



ISSUE 4 | 2021

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE & EXPECTATIONS & other topics

World Showcase
Helena Real's Wall Mapu

The Road to Mort Arbor
A Short Story and a Lesson in Dialogue

Thinking Sideways About Diplomacy
A Brief History of Love and War

Featuring:
L. D. LEWIS
of FIYAH Magazine

Analysis | Art | Interviews

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

2021 has been a difficult journey for all, and WBM hasn't been immune to the trials that this year has brought. As a volunteer organization, it should come as no surprise that we struggle with burnout and participation on a good day, and the Age of COVID has been anything but a "good day." Throughout the year we've discussed strategies for reorganization, sustainability, and reformatting this labor of love into something that could be maintained for longer. Unfortunately, we've come to the point where hard truths must be said and harder decisions be made.

Worldbuilding Magazine has always been a passion project remarkably brought to life by a gaggle of pedants willing to beat any subject into the grave given a high enough word count. It's served to provide artists, editors, and writers with professional experience marketable through a carefully crafted artifact: this colorful periodic publication you hold in your digital hands. Many of us have achieved noteworthy success in our fields, no doubt due to our time with WBM. As these things go, however, people need to move on and focus on what their time with the magazine has brought them, myself included.

So, we have decided that, in its current state, WBM is no longer sustainable. Our primary struggle is with acquiring and keeping layout artists willing to craft this beautiful publication each cycle; as, unlike our Writing and Editing departments, Layout cannot

subsist on plucky amateurs alone. It requires volunteers with experience and software access, often people who are already working in the publishing field. If we cannot achieve this over the next year, we will have to cease publication of the magazine for the foreseeable future. In an effort to recruit and provide our existing staff the time to produce a potentially final issue of WBM, we will only be publishing once during 2022, likely towards the end of the year. By infernal providence the theme for the next issue is Catastrophes, Natural Disasters, & Apocalypses, and we take grim pleasure that such a theme may represent our swan song.

If we do not fill these roles in 2022, we will not be able to continue publishing the magazine. The podcast will go on and there are those interested in continuing the work as a blog, but the current form will end. So, if you are interested in keeping this magazine alive, and may have the skills we require, please let us know either at contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com or through our Discord. We also have numerous opportunities in administration and editing available if any are interested. Please reach out with questions about those roles.

Thank you for your time and attention these past five years. While we hope to achieve five more, we won't be able to make that happen without your help.

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WORLD SHOWCASE

HELENA REAL'S WALL MAPU

Interviewed by Ike Riva | cover art by Joyce Maureira



TABLETOP GAMES



INTERVIEW

Helena Real is a trans writer, editor, translator, and professional gamemaster from Chile. Her recent writing includes *Ngen Mapu* and *The Way of the Pukona*, both of which are supplements in the *Fate Worlds* line published by Evil Hat Productions. Her work on *The Way of the Pukona* has merited it the Best Setting award at the Indie Groundbreaker Awards 2019. She is currently working on the upcoming *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition* setting *Wall Mapu: The Surrounding Land*, which she received the 2020 IGDN Diversity Sponsorship to develop.

Hi! My name's Helena Real (she/her) and I'm a Chilean trans writer, editor, translator, and professional gamemaster (GM). I studied and majored in English Literature and Linguistics here in Chile, but I did my first worldbuilding when I was 17–18. At the time, I was reading Tolkien's *The Book of Lost Tales* and Louise Cooper's *The Time Master Trilogy*. Both the combination of Tolkien's wordsmithing and mythology, plus my dissatisfaction with the *Time Master's* endings led me to scribble my first attempts at fantasy world mythology and history. I didn't go far at that time, though; I only remember taking notes about gods and goddesses' names and their respective domains.

After that, I went on to develop my own dark fantasy world in the years that followed. I called this world "The Shattered Lands" and set some of my earliest stories there. It never went past that primordial stage, though. It was far too complex and mythological to be of any practical use when writing short stories and novels, except to make them cryptic! Later on, I fell in love with Celtic mythology and legends, and tried to build my own version of it; but, it once again never evolved beyond using the language (in an amateur way) and some simplified version of Celtic names.

Finally, around 2015 I had the chance to write a tabletop role-playing game book for Evil Hat Productions. Although my approved pitch was for a Celtic fantasy world, I decided to make use of this opportunity to develop one of my childhood passions: the Mapuche people. The Mapuche are the most numerous aboriginal inhabitants of both Chile and Argentina, and although they are still with us to this day, much of their myths and legends are not kept in a "pure" state. Instead, we have the versions that Catholic priests wrote of them, in which they twisted and turned the originals in order to make way for their god.

Considering this, I pivoted the project and dedicated the next months (and years) to reacquaint myself with Mapuche myths and legends, trying

to search for primary sources and, when those weren't available, secondary sources that were respectful of what the Mapuche had actually mentioned as their beliefs, myths, and legends. Of course, this created a very fragmentary pool of sources, so I decided to add my own ideas—trying to be as respectful and coherent with the original as possible—to create a solid basis from which to create new stories set in this Mapuche world, one that hadn't suffered through the Spanish invasion and genocide of 1536 CE onward. The result, at least in an early stage, is what you can read in *The Way of the Pukona* (2018).

That's fascinating! I think that that pivot was definitely fortuitous—for both *Fate* players who can now enjoy a refreshing and interesting new setting, and for *Dungeons & Dragons 5E* players who can look forward to your next project: *Wall Mapu: The Surrounding Land*. Can fans expect the world of *Wall Mapu* to be the same as that of *Pukona*, or will they merely share the same basis in Mapuche myths and legends?

Great question! And yes: the world of *Wall Mapu: The Surrounding Land* is basically the same as that of *Pukona*. There have been some changes, though, mostly because of what *Wall Mapu* brings to *D&D 5E*, but also because my appreciation of Mapuche worldview has changed and evolved during the last few years. I've found new secondary sources as well as some primary ones, and they've added some missing pieces to the Mapuche-inspired world I've been building. At the same time, they've provided me with some interesting challenges in regard to (previously unknown to me) information, which I was happy to incorporate.

Well I, for one, am really looking forward to seeing more of your explorations of the Mapuche worldview! I'm curious, though, about how the mechanics of the two different systems—*Fate* and *D&D 5E*—impacted your worldbuilding and storytelling, if at all.



CLAUDIO HUENCHUMIL CRUZ

They did, actually. In the case of *The Way of the Pukona*, the flexibility of the system meant that I basically wrote a whole new set of rules to put on top of the amazing engine that *Fate* offers. In the case of *Wall Mapu*, I took a different design route; I tried to modify the underlying system as little as possible, but instead chose to make a few but major changes in the underlying—and often unstated—assumptions of *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*. Just as an example: in traditional *D&D 5E*, you get most of your experience from defeating (and often killing) creatures. In *Wall Mapu*, not only do you not get experience points from doing that, you risk becoming corrupted. In essence, if you kill enough living things, you become a monster yourself and have to retire your character. And getting rid of that corruption is, under most narrative circumstances, impossible. The only way you get to “level up” in *Wall Mapu* is by leveling up your community (*lof*). So yeah, the worldbuilding was different because, although I wanted to emphasize some of the same aspects, each tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) provided me with different tools to do the job.

I see. That makes a lot of sense! Given *Fate*’s relative flexibility compared to *D&D 5E*, what are your plans for further worldbuilding projects after *Wall Mapu*? Do you want to continue building Mapuche-inspired worlds within the context of *Fate*, *D&D 5E*, or expand to another system?

At this time I have no further plans to expand my Mapuche-inspired worldbuilding to other TTRPG systems, but never say never! For now I’m focused on finishing *Wall Mapu* and then looking for the best way to publish it. I’d like to revisit what I’ve already written in *Pukona* and *Ngen Mapu* with some further supplements afterward, but that depends on a lot of factors, so I can’t say they’re high on my to-do list.

On the other hand, last year I wrote a first attempt at what I can only describe as a “Mapu-



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che *Silmarillion*,” a compendium of myths and legends that explain the creation of the land and the different stages or worlds that have existed—and have been destroyed—ever since. I’m excited to edit it and then look for a way to publish it. That book is the most well-developed and mythological out of all the Mapuche-inspired worldbuilding that I’ve done, so I’m really looking forward to completing it and sharing it with the world!

That sounds really in-depth, and very interesting indeed. I see you’re also a fan of the *Silmarillion*! Tolkien set his Middle-earth in a distant version of our own planet and, while reading *The Way of the Pukona*, I noted that you similarly described the world of *Pukona* as “an ancient Mapuche society that never was.” Does this mean it’s an alternate history, perhaps like Tolkien’s Middle-earth, or is this a different kind of uchronia?

I’d say that the Mapuche-inspired worldbuilding I’ve done is indeed very close to Tolkien’s Middle-earth, although I won’t claim to go nearly as close to detailing it as Tolkien goes when it comes to Middle-earth! He’s the king

of that game and I’m not even an aspirant. But yes, I hope that my fantastical reconstruction of that Mapuche society pre-Spanish invasion can somehow provide us with a vision of the wonderful world they must have inhabited. One in which person-to-person relationships were closer, and the community was truly the basis of our society. I also think that the relationship the Mapuche had—and still have—with the preternatural was enviable: they didn’t worship or weren’t scared of them, but instead had a fluid relationship like that of different people who understand and work with each other. They truly inhabited a magical world, a “complete” world if you get my meaning.

I believe I do! What you’re mentioning reminds me a lot of certain notions of mythic belief, and how myths can become realities by affecting how individuals interact with the world and each other.

Our upcoming issue is about social interactions, etiquette, and expectations—which had me wondering what kinds of social habits exist for the people in *Pukona*? How do you teach players about them, and encourage them to

take on those social norms, in-game?

This is something I sadly didn't get the chance to develop more in *Pukona*, but the Mapuche people had—and still have—a highly developed social system. Their original Mapuche society was, the way I see it, both egalitarian and communist, so that already hints at the importance of showing respect for everybody. Moreover, their most important social gathering, *Ngillatun*, was one in which members of different communities came together and celebrated their bond with the preternatural beings and one another, establishing new relationships among them, so you'll agree with me that their social interactions were (and still are) hugely important to them. If we add to that even something as personal—in our Western mindset—as a healing ceremony (*Machitun*) was celebrated communally, their sense of community was unparalleled, in my opinion. Do you imagine a Western doctor operating with the whole community observing and cooperating?

One more example of the Mapuche's incredibly complex sense of etiquette: the typical Mapuche greeting—the equivalent of our “Good morning!”—is *Mari mari*. *Mari* is the word for the numeral ten, so the greeting is basically “(My) Ten (and your) Ten.” We are the same: here are my ten fingers that join with your ten fingers. Marvelous, isn't it?

