fleets, usually to the great relief of the residents of the system where the event takes place. It’s possible that some systems are generous enough to make facilities available, whether planetside or on a station. These places get a good reputation among the travelers, who take care not to spoil the opportunity for return visits.

At these events, it’s common for knowledge and parts to be shared so that major repairs can be undertaken. Young individuals may choose to move from one fleet to another in hopes of finding a suitable mate or a new adventure. When the time comes that a ship is truly beyond repair, some of its passengers and crew might move to another ship in one of the fleets, leaving the empty husk behind.

Once or twice a century, a grand meeting of the fleets is held, usually in a system uninhabited by those not of the travelers. At these conclaves, which might last a year or more, the fleets’ princes hold profound discussions about the future of the people. New fleets might be created and old fleets disbanded. Technology is shared and knowledge spread about. These are times of subtle politics, long-held grudges, and epic parties. While the fleets are gathered in their conclave, the “civilized” systems breathe a sigh of relief and dread the return of the newly revitalized travelers.

**IT’S NOT JUST A JOB.  
IT’S AN ADVENTURE.**

Now that we have space travelers with no homeworld except their ships, space hobos stealing passage between the stars, and lone strangers dropping in with unknown business to take care of,

what can we do with all this *otherness*?

Let’s look at it from the point of view of a space station’s head of security. Before she even leaves her quarters, she gets a briefing from the deputy on watch. A big liner had arrived, as expected, after a long trip from one of the major systems. A few passengers had gotten off before it departed again. A half-dozen smaller ships had entered the system not long after. They were huddled together outside the station’s sphere of control, but a small craft had slipped out from among them and docked a short while ago. Oh, and one more thing: some kids must have used one of the decontamination showers for a prank, as there was a large puddle down by one of the maintenance airlocks.

She sighs and heads toward the security office, stopping at the diner nearest the docks on her way. When she walks in, the manager already has a cup of simul-coffee waiting at the counter. She nods to the manager and takes in the other patrons. At one table, a handsome young man, talking fast, is showing the contents of a box to a couple who obviously have just gotten off the liner. He subtly shifts his position to ensure that she can’t see the contents of the box.

At a nearby table, three others wearing the same style of clothes as the fast-talking man sit sipping from their cups. Unlike him, they only speak in short, quiet sentences, and their attention alternates between the other table and her at the counter.

In her ear, the manager speaks softly, “The four of them came in together. After those other folks came in, he walked over to them and started his sales pitch.”

In the corner, a man and a woman sit together. They appear emaciated and slightly damp, their faces sunburned. They are almost motionless and without conversation, their eyes gazing out in a thousand-light-year stare. Occasionally, one or the other will scratch a random itch through the rumpled and worn overalls they’re wearing.

The security chief gestures toward them with her coffee cup and says to the manager, “Have they ordered anything?”

“No, they just walked in and sat down. When I walked over, they didn’t even notice me.”

She takes a sip of her coffee and nods. “Give them something to eat and drink. Put it on my tab. When they’re done, send them down to Greko. I heard that he needs a couple of hands to help him cut up that old fuel barge.”

The manager heads off to the kitchen. He’s seen enough spacers who’ve lived on squeeze-food for weeks to know what they’re going to want.

As the security chief finishes her coffee, she sees the conversation between the young man and the others reaching an end. The box is closed, and it’s obvious that they’re waiting for her to leave in order to finish their business. As she thinks about whether it’s worth walking over and asking to see what’s in the box, someone else enters the diner. He’s a tall, thin man with blonde hair and squinting blue eyes. He scans the room, and seeing her, he walks over and nods slightly before asking, “Pardon me, but do you know if Shorty Morgan is around?”

She looks him over. “No, he’s out rock hopping. Why do you want to want to see him?”

“No particular reason, ma’am.” He nods again and then walks over to a table, where he picks a chair with his back to the wall and a clear view of the entrance.

She sees the manager come out of the kitchen and hands the cup to him. “Do me a favor and fill this up again, please. I’ve got the feeling it’s going to be one of those days.”

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# WORLD OF WICK: THE CONTINENTAL HOTEL

*by Ianara Natividad*

*Photos of scenes from John Wick 1 and John Wick 2*



EXPLICIT



FILM REVIEW



THEORY & ANALYSIS



SPOILERS



Tristen Fekete



*This article contains analysis and spoilers of major plot points in John Wick and John Wick 2. It will not directly include details contained in John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum.*

Worldbuilding takes on many forms, and worldbuilders adopt different approaches based on their needs. We create details for our worlds that range from the extravagant to the plain, from generalizations to the minutiae. Now, what if a worldbuilder does not want to make everything from scratch? There are numerous works, whether personal or published, that use existing settings as a base to work from. After all, our reality serves as the most common source of inspiration, as can be seen in titles like *American Gods*, *Doctor Who*, *Mass Effect*, *The Godfather*, and many other fictional works.

The *John Wick* franchise proves no exception, being set primarily in the modern-day United States.<sup>1</sup> *John Wick* and its sequel *John Wick 2* operate on a simple premise taken to the extreme: a retired hitman who had just lost his wife seeks retribution against anyone who mars his grieving process. In the first film, a man kills “his fucking dog,” a memento left to John Wick by his late wife. In the sequel, an Italian mafioso blows up John’s home which contains mementos of his married life. These transgressions drive John to commit incredible, brutal acts of violence against anyone or anything that stands in the way of his retribution. Armed with an indomitable will and a deadly skill set, he, more often than not, murders his opposition and leaves a trail of corpses in his warpath. Knowing now what the films have in store, we’ll look into what specifically makes the worldbuilding work despite the medium’s limitations and how that worldbuilding improves the audience experience.

## THE PILLARS OF JOHN WICK

The significance of any action film’s setting may get overlooked by the cinematic bloodbath. After all, people don’t come into an action flick to watch two characters talk about the intricacies of law enforcement or the profiles of local mob

bosses. They want action and scenes that will pump up adrenaline just by bearing witness to them. Choreographed gun-fu set to club music. Silenced shootouts in the New York subway. A one-man assault on a crime lord’s safehouse!

The time constrictions of film can make blatant expository worldbuilding difficult without either overexplaining or losing the audience. Every precious minute often goes towards entertaining scenes and/or pushing the narrative forward. However, the background details present in John’s reality directly shape the action we see on the screen. These details notably manifest in the unwritten rules and customs of criminal society. The rules often play into motivations behind the films’ conflicts in addition to dictating the flow of tension within and between scenes.

In general, *John Wick*’s setting rests upon certain “pillars” of worldbuilding. Since the characters already have pre-established knowledge of their surroundings, there must be some way to convey the defining qualities of their reality without delving into drawn-out particulars. I consider these pillars to be central, defining aspects of the world which audiences experience through the narratives. They need not always provide overt exposition, and their presence ideally adds depth to the setting. Pillars of worldbuilding, if not facets relating to those pillars, must be consistent, significant, and pervasive throughout the work.

In the films thus far, we attain glimpses of the culture (including rituals and operations) of the criminal underworld along with organized crime’s integration into wider society. Considering the narratives’ focuses, I identify three pillars of worldbuilding in the *John Wick* franchise: first and foremost, the Continental Hotel (colloquially known as the Continental); second, the elite criminal council known as the High Table; and lastly, the mythos surrounding John. These pillars often have screen time in tandem with adrenaline-filled action scenes. Their associated details flesh out a world that diverges from our reality while

remaining consistent. Of the three, the Continental has received the most screen time and concrete development from a worldbuilding perspective. While the upcoming third film seems promising in fleshing out the franchise’s wider criminal world, this article will focus its analysis on the Continental as a pillar of worldbuilding.

So, what is the Continental? Well, to get down to (literal) business, the Continental is a global hotel chain and organization that serves as neutral ground for the criminal underworld. There, members (from hitmen to bodyguards and other ne’er-do-wells) can acquire resources, such as information or material services, needed for completing their jobs. On top of it all, the Continental still functions as an upscale hotel open to even non-criminal clientele. While not the sole authority of the criminal underworld (as will be discussed later), the Continental Hotel acts as the most prevalent pillar of worldbuilding in the franchise.

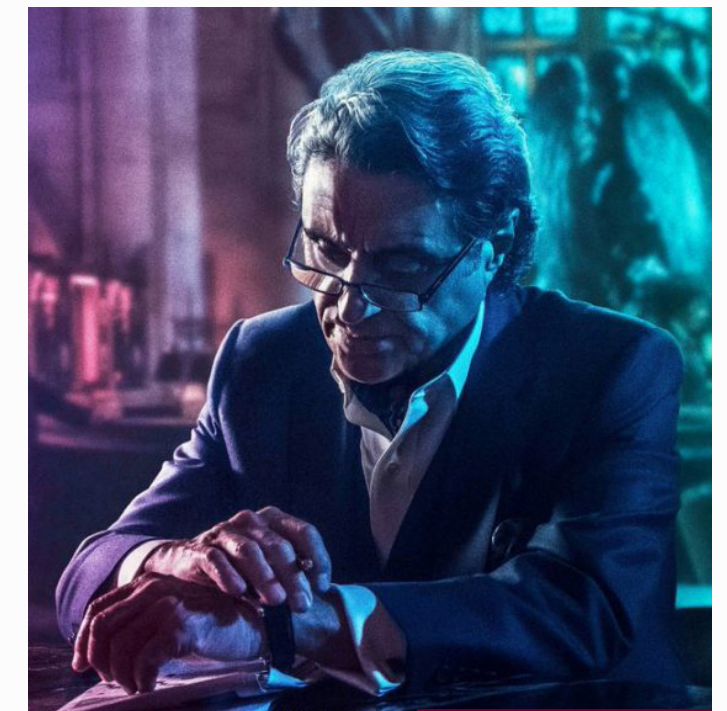
## TWO RULES

In the first film, John sets his sights upon Iosef Tarasov, the man who killed his dog and stole his car days after his wife’s death. Iosef’s father, a Russian crime lord, orders a mercenary strike team of over a dozen men to assassinate John as a preventative measure. Our protagonist single-handedly kills each one and has his house cleaned of the bodies. However, this hit indicates that he can no longer rely on the safety of his own home. Following this attack, audiences first encounter the Continental when John relocates to the hotel. The scene which introduces the Continental displays the institution’s upscale facade. Furthermore, John makes mundane inquiries to the concierge regarding the hotel’s decor and owner, layering subtleties over his more vengeful purposes for visiting the hotel.

We catch glimpses of the Continental’s wider influence during John’s introductory conversation with his friend Winston, the hotel’s owner. Winston proves to be a valuable source of information and wisdom on underworld dealings, repeatedly providing aid and advice to John. Moreover, the audience learns during these discussions why John chose to stay at the establishment during his current manhunt: no violent business on Continental

grounds without “incurring heavy penalties.” This rule makes the hotel a safe haven for any member in good standing.

Winston doubles down on his role as an enforcer in *John Wick 2* by more blatantly stating the Continental’s two cardinal rules which “cannot be broken”: one, a reiteration of no bloodshed on hotel grounds; two, all markers “must be honored.” The markers represent another law-bound system in the underworld, serving as binding blood oaths between two individuals. The Continental records when an individual issues a marker and oversees the administrative side for their completion.



Winston, from *John Wick*

Furthermore, we see how the Continental stands when pressured by another authoritative entity, the High Table—a council of crime lords that oversee the underworld’s most powerful syndicates. In the second film, Santino d’Antonio, an Italian mafioso, ascends to the High Table and, during the latter half becomes John’s main target. Following a narrow escape, Santino demands Winston to revoke the legendary hitman’s membership to the Continental. Winston fiercely replies that he owes Santino nothing and refers to the hotel chain as a “kingdom” only his to rule. Although Santino tries to save face by subtly threatening Winston’s authority, the mafioso still retreats into the safety of the Continental. Despite Santino’s elevated position

<sup>1</sup> *John Wick*. Directed by Chad Stahelski, performances by Keanu Reeves, Michael Nyqvist, Adrienne Palicki, Ian McShane, Summit Entertainment, 2014; *John Wick 2*. Directed by Chad Stahelski, performances by Keanu Reeves, Common, Laurence Fishburne, Ian McShane, Lionsgate, 2017.



in the criminal underworld, he nonetheless defers to Winston's rule while within his domain. By hoping to stay there indefinitely, Santino intends to escape John's wrath, which indicates significant confidence in the hotel's influence to deter violence. After all, who would be foolish enough to incur the Continental's ire?

The consequences for breaking any of the two cardinal rules become recurring events in the franchise. In *John Wick*, an assassin named Ms. Perkins attempts to kill John during his stay in the hotel. Her attempt fails, which results in John incapacitating and restraining her. John then leaves her in the custody of another hotel guest, who Ms. Perkins later kills during her escape. However, at the end of the film, Winston casually calls Ms. Perkins to a meeting in a remote location. He spends no more than ten seconds saying that he has revoked her membership to the Continental, presumably for attempting to assassinate John as well as killing another guest. Moments later, his henchmen swiftly execute her while he walks away.

Whether Ms. Perkins had an inkling of her fate remains unclear. The scene of her expulsion and execution was rather succinct, and Ms. Perkins provides no visible resistance to Winston's verdict. Still, I have two possible interpretations regarding Ms. Perkins' actions. The first, she defers to Winston's orders, indicating that a call from him presumably holds enough authority that someone, assassin or not, will obey with little explanation. Secondly, if Ms. Perkins already had any clue of what awaited her for breaking the rules, then she ultimately defers her very life to the Continental, perhaps accepting that she could not escape punishment. Either situation exemplifies the magnitude of the Continental's power and/or reach.

The trend continues in *John Wick 2* where characters repeatedly face the prospect of breaking either rule. Audiences learn that John gave a marker to Santino, the aforementioned Italian crime lord, in order to leave his criminal life behind years before the first film. Later, only days after John kills Iosef Tarasov, Santino returns to collect on this marker by ordering the assassination of his sister, Gianna. When John refuses, Santino destroys the hitman's marital home—well within the mafioso's rights

due to the rules of the marker. To rid himself of this obligation, John first attempts to find a way around honoring his marker by consulting Winston. However, Winston provides him no alternative, for doing anything but completing the marker would incur punishment in the form of exile from the Continental or even a mandate for his death from the High Table. The markers' overall worth and implied severity of their fulfilment accentuates the Continental's standing as an enforcing power.



John takes on the job and technically succeeds in taking Gianna's life in Rome, shooting her in the head when she attempts suicide rather than die directly by his hand. After his initially clean infiltration, an escape scene ensues during which John mows down Gianna's guards. However, Santino wants no loose ends, so he sends his own henchmen to take out John. The extended massacre and chase eventually resolves with John dueling Gianna's bodyguard, though this fight only comes to an end because they crash through the Continental Hotel premises. The rules of the Continental prevent bloodshed, so both hitmen stand down in the hotel bar before purchasing one another a drink. This occurrence serves as a reminder of the Continental's rules while also doubling as foreshadowing for the upcoming tension in the latter half of the film.



Santino subsequently opens a \$7 million contract on John's life. The rest of the second film focuses on John hunting down Santiago in retaliation. Then, John commits an act that forces Winston to demonstrate the dire consequences of breaking the Continental's rules. As Santino savors a fine meal and taunts the legendary hitman in the hotel's lounge, John puts a single bullet through his head. Winston bears witness to this transgression and can only comment in shock at his friend's action. The following day, John meets with Winston in Central Park. Winston informs John that his bounty has doubled and declares him "excommunicado," closing John off from the hotel chain's vast underworld network. As a nod to their friendship and a testament to his authority over the Continental, Winston refrains from executing John (à la Ms. Perkins), delays his bounty instead, and provides him a marker for future use. However, Winston does not stoop to outright break the Continental's rules for John. Each film displays the direct consequences for breaking the Continental's rules as nothing short of death, or a death sentence, regardless of the individual's status.

Winston definitively sums up the Continental's purpose by stating, "Rules...without them we live with the animals." Introduced in the first film, the hotel initially serves as a backdrop to the action, supplementary in building up the setting while providing an avenue for important character introductions. We receive hints of the extent of

the Continental's authority through Winston's interactions with John, but no blatant presentation until Ms. Perkins's execution. *John Wick 2* elaborates on the Continental's role in the underworld, specifically the two rules which denizens must adhere to lest they forfeit their lives. These rules not only get sustained throughout the films' narrative but also become pivotal in escalating the plot. John, roped in by the rules enforced by the Continental, dips further back into the seedy underworld to honor his marker, but, in the process of resolving his grudges, he conducts the ultimate transgression of killing a man on Continental grounds. He receives an effective death sentence or, at best, must eke out a life on the run. The Continental displays in full why its rules must not be trifled with.

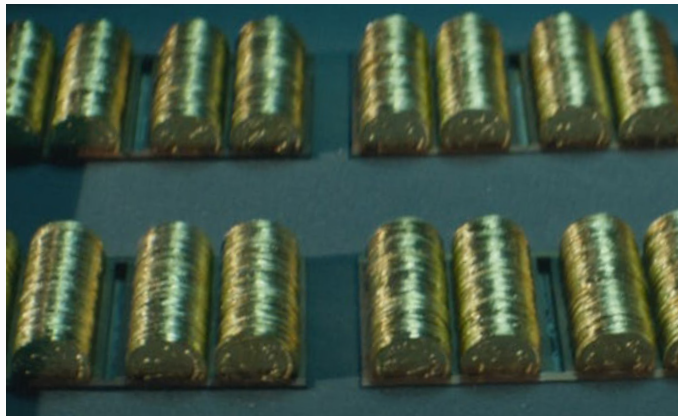
## SYSTEMS OF CONTROL

Beyond just a physical location, the Continental represents an established order and authority even amongst the chaos of the criminal underworld. From its initial introduction as a hotel, the films gradually expand it to contain whole networks of criminals, services, businesses, and information. This quality of interconnectedness appears more prominently in the second film; John pays for a black market shopping spree using gold coins minted by the Continental and then has those purchased goods delivered directly to his room at the Continental's branch in Rome. The Continental utilizes systems of control which make the underworld a grim parallel of



law-abiding society. Moreover, these systems also represent the hotel chain's pervasive influence.