That's really interesting to learn! I can definitely see the influence of that worldview underlying the world of *Pukona*, especially how it is the community and not the individual who levels up and “progresses.” Although you may not have been able to develop this aspect as much for *Pukona*, I imagine it figures more prominently in your Mapuche *Silmarillion*.

In *Pukona*'s disclaimer you mention that your worldbuilding relies a lot on secondary sources. I wanted to ask you, because some of our English-speaking audience may not be aware, why is it so hard to find primary sources about natives? Especially unbiased ones.

The issues in this case are manifold, but I'll try to explain it as much as I can.

First, Mapuche culture is primarily oral; that means that they had no writing throughout most of their history, and that their traditions and beliefs have been kept mostly through stories told in each community. This means that there have been few if any Mapuche authors who have come forth and laid out the traditions they hail from in fiction form—and none in the fantasy genre, as far as I'm aware. They are more interested, as it's understandable, in the current political struggle they are immersed in, one that has lasted at least a century and a half. In short, the Chilean and Argentinian states stole huge parts of their homeland through expropriations and other less savory means.

This political situation also has created, at least in Chile, that their main territory is one with an absurd amount of military presence. Clashing between Mapuche people and the military are commonplace; people die on both sides and the situation keeps on escalating. This creates a situation in which a *wingka*—a foreigner—such as I am, would have a hard time without an introduction of a local, which I had at one point, but I postponed the journey and then the pandemic hit us. I hope to be able to go and stay in a Mapuche community (*lof*) in the future to learn as much as I can firsthand.

All of these things considered, what we have now are numerous books written by non-Mapuche people following accounts given by Mapuche people. The problem, as I mentioned before, is that some of these authors are more interested in interjecting their own ideas, whether it's Catholicism or New Age stuff into what the Mapuche are saying. I can be blamed for this too, but the main difference is that I'm clearly writing fiction and never claim to write history instead of stories.

Thank you for explaining! I really appreciate it. And that all makes a lot of sense. Given all these obstacles to reaching Mapuche perspectives, historical and contemporary, what are some good sources that you would recommend for those researching the Mapuche people—whether they're gamemasters wanting to better run *The Way of the Pukona* or world-builders seeking out more worldviews to consider in their work?

Sadly, there isn't much material in English that I'm aware of that I'd consider well-informed and respectful of Mapuche culture. Still, I can mention a few books.

Shamans of the Foye Tree by Anna Mariella Bacigalupo is a book dedicated to talking about the Machi (Shamans) of the Mapuche people. The cool thing about this book is that, as with most stuff by Anna Mariella Bacigalupo, it's based upon interviews. Actually, I'd recommend any book by Anna Mariella Bacigalupo; she's just a great scholar and researcher of the Mapuche culture.

If people are interested in the language, *Mapudungun*, I recommend the huge *A Grammar of Mapuche* by Ineke Smeets. I believe this to be the most detailed account of *Mapudungun* in the English language so, yeah, if you want to learn more about the language, this book's for you.

Finally, I'll mention *Hawks of the Sun* by L. C. Faron. This is a weird book because it has some great insights into Mapuche culture, while at other times it just goes inventing stuff that I've

never seen elsewhere. For example: the title. It makes reference to a tradition in which the Mapuche ancestors are supposed to reincarnate as “hawks of the sun.” I haven't found references to this tradition in any of the other 30+ books I've researched throughout the years.

Thank you for those resources! And, speaking of *Mapudungun*, to some readers there may seem to be a lot of conlanging in *The Way of the Pukona*, but some of it is clearly the Mapuche language itself. This made me curious about how much conlanging you went through (if at all) to create this setting—for example, if there

were any terms that you needed to use that simply did not exist in *Mapudungun*? And, if so, what was your process like?

Yeah, the truth is that I didn't do much conlanging. Although I love it in theory—and I did my fair share of it when I started worldbuilding—I didn't do any proper invention of words in *The Way of the Pukona* (or *Ngen Mapu*, for that matter).

“YOU’LL HAVE ROUGH DAYS IN WHICH YOU’LL WANT TO QUIT AND, IN MY CASE, THE ONE THING THAT KEPT ME GOING WAS REMEMBERING THAT, NO MATTER HOW HARD IT SEEMED, I WAS WRITING SOMETHING THAT WAS MUCH MORE IMPORTANT THAN I AM.”

What I did do—and I don't know if this qualifies as conlanging or not—was take original words in *Mapudungun* and expand their meaning. For example: *kona* (plural form *pukona*). The word exists in *Mapudungun*, but as with most words in languages, we don't know why it was created. What we do know is that it's used to refer to a number of ideas or concepts: brave, young, warrior, soldier, and servant. So, instead of going for the natural assumption—this is a word with many unconnected meanings—I went in the total opposite direction: what if *kona* represented one

concept? One type of person who embodied all of these disparate ideas? And that's how I "grounded" an idea I already had (young female warriors serving an important figure in society) in Mapuche culture. So, in other words: I don't feel like I invented a word as much as reinterpret it in order to serve the narrative I was trying to build.

Something special occurred with the word *pillañ*. This is one of the most "deformed" words in Mapuche language and culture. It has been appropriated by many scholars and academics as the equivalent of demons (or angels), or even god(s), depending on what they're trying to argue for. Because of that, I had many issues fitting it in my fantastical Mapuche cosmology. And then I read a paper by Tadashi Yanai that presented, persuasively to my mind, the idea that *pillañ* was in fact related to the word *püllü*, which is one of the words in *Mapudungun* to refer to "spirit" or "soul." From that jumping point I took *pillañ* and turned it into the "soul" or "spirit" of natural places. This interpretation did not only fit with the worldbuilding I was doing, but it also felt coherent with other antecedents of Mapuche culture I had access to.

So, as you can see, more than creating words per se, I bent and reinterpreted as many original words as I had to in order to fit the fictional world I was building. There weren't as many as one would think, but I wouldn't presume to present "real" Mapuche mythology and culture in what I wrote nevertheless.

I see! Although you may not have been making them from scratch, the process of bending and re-interpretation is definitely creative. And, ultimately, results in a constructed language! I think that the thought you put into this project clearly shines through in the final product, and that readers and players will be able to appreciate an entirely new worldview because of your work. The judges at the 2019 Indie Groundbreaker Awards certainly agreed, giving *Pukona* that year's Best Setting award!

Given the quality of the final product, and the critical acclaim it received, I think our readers would be very interested to hear about the biggest lessons you learned while creating this. How will they impact your future creative projects?

Yeah, well, getting that award was unbelievable! I was over the moon with the nomination, but getting your work recognized by your peers, who know how hard it is to go from idea to finished product, was a huge honor. I think it's the most important award I've received in my life and it'll always have a special place in my heart.

Now—and trying to answer your question—I learned many incredibly valuable lessons from *Pukona*. For example, it is much harder than it looks to write something relatively small instead of just going and writing a huge tome. Or that titles are hard, and that it's much better to get a good one as soon as possible than to leave the decision until the end.

However, the real lesson that I take from *Pukona* is that you not only can write a passion project—no, you have to. The process from idea to finished book is so long (in the case of *Pukona* it was over two years), that I don't think that money or any other kind of external gratification can last you through the entirety of it. You'll have rough days in which you'll want to quit and, in my case, the one thing that kept me going was remembering that, no matter how hard it seemed, I was writing something that was much more important than I am.

I read a Mapuche saying in which the message was more important than the messenger, and I can't agree enough. When I incorporated that into my writing, it helped immensely to combat all the fears and threats to one's ego involved in writing for an audience.

That is a fantastic takeaway, and one I think will be really helpful to all creatives if taken to heart.

The Mapuche saying about the message and the messenger is striking, and very apt!

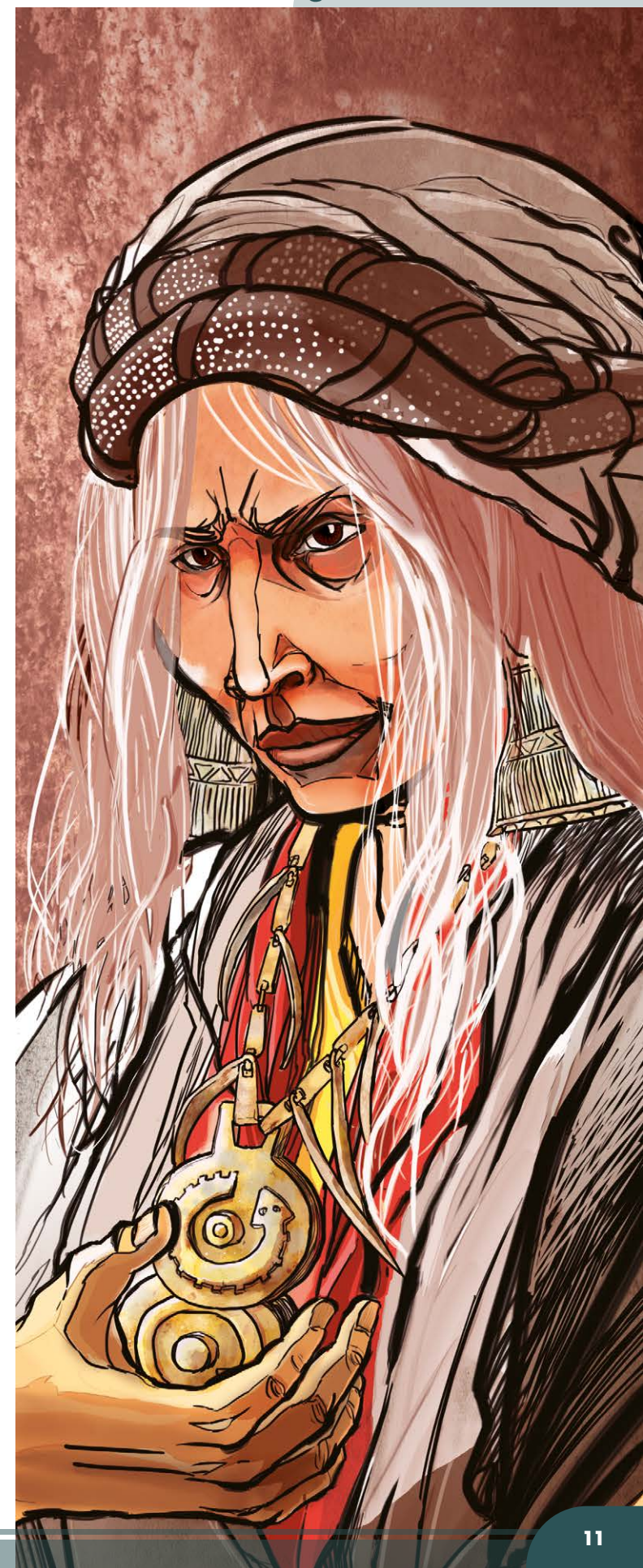
Speaking of the difficulties of writing short form, I wanted to remark on the short story that is inserted before the introduction of *The Way of the Pukona*, which focuses on the Pukona Antümañke. I found this to be a very engaging "hook" into the setting, and I was curious about your reasoning and intent behind starting the text in this way.

I'm so glad you liked it! I consider beginnings of any type to be the hardest things, and the beginning of a book to be the hardest of them all!

I wrote maybe a dozen variations of an opening for *Pukona*. In all instances my thought process was: "I need to present to people, who know nothing about this, what the world (and therefore the game) is like in the smallest space possible." So I went back and forth from a first-person narration of the world's creation to some third-person historical perspective on the matter. Nothing seemed to work. It seemed to me either too long, too cryptic, or just too out there. It didn't feel inviting.

And then Colleen Rourke (another *Fate Worlds* author) read a beta and offered some incredibly accurate edits to what would become the current opening fiction. When I realized what I could do in 200-300 words if I laser-focused on the defining moment of any *kona*—their death—I went ahead and edited the previous fiction mercilessly. The result is, after a couple of more edit passes, what you encounter at the start of the book.

I think that it's critical to provide players/readers with appropriate fiction when the fantasy/secondary world they're entering is unknown. Otherwise, you risk losing their interest by having them go head first into a block of text with a number of new concepts and words they have no context for. This little fiction becomes the con-



text for everything else that comes in the book afterward.

I think you certainly succeeded at making an inviting beginning! I would not do the beginning justice if I did not mention the illustration inserted before the short story. It is in and of itself like a hook, like a window into a different and mysterious secondary world. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. Trying to convey the world in the smallest space possible is essentially a question of conveying information as efficiently as possible.

However, short form's emphasis on informational efficiency and making the most use of space is difficult! Even more so if one is trying to establish setting. The pitfalls of short-form worldbuilding, like you say, are that pieces can become too long, cryptic, or "out there." Given these issues, and that you worked through them, I think writers and worldbuilders alike would be really interested in, and benefit from, hearing your thoughts and tips on the revision process. How do you edit? What role should other creatives have in one's process?

I consider editing to be a fundamental part of the creative process. First drafts are fun and all, but they are just that: drafts—rough sketches that suggest what could be. Considering that, I edit in a very common (I guess) form. After I finish a draft I let it to rest for some time (weeks or months), and once enough time has passed, I print out a version of the first draft and I sit down to read it armed with a red pen and the willingness to make whatever changes are necessary to get the best story out of the material I find.

Usually this gives me a ton of ideas and things that need change. Once I make a list of those, I try to divide them between fundamental and accessory. Fundamental changes include stuff like creating or deleting characters, adding or deleting entire sections, or major rewrites. Those I tackle first,

and try to remain as patient as I can through the whole process because I know that I'll end up hating myself, usually right in the middle of it all.

Once the fundamental stuff is done, I go for the accessories. This gives me a solid second draft that I'm now in condition of sharing with beta readers, which are few and far between. It's hard to find good beta readers, but I think they're invaluable. As soon as they are done reading I try to meet with them and I ask them for their honest opinion. Sometimes it takes some nudging or prodding, but they often open up afterward and spill a whole lot of useful commentaries about the work. Nowadays I try to record this, but once upon a time I tried to make notes while we were talking. Gladly, we now have the tools available to just record the conversation and listen to it afterward.

After that it's time for the editor to come in, and in my experience so far, they have been another invaluable source of insight when it comes to the text. Most of my editors have come up with ideas and changes that I never could have come up with myself, but it feels just right when they mention them. Moreover, my greatest editor so far—Elizabeth Chaipraditkul—has the amazing power of always pushing my limits, so I credit her with always getting the best out of me no matter the situation.

Thank you for giving us such an insight into your process! I think this is a concrete and very helpful account of a creative process which will help readers have better expectations of their own work. I completely agree that seeking out feedback is invaluable, and that the advantage of another person's eyes is precisely that they see what one cannot. And that mid-stage slump is certainly a killer! But patience and dedicated work, as you note, are a productive response to this creative challenge.

Before we conclude with the interview, I wanted to ask: were there any elements of Mapu-





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che culture, *The Way of the Pukona*, or world-building itself that you wanted to discuss, but that we didn't get to in this interview?

Well, I think that I just want to mention that I'm not interested in Mapuche culture from an antiquarian point of view, as (sadly) most scholars seem to be. What I mean by that is that I don't care about "discovering" Mapuche legends and myths in order to preserve them in a museum, no. The reason why I write fiction based upon Mapuche culture is because I believe that what the Mapuche believe in is not only relevant but crucial to ourselves in 2021. We, who live in a world that is on the brink of a natural apocalypse, could for sure make use of a little of the great wisdom the Mapuche people have—one that can be summarized in something as simple as, "We do not own the Land; the Land owns us. We are Her children. From Her we came and to Her we will return, once our lives here are done." I really consider this a paradigm shift

that would help us focus on what's really important while, at the same time, takes our attention away from the destructive cycles in which we are stuck as a species.

I think that it is a very important worldview that we should certainly take into account, especially because of its potential utility in our present-day world. Thank you for putting a spotlight on such an interesting living culture, for teaching me and our readers about it, and for giving us an opportunity to get closer to it through tabletop gaming!

We really appreciate your time answering my questions, and your wonderful answers.

Thank you for the interest and the great questions! I had a lot of fun answering them.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks so much to Helena for the great conversation! If you would like to follow her or read more of her work, follow her [Twitter](#) and visit [her website](#)! You can find Helena's store [on itch.io](#), and currently has three tiers available [on Patreon](#).

If you would like to be featured in a future World Showcase, [click here](#) to apply!

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JOYCE MAUREIRA

AUTHOCHTHONOUS RITE

OF A BOREAL TRIBE

by Ike Riva



FANTASY



RELIGION



FICTION

“Theopompus, also, in his *Philippics*, speaks of certain boreal fruits which originate in those who eat them . . .”

—Herbert Quain

The air was cold. The wind carried loose snow, drifting away, into a cloud that seemed like mist. A huddled group of figures, hugged close together, weathered the persistent evening flurry. The children of the plateau had, once more, like generations before them, congregated at the storyteller’s feet.

Nobody knew his name; nobody knew how old he was—but they guessed. They guessed day and night. Of all the stories told, the most popular was that the old man had been carved from a pillar of ice by the Great Goddess, Wind, herself; the tale in which the Old Mother breathed life into him for a single purpose: with her breath, to tell stories as old as the earth, as old as black ice on the Mountain, as old as he was.

The elders of the village had revered him for generations. They’d traveled to his hermitage asking for counsel, and begging for his judgement, since time immemorial.

They called him *Basna*, “the Old.”

The village was very much north of the most northern towns of the known world: where, during six months of unanimous night, ice crept over the inhabitants’ windows; where, during six months of everlasting day, the sun shone painfully in the sky and glinted off the snow. The cold could bite your thumbs and toes off, and the only food to be had was from the odd sea creatures which washed up on shore from time to time. In times of hunger, they set out hunting for the Spirit Bears which still den in those remotest areas.

But it was their home. And, like all homes, it had its customs. The most significant rites took place every two years. During those revered hours, when the sun sank below the horizon on its perennial journey through the world of the dead, those children who’d not yet heard the stories sat at the ancient storyteller’s feet; by the Grand Fire—Treasure of Treasures—which the villagers assembled out of driftwood, its column of smoke beckoning the hermit down from his cleft between two rugged hills. There, the youngest generation listened to tales of old and new, and sometimes of tales to be.

It was then, in the oncoming night, with the sun’s dwindling rays behind him, that *Basna* spoke. His voice was barely audible over the now-howling wind, which twisted the fiery tongues into a whirl of smoke and flame, and the children strained to listen. They knew this was important, that this was unique. This was the first tale:

WHEN the world was young and this land was lush and green, the first settlers came; they looked for somewhere to call their own, somewhere they could call home. Carried by wind and wave, they crossed into unseen vastnesses—into lands far from their brethren and the vigil of the southron gods.

They found this valley and settled here, content and rosy-cheeked from all the food they gathered from the bushes and from the fattened animals that once roamed here. For a while, they were happy; they sang and danced, drawing milk from rivers and honey from the trees. But, on this night, millennia ago, as the sun plunged past the horizon and into the great abyss, the first hoar frost spread across this land.

Nobody knew why, but the grass under their bare feet shriveled and died; the waters turned to ice; everlasting snow collapsed

their houses, choked the trees, covered the plateau, and killed their children.

It was a time of mourning. They could not sleep or eat.

However, there was one man, whose name is lost to time, who did not fall into despair. He retreated into himself and hoped for better things. He prayed to all the gods he knew and all the gods unknown; he prayed day and night to this goddess and that. He asked for them to guide him, to help him understand, and to redeem them all. Kneeling on the frozen earth of a snow-swept hovel, trembling, he begged for grace—for the children's safe passage into the umbral realm.

But nothing happened.

On the forty-ninth night, when the settlers could no longer bear their sorrow, and the man could no longer pray—for his mouth was dry, and he had lost all speech—then, at last, the gods looked north to our forgotten village. In horror they beheld us, their stray creatures, and averted their eyes in shame. They could not believe the zeal of the man or the sorrow of the settlers.

That night, the gods came down to earth as they had never done before and gave back the children that the settlers had lost. They sprouted whole and unblemished from the ground and ran into their families' outstretched arms. They rejoiced, feeling the warmth of life again: the gift of grace. But, when the gods went to visit the zealous man, they found him dead. They sought his soul among the shadows of the world and raised it up to their realm of clouds and light, seating him upon an ivory throne. But they imposed one condition on their gift: once enthroned in their undying land, he would be commissioned to protect the boreal regions of the pole whose unexpected newborn nation was now in need of a native god. And the zealous man accepted.

Once enthroned, he begged those summer gods of wine and song for one more gift: "I have seen the sorrows of my people, and that their hearts are pure; to live is to love their sons and daughters, the fruit of their trees. I wish for this joy to be prolonged—for a child's soul to paint the heavens when called back to that silence from where it was brought forth."

The gods marveled at his thought and granted the wish. They placed the souls of children so close to the earth that their spirits brush up against the sky during their passages into, and out of,

life. That night, the northern lights first graced the depths of the night sky. Our ancestors looked up, and marveled at them.

And so, our first generation was born from the frozen ground itself, into this frigid air; by the sacrifice of a nameless man, and the glory of the venerable old gods, we see our own dance across the firmament, alongside night-fringed stars.

Then, as if Basna could command them, he threw his outstretched palms up into the sky—the aurora writhed out of his fingers, into the unfathomed darkness above the smoky bonfire, into which the children looked up in awe. In that instant, the spirit of the north was branded on their very souls.