For one, the Continental mints its own currency. In *John Wick 2*, we witness Winston examining a fresh batch of gold coins before approving them for circulation. Characters throughout the films use them to purchase goods (from drinks at a bar to munitions) and services (such as body disposal after a killing spree). Aside from their golden appearance, we receive little context for their numerical worth and the exchange rates vary. A coin nets John a drink at a bar, a stay at the hotel, and enough favor with a homeless man assassin to not only hide him from assailants but also take him to meet a crime lord. In other cases, he uses a coin per corpse with a body disposal service and a handful of coins for detailed info on the location where he would assassinate Gianna d'Antonio. The Continental's currency possesses worth throughout the factions of the underworld. Furthermore, the gold coins exist in tandem with other international currency, such as dollars. This legitimacy makes the hotel chain an overseer of economic exchange, much like a government, in addition to being a practically lawful authority.



While the first film mentions the underworld's contract system, *John Wick 2* actually gives us a look into how bounties get placed. When Santino places the hit on John, the film provides a series of scenes that switches between John leaving Rome, Santino arranging the bounty, and a call center office. In the latter, heavily tattooed women work as switchboard operators, complete with 1950s garb. They appear to manage communications between the Continental and different parts of the underworld. We know

this office belongs to the Continental and is located within its New York branch due to a set of pneumatic tubes with one labelled to Winston and a letterhead with the hotel's name printed on it.

Santino specifically opens an "account" to kill John, making it sound more like a mundane business proposal rather than a hit on a man's life. This process connects the hotel chain back to making the underworld mimic the rest of non-criminal society. Moreover, with the Continental overseeing the contract system, the institution possesses another level of control by overseeing an exchange of money for lives, which can call for the death of notable individuals like John. The Continental's control thereby extends to literally all facets of its members' lives. Membership becomes an unwritten, binding contract for all its members, where exit often involves one's death. The Continental bolsters its authority by intertwining its existence with underworld society's very structure, allowing them to exert power through financial and social fronts in addition to business-mandated violence.

### A PILLAR OF WORLDBUILDING

Imagine the plot of the *John Wick* films without the meat added by the Continental's lore. They would still make decent action flicks, right? However, the details—the rules, the authority figures, the network—that nail down the Continental add depth to the setting. It becomes a focal point for the franchise's world and narratives. While the Continental does not encompass the setting in its entirety, the hotel chain gives us a relevant basis for understanding John's conflict and why he's constantly in hot water. The franchise gradually builds up the Continental's profile with each installment, and more aspects of its alternate reality open up in tandem.

Significant, consistent, and pervasive. I repeat this mantra because it describes an ideal pillar of worldbuilding. The clear cut rules, internal consistency, and recurring presence of the Continental uphold the alternate reality despite runtime limitations of each film. While the Continental may impose any number of rules on its members, audiences need only to understand the



gravity of two in order to understand and appreciate the films' plot thus far. Avoiding bloodshed on Continental grounds and honoring one's markers build up narrative tensions and, as in *John Wick 2*, directly escalate the plot.

Thus, the Continental makes for an excellent example of a pillar of worldbuilding. However, pillars do not encompass all of the worldbuilding presented in the *John Wick* films. For example, the underworld society's wider customs, the High Table, and the pseudo-mythos revolving around John's reputation lie beyond the Continental's lore. They exist in the world, contributing to the narrative and setting, but audiences have received less exposure to them, individually, compared to the Continental.

However, pillars of worldbuilding do focus the audience's attention on a particularly major facet of the setting. Moreover, they have the very important function of being storytelling tools to frame overall worldbuilding within specific contexts. Audiences understand the stakes hanging on the franchise's central conflicts because of the Continental. We see the cardinal rules combine with the hotel chain's sheer reach, resources, and relations to create both advantages and severe complications for John. The worldbuilding with this institution allows the films' narratives to pivot around it. Therefore, consider pillars of worldbuilding like a springboard from which audiences can process and understand a setting. 🌌





# MARRIAGE: AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURAL VALUES

by Adam Bassett

People today marry for different reasons. However, for much of our collective history, “it was inconceivable that people would choose their mates on the basis of something as fragile and irrational as love and then focus all their sexual, intimate, and altruistic desires on the resulting marriage” (Newman and O’Brien 159). The resulting situation results in varying types of arranged marriages to gain political standing, wealth, or new allies. One of the most prominent examples lies within Europe. Nobility, in particular, would marry off their children (if at all) strategically to either gain or maintain family wealth. Catherine the Great, for example, was born Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst, a princess of Prussia 1729. She would later become a hugely influential empress of Russia. Her first steps toward this new life were through an arranged marriage when she was just fourteen. Similar marriages occurred in the Iroquois Confederacy to bind families or tribes, sometimes arranging betrothals between children who would marry once they had come of age.<sup>1</sup>

Wealth, land, and bonding families: these have historically been the primary reason to wed because they have been highly valued by many cultures. Marrying for the sake of love—such a thing was actively discouraged. For the purposes of this article, we too will (mostly) put aside our notions of marriage for love. This brief analysis of marriages will result in a greater understanding of the mechanisms, values, and types of marriage traditions. Through this understanding, we can better create marriage traditions in our own worlds.

CULTURE 

ECONOMICS & INDUSTRY 

HISTORY 

## CULTURAL VALUES

Arranged marriage can be divided into three archetypes when analyzed by economic anthropologists such as Laurel Bossen, author of *Toward a Theory of Marriage: The Economic Anthropology of Marriage Transactions*.

Brideservice is defined as a “net transfer of labor from a young man to his prospective father-in-law in order to win his permission to marry the daughter” (Bossen 128-9). We can see this in the Kalahari



 Adam Bassett

Desert where, in !Kung San culture,<sup>2</sup> the man may assist the woman’s family for up to ten years before marrying her. In this case, his contributions often involve hunting and farming. Not all examples of this sort of courting are so lengthy, and the tasks may vary. In general, brideservice most commonly appears in Native American and African hunter-gatherer cultures.

Bridewealth, rather than a transfer of labor, is a transfer of valuables, land, and/or money to the kin of a desired bride. On the island of New Guinea, the indigenous Dani tribe practices marriages of this kind. Such a payment is made over the duration of the marriage rather than all at once. According to Brian Schwimmer from the University of Manitoba, these exchanges involve donations of livestock and shells at key moments of a marriage such as at the wedding, consummation, and the birth of a child. Among economic anthropologists, it’s common to find claims that bridewealths are supported in cultures where daughters or brides are valued as “producers and reproducers” (Bossen 133). Thus, the suitor must give her father something else of value to reciprocate his loss. This is referred to as compensation theory, although this is just one of many ideas surrounding bridewealths.



A dowry, historically, is the least common of these archetypical marriage transactions. It mostly comes from Europe and Asia where population was dense and the societies generally more complex. Functionally, it is the inverse of a bridewealth. A dowry contains the items, land, and/or money which a woman brings to her husband in marriage. Generally, fewer people are involved in these situations, both on the giving and receiving ends. Why, then, would some societies transition to a dowry system? Some theories suggest that, within dowry cultures, women hold less value than men, as they are not expected to tend the fields or help support the family like working men would be. Thus, according to this theory, the husbands must be compensated. In countries where land inheritance is hugely important, a dowry is seen as a disinheritance. “The exclusion of daughters from landed inheritance,” is not uncommon among several Chinese and Indian cultures wherein the couple settles in to the husband’s home (Bossen 140).

Additionally, there have always been couples that eloped. Historically, this term has been used to describe marriages conducted in secret. The couple would flee their families and wed without their consent. Considering the great lengths people go through to arrange weddings, and the cultural importance placed upon it, eloping tends to be viewed poorly. After all, those enacting it are going against their cultural and (often times) religious beliefs.

## MARRIAGE AROUND THE WORLD

Knowing a bit more about the basic terminology of marriage agreements, we should turn toward examples from cultures around the world. Yes, in the end we may be creating some truly fantastical settings filled with space-elves who have their own complexities, but there is no better source of inspiration than the many cultures who live or have lived on this Earth.

We’ll get back to the aforementioned social structures, but first I’d like to briefly cover marriage

<sup>1</sup> DeCuir, Greg. “Marriage among Native Americans.” Remarkable Marriage, 9 June 2016, [remarkablemarriage.com/marriage-among-native-americans/](http://remarkablemarriage.com/marriage-among-native-americans/).

<sup>2</sup> “!” indicates a click, which are considered a consonant in some African languages. Read the Britannica article about the click speech sound.



in the United States. I'm going to make some assumptions that the majority of us understand Western Christian marriage. For those who may be less familiar, marriage laws in the US change based on location. Once the marriage is organized (ideally for the sake of love), it begins with a ceremony and culminates in a reception somewhere else to celebrate with the newlyweds. The practices mentioned before don't apply so rigidly. According to the United States Census Bureau, the country has a population of approximately 328.5 million.<sup>3</sup> Among that vast number, there are many beliefs and traditions, not all of which mix well. One wedding in New York City might begin at a church or mosque, whereas another may take place at a relative's home, and a third couple may elope; all in the same city. And that's all fine. These are all concepts of a *proper* marriage, but they vary greatly, as do the reasons to wed. Such is the nature of a country of immigrants or a world as connected as ours.

The aforementioned !Kung people of the Kalahari Desert view marriage quite differently. Whereas in the United States we see a mingling of ideas and people, some social rules constrict this behavior among the !Kung. According to Lorna Marshall (345):

*"polygyny<sup>4</sup> is the ideal form of marriage among the !Kung. This is not a society in which prestige and wealth concentrate to give certain categories of men more power or right than others to acquire wives. Headmen and medicine men are held in esteem, but their positions do not in themselves entitle them to have extra wives or give them special dispensations."*

She goes on to explain how a !Kung man may have any number of wives so long as he can continue to comfortably support them. This usually limits a man to one wife, and Marshall's studies saw that the most any !Kung man at the time had was two. She writes that only one man, deceased at the time she visited, had four wives. He was spoken of highly as an incredible hunter and fletcher—skills which his people value highly.

Daily life for a man and his wives vary, though often all three (or more) share what they have very closely. There are tensions among these relationships, but it is part of their culture to accept polygyny. Jealousy between co-wives is a concern among !Kung males. It is common for men to take multiple wives from the same family, since it is assumed that sisters will be less jealous of one another. Despite that "a few men said that the jealousy of co-wives could be so unbearable that they would not marry a second wife" at all (Marshall 347).

Polygyny is also allowed in Dani society, where they practice a bridewealth system as a part of marriage culture. However, these natives of New Guinea also have an interesting social structure wherein they are divided into two exogamous divisions: *Wida* and *Waija*. What this means is that a Wida man may not marry a Wida woman—each person must marry outside the moiety (or group) they are placed within (Schwimmer).

Returning to India, we run once more into the dowry system. To quote Laurel Bossen again: "At marriage, women are granted movable property such as furniture, household goods, consumer durables, clothing, cash or jewelry, but the family lands are held intact as productive capital reserved for their brothers...in bridewealth systems women are 'paid for' but in dowry systems they are 'paid off'" (Bossen 140).

This is a great example of disinheritance within the dowry system (neither of which are limited to India). Now, this is not the case for all of India these days (laws such as the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 work to reduce some of these occurrences). Still, it is important to mention because it's a contemporary example of an established system that penalizes women for their gender by removing an inheritance they would otherwise receive had they been male. The fact that India has been pushing back with law is curious as well, since it shows that various regions do not see eye-to-eye on these practices. Perhaps we could use a detail like that in our own worlds....

## CRAFTING NEW TRADITIONS

Let's create some marriage customs of our own. At the beginning we touched on historical European marriage very briefly, so why don't we start there? Medieval Europe is especially popular as a template. Many fantasy enthusiasts know it well from works such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Game of Thrones*. So what does that give us? Castles, peasantry, knights, virgin brides, and maybe the odd dragon or two. *April*, a page taken from the Limbourg Brothers' illuminated manuscript, *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, depicts what is likely the Duke's marriage to his second wife. That's a great visual to work off of, but let's mix in a bit of !Kung culture. What if his first wife wasn't dead? What if he was just taking a second wife?

Of course, the wedding ceremony and celebration would be a lavish affair. The existence of a group living within the castle and another living outside of it creates social divisions. The !Kung's views on equality around wealth and power would not work in Medieval Europe's feudal system, but perhaps we can draw the nobility and peasantry closer together on a different level.

If our fictional Duke's first marriage were arranged to strengthen political ties, and everyone were still alive, we can probably assume that he still has political power. The next step could be to gain the favor of the peasantry. In this society, it might be commonplace to have one wife wed for relations to other nations, with a second wife wed to maintain relations with the locals—a *nation's bride* and a *people's bride*.

And so, imagine the Limbourg Brothers' painting in a new light. This is not the Duke of Berry and Jeanne de Boulogne, but rather our fictional duke and his second wife—his people's bride. To gain her father's favor, our duke might give a bridewealth to her parents in the form of gold and food. After all, if she's from the peasantry, it's likely that the bride-to-be helped her family with the farm or a shop. A woman wed in this structure would likely move into his home. Thus, her parents would have one less person to help with daily chores.

Of course, her father would want some form of compensation. If the gesture is acceptable, her father would give consent to the arrangement. The two would be later wed by a preacher, outside the castle where all of her contemporaries can attend. One of the women attending may be the Duke's first wife, also giving consent to the ceremony.

How would such a marriage function? The castle is large. The two wives may not have to interact much, and perhaps that is encouraged in order to limit any feelings of jealousy they might have toward the other. Surely their husband is keeping each busy. The first wife may leave on diplomatic missions, greet foreign guests, or aid in writing new international law.

After undergoing some form of education and etiquette training, his second wife might instead advise in national law, hosting notable individuals from their homeland, and spreading good will to the farmers and merchants in town. Essentially, our duke's two wives become active advisors and aides, as well as romantic partners.



The Limbourg Brothers

<sup>3</sup> Find more details at <https://www.census.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> Polygyny is the state or practice of having more than one wife/female mate at a time. This is a gendered term for polygamous relationships, the alternative being polyandry: the practice of a woman having multiple husbands/male mates at once.



A marriage such as the one we’re outlining brings with it a few logistical issues. For example, how does inheritance work when the duke has two wives? It’s an important question, though have no idea what the right answer is. Perhaps the eldest son still inherits everything regardless of which wife is his mother. That could create a competition among the two, though, which surely their husband would want to avoid. Perhaps to resolve that issue there is some challenge after the Duke’s death in which all his children compete in some way for his holdings. At least that way there is less direct competition between his two wives.

As an emissary visiting this Duke’s castle, you may be greeted by his first wife and a retainer of guards, shown to your room, and later escorted to a large banquet hall. She’s arranged for a great feast, the tables stuffed with food and drink. Guests are packed from wall to wall, a few warming their backs by the hearth. As you wander through the hall you notice the variety of attendees—names recognized internationally but also those famed within the Duke’s country. All of them were gathered by his second wife. It’s then that you notice the Duke himself, taking a seat at a table upon the dais, his wives taking a spot on either side of him. They each had a hand in organizing this event, each serving their husband and country.

And there we have it: a mix of both Christian and !Kung values with a bridewealth transaction. The melding of these different facets has resulted in something new and unique for this not-quite-Medieval-Europe setting, made to suit the needs of this political society within and without the duchy we’ve created.

**BUILDING THROUGH QUESTION & ANSWER**

Worldbuilding is, in some ways, an extreme form of problem solving. We present ourselves with a set of questions, which in this case focus on marriage practices, and attempt to answer them. Such questions include:

- What matters to people in this world? How can we reflect what’s important to a given culture in their marriage practices (both in courtship and post-marriage)?
- How many partners might a person have, and why?
- Who is permitted to marry, and why?
- Do a person’s partners have particular roles, and if so, do they get to choose what they are?
- How might a marriage affect a region or the families involved?
- What happens when a couple goes against social norms?

These questions were relevant to creating the scenario above, but they may change based on what you’re trying to create. For example, if we were diving a bit deeper into the above example with our fictional duke, we could ask what the typical family looked like, or how wealth might affect their marriage.

Something to consider as well would be the implications of your custom marriages after the ceremony. How does the couple function on average? How do they raise their children? These are all important factors which may be influenced by the way their bonds were formed.

How do we answer these questions now? With real world examples. With the plethora of real-world traditions—past, present, and developing—you’re sure to find some analogues. Take note of them, learn about each, and let these existing practices inspire you. We did this above when creating our polygamous duke, taking inspiration from medieval European culture as well as !Kung San and Dani to create something new.

Asking questions such as these, and informing or inspiring your answers with real world examples will result in the creation of a marriage system that is not only authentic and complex, but also one that reflects the values of its people. Each situation will be different, and each individual couple will be as well, but so long as you tailor the culture to the people and their views you’ll be on the right path.



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# WEAVING A ROMANTIC THREAD

by B.K. Bass  
art by Tristen Fekete

PLOT & STRUCTURE 

WRITING 

We’ve all been there: the butterflies hit our stomach, although that’s too kind a term, as it feels more like a pack of angry badgers scratching to get out. Our heart thumps like the drums of an orcish warband. Sweat breaks out on our brow in what we hope is a glistening sheen but eventually runs down our face in rivulets. There’s somebody we’d like to talk to, but the anxiety kicks in even thinking about it.

Romance is a difficult thing. It’s filled with all sorts of social nuances, unwritten rules, and unspoken body language that even a master of the craft would be hard-pressed to translate. Often, mastering this enigma is a central goal in many of our lives; or if not, it is a major secondary goal. Why then should this be any different for the characters in our stories?

There’s a lot of people giving writing advice these days, and if you’ve been paying attention, you’ve probably heard this: “You have to have a romantic subplot in your book, no matter what it’s about.” I’m going to start by setting the record straight and saying that this is rubbish. By no means should you feel obliged to wedge a romance into an otherwise fully developed narrative. Imagine a perfectly crafted stone tower. What would happen if you tried to force another block on one side? For one, you’d probably find it impossible to do. Secondly, even if you could, it would send the whole thing teetering to one side—perhaps to crash to the ground.



That being said, there are plenty of reasons we should weave in a romantic subplot to our books in the planning phases. Depending upon the narrative, a romance can add a lot of depth to the plot, a new side to our characters, and a new level of tension that might have been missing. “But I can’t even figure out romance in my own life,” you say?

Never fear, faithful wordsmith, because when you’re writing the romance, you’re in charge of both sides of the story. The emotions, communication, and reactions of both (or all) parties are yours to command. Are the intricacies of romantic tension something altogether foreign and mysterious to you? Do not fret because I have found a deconstructed pattern for writing romantic subplots.

## PULLING THE WOOL APART

I myself am one who has little understanding of the subtle nuance of wooing a potential mate. I have been lucky to build successful relationships based on trust, loyalty, and compassion; but when my current partner asks where the romance is, I promptly remind her that I didn’t sign up for that!

So, how does one not versed in the intricacies of writing romance into their fiction navigate the minefield of the most subtle and mysterious of social interactions? This is something I recently set out to do.

First, I needed to add some tools to my writing toolbox. In the course of my writing career, I’ve come across many methods to structure a narrative, but my favorite thus far has been the seven-point story structure developed by Dan Wells. This structure breaks down the traditional three-act model into smaller chunks and sets a rhythm of highs, lows, and breaks that provides a framework upon which to build an exciting tale.

To start, here are the seven points:

- HOOK
- PLOT TURN 1
- PINCH 1
- MIDPOINT
- PINCH 2
- PLOT TURN 2
- RESOLUTION

Before we get into what this means for a romance, let’s look at the basics first.

The Hook is what will draw the reader into the story. This is the status quo of our main characters and the setting. This is where we establish the world we have built and the lives of those within it.

Plot Turn 1 is where we will put in what is more commonly known as the inciting incident. This is what happens to push our characters out of the status quo and set them upon the path that will be the rest of the narrative.

Pinch 1 is where we start to throw our characters under the bus. As they are reacting to the inciting incident, this is the first major failure they face. It may not be their first challenge, but it will be the first challenge with major negative consequences.

The Midpoint is where our characters may learn something important, gain a new ally, or simply gather the determination to transition from a reactive state to a proactive state. This state change is the important piece of the puzzle, no matter what inspires it.

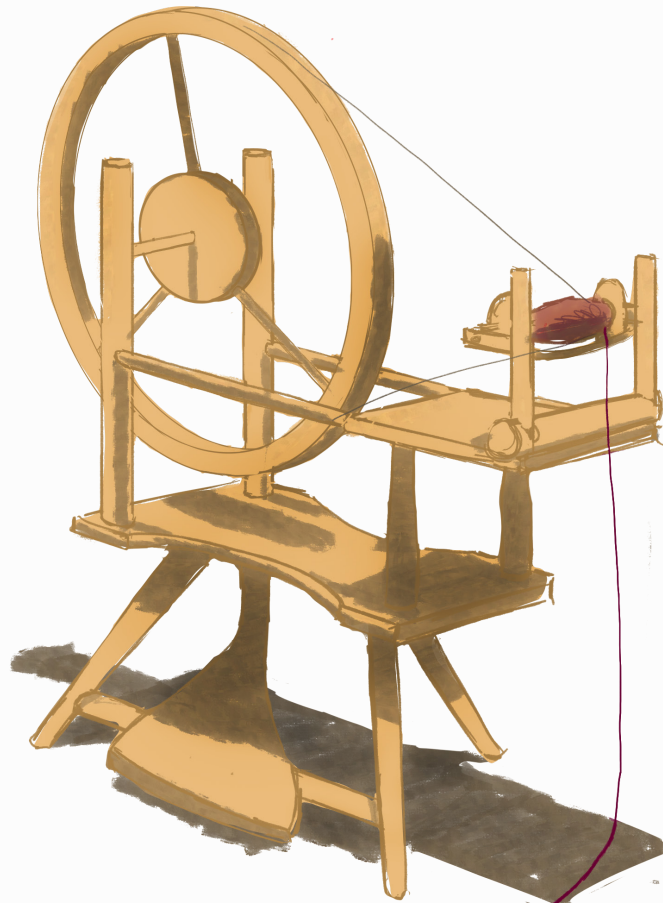
You’ve probably guessed by now that Pinch 2 is going to be another traumatic setback for our main characters. It is, but this time it’s even worse! The death of a mentor is a common event to be found here, especially in a story that follows the hero’s journey.

Plot Turn 2 is where our characters finally discover what is needed to overcome the obstacles that you have placed in their way. This can be a moment of self-discovery, tactical genius, or any other number of things.

The Resolution is where we take the newfound tools from the second plot turn and put them to use. This is the climax of the story where we overcome the final obstacle and grasp victory from the jaws of defeat!

So, how in the blazes do we turn all of that into a romance? It’s quite simpler than you think! While there are numerous combinations of social dynamics that can be thrown together to form a relationship,





for the sake of brevity we'll look at the classic 'boy meets girl' perspective as an example:

HOOK: Boy is alone.

PLOT TURN 1: Boy meets girl.

PINCH 1: Girl rejects boy.

MIDPOINT: Boy and girl start to get along.

PINCH 2: Boy loses girl.

PLOT TURN 2: Boy figures out how to get girl back.

RESOLUTION: Happily, ever after.

Now this is a very elementary explanation of the situation, but you can see how this not only follows the seven-point story structure. One can find that it also aligns with many romantic plots throughout all kinds of fiction. Here's a popular example that—while it may or may not have been written with this structure in mind—still follows the same major beats. This is the story of Han Solo and Leia Organa's relationship in the original *Star Wars* trilogy by George Lucas:

HOOK: Han Solo is a selfish rogue hired to take passengers to Alderaan.

PLOT TURN 1: Han is convinced to rescue Princess Leia from the imperials aboard the Death Star purely for profit.

PINCH 1: Han thinks Leia is conceited and self-righteous; he can't stand her. She finds him to be selfish and can't stand him.

MIDPOINT: Han and Leia form a tenuous bond over time, and after escaping Hoth, they both unexpectedly realize they have fallen in love.

PINCH 2: Han is taken captive by the Empire, frozen in carbonite, and turned over to Jabba the Hutt.

PLOT TURN 2: Leia rescues Han from Jabba's palace.

RESOLUTION: On Endor, Han and Leia resolve remaining roadblocks and enter into a relationship.

## SPINNING THE YARN

Now that we have an idea of how to structure our romantic plot, we have to figure out how to fit this into both the world we have created and the overall narrative we are writing. How can we use worldbuilding

elements to further develop this romantic plot? Can the romance help us to flesh out parts of our world we hadn't thought of? Again using the 'boy meets girl' analogy for the sake of brevity, let's take a look at a relatively standard fantasy setting and a character on the course of a hero's journey and see what we can throw at him.

*Hook: Maxwell is a farmer's son living in the village of Wheaton. He is not romantically involved and has lived a quiet life.*

This is where a lot of our worldbuilding foundation will be set. What kind of society does

Maxwell live in? What is the population, economic system, and geographic situation of Wheaton? This is all general in terms of worldbuilding, but we can start thinking about the customs of Maxwell's people as they relate to romance. Is he of an age of consent? Are there arranged marriages? Is it a liberal or conservative society?

*Plot Turn 1: Maxwell meets an elven princess named Laira. He is immediately smitten by her.*

Now we can get into the interesting questions! What is the worldview on interracial (humans and elves in this example) relationships? What kind of problems do their different social standings have? Do the two societies have entirely different rules regarding courtship and romance

*Pinch 1: Maxwell has insulted the elven king, perhaps by his very attempts to woo Laira. He has been told he must leave their lands.*

This is a great opportunity to explore the consequences of the social ideas we considered in the last step. What differences between their cultures led to this insult? Was it an honest misunderstanding on the part of Maxwell, or did he consciously violate elven customs for the sake of love?

*Midpoint: Maxwell and Laira have one last night together before he must leave the elven kingdom to continue on his quest. Their love blossoms.*

Now we have to look at the customs or laws that caused Maxwell to be exiled and explore the possibility that Laira is violating those same customs now. What are the consequences for her? Are they different because she is royalty, or simply because she is an elf?

Is she rejecting her people's ways and risking exile herself—or worse?

*Pinch 2: Laira is abducted by a marauding band of orcs!*

This throws a wrench in the works for everybody. Does Maxwell follow his heart and rescue Laira? Does the elven king support him in this effort despite his former misgivings? What are the political tensions between the elves and the orcs compared to those between the elves and the humans?

*Plot Turn 2: The elven king hands over a magical weapon to Maxwell so that he can defeat the orcs and rescue Laira.*

The king might be violating his own laws here. What might the consequences to this be? Will there be a reformation of elven attitudes towards humans, or is the king destined to be held culpable for his actions by some sort of council of governing nobles?

*Resolution: Maxwell saves Laira, and they determine to stay together after the ordeal they have endured.*

What kind of ramifications might this have on their cultures? There might be changes in customs or laws that are inspired by this. Or if the society is too rigid to change, Maxwell and Laira might have to set out on their own.

## WEAVING IT INTO THE TAPESTRY

So, now that we have a formula for building a romantic subplot and understand how to use it, how do we weave this into our narrative? This can be the most difficult part of outlining a book, and it is where we need to ensure that our romance is related to the main story in some way. Let's take our story of Maxwell and put it into the scope of a larger tale.

Maxwell is a farmer's son in a simple village (*hook*), and life is going great until a band of orcish raiders burn it all to the ground (*plot turn 1*). He sets out on a quest of revenge but



fails to overcome the orcish horde (*pinch 1*). He hears of a magical weapon held in an elvish kingdom that can help him to defeat them (*midpoint*). He travels to an elven city and begs the king for help but in the process insults him and is cast out (*pinch 2*). When the king's daughter is abducted by the orcs, the king agrees to give Maxwell the weapon (*plot turn 2*). Maxwell defeats the orcs (*resolution*).

So, our romantic subplot is only going to occur in the second half of this story when Maxwell encounters the elves. The insult to the king (*main plot, pinch 2*) is the same event that throws a wrench into the relationship (*romance plot, pinch 1*). But then when the elven princess is abducted by the orcs (*romance plot, pinch 2*), the king agrees to hand over the magic weapon (*main plot, plot turn 2*). And then, when Maxwell defeats the orcs and saves Laira, both challenges are overcome (*main plot and romance plot resolutions*).

Not only does the romance now make sense in the framework of a larger story, it also serves to propel the main plot forward. Note how some of the events overlap, where one incident fills slots in both outlines. Alternatively, an event in one plot (Laira's abduction) leads to an event in the other (the king gives Maxwell the weapon). This is a key trick to making a moment in a story more exciting! You can have ten different subplots, but if they're all parallel to each other there's just ten separate stories. If they weave between each other, crisscrossing and intersecting at key moments, you have ten interesting stories that come together to create one amazing book.

We also have the opportunity to bring our world to life by examining aspects of societies and cultures that otherwise would not serve to propel the narrative forward. In the main plot, there are chances to explore the relationships between the humans, elves, and orcs. We also have the chance to view the elven kingdom from an outsider's perspective with Maxwell's point of view. This, however, would be limited to his interaction with the king. By adding in a romance, we can take a deeper dive into the culture and examine facets of mating and courtship customs. Also, since Maxwell and Laira have a more personal relationship, there are opportunities for her to show him parts of the

culture that the king himself—in a purely official capacity—would not be interested in sharing.

In conclusion, you don't need a romance in your book. However, if it makes sense with the main story, it can add tension, excitement, and intrigue to the plot. It can also serve to flesh out your world and provide opportunities to look at the cultures of the setting from a more intimate perspective. Even to a reader who isn't interested in a romance, you can turn this into a social tug-of-war that can help illustrate aspects of the cultures you have created that would have otherwise gone unseen. This extra layer of depth adds realism and life to your fictional cultures in addition to the layers added to the story itself. 🐼

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

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## ART FEATURE: JAY EATON

Curated by Wynter

INTERVIEW

BIOLOGY





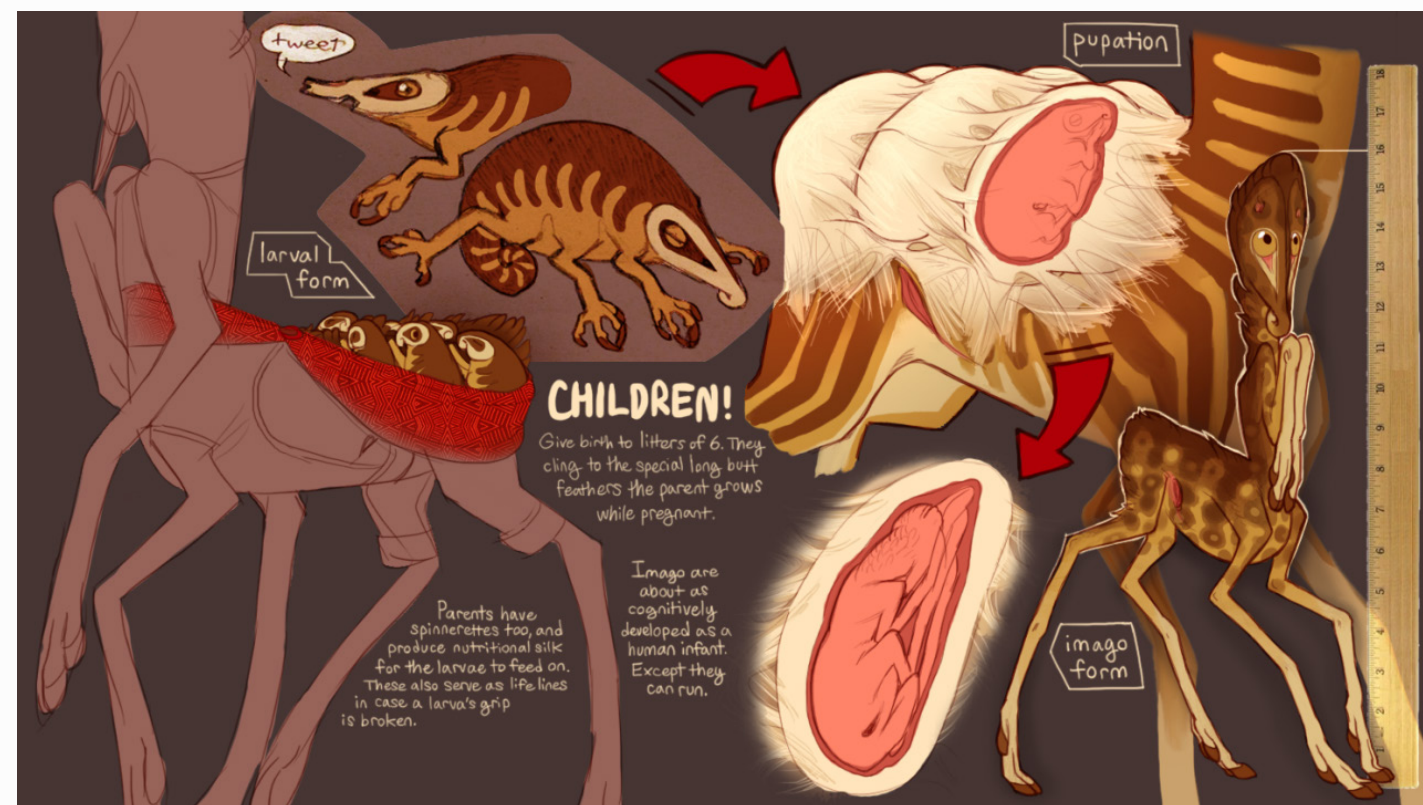
I'm Jay Eaton, a non-binary biologist and comic artist from the Silicon Valley region of California. I'm primarily a digital artist, but I'm also fond of pencil sketching, Micron pens, paint pens, and watercolors. Outside the realm of worldbuilding, I also emboss, bind books, embroider, create graphic designs, and make stationary. I love the versatility of digital art but creating something physical is so satisfying! I've been drawing ever since I could hold a marker in my chubby toddler fist. When I drew anything with any characters, I immediately created a story for them. In order for the story to fit together mechanically, it needed a solid world, and everything blossomed out from there. I suppose I just picked up worldbuilding from seeing media I liked—comics, movies, books, cartoons—and wanting to make stuff like that.

All of my personal projects focus on telling the stories of characters, and because I'm such a visual person, comics fit best for that! It's also the medium I'm most fluent in for storytelling. My current big goal is creating a graphic novel for my hard(ish) science fiction story *Runaway to the Stars*, a world which I have been building for about six years now.

I come up with my ideas by learning about the world we live in. Obviously, biology is my

specialty, so the flesh and bones of my creature designs are usually the first things I finalize and are usually my most solid work. But it's never coming out of nowhere; I would often get new ideas for worldbuilding literally sitting in biology classes. Like, "Wow, earthworms have a gland that turns carbon dioxide into solid bicarbonate to avoid suffocation? My subterranean aliens could use that!" or, "Woah, giant kelp has sugar-transporting vessels analogous to phloem in land plants? So you could tap algae for sap? I gotta make algae syrup the power source for my marine alien's biotech—they could farm their energy!" I also like to take patterns in our natural world and imagine what alternative routes would have been like. For instance, there are very few animals that can photosynthesize, and those that do are aquatic, sessile, or slow-moving. What would a terrestrial photosynthetic animal look like, and how big could it get? Would it be possible for a tube-dwelling worm to evolve into a "tree"?