ORALITY, MYTHOLOGY & RITUAL: AN ATTEMPT AT SELF-VIVISECTION

In this unprecedented age of mass literacy with its emphasis on written poetry and prose, the oral story has been relegated to a secondary role. Mythology's ability to frame reality and contextualize humans within the universe has diminished, having been supplanted by newer, grander narratives or scientific theories. Ritual, which for a long time was an important way to structure our shared human experience, now fulfills largely symbolic functions. None of these circumstances are the case in "Autochthonous Rite." At its core, this short story was an attempt to portray these three negations—to portray a culture in which orality, mythology, and ritual are still important.

Firstly, the means by which the plateau tribe conveys important information across the ages is the spoken word. Like those who initiated the first religions, and indigenous Australian tribes which most closely resemble our prehistoric, hunter-gathering ancestors, they have a culture of orality in which writing is not employed.

"Everything that their ancestors learned with difficulty, from healing herbs to stirring legends, is now stored in their collective minds and there only . . . the living reservoir of knowledge . . . that shapes and stocks their lives."¹ The importance of the spoken word in no way detracts from a culture's ability to develop a refined narrative art. "Speech is a part of a speaker's life, and as such shares that life's vitality. This gives it a flexibility that can be tailored to speaker and hearer alike. Familiar themes can be enlivened by fresh diction. Rhythm can be introduced, together with intonations, pauses, and accentuations, until speaking borders on chanting, and storytelling emerges as a high art."² The *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, like the Vedas, the Quran, and the Torah, are products of an oral tradition and originally intended to be spoken out loud. Their codification into writing evidences a drive to regularize how these narratives were told—a drive which, in an oral culture, turns the telling of myth into chanting or recitation. When one adds elements such as the myth having to be told

¹ Huston Smith, "The Primal Religions," in *The World's Religions*. (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 369.

² Huston Smith, "The Primal Religions," in *The World's Religions*. (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 368.

at a certain time, or at a certain place, or with certain implements or any other conditions, the recitation mutates into a ritual.

Secondly, the myth at the literal and figurative center of the piece is an attempt to explain and contextualize a universal tragedy of human life, especially in hunter-gatherer societies in harsh environments—child mortality. “Mythology often springs from profound anxiety about essentially practical problems, which cannot be assuaged by purely logical arguments.”³ In times before modern medicine, before even agriculture, mortality was a far more present problem and practical concern than the abstracted written word can convey. Illness, the dangers of hunting and childbirth, the delicate years of human infancy, conflict with other animals (including humans), and other factors conspired to make the visible world unimaginably inhospitable to early humans. Fortunately, “we are meaning-seeking creatures . . . from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had a meaning and value.”⁴ Therefore, it may come as no surprise that “the most powerful myths are about extremity; they force us to go beyond our experience. . . . Myth is about the unknown; it is about that for which initially we have no words. Myth therefore looks into the heart of the great silence. . . . Like poetry and music, mythology should awaken us to rapture, even in the face of death and the despair we may feel at the prospect of annihilation. If a myth ceases to do that, it has died and outlived its usefulness.”⁵

Lastly, the titular rite is an example of how myth may actively tie generations to a culture and a culture to a land. Myths and “folk” elements (folk-lore, -stories, -music, -religion, etc.) are what incorporate the individual self into a community, a *folk*. Along with a folk’s vernacular and individual blood ties, myths drive group identification. Unlike language and blood ties, myths are narratives. Unlike scientific narrative, “a myth does not impart factual information, but is primarily a guide to behavior. Its truth will only be revealed if it is put into practice—ritually or ethically. If it is perused as though it were a purely intellectual hypothesis, it becomes remote and incredible.”⁶ More importantly, it is not enough to simply retell a story and expect generations to draw strength from it and deposit vitality into it. “A myth cannot be correctly understood without a transformative ritual, which brings it into the lives and hearts of generations of worshippers.”⁷ Initiation rites, such as the one which the people of the plateau still engage in, are those during which “a neophyte hears the most sacred myths of his tribe for the first time. This is an important point . . . because it imparts sacred knowledge, it is always recounted in a ritualized setting that sets it apart from ordinary profane experience, and can only be understood in the solemn context of spiritual and psychological transformation.”⁸ The narrative component of the rite is the telling of an autochthonous myth—a myth in which a culture is tied to a land by a mythic second generation, which was born out of the ground itself. This myth is told at a transitional, liminal point in tribal life and the changing of the seasons.

As the reader can see, this publication is a product of literate society. I will confess that I am neither an Inuit nor an Indigenous Australian. I have also lived most of my life within cities and was born in one. I am steeped in modernity and as much an alien to the lands depicted as (most likely) the reader is. I knew that to have any hope of controlling my affirmations or negations of the primary world into a secondary world, I would have to do research and actually become acquainted with the views of hunter-gatherers as regards religion, nature, ritual, and orality.

The two invaluable resources which I used to refine my worldview were the comparative religions texts *A Short History of Myth* by Karen Armstrong, particularly chapters one through three, and the last chapter (“The Primal Religions”) of *The World’s Religions* by Huston Smith. Armstrong’s text is a concise and layperson-friendly summary of mythology and religion’s development—it is particularly helpful for how it teased out the relationship between material paradigm shifts (the invention of tools, the agricultural revolution, increasing population) and the religious paradigm shifts that they brought about. Smith’s text is an in-depth and systematic study of the ideas and doctrines of the world’s major religions. It is a valuable resource for information and a great starting point for anyone who is looking to study religion but would like to acquire a broad overview before choosing a specific religion or religious family to specialize in.

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3 Karen Armstrong, “The Palaeolithic Period,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 30.
4 Karen Armstrong, “What Is A Myth?,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 2.
5 Karen Armstrong, “What Is A Myth?,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 3-4, 8.
6 Karen Armstrong, “The Palaeolithic Period,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 22.
7 Karen Armstrong, “The Post-Axial Period,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 107.
8 Karen Armstrong, “The Palaeolithic Period,” in *A Short History of Myth*. (New York: Canongate, 2005), 35

A RUIN OF SHADOWS

A tale of
assassins,
betrayal, and
djinn.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

WITH L. D. LEWIS

Interviewed by Adam Bassett

Author, publisher, and researcher L.D. Lewis has her hands in a lot of pots. She works at Fireside Fiction and the Black speculative fiction magazine FIHAH in addition to writing her own work and helping with the podcast LeVar Burton Reads. We were thrilled to chat with her about all that she's done, what she's working on now, plus some of her own creative projects.

L.D. LEWIS

I'm a science fiction/fantasy writer and editor primarily (or I used to be) and now publisher at [Fireside Fiction](#). I'm also one of the founding creators/project manager/outgoing art director of [FIYAH Literary Magazine](#) and the founding director of the Hugo-nominated FIYAHCON, [Nebula Conference Chair](#), and pay the bills as the awards manager for the [Lambda Literary Foundation](#). I'm also the researcher for the [LeVar Burton Reads](#) podcast. I bother the publishing industry by authoring studies about the treatment and experiences of racially/ethnically marginalized authors in speculative literature. I'm the author of [A Ruin of Shadows](#) ([Dancing Star Press, 2018](#)) and have published short fiction and poetry at FIYAH, PodCastle, Strange Horizons, Anathema: Spec from the Margins, Lightspeed, and Neon Hemlock, among others. I live in Atlanta (on perpetual deadline) with two very photogenic kittens; an impressive Funko Pop! collection; and Lego, baking, and blanket fort habits—all terribly expensive.

We'll chat about how you got started with publishing, but first let's chat about your writing. What kinds of stories get you excited about telling them, and what inspires you?

I like stories that are fun to tell or that allow me to generate lush, living worlds readers want to stay in for a while. They're primarily centered around Black femmes with extraordinary powers in occasionally extraordinary circumstances. I'm most often influenced by music, video games, and nature documentaries for some reason.

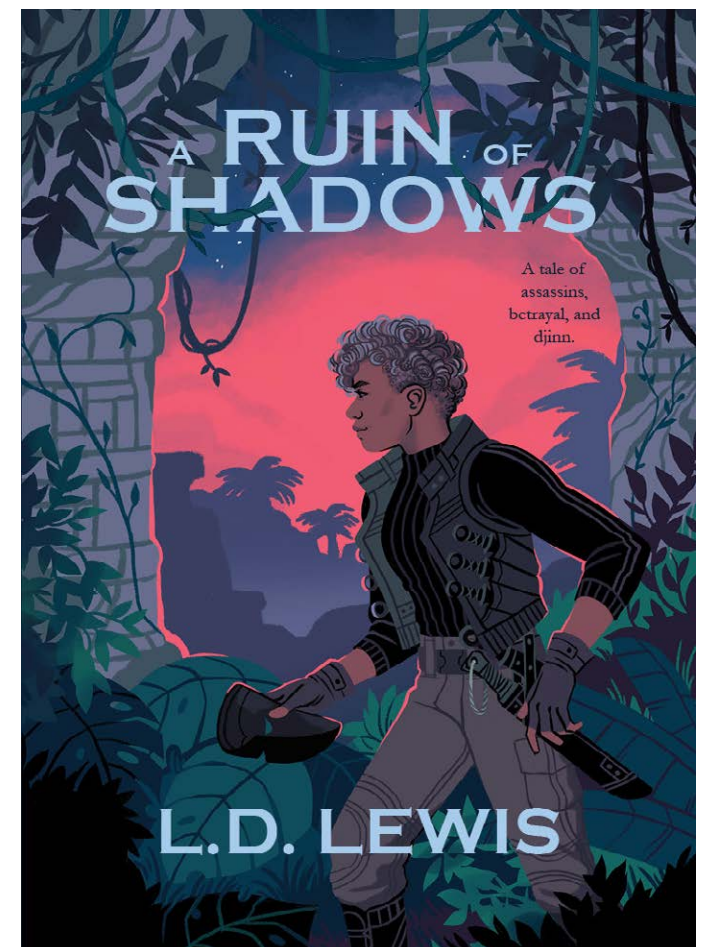
Ah, that's interesting. Usually people just say they're inspired by [insert popular fantasy author here].

I have chromesthesia, the synesthesia that blends sound and color, so I'm sure that has a lot to do with my taking inspiration from non-literary media. It informs my sense of mood and atmosphere in worldbuilding in a way I don't get

from reading. All of my stories have playlists and mood boards.

That makes sense! Now, how would you say those themes of powerful Black women and nature get represented in your work?