My desire to insert as much detail and thought into worldbuilding as possible is often butting heads with my desire to finish technically good art rapidly. Since I'm often worldbuilding for a story, I find it helps to *only* work on details that directly affect aspects of the plot and main characters. Sure, I *could* spend six months figuring out every linguistic

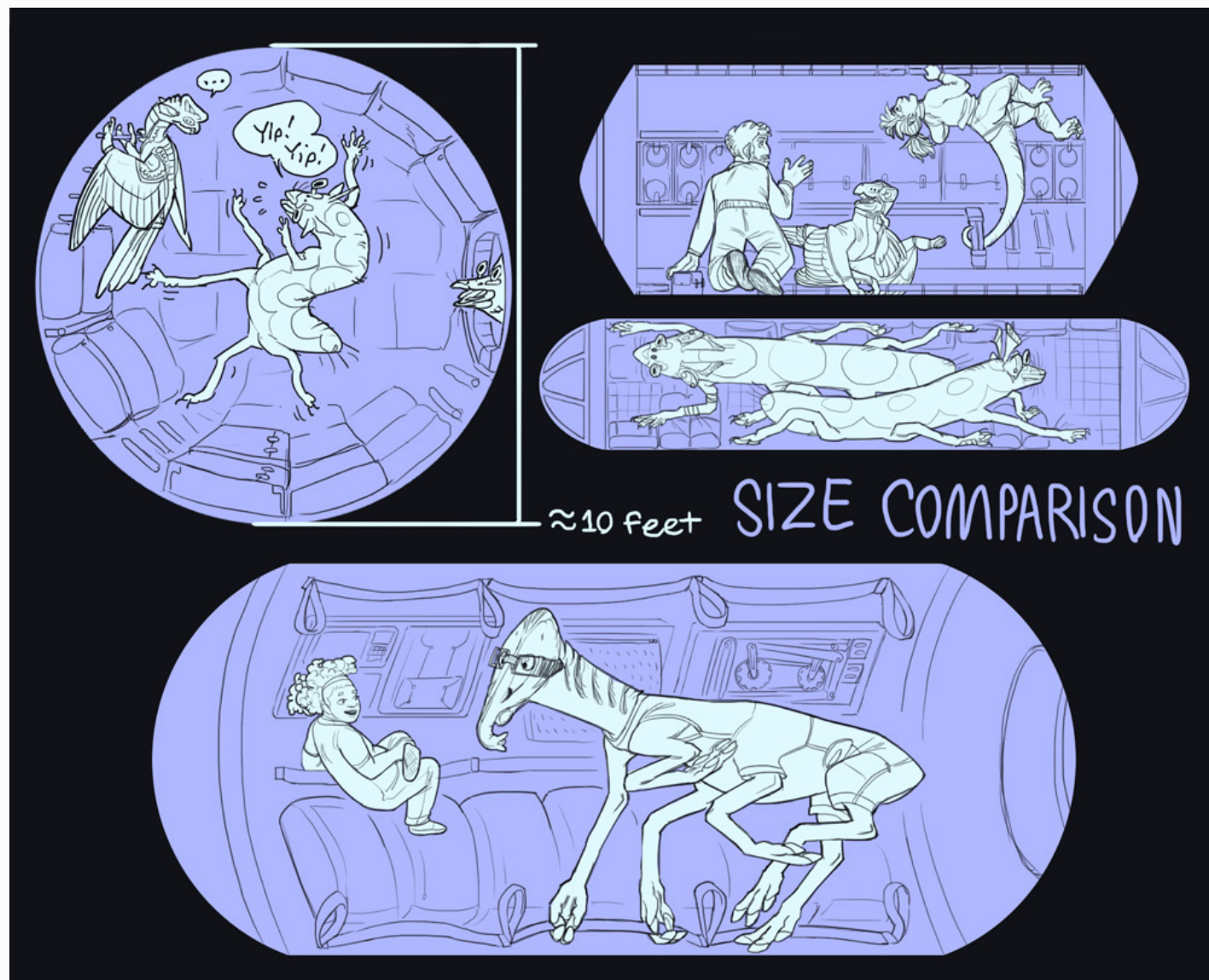


branch of bug ferret writing systems and their associated tactile sign languages, but do I really need to if only one or two of those languages will appear in the story and the written text only as background scribbles? In reverse, neat new concepts can appear because the plot demands a solution for them.

Since I'm such a visual person, ideas often first come to me as an image. And if they don't, I try my damndest to give them a satisfying image. This is partially because I'm worldbuilding for comics—if I can't draw the thing, then I can only represent it through dialogue, which I find far less impactful. One of the bigger struggles with this in *Runaway to the Stars* was figuring out how to visually represent Artificial Intelligence, who are, when you get down to it, a server room full of quantum computer boxes. Since they need to visually interact with the characters and world, I have to think of ways for them to do that and how the reader can distinguish each AI as an individual. Holo-projected bodies aren't an option because this universe has no real holograms. Instead, I decided on AI using a combination of animated screen icons and remote-control robotic units to communicate with squishy sapients. It gives me a huge range for showing an AI's personality purely through visuals. Did they choose a realistic 3D model or silly cartoon avatar? Are their RC units purely functional extensions of their "body," or are they beautiful and stylized? The best worldbuilding elements are the ones I don't have to ever verbally explain in a comic. You just see it and you understand.

If I had to pin down a theme for (most of) my work, I think it would be immersion through mundanity. For *Runaway to the Stars*, it comes through like this: a lot of sci-fi focuses on grand political schemes and space jousting, but that doesn't interest me. What are the daily lives of people like? How can I immerse the reader in a world so different than our own through environmental details and everyday problems? What does a toilet designed to fit four different species of butt in both microgravity and 1g look like? Even if there are grand political schemes happening, isn't it most interesting to show them through the eyes of citizens who have to cope and interact with the society that those politics affect?





As someone who focuses a lot on biological realism in character designs and technological realism in my worlds, I feel as though I may come across as the sort who scoffs at more fanciful worldbuilding. But the truth is that I do things this way because I enjoy it. Figuring out how to make my story elements and designs work within the tight constraints of the world I've built is a fun challenge for me, but for you, it might sound like an unrewarding chore. And that's absolutely fine—I don't think good worldbuilding comes from a rigid ruleset. I think it comes from passionate people smushing a whole lot of stuff they love into an amazing interconnected setting. Make a world and characters you love to spend time with, and find an artistic process that makes you want to keep creating art for it. 🐼

Jay Eaton is on [Patreon](#), where you can help support all of the fantastic worldbuilding and stories being created! You can check it out here, or visit Jay's [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Special thanks to Jay for taking the time to speak with us and share a few pieces. If you have an illustrated world of your own, [apply for one of our future art features](#).

# SCRIM'S STORY

by Arit Reede

As she had promised, Kate followed Auntie Jean into the robot-proving ground without a word. *Beats testing robots in a transport parking facility.* They waded the ebb-tide round the wall separating the scientists' dormitory village from the proving ground, where the wall ended in the sea to prevent errant robots ingressing. On the beach, Kate read a sign, "Welcome to Hell-city."

*Hub? I thought we lived in Zinc City? How is it a hell?*

Auntie Jean mouthed words. No questions now. Auntie Jean was entirely too good at reading Kate's expressions. They started down the dusty, uneven road that ran parallel to the wall. Kate glanced furtively at the ground. *Wait? Was that...? A robot's footprint?* Auntie Jean frowned and shook her head. No stopping now! Too dangerous!

Too dangerous? When Auntie Jean talked Kate's parents into allowing Kate to participate in her latest project, she'd stressed the *benefit* to Kate's dream of getting a summer job to help train robots. How would "too dangerous" every five minutes help with that?

Auntie Jean took Kate's arm and pulled her alongside for them to walk together into a street running in a westerly direction. Every street corner had a tall, egg-shaped steel sentinel.

"The Nubian-class robots, at present folded-up and at rest," Auntie Jean said. "They are one hundred percent smarter than the Martian-class robots."

Common wisdom said there was nothing to fear from the Nubians while they slept. *Duh.* Finally, Kate saw what looked like the garbage mountain Auntie Jean had installed to discourage snooping.

SCI-FI 🦋

ROMANCE ❤️

GENETIC ENGINEERING 🧬

EXPLICIT ⚠️

"This way." Auntie Jean led Kate into a narrow alley between two concrete yard walls that ended at a T-junction; after two right turns, they were in a backyard. Two large chicken-wire clad aviaries, both filled with cooing pigeons, left only a narrow path between to a house door.

"Make yourself at home. I need to go out and I may be gone the rest of the day." Auntie Jean showed Kate the guest room and bathroom.

"Okay if I go out, too? Explore?" Kate said. "Any other humans in this town?"

"Explore? Without knowing how the proving ground, the robots, or the people work? You're to stay at home. Your grandfather's marine telescope is in the comm-room. You can look out of any window so long as you stay out of sight. Other than the robots, everyone is human," Auntie Jean said. "And also, out there I'm known as Harmless."

Kate laughed. "People think you are *harmless*?"

"Out there my *name* is Harmless," Auntie Jean said.

Scrim stood by the window of his high-up, a high bit of a broken building that swayed in every breeze. Like a tree. He chewed the crust he found. The whole top of a loaf of bread. And he picked up a half-eaten fruit this morning. He looked out over his ground. Two Nubies sat folded up in their steel egg-shapes, one at each end of the street. One of them, Yellow Leg (his leg had yellow steel), supposedly slept but probably knew everything going on.

When he finished the bread, Scrim was still hungry. *Where is there more food?*



Fingers sat folded in *his* tall egg-shape at the bottom of Scrim's high-up. Always there, always guarding. On his way out, Scrim laid his hand on his friend's ID pad, so Fingers could know Scrim had left the high-up.

When Fingers felt Scrim's hand, he raised his head and slid his steel shoulders-and-arms free from the egg-shape. Every couple-of-months, Scrim asked the same question, "Why did them scientists put men, all-you, in steel cans and call you robots?"

Fingers got his name when Scrim-friend replaced his left-side finger blades with toe bones off a dead Nubie. He was the only Nubie who could handle things without cutting them. But Fingers still talked by skitzing his finger blades. "Some-of-we can sense their every part. They teach us to know that we are still whole men. More secrets to keep, Scrim-friend."

A no-answer meant the Nubies-themselves still dint know. Scrim put the secrets in his heart alongside all the things Fingers told him for Scrim's future. Like orca, the dolphinate mate for life. The silver is magic. The mud is alive. Fingers and Scrim are of the dolphinate.

"Whisper me about the three cities," Fingers skitzed.

Scrim leaned against Fingers's shoulder where the mic was and repeated the lesson. Every time he said it, he knew more of the meanings. "Humans say we are a hybrid. Human-dolphin, at first equal shares. For twelve generations, only the dolphinate lived in the delta. Our people were made by the scientist who brought us to the delta after she bought it from an overlord. He died, the three cities grew, and farmlands spread into the old floodplain. Farmers come into our creeks to swim and fish ..." he stopped. Sometimes he remember-dreamed how Hell-city's hunters stole little-Scrim. "The hunters come into the delta to make us fewer?"

"The cities force them to take a quota of us in return for hay from the delta for their camels," Fingers skitzed. "These things I heard while serving them in their tents, while we traveled here."

Scrim's stomach grumbled, and he pressed his midriff. *Give me more food, his stomach said.* Out in

the street, he heard Harmless talking here and there. "I have to go," he said. "Get more food."

Kate expanded the brass-bound marine spyglass to its limits and rested the end on a drinking glass she'd set in the laundry window. She focused on the birds in one of the aviaries. Wait a sec? Something much bigger than pigeons in there? She refocused the spyglass. A boy? Fifteen or sixteen? Her age. Dark blond dreads. Skin an old ivory tone that she was instantly attracted to.

He felt gently under a brooding bird and brought out an egg. Oh no! He broke the egg by pressing into it with his thumb. With a quick move he upended it above his mouth. *Yuck! A raw egg!* Despite her revulsion, Kate watched him take two more eggs. When he came out of the aviary licking his lips, she licked her lips. She smiled as he stretched luxuriously outside the cramped confines of the cage. Mm-mm, he was a total Mr. Handsome despite his ragged clothes. She would definitely like to be introduced.

The front door unlatching echoed through the house, and then he was gone. Harmless looked at everything that Kate hadn't touched. "You didn't even try to get out of the house? Where's your famous initiative?"

Scrim visited in his street. The Nubies. If they slept, how come their patterns said hello to Scrim by swirling around his outspread fingers on their ID pads? Stumpy waved for Scrim to come and sit with him on the curb in-front of the lane where Stumpy parked his made-over bicycle. Hell-city's black trades took Stumpy's lower legs to put on someone who wore his out. Them offering Stumpy tin legs, Stumpy said no thanks.

"Be forever in their debt?" he explained. Stumpy's living was painting patterns on anything Scrim brought him. Old time crockery. Shards. Bits of flat steel. Selling them in the tourist markets. "Yesterday Harmless stopped by, asking after you," Stumpy said.

"About the eggs?" Scrim said.

Stumpy laughed. "She didn't mention eggs. She has a job for you. Extra special good pay."

"Makes it sound like a nasty kind of work," Scrim said. "What's she working on?"

Stumpy made noises like he dint know what science project Harmless had going. "The job is today," he said.

Aunty Harmless dumped a string-tied bundle into Kate's arms. "You'll need to take off your own rags." Luckily, her aunty left the room, because no way was Kate going to be naked under this get-up. The frock was dusty and had probably had been laying around for a hundred years. She sneezed. *And who wore it before me?*

"Ready?" Harmless asked. "Mmm. That should do the trick."

"Trick?" Kate said. Although her aunty hadn't stopped Kate from listening in on every conversation she had with her team, the frock seemed to have no relation to anything Kate had heard. Deep green velvet, medieval-style, tight fit. Kate yanked at the lacing across the bodice. What kind of performance had her aunty in mind? She walked round Kate tweaking and...and inserting...things? Kate recalled her mother not-so-secretly hiding audio pick-ups in Kate's ball-gown. That was for eavesdropping. So this...?

"That should do it," Harmless said. "I'll check if the mark is here." She walked into her comm-room. Her aunty intended to listen in on her and the mark, whoever he was. For what?

*Shut up thinking. Listen.*

"You there, Stumpy?" Harmless said. "We can't fail, man. The proving team is at its wits end with so many of the Nubians out of contact. Yeah, yeah. No, the Martians are fine. You need to ask? I'd say they'll be eliminated and good riddance. Have you got the mark teed up? Ah. Waiting for us in the mountain."

Scrim waited by the fire in the street-side cave in Harmless's waste mountain. He tried to think what the extra-special-good pay might be. A week's worth of food? Spit gathered in his mouth. Harmless had pigeon squabs, pigeon eggs, and smoked short-eared rabbits that looked quite a lot like rats with their tails cut off. He swallowed his hunger-drool. Mm-mm. *This fire smells like it is where these rabbits were smoked. Visit here one night, for sure.*

Shuffling came from behind. Harmless led forward a blindfolded girl in a green, floor-touching garment. "Greetings, oh Scrimshaw of...where *do* you come from?" the science-woman said. "Your curiosity overcame your scruples?"

*Whatever. Get the job and get away.*

The girl wrenched loose from Harmless's grip, two-stepped out of reach, and flipped off the blindfold. Seeing him, her eyes and mouth made three round "oh's" of surprise.

*Like she knows me? I never saw her before.*

She took a couple more steps, nearer to him.

Harmless laughed. "Look at her. Isn't she pretty? Meet Kate." Scrim stayed silent. People usually said more. "She's my niece," Harmless said. "The job is to show her round. I don't have time. Besides, young people like the company of young people." She turned and walked back into the mountain.

"We should go. Got a place to hide near here?" Kate said. With her face, but without her voice.

"Huh?" he said with his face.

"We need to go. Now!" Again the silent talking. Scrim took her across the street. Row houses. The one where he would hide to study Harmless's waste mountain. Behind the house was part of a shed still standing. Four brick walls with only the doorless hole for coming in. No roof.

Kate pushed past him and hid in the corner next to the doorway. She combed with her fingers over



the green cloth she wore, pincered up a little black thing between two fingertips, and cleared a place in the floor dust with her foot. Then, she put down the little thing, no bigger than a wheat grain.

Everytime he started to ask, she made a silent “shh.” She found nine more before shaping her hands with more signs.

He smiled, this time knowing exactly what she meant. Squared thing, solid? He prised a brick from the doorway. She smiled, too, and he glowed inside, happy for knowing what she meant.

She mashed all the little things, grinding them like flour. “We need to go now,” she said. “I don’t trust Harmless not to come and check why her gadgets aren’t working.” She looked impatient for him to show her the way.

*Where to*, he wondered. “There’s a road through the attics all connected,” he said. He led her to a brick-oven beside the house. Fingertip-touched her, showing her where to put her feet to climb up onto it. She blushed. Then climbed. Blushed again when she tripped on the green cloth she wore and he steadied her. He helped her up the stair by her hand, and after he got through the hole in the roof, he pulled her after him by her arm, skimming the back of his hand by her breast.

Sorry, he should’ve said. But his face heated up so hot he didn’t want to be looking anywhere she might see. *What is your problem?* he thought at his blood. *Just be blood. Ordinary.* “Them little things...?” he said for having a distraction.

“Things for listening,” Kate said. “A way that Harmless could listen to everything we might have said. More particularly, anything you might have said.”

His blood ran cold. “Things like what?” he said.

“Streets are not good for talking secrets,” Kate said.

Scrim swung his head. Left. Right. No one in either direction and an old tin roof overhead?

She shrugged. “Anyone can come along.”

He walked ahead of her. “Watch where you walk. This *street* is missing some of its boards.” At the end, he led her down a stair.

Again she blushed when he touched her to warn her of missing stair treads. Had him blushing too, now. His blood was not behaving. Scrim peered round a street corner. A six-stall market on the wider pavement. He heard a hurdy-gurdy tuning up. Could the people here be expecting tourists? Not good. Where there were tourists, there were guards.

“Those robots sitting fore and aft...” Kate said. She leaned against him while watching around the corner with him.

*Watch out my blood.*

She shuddered. “Might they be some of the ones that Harmless calls the Nubian-Class? She said more and more of them are out of control?”

Scrim wanted to correct her. *They have freed themselves. They’re out of contact. They call themselves Anuboids after that dog snout they were given. They are Nubies to me since I was little and lost, and one of them saved me from...* he shook his head. *Wait till I know her better. Wait till I know her job.*

His blood? He never before thought to listen to his blood. Right now, his blood ran cold like he was afraid. She might betray him and all the Nubies just by shuddering in full view of a guard while walking past a folded-up Nubie. Most of the guards hated the Nubies.

Only one place Scrim could think of where to hide Kate with no one daring to decide to come up and winkle her out. Dry-mouthed, he grabbed her hand. Held it tight, whatever she might think. “There can be no tripping. We’ve got to move smart.”

She picked up a good bit of cloth and held onto it while he led her through lanes, tunnels, and narrow corridors open to the sky. His street was as usual, though Fingers wasn’t sitting at the bottom of Scrim’s stair.

“Up there?” Kate said. Was that her voice trembling, or was it a thing she did on purpose?

“Up there we’re safe. Down here ...” What to tell her? “A Nubie comes to be here.”

“Right here into this lobby?” she said.

He nodded. Thinking about Fingers, he remembered when Fingers found little-Scrim imprisoned in a cage and freed him. The way Kate glared at him. He shrugged with his hands akimbo. “What?”

“Help me out of Harmless’s stupid frock? It’s too tight for me to do it by myself. I can’t climb *that* with it.”

He grinned. By that, she meant his stair. He studied what she called a frock. “How? Help, I mean. Can I use my knife?”

She giggled. “In the front where I can see what you’re doing will be good.”

His blood simmered. *Blood, be still.*

Kate pulled out the part criss-crossed with string. “These laces first.”

He had to stand close up to her to slash the string. *Legs, be still. No trembling.*

“At last! I can breathe,” Kate said. She loosened her top so far that he glimpsed her private skin.

His blood sang louder. “Where next?” he said. He had to swallow hard at a flare of excitement.

“If you just cut the green stuff, we’ll be good,” Kate said.

He pretended to slash anywhere. It *was* all green.

“Maybe holding it so?” She demonstrated by pinching a pleat in the cloth from between her breasts to the top to her stomach.

The way she slung her body-scent at him, he’d be legless in a minute. Something he heard? Long time ago, long way to the delta. *Man-talk. Get with the action, Scrim. Not your time yet.*

Scrim forced his hands to the job. Slid the knife,

sharp outward, into the fold she held and slid it downward to where he helped her pull the pleat straight for cutting through the sewn parts. After that an easy slide down to the lower hem. The green thing fell away. She had on long pants and a shirt.

To make it easy for her to remember his moves, Scrim climbed the three floors of the broken building half a length at the time. “Watch where I grab with my hands and put my feet.” He waited to help her step over the gate tied in the doorway to his high-up. “This gate is so we don’t slide out when the house sways.”

She had a wild-hair, eyes popping look about her. “Rest up first?” he said. “I’ve got water.” He sat her on the pad of old clothes where he slept. Fetched a bottle of water. Every little touch him-to-her and her-to-him weighed meaningful. He guided her hand around the water bottle.

*Oh my*, Kate thought. *This man-boy is such a... heartthrob!* He touched her and she just about melted. She glanced swiftly, softly into his eyes. *Mm-mm. Met me mid-look, didn’t you? You’re as taken with me as I am with you.* She wished they could’ve met in their ordinary lives. Maybe she still could? What did summer-jobbers do, anyway? *But now, what do I do now?* She breathed deep. *Tell him now or tell him after?* She thought it through for three seconds. *Tell him now and if he’s upset, I can comfort him.*

“Is it safe to look out of the window?” she said. “This place seems quite unsteady?” She leapt up anyway and staggered to get her balance in the swaying house. She fell against Scrim standing right there, smiling and ready to catch her, and she couldn’t help but give him a quick hug and a peck on his chin.

She pulled him to the window by his hand. “I overheard Harmless in her communications room,” she said. “The Nubian-Class Robot-Proving Team hired her to find out why the Nubians have stopped responding to the proving team’s commands.” She felt him begin to tremble and tightened her grip. “Harmless thinks you’re a spy. I so don’t see you



selling secrets to the competition? Her team is afraid to...to take you in...to question you about the skitzing language, because you are so well-guarded by your Nubie-friends?"

Scrim filled with such sorrow that his heart wept. "Where does Kate fit in?" he said rough-voiced.

"Harmless thinks she knows all about young love," Kate said. "When boys like to brag to impress their girls. She coached me on how to get you to tell me what language you speak with the Nubians. She expected to hear it all through the transmitters she hid on me." She laughed—maybe about Harmless's disappointment—but Scrim knew only despair. Everything felt wrong, and his roaring blood said it was too late to stop Kate-and-Scrim happening.

She squeezed his hand and raised it to the place between her breasts. Where he could feel her heart beating, among other things. "But you didn't need to brag," she said. "We got into a fever to be together really well without it."

He sobbed.

"Scrim, please-dont-cry!" she exclaimed all in one word. "I've dreamed and dreamed about us. How good we'll be together." She hugged him close, kissed him every-and-anywhere she could reach, while they were both upright. She walked him backward to the bedding. Her thigh between his thighs. His thigh between hers. His spurter was never going to lie down again. He tripped backward. Did not fight her off when she fell on him.

He learned kissing without hesitation. Her world-breaking words lost their power. Dimly he marvelled that she knew he was ready for the patterning when he didn't. All those wrong-time feelings—the blushing, his blood roaring hot one minute, slacking and cold the next—this was what was wanted? Grinning wide, he mind-jumped to the delta, to the feast to celebrate his new-man's paloosa patterning that would mark him as partnered for his evermore.

Kate helped him out of his clothes. They laughed about him helping her, not with his knife this time.

She closed over him like warm smooth mud. He joined her love-making exultantly. And after she fell asleep, he beheld the delta's silver erupting under his skin and mark out his pattern. Finally, he slept too.

Kate woke first. She smiled at the pearly pre-dawn light in the high-up. Smiled wider about last night, how she'd fixed Scrim's upset. How they enjoyed themselves. She licked her lips to prep them for a good morning kiss. Found Scrim under the covers.

She reared back. Her mind stuttered. *This isn't Scrim! Is it? Same dreads! He'd changed!* His skin was pale silver-grey. It wasn't last night. He had silvery blotches on him. Chest. Arms. Legs.

*He doesn't look human! Not his face nor...* she swallowed *...nor down below.*

She felt sick. She'd made love with a...? A what? *Not a human boy!*

*I can't stay.* She dressed hurriedly, clumsily. *Please don't wake.* She slid more than she climbed down the impossible stairs and managed to sneak by the Nubian at the bottom without waking it. Out in the street, she walked east, fighting back tears. Not now. Not safe. What had she done? Damn Auntie Jean!

Just in time, she heard—she stopped—a pair of men meeting up. They would be coming out of that alley ahead? She slipped into the nearest foyer. *Please let there not be a Nubian.* The men stopped right there in front of her within the doorway. Guards. One was armed to the teeth. Gun. Laser. Knives. The older one had a baton. Kate stilled so she only breathed. If they turned, they'd see her.

"Old Harmless has a hide sending us out for this," said the younger man. "Is it our job to take down out-of-control Nubians? I'm Ferris, by the way."

"Cade." They shook hands. "The Nubians are men in cans, I heard," Cade said.

Kate stopped breathing. *How can that be true?*

"Scum from prisons, mass murderers," Ferris said.

Cade chuckled. "This whole city is a prison? Most people here—the ones who hide from us—once were ordinary folk caught up by Hell-city's hunters."

Kate recalled the sign down at the beach. *"Welcome to Hell-city."*

"The Nubians are men. Like us," Cade said. "They're controlled with bursts of electricity. My cousin, who works in the pen, doles out way more pain than pleasure."

"That's a lot to take in," Ferris said. "My first shift in, and they team me up with a Wall-Breaker?"

"You're my third buddy this ten-day," Cade said. "Both the previous two thought the same as you. The Nubians are two-and-a-half-times your size, faster in proportion, and furious that people *will* try to shoot them."

"So how do you stay alive?" Ferris said.

"I respect everybody on the streets like they are people," Cade said. "And they are, if that rumour is true. As for the Martian-Class, they're to be taken for a run at sunset, all three troops, in among the cornfields. The power to the gates will be out for the duration."

As they walked away, Cade smacked Ferris on his shoulder. "If you *do* want to keep on living, I suggest you go get lost down a lane somewhere. The Martian-Class Proving Team are signing on keen types to police the Martians, and the Martians are still no more than hit-and-runners."

Kate knew what she should do. *Must do. Treat them like people. Hurry. What if I meet Scrim? I am so, so sorry, Scrim. I am so sorry.* She shuddered, recalling his skin. Grey! All those silvery spots. Like he had some disease. And she slept with him? Would she need...? *Go now. It's still early.*

She ran back to Scrim's building, that foyer. Yes. The Nubian was still there. Still the egg-shape. How could she talk with it? Him? Okay, yes. He had an ID pad about her chin-height. Swirling colours. She put her palm on them. "P-p-please, Mr. Nubian.

Cade the guard said the power to the gates...the power to the gates will be off from sunset..."

*Schlick.*

*Help!* What was that sound? It came from under her hand! She stepped back. The Nubian raised its strange head and slid its shoulders and arms upright and free from its knees. Stayed like that and looked down at her. First with one side of his head, then the other. She heard Scrim waking, three floors up, broken building, nothing in between. He moaned. She woke from her stupor.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know...From sunset...from sunset today while the Martian-Class Proving Team practices the Martians in the cornfields. For the duration of that." She heard Scrim start down. So hurt. *I'm sorry.* She ran.

When Scrim woke, his arms were empty. His paloosa pattern blotched hesitantly. From fear? Where was Kate? Nowhere in the high-up, he saw with one wild glance. Her clothes were gone. He had to go and find her. His spurter didn't want clothes. How would he climb with it so rampant? At home, Kate-and-Scrim would've stayed in the silver mud day and night for a week.

He moaned. It was too soon for them to be parted. His body already couldn't remember how to be alone. Climbing down toward ground level, he fell the distance of a floor onto Fingers sitting half-unfolded. Scrim's mouth and nose snotted with grief and his spurter sprayed uselessly.

Fingers calmed Scrim's paloosa pattern with a Nubie-finger-blade as gentle as a feather, despite that he-Scrim was a torn-asunder no-thing. A wreck when he was hardly begun. Fingers slung Scrim over his back and ran him to the secret yard between the ruined house and the wall of the pen.

Scrim cried and spurted without let-up. The Nubies still caught behind the wall crooned him to sleep with their skitzing songs. He knew already that Scrim-and-Kate would never bear young.



Conception was the work of that first week. Why was he still alive?

All day, Fingers watched over Scrim while skitzing his finger blades at his Nubie friends. Some brought others, one at the time. Some, gently, quietly, pulled stones from the wall and silently deposited them in the cellar of the ruined house. Whenever Scrim remembered Kate, he spurted, now not more than a dribble. He grew weaker and weaker without her to sustain him and him to sustain her with the silver mud and the manna. He was an interrupted journey. A broken circle.

Finally, Fingers dragged Scrim upright and lifted him up against his steel chest. He swept aside Scrim's hair on top of his head and cored him, suddenly, with one of his finger-blades. There was only a little blood. Scrim's head cleared. His snot and tears dried up. He could breathe better than he breathed his whole life. His grief dried up. His spurter went back to being the tap to his bladder.

But his paloosa pattern stayed. A man's skin on a boy. What use would his life be? He tried to remember if he ever knew any such as him. Some hours after sunset, Fingers knelt beside him. "Climb up, my Scrim," he said with his knife-blades singing. Scrim climbed onto Finger's steel back and held onto his neck flange.

Yellow Leg joined them. The streets were as empty as always when the Nubians roamed. The gates between Hell-city and the broad common road lay broken in the street. In the west, moonlight glinted on steel. The Anuboids marched there. The Martian-Class robots jogged far to the south with their handlers beside them in low-flying, open hover-cars.

Fingers and Yellow Leg walked through the gate and picked their way among the rocks and stones of the rubble field surrounding the city. Yellow Leg stopped them at the edge by a stone as big as a house. "Hide here till daylight, Scrim-friend," he skitzed. "You are grey. Good camouflage."

Fingers knelt and Scrim slid off. "Hide from the hunters, however you hunger or thirst," Fingers skitzed. "You need the delta's mud to be finished. The delta has many such as you, too human to mate with our-others. We-Anuboids are going to Bight. When you're done with growing, you may come there to search us out. If you still want to." 🐼



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# EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: MARTHA WELLS

*Interviewed by Cathy, the Overprepared GM*

**M**artha Wells is a *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestselling author of sci-fi and fantasy. Publishing since 1993, she's written the award-winning *Murderbot Diaries* series, the *Books of the Raksura* series, and the *Ile-Rien* series in addition to a plethora of short stories, media tie-ins, and nonfiction essays on fantasy and science fiction. Recently, she also led the story team for *Magic: The Gathering's Dominaria* expansion, and, as the 2017 Toastmaster for the World Fantasy Convention, she gave a call to arms to all of us interested in speculative fiction with her speech "[Unbury the Future](#)."

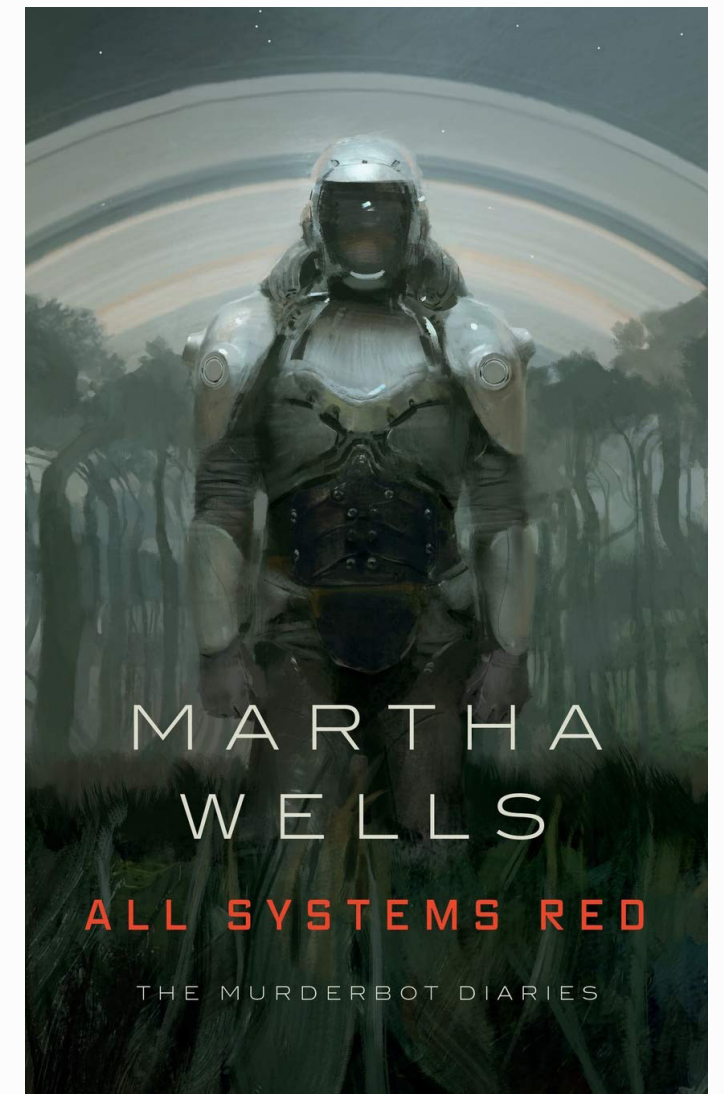
*Thank you for joining us, Martha. Since 2017, you've won the Alex, two Hugos, a Locus, and a Nebula. Additionally in 2018, you lead the Magic: The Gathering story team's Dominaria expansion. Plus, you're currently a finalist or shortlisted for another Hugo and another Nebula. Does it feel like your career has kicked into overdrive lately, or does it feel more gradual than it appears from the outside?*

It was fairly gradual up until *All Systems Red* came out in May 2017. It was a very strong seller from the beginning, and the sales increased as the other *Murderbot* novellas and the audiobook narrated by Kevin R. Free, which made the *New York Times* Bestseller list, came out. I've never had a book this popular before, and it made 2018 kind of a whirlwind with all the award nominations and wins. But I don't think *All Systems Red* would have hit as big as it did without the past few years of Night Shade Books publishing the *Books of the Raksura*, and that was definitely a gradual build. When *The Cloud Roads* came out in 2011, it got almost no attention. It was probably about six months before I saw anyone mention it at all. Then word of mouth started to get around, and more and more people recommended it. I also think the *Raksura* audiobooks narrated by Christopher Kipiniak really helped get the series more readers. It still didn't sell

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well enough for Audible to do the last book, *The Harbors of the Sun*, in audio, though, which was disappointing.

*So, let's look at that gradual buildup of your career in more detail. The Ile-Rien books were your first published series. Can you tell us about how you developed this fantasy setting that gets more technologically advanced over the course of the series?*

*Ile-Rien* took a lot of research to develop. I had to look at real world examples of how cities and



technologies changed over time. I read a lot about the development of the city of Paris, how it changed between the Middle Ages and the early 19th century, and why those changes took place. I wanted to capture that feel of a long term occupation site, a city that was built on top of earlier versions of itself, that had grown outside the walls that had at one point been such an important defense.

I also had to think a lot about what it would mean to have magic, and the world of fairy, involved as well. The magic in *Ile-Rien* has always been handled like another technology. The characters don't find magical artifacts; they have to do research and development to create them.

*And then in 2011, after publishing the Ile-Rien series and a couple of stand alone novels, you debuted the first of The Books of the Raksura. For those who haven't read your Raksura series, can you tell us about it—especially your inspiration for the Raksura culture?*

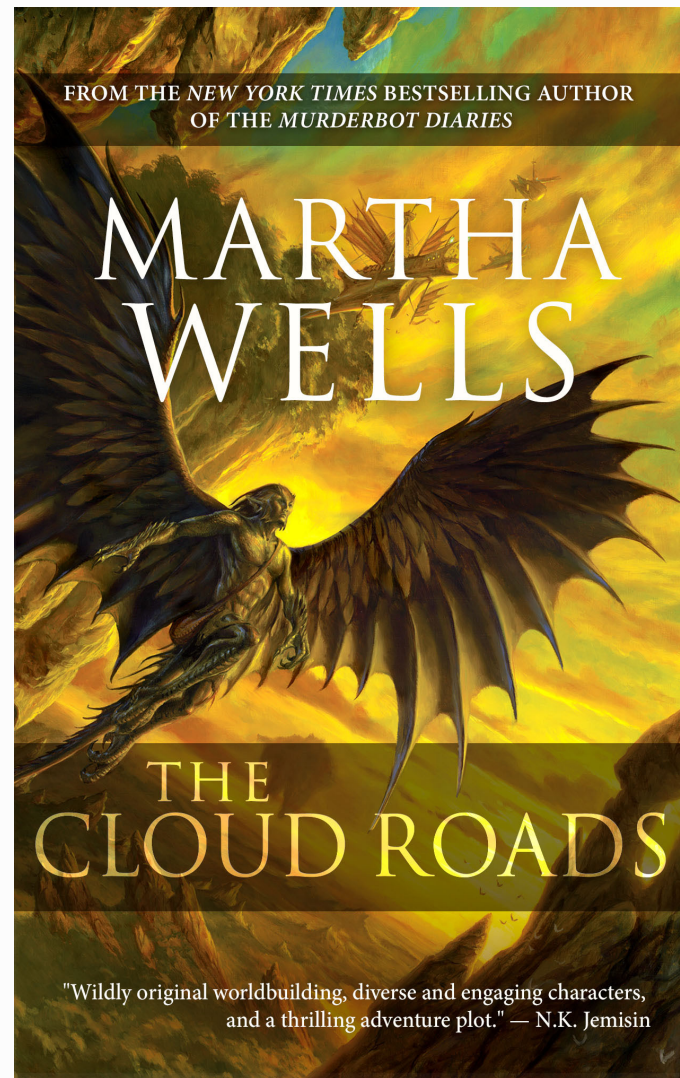
I wanted [the protagonist] Moon to have to navigate a complex culture, and for it to be clear to Stone<sup>1</sup> (and to a certain extent to the reader) that the person Moon had thought was his mother and the people he had thought were his siblings couldn't be. So a lot of it came out of that moment, that first meeting between Moon and Stone. Then I had to think about how a culture like this would function. That's basically how I developed everything in the series: whenever the characters encountered a place, a person, or anything, I tried to think how to make it as interesting and different and cool as possible. Then I had to think about how it would function in context with everything around it.