These women are largely crafted as people I would find interesting to know. And these powers I give them (supernatural and otherwise) are largely based on what would excite me to see rendered in a visual medium. My first short story sale was a science fantasy novelette titled "[Chesirah](#)." It's set on this secondary world, and the titular character is, for all intents and purposes, a Black woman but exists as a member of a humanoid species known as the fenox. They have the lifecycle of the fabled phoenix where they are born, molt, burn, become ash, and then are born from them again. They're largely enslaved, but as prized collector's items rather



than as laborers, and are beholden to their captors as keepers of their ashes. If the ashes get wet, they can't be reborn. It's a whole thing. Chesirah is kept by a doll-maker obsessed with her beauty and creating dolls in her likeness. And she's determined to escape and get offworld by any means necessary. A bunch of people have to die for that to happen.

There's also "Moses," a short about a character of the same name who at an early age discovers she can zap people out of existence if she's experiencing some kind of emotional duress. As an adult, there's an instance where she unwittingly kills someone she loves. The story focuses on the aftermath of that and her descent into addiction and substance abuse to escape her past. That was written because I'd never seen addicts represented compassionately in SFF, and I found it worth exploring.

I really like that you find so much inspiration from less traditional sources. That's got to keep things fresh seeing something non-literary and working to blend that into your writing. For a story like "Chesirah," how would you say you constructed that secondary world and its peoples?

"Chesirah" began as a vignette of a character I created for this trilogy [which] I was determined to make my debut ([It] wasn't bought, but Book 1 did land me my agent, so small victories). This story shares a universe with my novella *A Ruin of Shadows* and takes place on one of the moons of the planet on which the trilogy and the novella happen.

"Chesirah" is science fantasy. The story is initiated sort of as fantasy with this woman with these seemingly magical powers, but the world in which she resides is wealthy, multicultural, and highly technologically advanced. This civilization is one of starfarers, demographically similar to Andalusia. There's a lot of interstellar trade that happens, and that's our main character's endgame: to use those systems to make her

escape. All of this was developed more or less when I was setting up the history of the trilogy. In the future, Chesirah's home planet appears in the sky as The Shattered Moon. So in developing Chesirah's world, it was an exploration into: (a) how that happened and (b) what it was like before the fall.

That's a great approach. I always tell people that sometimes the best way to figure out the setting or the characters is to just start writing.

So I have to ask, how do the fantasy and sci-fi elements interact? Is there sort of a blending where they complement one another? Do the two elements come in conflict? Or, is it some mixture of the two?

Chesirah's rescuers are essentially magical beings: demigods introduced as Players of the *Cirque Nocturna*, a night circus that deals in the theft of fateful objects and general mayhem over a broad swath of time and space. They also possess an airship. I like to explain the dichotomy as the science or technology belonging to a people or a civilization. It's those advancements that drive the connection to other people, places, worlds, and experiences, but they must be developed. Whereas magic or those elements of fantasy exist organically in all places. They're discovered, found, or explored—not necessarily developed. So in our case here, the Players and Chesirah, who exist naturally within their worlds with powers we as human beings recognize as supernatural, adapt Atlas's (the planet's) and develop technology for this one specific instance of their adventures.

That's awesome, thanks. I think we kind of need to touch on some other things too now. So, why don't you tell us about what you do at FIYAH?

What don't I do at FIYAH? So we got started in the summer of 2016. I built the website, logo and branding stuff, and did all the merch designs for



the store. I've also been art director since inception and just passed that baton to Christian Ivey who is commissioning our covers for 2022. I also design and compose our issues, author and orchestrate our special projects like our [BSF and POB Reports](#), our November VoicesOnFIYAH writing event, and our upcoming grants series next year; and I co-created our game show Em-Dash with our Social Media Manager and Reviews Coordinator Brent Lambert.

Oh so you were on the ground floor of building FIYAH? That's awesome. What prompted you to create it?

The short version is that in 2016, Fireside (where I'm publisher now) published a study called the "[#BlackSpecFic Report](#)," in which they examined the presence (or lack) of stories being published by Black authors in about sixty short science fiction/fantasy markets. The result was something like two to three percent of a given year's output was by Black authors. At the time I was in a writing group of Black SFF authors with P. Djeli Clark, Troy Wiggins, and Justina Ireland, all of whom have in some way a "we'll do it live" personality. Justina put up \$2,000 in starter funds, I knew how to do a website, Troy had editorial experience, and here we are.

That's fantastic. That's an awful percentage, but I'm glad FIYAH came of it.

So let's jump forward to where FIYAH is now, publishing quarterly issues and reviews on the blog. It seems like your team has come a long way. What are some of the challenges that come with publishing each issue?

We've got a pretty aggressive submission-to-publication schedule, so it took some work over the first few years to iron out how to keep from having to rush to [the] deadline every quarter. Longer and earlier submission windows for unthemed issues has put us in better shape along with a more organized workflow developed last year.

We also had high enough subscriber numbers to where we could finally expand our editorial team, so some of the editorial labor is distributed better now. I also got to hire an assistant last year which has done amazing work for my blood pressure.

I can imagine so! Any particularly memorable moments from over the years that you would like to share?

A couple of years ago, we crowdfunded a trip for our team to come to Atlanta to meet each other in person for the first time and to celebrate our first Hugo nomination. That was great in itself, but we also sent out bookmarks to some of our donors, and that required a number of visits from me personally to my post office. Well, the post office worker was a subscriber and was delighted to know that at least one of us was local. That was a good time.

So when somebody submits to FIYAH (or Fireside), what do you and your teams look for? What kinds of stories excite you? Kind of in tandem with that question, what advice would you give somebody who is curious about submitting?

The one thing I don't do [at FIYAH] is editorial. I do know they look for highly imaginative works that respect the whole of Black experience. So you won't find anything in our pages that disparages queer, trans, or disabled identities, things like that.

Same with Fireside. We're still in our transitional phase, but we use guest editors for our issues. Though their personal tastes may vary, the same principle of not putting up with bigots stands.

So the guest editors at Fireside determine what gets published?

The former publisher, Pablo Defendini, stepped down earlier this year. I assumed the mantle in June, but Fireside acquires its work pretty far in advance, so much of the rest of the year had already been acquired by the time I started. We hire guest editors to acquire and dev edit a quarter's worth (3 issues) of content. They set their preferences for content, and authors submit specifically to them during our designated submission windows. So each quarter has a different editor and different tastes to satisfy.

Ah, that's an interesting way to go about it.

One more thread for us to explore: can we talk about your work with the LeVar Burton Reads podcast? How did you get involved in that, and what's it like?

Season 10 is my . . . third or fourth season now. I'm doing an almost absurd amount of short fiction reading, but it's been a good time. The show's producer, Julia Smith, reached out to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA) to see if they had any recommendations for researchers to assist with sourcing material, and I was suggested on the heels of being passed over for another position with SFWA.

Cut to my hiring, scouring the stacks for twelve episodes, meeting very specific parameters each season, and I guess I'm doing an okay job because they haven't fired me yet. LeVar insisted on meeting and welcoming me personally, which was mind-blowing as you can imagine. But he's an absolute delight. I get shoutouts at the end of the episodes. I got to present him with an Ignite Award our first year of FIYAHCON, and it's just all been this unimaginable joy.

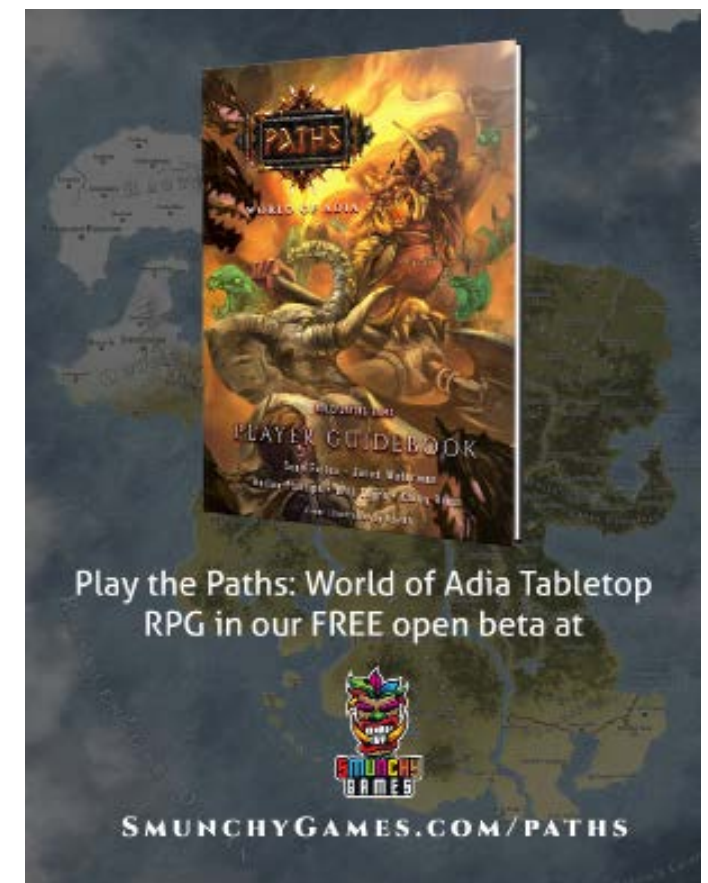
That's wild. I assume being a part of that has exposed you to a bunch of people and stories you might not have gotten to otherwise. Any standouts?

Not off the top of my head. Honestly, I go through literally hundreds of shorts and anthologies every season, and it ends up being a blur. The ones that win out end up on the podcast, though! And it's always a joy to get FIYAH stories on there. Before I worked for the podcast, I knew about it and was determined to get some of our stories on his radar. [The] universe works out sometimes.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thank you to L.D. Lewis for joining us! You can follow her on [Twitter](#), [Tumblr](#), or check out [L's website](#) if you want to stay up to date on any of her work. Plus, she has a [Patreon](#) if you'd like to support her!

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GO AHEAD, JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER

by Eleanor Konik



CULTURE



HISTORY

Don't judge a book by its cover" is a common platitude with a long history, but personally, I prefer to live by the maxim that if someone tells you who they are, believe them.

The idea behind not judging a book by its cover is basically that stereotyping is bad and people can surprise you. Books serve as a useful metaphor for reminding us that just because people look different than expected doesn't mean they can't be smart or strong or nerdy. An old, ratty book with broken binding can be a gem—but I would argue it's more likely to be well-written and engaging, since it was well loved enough to break.

There are dangers in judging people by how they look, of course. There is a horrible history of white supremacy and pseudoscience used to judge the intelligence and ethos of entire groups of people based on the color of their skin or the shape of their head. Yet on the flip side of that, people have been using their appearance to de-

liberately signal social allegiance for thousands of years.

For the most part, even in schools and workplaces with uniform policies and selection processes that privilege uniformity and "culture fit," the average person can tell a peer's social class and political allegiance based on the appearance of their clothes and how they choose to style themselves. In my area, broadly speaking, the jocks wear long socks up to their knees, the nerds wear witty t-shirts, and the kids who hate school wear their hoodies up.