*The Raksura culture is especially complex with regards to sex and gender.<sup>2</sup> Can you talk about that a bit?*

I don't think of the Raksura as having the same ideas of gender as we do, especially since they're also two separate species who decided to combine into one. So the Arbora have two genders, the royal Aeriats have two, and the Aeriats warriors have two.

<sup>1</sup> Moon wasn't raised among the Raksura. Stone finds him and introduces him to the Raksura culture, including the complexities of Raksura reproduction.

<sup>2</sup> The shapeshifting Raksura started as two separate species that merged. Remnants of the original ancestor species persist in the two body forms that Raksura can change into: the winged Aeriats and the heavier, climbing Arbora. Arbora comprise fertile males and females. However, Aeriats comprise both fertile royal "queens" and "consorts" and the infertile male and female warriors.



So the total would be six. For example, a consort, a male warrior, and a male Arbora are all considered male, but they're all different physically, and they each express gender in different ways. Also, Raksura don't tend to have things like gendered clothes or jewelry. Probably the only thing they have that would come close to being gendered would be the claw sheath jewelry and the fancy belts that the queens wear, which are reserved just for them.

*I've noticed that many of your works subvert or ignore traditional gender norms. Is this aspect of your writing a purposeful exploration of gender or a side effect of the stories you're telling?*

I think it tends to be a side effect. For example, I didn't plan for Murderbot to be asexual or agender. As I was writing the story I just felt that this was a character who, because of their life up to this point, is not going to want to have any kind of sexual life, and it's not going to be gendered or want to be gendered.

*And so onto the Murderbot Diaries! For me, it consistently subverted my expectations. It has the low-class, jaded protagonist doing illicit things in a world of AIs and corrupt corporations that I expect of cyberpunk but without feeling angry or nihilistic. It has humans imposing code to keep the bots in control like much sci-fi since Asimov developed his three laws. However, it shows from the beginning how commonly the bots subvert the humans' intentions and how little the bots care about overthrowing the humans. Can you talk about how your worldview shaped the series, and what you really think about corporations and AIs?*

I think corporations need to be severely regulated for the protection of workers, the environment, and basically the rest of the world. I think we're in a position now where corporations are happy to let people die in order to increase their profits, and that's not a position we can tolerate. And I think if we do develop sentient AI, it would be really nice if it was the one thing humans didn't screw up. We have this idea that humans are inherently violent, so therefore, AI will be inherently violent, but violence is a learned behavior.

Ann Leckie has a great quote about the "evil AI which has to be destroyed/controlled" narrative, that it's "—often a narrative about the threat of the oppressed taking over...basically the 'AI takes over' is essentially a slave revolt story that casts slaves defending their lives and/or seeking to be treated as sentient beings as super powerful, super strong villains who must be prevented from destroying humanity."<sup>3</sup> I hadn't seen that when I was writing *All Systems Red*, but it's a perfect encapsulation of the story.

One of my inspirations for the behavior of the bots was one of the documentaries for the making of *The Lord of the Rings*, where they used AI-type

software to make all the thousands of the tiny little figures in the armies during the massive battle scenes, so the figures would move in realistic ways without having to be individually coded. When they first ran the program, it would have the armies start to attack each other and then all the little people would run away because the program was prioritizing self-preservation for each figure. It reminded me of an old movie that was popular when I was a kid, *War Games*, where a supercomputer intended to fight a nuclear war becomes sentient and, when given the choice whether to fulfill its function by starting a war, decides that war is senseless and it's better to play games instead. We don't know what a real sentient AI might want, but it probably won't be interested in the same things humans are interested in, unless we force it to be.

## I THINK IF WE DO DEVELOP SENTIENT AI, IT WOULD BE REALLY NICE IF IT WAS THE ONE THING HUMANS DIDN'T SCREW UP.

*Besides your custom settings like Murderbot, Raksura, and Ile-Rien, you've also written for existing settings such as the Magic: The Gathering multiverse. Do you do anything differently when you write in established settings compared to writing in your own?*

With *Stargate: Atlantis*, *Star Wars*, and *Magic: the Gathering*, it helps that there are so many great resources about the worlds. *Magic: the Gathering* was especially fun to work with, with all the other stories, the worldbuilding guide, the maps, and fantastic art to draw inspiration from. I didn't really do anything differently, except that for the *Star Wars* and *Stargate* books, I had to submit outlines, and the *Magic: the Gathering* stories were based on a

<sup>3</sup> Ann Leckie is an award-winning science fiction and fantasy author, best known for her novel *Ancillary Justice*. <https://www.annleckie.com/>



story arc outline that was put together by the story and worldbuilding teams.

*So tell us a little bit more about leading the MTG story team’s Dominaria expansion in 2018. What did that entail?*

I was working from an outline developed by Nic Kelman and other members of the story team. Parts of it were fairly detailed because the overall story had to fit in with the *Planeswalkers* story arc that had been written to play out over several years. And other parts I got to have a lot of input, like the backstories of new characters and what some of the older *Dominaria* characters had been doing since the last time they were featured in the stories. It was a different process for me, but I liked working in collaborative environments and being able to ask questions and get ideas from other writers.

*Looking at your works as a whole, You frequently write within settings of epic scope. How do you keep track of everything?*

I don’t really use any tools or techniques except a word processor. I used Wordperfect until I was finally forced to switch to Word. I have notes in random files and usually a file where I keep track of my daily word count, also with random notes. I tend to research as I go along, concentrating on things that I need to know for the story, though I’ll often be reading or looking at other non-fiction for inspiration, like interesting architecture, natural formations—that kind of thing. It’s not a very organized system, and it reflects the mess that is my brain. I think it’s sort of functional for me because

I tend to revise a lot as I go along. My first draft is usually a lot closer to a finished draft because, whenever I have to change my plot or worldbuilding or characterization, I generally go back and do it immediately, which helps me keep everything straight in my head. It’s not a system I’d recommend to anyone, but it works for me.

*Speaking of recommendations, do you have any advice to aspiring authors and game writers?*

Learn as much as you can about publishing and the industry. Because writing and games (and any kind of creative, artistic work) often start out as hobbies, it can be hard to transition into thinking of them as jobs. But if you are going to make creative work your job, you have to learn to treat it in a professional way.

*One more question before we go. What’s next for you?*

Right now I’m totally focused on finishing the *Murderbot* novel, which will be called *Network Effect* and should be coming out in May 2020. After that, I’m actually not sure what I’m going to write next!

**We would like to thank Martha for taking the time to be a part of this issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine*! You can find her on her [website](#), [Goodreads](#), or [Twitter](#). Check out her latest book, *The Murderbot Diaries: Artificial Condition*. This fourth novella in the series is also a finalist for the Hugo, Nebula, and BSFA awards.**

# DIVERSITY AS A TOOL FOR VERISIMILITUDE

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT   
CULTURE 

John Venner  
Art by Anna Hannon

As a dungeon master and author, I often struggle to populate my worlds with the multitude of deep and meaningful characters that can help bring any fantasy world to life. I find that while developing a protagonist is relatively simple, creating a multi-layered and rich world for them to reside in often eludes me. This tends to create plots that, while interesting, feel decidedly flat. I have attempted to create that depth in my gaming sessions through the use of evocative music, compelling images, and incorporating characters with odd quirks and personalities. However, with the exception of the final point, these tools do not translate well into the written word. A colleague of mine suggested that I analyze my previous work, paying close attention to character development and depth. This practice proved invaluable, as I discovered in my work a worrying propensity to skim over certain characters whose lifestyles or experiences I struggled to understand.

The truth is, too often we get caught up developing only the characters which speak to our personal experiences. Most of us naturally base our main characters around things we know and understand, with aspiring writers often being told to write about what they know. Joe Haldeman, the author of *The Forever War* and winner of numerous awards for his science fiction, writes:

*“Bad books on writing tell you to ‘Write what you know,’ a solemn and totally false adage that is the reason there exist so many mediocre novels about English professors contemplating adultery.”*

## THE POWER OF A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Increasing the diversity of our narratives has frequently been shown to have a positive effect in terms of engagement and retention of audiences, a fact well understood and often implemented in the education system. This can be useful information for those writers who intend for their work to be consumed by large audiences. However, writers who build their worlds for friends around a gaming table, or themselves, may question the benefits of putting in the extra effort needed to consider these issues in their work.

Opening our viewpoint when building worlds can often lead to new avenues of exploration. Consider, for a moment, your entire world history written from the viewpoint of one of your less populous, non-humanoid races. What would be the primary focus of their histories? How would they interpret the cultures of others? Considering your world from this perspective may generate new ideas, adventures, and characters. For example, a society of elves that live for thousands of years may interpret death completely differently from a society of humans for whom death is a close and ever-present companion. Even if it doesn’t, the existing characters within your world will now feel inherently deeper and richer purely for having thought about the world from an alternative perspective.

This process of examining existing information in a new light occurs regularly in the real world as well. Scholars are able to generate fascinating insights into the life and culture of pre-colonial civilizations in Africa by considering non-Eurocentric viewpoints. For those of you who are able to speak several languages, I highly recommend finding a novel that has editions in more than one of your languages and





reading them back-to-back. You'll likely find that, while the main thread of the story remains the same, the connotations, tone, and perspective of some passages differ. Even these minor differences can lead to a story that feels richer and deeper in its retelling.

Similar techniques can be applied to other spheres of diversity. Consider the perspective of a marginalized gender in your world's equivalent of a medieval royal court. Or perhaps a gay male in a matriarchal society. Both of these people would experience their world very differently from how it might be recorded in the history books. This can often lead to insights and ideas that would have been difficult to generate otherwise. Approaching worldbuilding from different angles can only serve to increase depth and verisimilitude.

### BUT MY WORLD IS DIVERSE!

Most worlds will include some form of diversity. This may be racial diversity, expressed through the inclusion of multiple species. It could be cultural diversity, used as a comparative filter through which to view variations in regions. Or it could even be socio-economic diversity, utilized as a delineator between various classes within a hierarchical system. Diversity simply means variety, and as the oft-quoted line from William Cowper's famous poem goes: *"Variety's the very spice of life, / That gives it all its flavor"* (Cowper 159).

This flavorful diversity is key to a fascinating world; however, the depth of this diversity is also important. In much the same way flavors can be layered to lead to a rich and delicious meal, diversity can be layered to create a deep and interesting world. The way that a member of a minority sexual orientation is treated in one region may differ significantly from how they'd be treated in a neighboring state. This is true of most differences between people. Someone of any culture, gender, race, or sexual orientation will likely not have to travel far outside of a comfort zone to be treated as an outsider. For some, this can be through moving to a different country, for others it can simply be travelling a few city blocks.



An outnumbered culture within a relatively homogenous society will likely group together, retaining some of the identity of its motherland while adopting many features of their new home. This is often seen in nearly every country on Earth, with large areas of major U.S. cities named Chinatown or Little Italy due to the communities that have created a new home there. This intersectional diversity leads inexorably to complexity and depth, to the point that a character created within this world now comes with a rich backstory and variety of motivations before their name is even decided.

The real world is a complex entity, and every person and creature within it comes with their own set of cultural, racial, sexual, social, and other forms of baggage. Creating rich and exciting characters that stand alone can be difficult and

time-consuming. While investing this time and effort into key protagonists and antagonists can be useful, developing secondary and tertiary characters to this degree can be exhausting. Investing the time instead into developing layers of intersecting diversity can help to provide a framework upon which to build all characters, leading people to be defined by the world in which they live rather than the heroes with which they interact.

### SO HOW CAN I DO THIS?

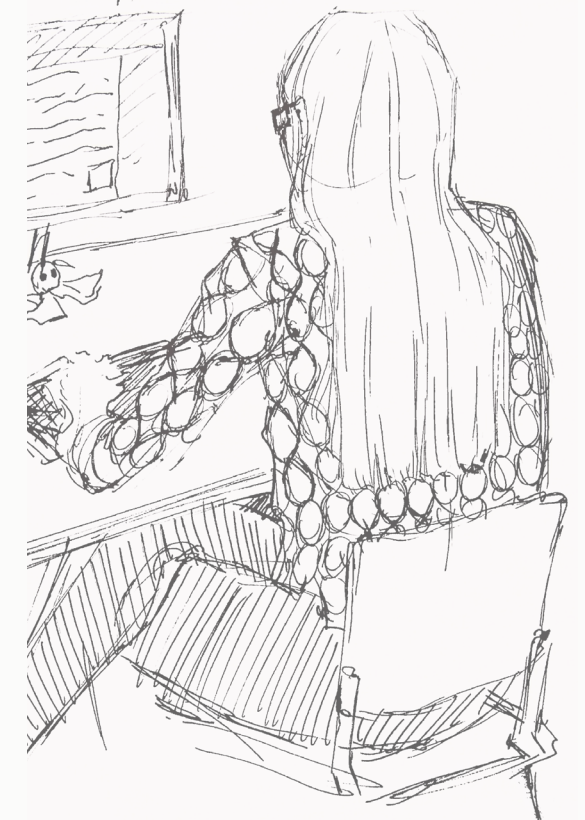
There are several techniques that can be applied to your idea generation. The simplest, but likely the most time-consuming, involves exposing yourself to opinions, cultures, and literature that you don't encounter in your day-to-day life. This could be as simple as watching a documentary on a remote tribe, or as protracted as finding a biography on being gay in a highly religious setting.

Since I discovered my work was lacking diversity in depth, I have attempted this approach myself and recently read two books in my pursuit of creating meaningful diversity. The first was a novel based on historical events that occurred in feudal Japan in the late 16th century, an era of history and a culture of which I previously had no knowledge. The second was a book about an Anglo-Saxon freedman shortly after the Norman invasion in 1066.<sup>6</sup> It is written in a hybrid language, a mixture of Old and Modern English. This hybrid language proves difficult to decipher at first, but before long, the reader finds themselves reading freely and gaining a much deeper understanding for how the character thinks and feels than if the novel were written in plain English.

Both of these books opened my eyes to new cultures, events, and beliefs that proved important in generating ideas and complex societies within my world. I didn't just learn about the strong sense of familial and feudal honor in 16th-century Japanese society, I experienced it through the eyes of a native person. Likewise, the close connection between an Anglo-Saxon freedman and the nature surrounding his home was expressed to me in a myriad of ways. Each of which brought home the spiritual symbiosis that's expressed by him through nearly every act and thought. This second novel greatly helped me when developing a nomadic tribe within my world.

The outlook of a primitive person who lives closely with nature was invaluable when visualizing the perspective of this tribe and it resulted in the tribe really standing out amongst the more civilized people around them.

The second technique is to get out into the world and experience the wonderful color and flavor of everyday life. Unless you live a long way from civilization, you likely experience this richness and variety of life and cultures daily, although we can easily become numb to the benefits it can bring to our work. Even those people that live in relatively homogenous towns can experience the varying perspectives exhibited by diverse social classes and ages. I take the train to work each day and, in an attempt to improve my worldbuilding, I have been spending more time observing my fellow passengers. Occasionally, I will write a simple description of a particularly interesting person, maybe even expanding that into a short passage involving them as a central character. I've found that this has greatly improved my perception of the variety inherent within our society, but it has also proved invaluable in highlighting my own biases and inherent assumptions. Since noticing that I tend to automatically write in a similar style about people that look or act a certain way, I've been able







to recognize and challenge these assumptions in my other work. Forcing myself to change my inherent biases allows me to create a more complex myriad of characters and cultures that exhibit genuine depth.

For example, on my train each day sits a man with a bright pink mohawk standing a good six inches straight up from the crown of his head. This man sits there every weekday morning with his small latte, his ham and cheese croissant wearing an immaculate three-piece suit. The incongruence between this man's appearance from the neck upwards and the shoulders down fascinates me and leads to a host of interesting character ideas. These could be as simple as the uptight businessman who lives a separate life each evening, or as complex as the successful and wily power-player who uses his appearance to distract from his cunning schemes and ensure he remains under-estimated by his enemies. While obviously a dramatic example, this technique can be applied to the smallest elements of diversity apparent amongst the people around you. All it requires is for your eyes to be open and your imagination to be running wild.

The final technique I'd like to discuss is one that is likely familiar to the majority of readers; however, it bears reiterating within the context of the previous two techniques. As stated at the outset of this article, the main point I found when critically examining my world was the lack of depth of ancillary characters. Their outward appearance and behavior were usually intriguing, but they too often lacked something that made them fully believable as real people. The lack of deep diversity in my world had led to my ancillary characters becoming pretty facades of people—interesting to look at, but with little behind the eyes. This final technique comprises asking yourself questions about what goes on behind the character's eyes, in order to give them depth of thought and character.

Stereotypical characters can actually be useful in this regard, as they provide a base point from which to build. Taking a stereotypical knight and examining the reasons why they became a knight, developing an inner turmoil and an atypical background, can culminate in an interesting and complex character. This can prove cumbersome when done for each ancillary character, which is the main reason many of us choose to abandon this approach once we realise the full extent of work it entails. However, used in culmination with the previous techniques, it can become a significantly easier process. By expanding our horizons in the examination of diversity around us and taking deep plunges into unfamiliar territory, we can utilise useful information that allows us to quickly flesh out diverse characters. For example, when creating a new ancillary character, the idea of making them of a differing sexuality to your own may seem daunting. You may wish to avoid accidentally creating an offensive caricature through your own ignorance, resulting in you shying away from such a risk. However, if you have taken the time to learn about and empathise with various other sexualities, you will likely find the act of fleshing out this new character significantly less daunting.

Even if the previous arguments in this article don't persuade you, the diversity you can consciously expose yourself to will enable you to create more unique characters simply due to mathematics. Being comfortable writing about one sexuality, one race, and five cultures gives you five unique



permutations. Expanding your comfort zone to just one more race suddenly increases your number of unique permutations to ten. Immersing yourself in knowledge about another sexuality will enable you to quickly create twenty different character permutations. It can be reduced down to a simple numbers game. The more diversity you learn about and expose yourself to, the more unique characters you feel comfortable creating.

By utilising these techniques and being aware of the benefits increased diversity can bring to your world, you may find your work significantly improve both in depth and verisimilitude. It certainly succeeded for my worldbuilding and I'm hopeful that it can work for you as well. All it requires is the willingness to identify biases, expand our horizons to learn about diverse people, and educate ourselves in how to apply that diversity within our own worlds. 🌍

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# Four Centuries After Earth...

Four colonized moons orbit a gas giant which releases a Haze that creates terrible reality-bending storms, but also incites magic. But what kind of places are these moons? What cultures have developed over the century since humans first arrived? What kind of stories are waiting to be told?

Join us on Discord to help with this worldbuilding experiment!

f t i s d  
Tina Hunter

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE



## EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW:

JOSHUA LORIMER OF SNEAK ATTACK!  
AND TITANS OF ALL'TERRA*Interviewed by Noah L.*

**J**oshua Lorimer, formerly known as Greack Stronghammer or Jaaash, is a podcaster, Dungeon Master (DM), and all-around good guy who has let us pick his mind apart for an interview so that we may learn about him and his work. We're going to touch on not only his background in worldbuilding, but also his podcasting experiences. Now that I've successfully delayed you long enough, let us begin!

I'm a full time video and podcast producer. I'm currently self-employed, and though that comes with it's own risks and challenges, I honestly adore the projects I get to work on, the stories I get to tell, and the people I get to work with. I'm a nerd to the nth degree. I even tuck my shoelaces in. I probably go through one to two fantasy novels every month, and I love board games of all types and, in the past 6 years, have fallen in love with tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs), 5th edition Dungeons & Dragons (5e D&D) in particular.

*How did you start with worldbuilding? Was it something you found on your own?*

Honestly, I'd been worldbuilding since I was a little kid, before I even knew what to call it. I'd sit alone in my room for hours outlining dystopian futures, wacky space stories, and fantastical lands full of all manner of creatures and heroes. It definitely stemmed from my love of storytelling. My dad is probably to blame actually, now that I think about it. When we were really little, he'd get us to go to bed by telling us stories where we'd play the role of knights and heroes. He was like my first DM, unwittingly.

*Have you ever introduced your father to your hobbies, such as Dungeons & Dragons?*

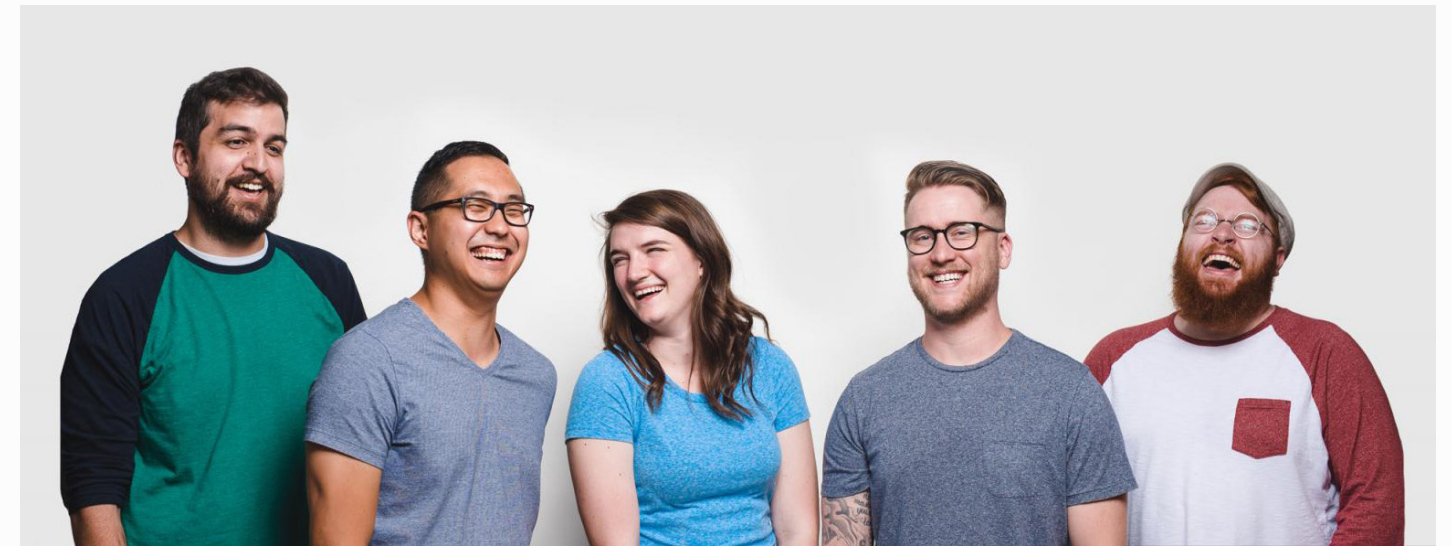
For sure, though it was an interesting experience. Since he's a pastor, my first step was educating him and my mom on why *Dungeons & Dragons* wasn't devil worship. Then we sat down to do a one shot session with my wife, brother, and the two of them. I was the DM. My mom, having an acting background, took to it like breathing, but my dad kept trying to understand how someone wins! They're avid supporters of both our D&D podcasts now though and listen to every episode.

*That's great to hear. Speaking of those podcasts, would you mind explaining them a bit to us?*

Well, *Sneak Attack!* and *The Titans of All'Terra* are both what we call Actual Play podcasts. Which is to say, we actually play D&D on them. We'll sit down for a gaming session, each with their own mic, and then I turn around and edit that recording into hour long episodes.



Joshua Lorimer



Jeff Cloud Photography

*How long have you and the rest of your group been doing the Sneak Attack! podcast?*

We started *Sneak Attack!* in early 2015, though the idea was conceived a year before. Back then, it felt like I could count the number of D&D Actual Play podcast with both my hands. With the advent of podcast and the next golden age of audio, as well as a resurgence in the popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons*, new Actual Plays come out just about every week now. It started as just a fun way for us to share a hobby we loved. My friend Reid was the Dungeon Master, and I was a player and the podcast editor. For the next three years, we released a new hour long episode every week without fail. It was part of what led to our growth, but was also incredibly unhealthy for us as creatives. After about 6 months on break, *Sneak Attack!* is now into its second Volume (AKA Story Line) and has a much healthier release schedule.

*I still find it amazing how you all were able to keep it going as you were, for as long as you were. Would you mind giving a brief (spoiler-free) summary of the first Volume of the show?*

I think the audience is what kept us going. Knowing thousands of people are showing up each week to hear what you and your friends are doing is a powerful incentive.

*Sneak Attack! Volume One is your quintessential open world homebrew Dungeons & Dragons*

adventure. It's full of high fantasy adventure, friends who love to laugh, epic stakes, and more heart than you might think possible. Brannis is a wonderfully built world. Reid laid the groundwork for some incredible storytelling and gave us all the room we needed to flesh out our characters.

*Brannis, as a world, is very interesting. Could you give a rundown on who your character was during that campaign?*

I played Greack Stronghammer, Dwarf Eldritch Knight. He is a prince of dwarves, banished from his homeland and forced to carry the hammer of the hero he killed. He's on a search for redemption, eager to take on any heroic adventure to somehow pay penance for past mistakes. Greack is what I like to call a dwarf's dwarf. Strong, proud, and perhaps too free with his thoughts. If there's a monster, he'll punch it. If there's a lever, he'll pull it. If there's a trap, he's probably going to spring it. For all the trouble he may cause his friends, he's the first one you want having your back and is loyal to a fault.

*He always was the stubborn one, wasn't he? When you were writing his backstory and personal history, did you envision him ending up where he was?*

Definitely not. Originally, I had thought he'd complete his character arc by becoming the first dwarf to unify all the dwarves in the current age. But, keeping things spoiler-free, I like where he landed much better.



Why don't we move onto your other podcast, *Titans of All'Terra*?

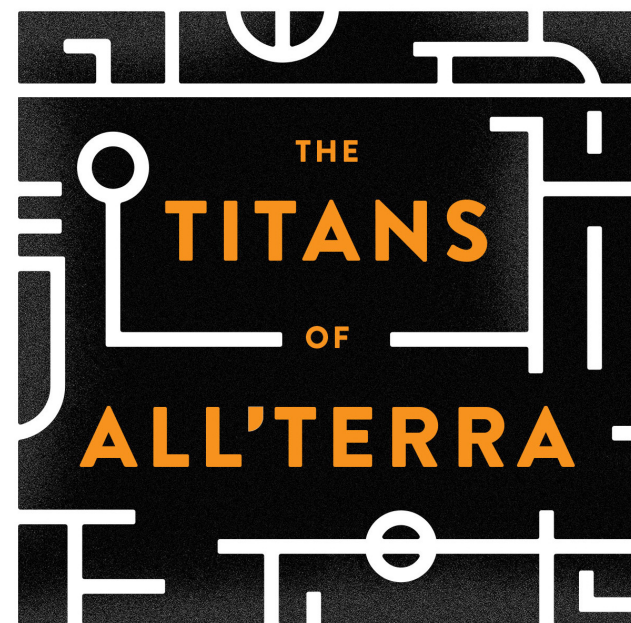
I've been DMing since D&D 5e came out, and once *Sneak Attack!* took off, I knew I'd eventually create something of my own. So, for about a year or so, I'd been playing around with different worldbuilding and story ideas. Then last summer, with *Sneak Attack!* on hiatus, I found myself going crazy not having something to work on every week. Took me a few months, but with the help of some friends, I realized it was time to start my own show. I then spent the next two months writing my brains out. Until then, the story and world had only lived in my imagination. *Titans* should probably be explained as one part D&D adventure and one part show. We structure it much like the cartoons I grew up on. Complete with seasons and even a brief "last time" section at the beginning of each episode. All'Terra is somewhat of a classic fantasy land with a few twists. Massive Titans (kaiju<sup>1</sup>-like creatures) begin to attack the land, and it's up to this newly formed team to magically bond with huge golems in order to fight them back. Think *Voltron* meets *Godzilla* meets D&D.

What was the easiest part for you when you began designing All'Terra? And conversely, what was the hardest part?

So, *Titans* has two histories. There's the present history, which accounts for roughly 5,000 years. And then there's the forgotten history, which was mysteriously wiped from all living memory. It left behind only strange ruins filled with all manner of cryptic glyphs. Crafting each age wasn't too difficult in itself, but trying to understand how the forgotten history influences and impacts the present age while still remaining cloaked in mystery is a fair bit more complicated. Also, I crafted a glyph system that's simple enough to understand at face value, but still complex enough to communicate larger and unknown concepts. That has been endlessly challenging. Amping up combat to a titanic scale comes with its own balancing issues as well, though I've loved every minute of it.

So, when you were making your glyphs, did you take inspiration from any sources? Or did you completely make it on your own?

First, I read up on Egyptian hieroglyphs, something I've always had a fascination with. Stylistically, though, I wanted them to feel more rigid and mechanical, sort of futuristic. Rather than drawing the symbols first, I came up with the meanings and worked backwards, crafting symbols that would help communicate the intended meaning rather than the other way around. Thus far, I've only articulated about a dozen or so symbols, but I started working with my sister-in-law who just so happens to be an educated linguist. With her help, I'm hoping to flesh out the glyph system in its entirety, even though it likely will never be fully featured in the podcast. I could go into more detail about the glyphs, but unfortunately, I need to hold it pretty close to the chest to avoid spoilers. There are several lines of glyphs out there for listeners and fans to attempt to decipher with little clues built into the show every so often.



Mike Hegberg

Next I guess I'll ask about the players of All'Terra. Did they completely build their characters themselves, or did you give them pointers here or there past the basic history/social situation of the world?

First, I built out the current land of All'Terra: i.e. major cities, kingdoms, and all that. Then, I gave the players that general info and let them all create their characters with as much freedom as possible. Once I knew what the whole team looked like, I put together two options for locations they could all plausibly start out. They picked the place, Port Lestraad: The Kingdom on the Sea, and I went to town fleshing out as much as I could. I did my best to make the location feel like a place each of their characters belonged in, trying my best to evoke a sense of agency and familiarity.



Jen Stead

How is the social prejudice (or lack thereof) in All'Terra? This in regards to people's relationships/ gender identities, if they're outside of the norm of the country/society?

Being that everyone in our cast is straight, we do our best to be respectful and not to speak for anyone else's experiences. The world of All'Terra most certainly has non-binary characters. It wouldn't feel very real in my opinion if it didn't. I've chosen to create a world where gender identity is not a hot button topic or major political issue. Characters are who they are, and are defined by their actions more than anything else. There are, of course, different societies within All'Terra, each with their own values and social structures, but I do my best to base those

on the history of the world more than the history of our world. However, there are some wonderful podcasts out there run by non-binary creators who are telling incredible stories and can speak into such things so much better than myself.

Is there anything else you'd like to share about either All'Terra, *Sneak Attack!*, or worldbuilding in general?

I guess the only thing I can think to add is, if our world sounds like a place you and your D&D party would have fun adventuring in, we'll be kickstarting a World Book in July 2019. The All'Terra World Book will include lore about the land and its two histories, unique mechanics for huge golems that players can operate, and loads of monstrous titans to do battle with. You can also check out *The Titans of All'Terra* on iTunes or wherever you listen to podcasts to catch up on season 1.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

We would like to thank Josh for taking the time to be a part of this issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine*! You can find him and the whole *Sneak Attack!* crew on their [website](#) or [Twitter](#). If you like what they're doing, you can support them through [Patreon](#). For *Titans of All'Terra*'s info, check out either their [website](#), [Twitter](#), or [Patreon](#). And last but not least, here's Josh's personal [Twitter](#) account.

<sup>1</sup> Kaiju is the Japanese word for "giant monster". Think *Godzilla* or *King Kong*.



# ASK US ANYTHING

RESOURCE 

By Various Authors

This Ask Us Anything is presented by a senior member of the Amalgamated Order of Interdimensional Persons, Percival Aluminus Illuminus, Adjunct Professor of Gateways, 3423 WestNorth Street, Dunny-on-the-Spire.

*How much of worldbuilding can or should be realistic, and how much can just be “rule of cool”?*  
—Wynter

The rule of cool (including something that requires a suspension of disbelief because it’s fun and/or exciting) applies in any sort of worldbuilding for fiction or gaming. That being said, how much the rule is used will depend entirely on the nature of your world. If you’re attempting to build a faithful recreation of Sassanid Persia, then the rule of cool will be less likely to apply in such a historical setting. On the other hand, if your world is built around the concept of flying train jousting, then the rule of cool will be there with bells on.

I would like to draw attention to the word ‘should’ in your question. No matter how thorough you research as you chase realism, there are always going to be august people of deep knowledge (such as myself) whom will spot the flaws in your grand design. Rather than real, aim for consistent. No matter how excessively the rule of cool is applied, and no matter how cool it gets, a world needs internal consistency.

*What tips do you have for revising your worldbuilding for your novel without getting too sidetracked?*  
—Alpha Wolf

Ah sidetracking, the worldbuilder’s bane. If you find yourself needing to revise your volumes upon

volumes of lore to fit a story into it, then you have a hard road ahead of you. The key to not wandering off into the wilderness like so many player characters is to have a clear goal in mind. Know what your story is and know what worldbuilding you’re going to need to support the narrative. Being aware of at least what direction you’re going is the simplest way to not be distracted by the new, shiny ideas that will fly into your head and make a terrible mess of things.

If said new, shiny ideas prove too tempting, perhaps it is best to simply embrace them and find ways to integrate these new concepts into the existing world. Perhaps a spacefaring group of nomads don’t work in your medieval fantasy tale, but you could certainly have nomadic sailors with an eye for the new technology of that period. If an idea has made a nest in your medulla oblongata and you cannot evict it, then there is a real chance it is a good one.

If that doesn’t scratch the itch, try organizing the various ideas you have into a journal or side documents. Writing them down will allow you to go back when you’re finished with the current project you have without worrying you may have forgotten something. If it’s not new ideas but rather other distractions stopping you from being productive, I have always heard turning off your internet connection or going somewhere new to work can help. Of course, I don’t have to do this, but it may help you.

*How can you expand beyond a vision for a single place, society, or event into a wider world?*  
—Kikkerman

Remember that different parts of a world interact with and affect each other. No man is an island and that logic applies to places, societies, and events as well. Take your one society, pick a cardinal direction, and move until you’re off the map. Where are you now? What is the climate like? What ideas and resources do this new society and your original share? The further away you go, the more different and the more ignorant they will be of each other. This can be done with events as well. Each and every moment in time is the culmination of many other moments in the past. What had to happen to lead to your imagined event, and why did those happen? These questions work going into the future as well, since events influence that which comes after them. For example, I did an extraordinary presentation on underwater portal weaving in my younger days, and I am reaping the benefits of it even now.

However, this methodology must be modified if you are intending to use your world for telling a story. In that case, expansion must happen only as needed.

For example: if you’re building a world for a thriller, you might only need to detail a few key buildings and a small fraction of a couple of agencies. As you move into the next adventure (whatever that may be), you may add some additional components. The rest of the city, details on the people in charge, the countryside just beyond it. However, the full history of the nation, the greeting customs of the adjacent country, and the current political firestorm occurring in the capital will likely have little bearing on your narrative. Creating an entire world, only to show a small piece of it, is a great way to waste vast amounts of time. Be smart with your worldbuilding, and focus on what’s important to share with your audience. After all, we don’t have all the time in the world to dig through your version of Middle Earth.

Well, *mortals* don’t.

*Class has ended. We’ll see you in two months. If you would like to submit your own questions for the next Ask Us Anything segment, submit questions to us via our email or Discord.*



**Inkblood**  
SPECULATIVE FICTION WRITERS' GUILD

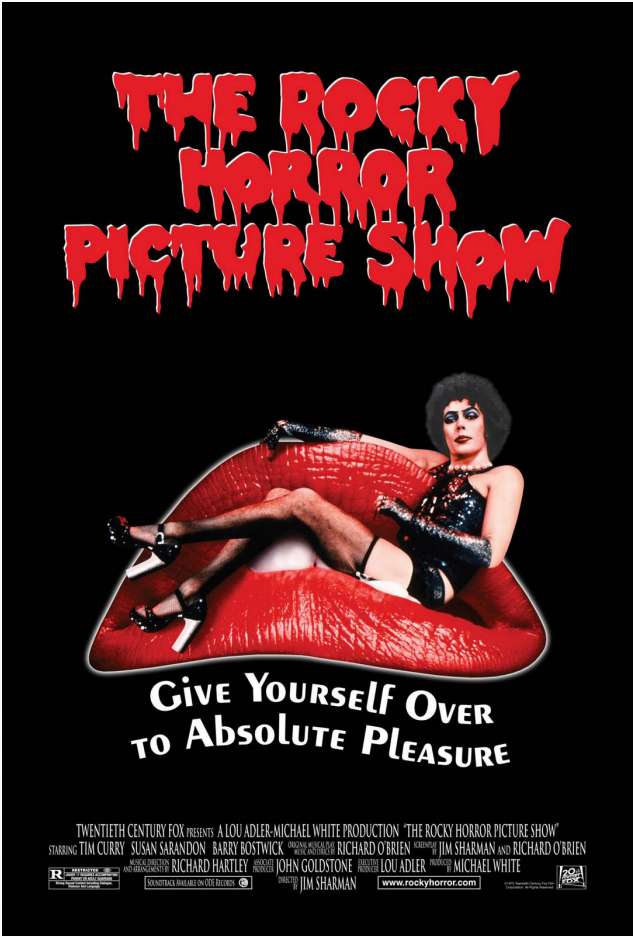
Have an idea? Ready to commit? Join below!