This is not a new phenomenon, and in some ways I would argue it's a deliberate choice on the part of the teens involved.

Clothing choices are a shorthand method of communication, and storytellers in particular can take advantage of these sorts of visual signals even in text. Jim Butcher, bestselling author of the *Dresden files*, consciously assigns

recurring tags to characters in order to help readers understand and remember them better. Jim Butcher wrote in his LiveJournal on characters:

For example; Thomas Raith's tag words are pale, beautiful, dark hair, grey eyes. I use them when I introduce him for the first time in each book, and then whenever he shows up on stage again, I remind the reader of who he is by using one or more of those words.

“

TRAITS are like tags, except that instead of picking specific words, you pick a number of unique things ranging from a trademark prop to a specific mental attitude. Harry [Dresden]'s traits include his black duster, his staff, his blasting rod and his pentacle amulet. These things are decorations hung onto the character for the reader's benefit, so that it's easy to imagine Harry when the story pace is really rolling.¹

From just those few items, it's easy to get a sense of Harry Dresden as a wizard, perhaps a bit of a "modern cowboy" à la *The Matrix*, and given the variety of weapons, probably somebody who sees a fair amount of action. Clothes, jewelry, and weapons can tell people a lot about a character—or another person.

SUBVERSION

Society loves an "ugly duckling" story, but "beautiful woman's beauty is hidden behind a complete lack of awareness of how to fit into mainstream culture" is effective precisely because society places value on fitting in.

Similarly, storytellers often subvert tropes to surprise or delight a reader—but after a while, readers start to expect the subversion. Consider the "gen-

tle giant," for example, or the brilliant *and* beautiful scientist. But by and large, these subversions are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Worldbuilders of complex societies in particular should be wary of leaning too hard on subversion, because it makes it hard to communicate with the audience—who might not have enough context to know what's being subverted.

SYMBOLS OF ALLEGIANCE

Appearance varies across cultures and climates. Clothes, jewelry, weapons and other accouterments are a powerful way to symbolize belonging to a group.

During the Peloponnesian Wars and the Greco-Punic Wars, many battles and wars took place on the island of Sicily. Aside from the obvious value that uniforms and standardized weaponry could offer an army in terms of making sure that members of one side of a large battle didn't kill people on the other side, the Greeks were able to use clothing choices to make determinations about people's political allegiances.

At this time, long hair was associated with the aristocracy; according to *Tyrants of Syracuse* by Jeff Champion, "many of the anti-democratic rich in Athens emulated the Spartans by growing their hair and/or beards long, and wearing their short, red military cloaks."² So when the Spartan general Gylippus showed up to the city of Syracuse with long hair and a red cloak, the Athenians and Sicilians mocked him roundly for it. At this time in Greek history, long hair was associated with conservatism and aristocracy—a far cry from 1960s America when it was linked to liberalism and communism and the various anti-war movements associated with hippies.

¹ Jim Butcher, "Characters," February 10, 2005, <https://jimbutcher.livejournal.com/1698.html>.

² Jeff Champion, *The Tyrants of Syracuse: War in Ancient Sicily* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010).

Specifically, long hair among the Greeks during the Peloponnesian War era was associated with the Spartans, who tended to be less democratic and more conservative than their counterparts in Athens, which led to many of the anti-democratic rich in Athens emulating the Spartans by growing their hair and/or beards long, and wearing short, red military-style cloaks.

These kinds of simple symbols can go a long way in fiction toward letting audiences know which side a character is on—the same way that old Westerns used black and white cowboy hats to tell viewers who to root for; sure, you can lose a bit of complexity that way, but sometimes complexity just bogs down a story.

And at other times, clothing is what hints at the complexity of thorough worldbuilding.

The Chichimecas were roughly eight nations who inhabited large swaths of the American Southwest and the Valley of Mexico circa the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries CE. Part of the reason that the people who lived to the north of the Valley of Mexico lived nomadic lifestyles is because the land wasn't conducive to farming; this was reflected in their clothes and weapons. Noted for their bow-and-arrow skills, Chichimecs learned archery young. Their obsidian arrows, fired by 60-70 cm long bows, had amazing penetrative power.

Aztecs didn't view Chichimecs pejoratively; they were seen more as "noble savages" with different skills. They were, nonetheless, known to be different. In Aztec paintings, Chichimecs were shown wearing simple animal-skin clothes, while the Aztec predecessor civilization known as the Toltecs were adorned with elaborate head-dresses and bodysuits sewn from cotton—which is to say, the products of farming, inherently implying a settled, agricultural society. Over time, both traditional ways of life—and their traditional clothing styles—were swept away. Europeans like Hernán Cortés conquered the region,

and people adopted a more European style of dress to reflect the balance of power.

Probably because Mexican women had less power, and imperialists thought their opinions mattered less, these women experienced less pressure to change clothing styles during assimilation. As a result, their traditional fashions survived better.

If the goal is to provide depth to worldbuilding, considering this sort of sociopolitical background and nuance for character clothes is an effective way to go about it. It's easy to have an oppressive regime ban traditional clothes and have characters act in reaction to that. A more complex option might be to see people deliberately choosing to wear clothes that might curry favor with those in power, or only members of a particular gender or class making that choice. The difficulty of navigating the resultant backlash could be part of the story.



Sometimes, this kind of change in attire is more abrupt and explicit. There's even an opportunity for comedy, if that's your preference.

During the Crusades, Eastern Christians and Muslims were known for long beards, while Latin crusaders from the west were known for being clean-shaven or, at most, having short, groomed beards. When Richard the Lionheart (mostly by accident) conquered Cyprus, the citizens of the capital city of Nicosia signaled the change in leadership by shaving their beards.³

It's almost like something out of a Monty Python sketch, but the imagery of a bunch of people shaving their beards or cutting their hair or removing their signature head coverings is a vivid way to illustrate capitulation or allegiance to a new leader at the end of a climactic conflict. It's also an opportunity for characters to reflect on the frankly startling—and sometimes surreal—difference that major appearance changes can have, without leaning too hard on the ugly duckling trope. Speculative fiction allows this to even be taken another step farther: the hue of a dragon's hide changing to match the eye color of a bonded partner, a species of sentient shape-changers all adopting the visage of their leader, or the outcome of silent elections being determined by the particular colors of a participant's auras.

SYMBOLS OF IDENTITY

Sociopolitical allegiance is only one part of identity, though, and many people alter their appearance to better declare who they are to the world.

The whole point of laws like Elizabethan England's sumptuary laws, in which only the upper

classes could wear certain kinds of satin, silk, and velvet, was to legislate clothing's role as a way to distinguish between social classes. In Ancient Rome, only citizens could wear togas, and only the emperor could wear Tyrian purple. During Korea's Joseon dynasty, royal women wore different colors and symbols to indicate their particular relationship to the king.

From changes as easy and mutable as clothing or hair dye to facial ritual scarification, people who change their appearance from "baseline human" are often making changes that represent their identity more truly than any modern resume or identification card.

Thracians used tattoos as a symbol of social status: the more elaborate the tattoo, the more important the person. Before the Spanish arrived, the indigenous peoples of the Philippines tattooed themselves with geometric designs and omen animals after successfully killing an enemy in a raid. Men and women of the Xingu from central Brazil got tattooed to demonstrate their respect for a departed chief.

By contrast, Persians in the sixth century BCE tattooed criminals and vanquished enemies and slaves who tried to escape. The Chinese, like the Persians and Greeks, generally considered tattooing a form of punishment. Xiongnu nomadic tribes on the western frontiers of China considered people without any tattoos to be lacking an identity. The Specifically, long hair among the Greeks Xiongnu demanded that Chinese envoys be tattooed before meeting with their "Greatest" (chieftain). This made things a bit difficult for the envoys required to serve in Xiongnu lands. These kinds of different approaches to body markings are a great opportunity for conflict.

¹ Michael Goodyear, "Richard the Lionheart and The Accidental Conquest of Cyprus," *Historic UK*, June 30, 2020. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Richard-Lionheart-Accidental-Conquest-Cyprus/>.

Tattoos are a great way to share information about a character. In the *Kushiel's Legacy* series, the completion of Phèdre's tattoo—known as a “marque”—marked the fact that she had completed her period of indentured servitude as a holy prostitute. She had paid back the debts owed via a tipping system known as a patron gift. The completed rose tattoo, proudly displayed in a gown with a plunging back, told anyone looking at it that she was a free agent and also a holy prostitute available for assignments. It made her social class immediately identifiable to anyone who looked at her and had great personal meaning to her. It served as a symbol of freedom and independence.

But tattoos aren't the only way to gauge culture and class. They aren't even the only permanent body modification that does the trick.

The idiom “don't look a gift horse in the mouth” exists precisely because of how easy it is to judge the health and quality of a horse based on the quality of its teeth. In America, teeth are often more of a class marker than clothes or even accent; crooked or missing teeth are typically associated with poverty and lack of access to dental care. Jaw size and gum health can also be a clue about diet; many ancient populations experienced less tooth decay than the modern world because they chewed more and had less access to sugar. Certain kinds of drug use (particularly methamphetamine) cause distinctive types of damage to teeth and gums—to the point where specialists can identify a meth user from their teeth alone.

Teeth can tell a story even beyond natural occurrences related to health and diet.

Archaeologists are able to identify members of the early Sudanic civilization because people from that culture extracted the two lower incisor teeth from adolescents. Tooth extraction is common among indigenous African tribes, but it is most common in Kenya, Tanzania and

Sudan. In one sense, it is considered a beauty enhancement à la foot-binding among the Han Chinese or Victorian waist training. Tooth extraction can also be used to symbolize tribal identity and has practical impacts. For example, the removal of the lower incisors allows specific sounds to be made, expanding the linguistic repertoire of the speakers.

In fiction, teeth modifications like filing teeth to sharper points—to seem more dangerous or make them more effective weapons when biting—are often used to indicate savage, brutal warriors. The Reavers from the television series *Firefly* and subsequent media are instantly recognizable because they appear covered in blood, with red stripes and corpse “trophies” adorning their ships—the way they file their rotting teeth to sharp points is totally on-brand. A character's sharp, piercing canines are often the easiest way to identify vampires and werewolves in the urban fantasy and horror genres, and they are by definition (exceptions that prove the rule aside) predatory and dangerous.

SYMBOLS OF POWER

If sharpened canines represent a weapon of last resort and a symbol of a willingness for violence, they are not unique. Fighters often rely on symbols of power to help them avoid fights—even though wielding them indicates confidence in winning.

Some of the earliest evidence anthropologists and archaeologists have of social stratification comes from large feasts and icons of power like maces. Maces, unlike the axes, knives, and arrows that preceded them, are pure weapons of war; they have no purpose except for cracking heads. When they became popular on the Eurasian Steppe, they immediately signified that their owner was a fighter, a warrior wielding a symbol of power. It's for this reason that maces as a symbol of power evolved into the bet-

ter-known scepter—which even now allows people to identify royalty at a glance or, in fiction, because they saw a word like “scepter” in the same sentence as the ruler. If a reader sees a reference to a scepter, they think royalty. Wands signify magic, whether a witch or a wizard or some other form of mage.

Often it's possible to take one look at what someone is wearing—or what they're wielding—and know their social status. The examples where these guesses turn out to be wrong are typically the result of deliberate deceit, like when Zeus hid himself in the guise of an old man. For most inhabitants of a world, fantastic or otherwise, it may make sense to hedge one's bets by being polite to everyone, but it's a lot harder to treat everyone like they might literally be a king or a god in disguise. Yet when a stranger appears in front of someone wearing all the accouterments of wealth and power, only a fool would treat them with only the politeness owed a neighbor.

Around 3700-3500 BCE, the people of the Northern Caucasus Mountains went from being relatively egalitarian small-scale farmers to having chiefs. Leading anthropologist David Anthony described them as “spectacularly ostentatious.”¹ They had gold-covered clothes, gold and silver staffs, and bronze weapons imported from the newly-formed Mesopotamian cities far across the mountains.

The chiefs in the Bronze Age Maykop culture (of the western Caucasus region) gained power partially because of their visible status icons. The “aura of extraordinary” that accompanied the exotic objects they acquired through trade allowed them to demonstrate their personal connection to foreign powers—which is to say, the mysterious unknown. What's particularly

interesting about this culture is that the chiefs and other high-status individuals were buried with most of their treasures, instead of passing them down to the next generation—the Maykop people tended to bury their dead with far more valuables than their neighbors.

These visible valuables were effective signifiers of power and wealth because they were exclusive—the same way that modern teenagers signal status through possession of expensive or limited edition shoes, or Phèdre's sangoire cloak in the *Kushiel's Legacy* series. Like the Imperial purple of Rome, the dyes used to make Phèdre's cloak are legally restricted: only she, as an *anguisette*, one of the angel Kushiel's chosen, can wear that color, which makes her status immediately identifiable.

IN SUM

Truth is often stranger than fiction, and history can serve as a useful jumping-off point with worldbuilding. From extraordinary trade goods and exclusive access to rarities that symbolize the elite power of connections, to the supply lines involved in common clothes, the things and stylings people use to cover their bodies are often highly indicative of their core identities. The reason it's effective for a character to don a servant's uniform to sneak into a lord's castle is that, the vast majority of the time, clothing does a lot of heavy work in signaling social cues.

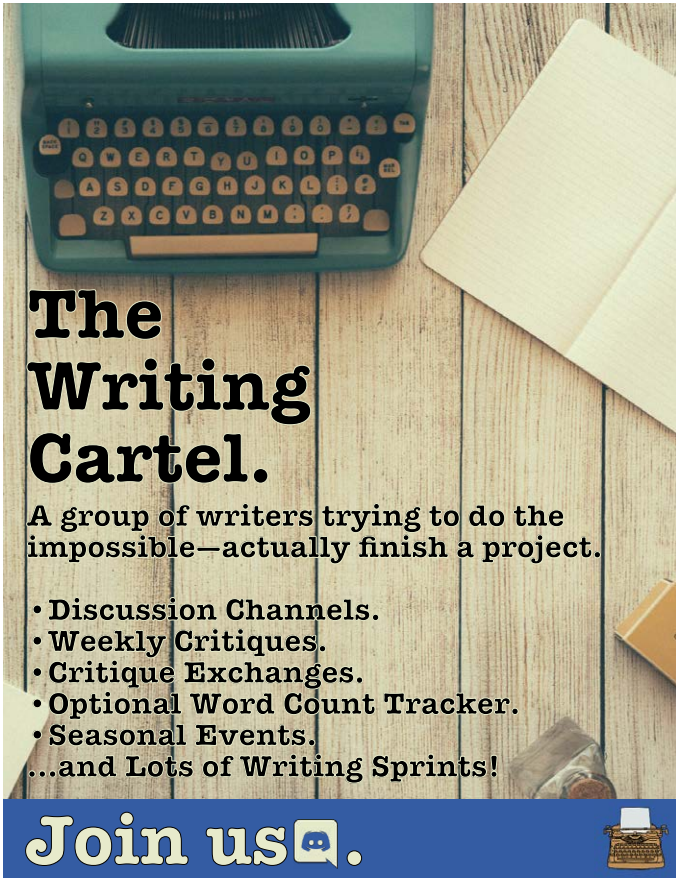
But there are other methods available to worldbuilders. Weapons, effective or symbolic, represent such a method. Another method is body modification such as scarification, dental alterations, or restricted body parts. Hair growth or dilapidation is also another method. Similarly, storytellers can use particular colors in places

¹ David W. Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel and Language: How Bronze-Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

unexpected . . . and expected, because whatever idioms we learn as children, it’s a useful skill to be able to judge a book by its cover, at a glance, and get a sense of whether it’s worth picking up.

How else can we gauge whether a book might have a blurb worth checking out?


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THE ROAD TO MORT ARBOR

by Cassidy Hammersmith

 SOCIAL ETIQUETTE  FICTION

Someone had to drive the cart.

The two pillcows in front of her groaned and twittered, antennae scanning the road for a scrap of greenery or a bit of mud to suck dry. But it was mid-Ashfall already. Weeks ago, snow gave way to clumps of fluffy rock ash and a light dusting of gravel. Each year as the light quickened, the wind shifted from Lady Veldra’s moist, mountainous bosom to Lord Merzeval’s molten volcanic furnace, and layer upon layer of volcanic debris followed. Dumb beasts.

“Ain’t bound to be a scrap, daughters. Eyes front!” Mohgen barked, pulling back hard on their reigns. One would think that getting beaned with a fist-sized hunk of granite hard enough to make them ball up like little chitinous boulders would clue them in to the season, but no. Pillcows are not kept for smarts. They’re kept to pull heavy things.

The cart was loaded near-to-bursting with bushels of millet and rye; the fundamentals of bread by the ton. The Nennian forest ahead was great for water, with its deep aquifers and thick snow-cover. But a forest thick enough to grow castle-sized trees is not a place to grow grasses. So the race of Nenn left it to their Munckish neighbors. Munck, like Mohgen, reap the grain and

slaughter the game in the bright months, Nenn dole out the water for the fields and flesh in the dark half of the year. That was the way. At least it was when someone was foolish enough to drive the cart.

And it was Mohgen. It was always Mohgen.

Opening her enormous black eyes even wider, Mohgan peered at the sky above for any trace of a sunbeam with the sand to trickle through the perpetual gray. She was hungry. And thirsty. She hadn't been able to bask in the light for days—so long that the bright-green solar sails folded neatly into her back were cramped and sore. She considered more than once whether it was wise to just unfurl them from her rail-thin frame and leave them out. Pale cloud light was better than no light, surely? But no, tromping along the Greyland Waste in a cart hauled by the best eating for three horizons in any direction was attention enough. Flapping a verdant banner on the razor-cold breeze would be even worse. One does not tempt Mother Death if one can help it, not this far from the Free Cities. Out here, there was no Lord and House to keep order and make sure all the guests of the city played nice. In the waste, there was only the Law. And the Law was penned with Mother in mind.

Mohgen was not what you'd call a fighter, nor were any of her Munckish siblings. She was strong enough, sure. Farming and herding was hard work. She held down centaur yearlings for gelding every year since her tusks grew in to prepare the foals for a life of draft work and riding, broke the wild ones, too. But that wiry strength never translated well to combat. Certainly not the kind the Law demanded should the members of rival houses meet by chance upon a frigid and ashen road. If Mohgen met a stranger, they might issue a Challenge. One decorum demanded she accept. If she lost, that would be her life, and everything she owned would become theirs.

ONE SLAIN IS ONE GAINED. THAT IS THE LAW.

She was still at least half a day's travel from the Free City of Mort Arbor when she spotted the first one. It was only for an instant—a quick flash of brown fur on the monotone gray of the road and the rocks beside it. Given the size of the stone it had hidden behind, it could be nothing but a Nennian. So small, yet so fierce. Of what

house, it didn't matter. A friendly Nenn House might block her path, challenge her ownership, kill her in a fair fight, and take the grain rather than wait for her at the gate and buy it, as was customary. A hostile Nenn House wouldn't even do her the kindness of calling out a Challenge first. She dropped the reins and the pillcows lurched to a stop. On reflex alone, Mohgen pulled a sickle from under her cloak, reached back for her bow, and threaded an arrow, then feigned looking in the opposite direction. Brown flashed again between the rocks, stopping about two dozen measures ahead of her. The arrow flew so fast it had no time for the business of falling, and stuck in the dirt right next to the Nennian's new hiding place.

"I see you!" Mohgen yelled, jumping to her feet. "Speak in peace, act in war, or leave as you came! I will brook no delay!" Surprised at the confident booming of her own voice, Mohgen knocked another arrow and raised it, sickle still clutched in her drawing hand. From behind the boulder, the fur-covered body of the Nennian stepped into view. It looked to be only half her size; panting, malnourished, and folded in on itself. She was not fooled. "Last chance, *furball*: speak, act, or leave!"

"You would do yourself no honor to shoot a child!" the Nennian said, contorting its enormous mouth into a frown as its eyes grew beady and wet.

"I would not. Happy for me there are no broodlings here," Mohgen said with a snarl, "Unhappy for you that your lie is so awful. Do you think me a fool?"

The Nennian said nothing, only flattened its frown and began to draw breath. Wind howled around them as it rushed to fill the intruder's body to bursting. Suddenly it was a measure and a half tall—a head above the arched backs of her pillcows. It had nearly doubled in size again when another of Mohgen's arrows sank deep into its side. The Nennian gasped and recoiled as a hiss of air leaked from the wound, folding it over at the waist as it shrank back. It coughed loud enough to rattle the cart wheels and gripped the hole in its side. Still louder than it had any proper right to be, the Nennian began to chuckle as it sank. "I would thank your poor aim for sparing my life!" Another arrow flew, cutting the fletching clean off of the first. The Nennian flinched in surprise.

"The only pooriness here is found in your manners. Or maybe also your purse?" Mohgen responded with a smirk. Her sails fluttered

in and out with the force of her breath. Calling out poverty was a risky thing, but the Nenian was useless if it could not scream her and the cart to splinters. This would be no fight at all, not anymore. “Quickly now, before the next shot finds your eye.”