<https://discord.gg/QcfSH9K>



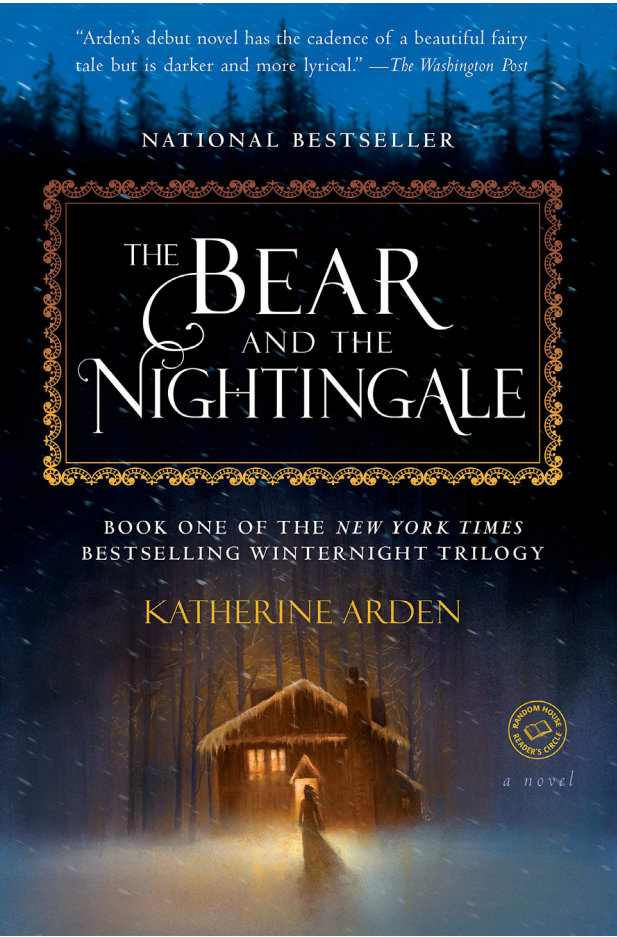
STAFF PICKS

RESOURCE 



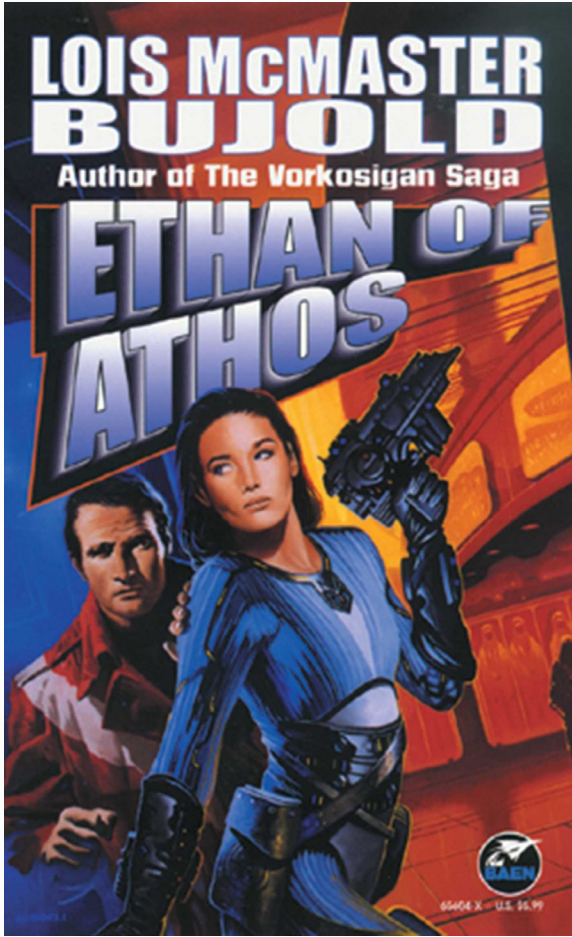
**Title Name:** *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975)  
**Author(s):** Richard O'Brien (Stage Play, Music) & Jim Sharman (Screenplay)  
**Media:** Film  
**Chosen by:** B.K. Bass

After their car breaks down, Brad and Janet, a newly engaged couple, find themselves stranded and isolated. They must pay a call to the bizarre residence of Dr. Frank-N-Furter. In this cult classic musical, the viewer follows a hetero-normative couple as they're taken from a familiar setting and thrust into a world where any expectation of gender and sexuality norms are thrown out of the window.



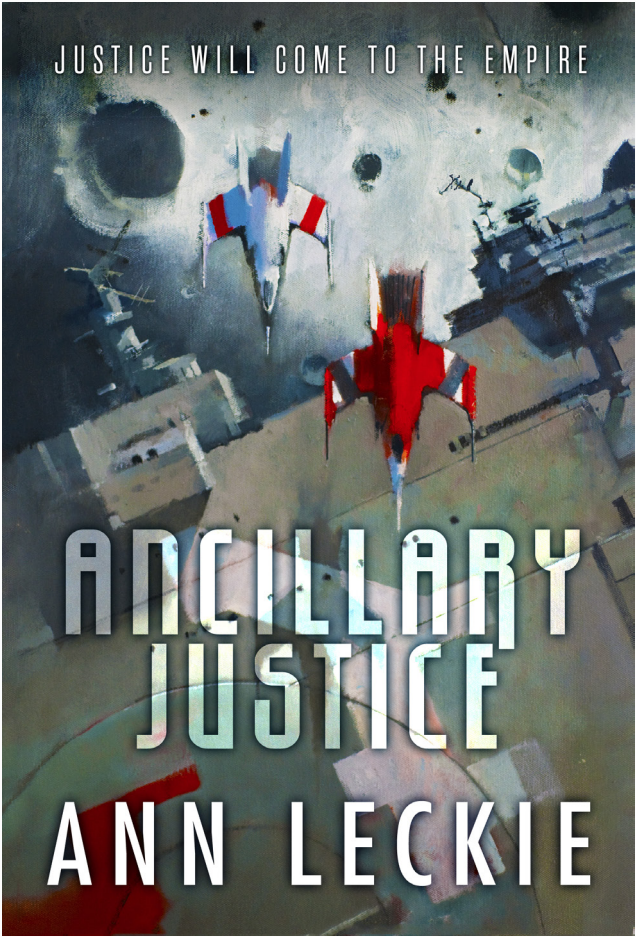
**Title Name:** *The Bear and the Nightingale*  
**Author:** Katherine Arden  
**Media:** Book  
**Chosen by:** Wynter

*The Bear and the Nightingale* is a wonderful counterexample to the character trope of the female who feels like she doesn't fit in. Arden's book showcases how a young woman with magical powers in c. 15th century Russia might be viewed by her family and her village, as well as how being different strains those social ties.



**Title Name:** *Ethan of Athos*  
**Author:** Lois McMaster Bujold  
**Media:** Book  
**Chosen by:** Cathy, the Overprepared GM

Set in Bujold's *Vorkosigan Saga* universe, *Ethan of Athos* is a stand-alone space opera with three main characters whose stories quickly collide. One is a sheltered scientist from an all-male, all gay world who needs to acquire fertile eggs for the next generation. Another is a female super-soldier on leave from her mercenary fleet. The third main character is a jaded young man on the run from his government. The plot revolves around intergalactic spying, corporate genetic experimentation, and adventurous derring-do on a working space station. However, the book also deftly weaves themes of family, reproduction, gender, and LGBTQ utopias.



**Title Name:** *Ancillary Justice*  
**Author:** Ann Leckie  
**Media:** Book  
**Chosen by:** M.E. White

Leckie superbly integrates worldbuilding and narrative in her debut novel set millennia into humanity's future in the interstellar Radchai Empire. The Radchai are very concerned about proper interaction between those of low and high birth but have no notion of gender. Throughout the book, this concept is represented by using 'she' as the third person singular pronoun in the Radchai language. As our revenge-seeking protagonist—a Radchai space vessel's errant AI given form in flesh—comes into contact with other cultures and foreign grammars that do recognize gender, she never quite gets the hang of guessing a person's gender from their appearance.



# PROMPTS

In dominant cultures, what expectations exist for each gender? For example, are men hunters and women gatherers, or vice versa? Are the lines so blurred that it's difficult to tell? What laws enforce the cultural norms, and if so, how do people react when they are challenged?

- What sports are most popular in your world? How do people treat their players and teams?
- What makes an attractive partner? Do people generally value appearance, skills, knowledge, or another quality/trait as a primary determining factor in seeking a mate?
- What pets do people have? Which are considered common or exotic? What roles may they fulfill (i.e. guide or hunting dogs)?
- What technological revolutions (such as the industrial or agricultural) have occurred in your world? What, if any, are unique to your time and/or setting? How have they impacted people's economies, cultures, and/or quality of life?
- How does the biology and physiology of your citizens, whether they're human or not, impact the conception of children and the social relationships surrounding procreation? For instance: what expectations or norms are assigned to different sexes? Are there any rituals surrounding childbirth and how does one's role in a ritual differ based on their biological (or assumed) sex?

Want more writing and worldbuilding prompts? Join us on [Discord](#) or [Twitter](#)! Every Wednesday we release a new prompt. Work on it in private or share your responses with us.

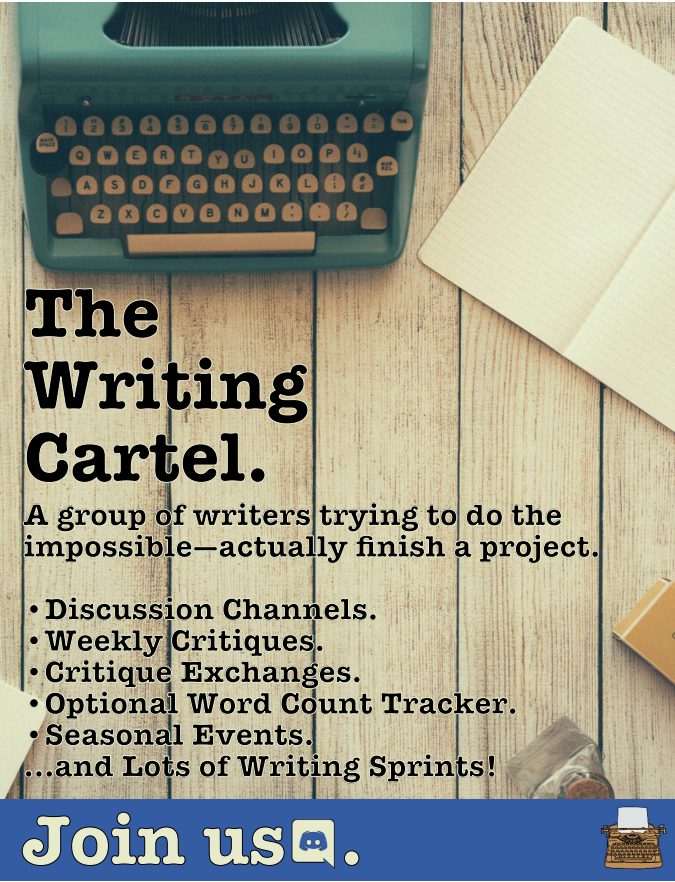
RESOURCE 

If you would like to write a short story based on one of the writing prompts or have a prompt you would like to share with us, please submit it to [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com) or on [Discord](#).

*Submission Requirements:*

Submissions must be no longer than 5,000 words


The submission must include title and author(s) in case of questions.



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# MEET THE STAFF:

*Curated by WithBestIntentions*

Hello, my fellow worldbuilders! My name is David Pagan, also known as LieutenantDebug (formerly Debug200). I became the Editor-in-Chief of *Worldbuilding Magazine* just a couple months ago, but I've been with the magazine in various capacities since its second issue in early 2017. It's been a wonderful blessing to work with such an inclusive, creative, and hard-working group of people who all care about creating the best magazine we can to help develop the worldbuilding community as a whole. I originally joined the team to build the website, but soon found myself involved in the organizational side of the operation: what we now call the Meta Department.

The first couple issues of the magazine were a wild west, with nearly 100 people helping in various ways. Everything was done on the fly. It was fun, but running on the adrenaline alone of a fresh, exciting project obviously wouldn't last forever. We needed some stability in routine and protocol. Not only did this help slow down how many people we were losing (as expected in a volunteer project), it made it much easier to bring in new helpers. Once that was more stable, I was able to actually create the website I had promised to make so that we could stop having to host the magazine issues on Google Drive. We haven't really touched it since, but more on that in the coming weeks... Over time I've taken on more and more, and now I have the privilege of being Editor-in-Chief. I hope to lead the magazine on to even greater things than what we're already accomplishing.

When I'm not working on the magazine, you may find me at my day job as a software developer, worshipping with my church, playing video games, working on my house, or tabletop gaming with friends.

Of course, between all those things and running the magazine I, unfortunately, find little time for my own worldbuilding. What little I have done for my world, called "Seven Skies," you can find on [World Anvil](#). The basic premise is that some materials possess varying levels of gravity-defying ability. These materials are called "elevators" and have two important impacts on the world: firstly, the world itself is shaped with much more vertical variation in its geography than our Earth; secondly, these materials—when refined—enable all sorts of technology, most notably airships. Incidentally, airships are the prevalent method of transportation as they are much better equipped to deal with the aforementioned vertical geography than seafaring ships. The time period I focus on is roughly analogous to our 15th and 16th centuries, deemed the Age of Exploration, although with a technology level closer to the Western tech of the mid-late 19th century.

Unsurprisingly, the same thing that got me building this world was what got me into worldbuilding in general. I was playing a short-lived steampunk RPG campaign with some friends (in which we were the adventuring crew of an airship) that ended up stagnating due to insufficient worldbuilding. The DM just didn't have the time to create the world on his own, and so the campaign ended after only a couple of sessions. I knew little about worldbuilding at the time, but I really enjoyed the game, so I started thinking about the world. I was a bit intimidated by the blank slate, so I wasn't really sure where I wanted to go with the geography or nations or things like that. Being the math and science nerd that I am, though, I got my spark when thinking about the physics of airships. Specifically, how the steampunk version would work with an envelope that's not that much bigger than the ship's hull; compare that to the envelope-to-hull ratio of, say, a modern blimp. Big difference, right? So I figured the only way a steampunk airship's envelope



could be that small relative to its hull would be if the gas inside was so much lighter than helium or hydrogen. In fact, you may need something that repels gravity entirely, as even a pure vacuum would still not counteract a heavy hull with just buoyancy. So, this led me to “elevators” and the rest of what I described above. Once I’ve completed more of the bones of the world, I plan to play or run a campaign in it once again.

P.S. the picture is of my late cat, Oscar. I found him in my house’s crawl space when he was around 4 months old, and I loved him very much during his short time on this earth. He was the sweetest grouch you’d ever meet. So sweet that my mom mostly changed her mind about hating cats. Rest well, bud. I miss you.



# BUILD SOMETHING NEW WITH US.

Worldbuilding Magazine is always seeking writers, editors, artists, and other passionate worldbuilders!

Our **Writers** help by providing content for the magazine **Editors** refine it and provide invaluable feedback. The **Artists** breathe life into the magazine and our **Layout Artists** arrange everything into the final products you see. Last but not least, the **Meta** department assist with organization and the community. If you are interested in helping with our next issues? Email, or find us on Discord.



Alexander Andrews, Adam Bassett



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

When I pick up a new speculative fiction book, one of the first things I look for is a nice map. Those who know me won't be in the least bit surprised, but they are a big part of what draws me into the world. Dragons work too, as well as any heraldic sigils or magic. If there are multiple strong points of view, I'll probably buy that book for a friend so that I'll have somebody to talk with about it.

Rarely have I actively considered gender and relationships within these kinds of tales.

Despite that, in preparation and production of this issue, many of us on the team have come to gain a greater appreciation for these topics. Worldbuilding is, as I described it to my family recently, sort of like remixed history. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was heavily influenced by World War II, and George R.R. Martin's is a reimagined version of the War of the Roses (but with dragons). When we think of speculative fiction, I find that we often think of epic worlds and battles fought to save them, but at the end of the day, a world needs people to inhabit it. A story needs characters to do good and evil—who can love, hate, or be selfish.

When we discuss gender and relationships, we're discussing the expression of gender and gender roles as well as the concept of non-human species, which may not even have males or females. We're discussing the relationship between married partners, families, or perhaps just a couple of drifters stowed away on a ship together. Our writers, editors, artists, and organizers made this possible. The team did an incredible job.

We're proud to give you the June 2019 issue: *Gender & Relationships*. I hope it inspires all of you just as much as it did us.

So what else is going on? There are a few projects in the works right now. Our web volunteers continue to develop the new website design, and [we're currently conducting a cartography contest](#) alongside [Wonderdraft](#) which you can enter until June 12th! We've got a few more projects being developed as well—another to be announced soon—but we'll discuss those later. They're not quite ready to be shown off, which sucks, because I want to tell you everything. Debug wouldn't let me, though.

Lastly, in case you haven't been following us, I'd like to share that we're already working on the next two issues! In August, we'll be releasing our *Geography* issue, and in October, we'll be discussing *Economics*. If you'd like to submit writing for either, get in touch with us! The deadline for *Geography* is June 12th. For *Economics*, you have until mid-August. If you would rather contribute editing, art, or help in some other way, please get in touch with us about that as well! We always welcome passionate people to help create this magazine. You can learn more about how to get involved by joining our [Discord](#) or emailing us at [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com).

Thank you for reading. We'll see you in a few months to chat about geography.

Happy worldbuilding!

Adam Bassett

Vice Editor-in-Chief

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Vice Editor-in-Chief — Adam Bassett

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Martha Wells — NYT Bestselling Author  
Susan Straddioto — Author and Member of PEN