Her target’s eyes darted back and forth among the rocks along the path. If there were others out there, none were stepping forward. It swallowed hard on a mouthful of air. “...I am Pondrik of Silmaug,” the Nennian said. He pulled the shaft from his side. A jet of red shot out after it, but with hissing and blue sparks the wound sealed itself. “What is your name and house?”

She lowered her bow slowly, but kept her arrow knocked. “Mohgen of Taurein. Now what business do you have blocking my path to market?”

Pondrik held his arm close to his side and studied the ash at his feet. The flaps of furry skin between his ankles and wrists rippled in the breeze. He had gone slack. Suppliant. “It matters little. I yield myself to your mercy. If you will permit me, I will be on my own way,” he finally said, stepped to the side and turned his back to her.

THERE’S NO GLORY IN TAKING A LIFE FREELY GIVEN, THOUGH IT BE YOURS TO TAKE. THAT IS THE LAW.

Mohgen put away her arrow and set down her bow, relaxing back into her seat on the bench. She clicked her tongue twice and the pillcows groaned back into motion as twenty legs scrambled in the dust to haul the weight of the cart. As she passed, the Nennian kept his eyes on the dirt and his back to her, even turning further away as her cart rolled past. That set Mohgen to thinking.

The encounter had been... too easy. Pondrik (if that was his real name) was clearly full grown and able, but Nennians almost never made direct confrontation as he just had. Their screams were a tool of defense. Besides that he wore no armor, nor clothes of any kind. His first act at being discovered was to call himself an unworthy challenge. If Mohgen had been anything other than Munckish, his tiny furry body would have been shattered to bits.

... If she had been anything other than Munckish, she would not have seen Pondrik at all. Mohgen frowned, groaned, and pulled back on the reins. Digging her palms into her large, black eyes, she slumped forward and followed the thought to the end.

He said he belonged to Silmaug... that was a rough life to lead. After they split from the rest of the Nenn, Silmaug turned savage to properly deal with outsiders, and it had won them control of the Free City of Mort Arbor. Unfortunately, it also won them a reputation for fearsomeness and cruelty of a kind that poor Pondrik clearly could not muster. Mohgen would bet five gallons of potable water that he had been sent specifically to rob this cart as a test of loyalty and strength. Why not? Munck were pushovers and everyone knew it. Seemed like House Taurein were vassals to a different greater House every week. What were the chances the driver would even bother putting up a worthy challenge?

Mohgen knew the chances. She had prepared herself for this ever since the last time she went home empty handed two and a half years ago. The rest of the village had thrashed her soundly for it. She swore ‘never again,’ picked up a bow, and had scarcely put it down since. And now Pondrik was in for far worse. His footsteps were already receding into the distance. Oh Mother... no. No she would not let this tiny thing impose his own exile. No one deserved the shame of having no House to come home to.

FIND HONOR AT HOME OR FIND SHAME IN EXILE. THAT IS THE LAW.

“Wait!” she yelled back over her shoulder. The footsteps stopped and turned in the loose gravel behind her. Mohgen pressed the heel of her palm to her forehead and swept back her short, ashen hair. She could hear the blood rushing in Pondrik’s veins, smell the anxious sweat building under his arms. “Come here, Silmaug.”

“If you mean to make me a captive,” Pondrick whimpered, “I would just as soon you send me home to Mother Death now and be done with it.”

“I said, ‘come here, Silmaug,’ and that’s what I mean. Now *come!*” Mohgen barked, hopping off the cart with her sickle still in hand. It might still be a trick. He might still be looking for a weakness

and a better time to strike. But with the stink of him? Unlikely. She'd shoulder that risk any day.

The diminutive Nennian trotted up alongside her wagon, head bowed, hands folded, and bloody near dropped to one knee in the dust before catching himself. This was clearly a man who was accustomed to losing his challenges and 'serving' his betters in bedrolls to save his hide. It turned her stomach to think of it—this poor tiny thing, ravished by a cold, uncaring brute. Try as she might, there was nothing in her mind for him now but pity. Mohgen waited for him to say something for what felt like an hour before she spoke.

"Why did you follow me?"

Silence.

"You would have screamed me deaf a moment ago and now you cannot speak?" Mohgen scoffed. "Fine, go! Rot in the Waste then!"

"No! Wait," Pondrik said, reaching after her. "I... I was..." He took a deep breath to steady himself and did his best to stand tall. "Twice or thrice each year, Taurein brings grain to Mort Arbor. Of this, Silmaug keeps little, as your house sees fit to trade with others."

Mohgen smirked. "There it is. You have come to tax us."

"...In so many words, yes," Pondrik said, lowering his eyes again. A gob of spit landed in the dirt at his feet and the Nennian jumped backward, jaw slack.

"Do not be surprised," Mohgen said. "Your truth honors me, and so I will honor you." She pulled the waterskin from under her cloak, drank deeply of it, and tossed it to the gobsmacked thief before her.

**SHARE LIFE WITH WATER;
SHARE WATER IN LIFE.
THAT IS THE LAW.**

Pondrik pulled the stopper and swallowed five mouthfuls before tossing it back. It was settled then. They would now be friends.

All the pretense and high speech could fall away. The pair would be permitted to breathe easy and speak plain. "My corpse on't, woman, ye'd 'ave kilt me eight blinks ago and now this? What's you after?"

Mohgen laughed a screeching laugh as she hung the water skin and hooked the sickle on her sash. "Think you're the only one what had licks for comin' home short?" she asked knowingly. One arm raised she leaned on the wagon wheel beside her with a tusk smile. "Nah. I seen your Lords get gorey over a misspoke word. No good does it to let you walk home to *that*."

Pondrik sighed and sank into himself again. "I weren't after a walk home and ye know't."

"Course I do," Mohgen said, tossing back the hides over her load. "Can't have that. How d'you suppose I'd sleep?"

"Hard, I s'pose," Pondrik admitted with a shrug. He shuddered off the bulk of his fear and a few stray scraps of fur. "...Y'know if either our Lords catch the breeze we spoke plain, it'll be our necks."

"I told bigger lies," Mohgen admitted, reaching into the cart and pulling up a bale of rye and another of millet. "Two bushels tax up front enough to buy you back into your Lord's good graces?"

She heard the sound of his eyelids snapping closed and open. "Ye... Ye'd do that fer me?"

"Beats a hug from Mom for either of us, don't it?" Mohgen said with a smirk. "Grain's gone up with the bad Ascension this year and Veldra's war on Xuul. I'll sell for double this season, I think. So; is two enough, or d'you need a third?"

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Pondrik picked some grit from his teeth, and spat at the feet of his new friend, smiling. “Two’s plenty. I got five House brothers out here meaner’n me, set upon diff’rent routes. Only...” Concern furrowed the Nennian’s brow and his mouth tied in a knot, “Only what’ll I tell ‘em?”

Mohgen thought for a moment, scratching herself behind one of her large semicircular ears. “Well, certainly not the truth. If I sliced it right, that way puts us both in Mother’s arms by the end of the week.” Her fingers drummed on the rim of the wheel while she studied the darkening sky. Time was short, and she had wasted too much of it here already. “What was you plannin’ before I caught you?”

“Follow you until you was abed or vacant, grab what I’d carry, and ride sparkflame to camp before you noticed,” Pondrik said,

“Follow you until you was abed or vacant, grab what I’d carry, and ride sparkflame to camp before you noticed,” Pondrik said, crestfallen and dark-eyed.

Mohgen quirked a brow. “Could you even *heft* two?” she asked skeptically.

Pondrik grinned. Clapping his hands together, he drew breath deep into his body, filling places no lung had any business filling, until again he stood three measures full height. Under each arm he hefted a bale of grain like a bag of leaves. “See?” Pondrik said, smiling literally from one ear to the other. “Not so hard.” The wind rushed out of him again, steady and strong enough to push Mohgen back two steps, until each bale was nearly as tall as the man who carried them. Pondrik winced and clutched his side. “Well... least when I ain’t been pierced, it ain’t!”

Mohgen frowned to one side, folding her hands in front of her face. “That won’t do. You *are* pierced. And I weren’t stoppin’ tonight till I made the gate.” She thought a moment more, then, sighing, grabbed her sickle from her belt. “There’s nothin’ for it,” she said with a sigh, pulled back her sleeve, and shot three cuts along her arm faster than she could change her mind about the whole business. Blood stained the fluffy ash of the road bright red. She doubled over and hissed between clenched tusks. “*Shit* on a tin plate that hurts! Quick now, get your ass over here and hit me in the eye!”

Pondrik’s jaw fell. He stood stock-still.

“*Now*, rot your House, hit me before I—!”

The very next thing she knew, Mohgen was on her back, staring at a swirl in the sky above her. Her arm was sticky. Her left eye was blurred. She snarled and sat upright, but her head felt heavy and her light started fading. With a dull thud, she fell back into the dust. The pillcow next to her shifted impatiently. Above, the clouds were darkened to slate gray with charcoal bright spots. And there was no sign of Pondrik.

“Now you’re thinkin’, Silmaug,” she chuckled, and pulled a sip of water from her skin. Blue sparks jumped across her arm as she knitted the gashes back together. From another hidden pouch she produced a small half-smashed shadefruit and ate it to brighten her inner light and stop the world from spinning so fast. Just enough juice to screw her head back on straight. Another moment passed before she dared sit up again. There, on the horizon, were the lights of Mort Arbor, and beyond them a wall of trees so tall they scraped the sky. By her figuring, that was three or four hours of travel gone that she’d never have to suffer in her life.

With a groan slightly louder than she’d hoped, Mohgen half-climbed the wagon wheel to her feet, and pulled back the tarp. Still only two bales were missing. She smiled and fastened it down again. “Looks like we picked a good one, ain’t we girls?” she asked her pillcows. They answered with twittery groaning noises as they dug through the ash, searching for a better answer to the question ‘is there food?’ than they had gotten hours before. “Alright, well enough.”

On creaky springs and ancient wood, the cart groaned as she climbed up onto the bench and took the reins again. For a moment she thought of her new unlikely friend and wondered if he knew she was okay, or understood at all how strong he really was. Mohgen could only hope that somewhere out there, Pondrik had cooked up a harrowing lie about a tussle with a cart-driver with more grain than sense who he’d knocked clean out with one good swing.

... Or maybe it wasn’t a lie at all. Maybe instead he was bragging about pulling a fast one over on some dumb Munckish ‘taur heard-er too kind for her own good. One who had the foolish notion to take pity on him in a land that barely even had a word for pity.

Mohgen scoffed at her own late-blooming distrust and pushed it aside. It didn’t matter. The Law had been served and they had

both come away more or less whole. That was a Good Day. With two clicks of her tongue and a whip of the reins, the pillcows skittered onward down the road. Just a few more hours to Mort Arbor, a hot mud bath, a good straw bed, and a rich meal besides. Either she had made a quiet, secret friend in House Silmaug, or nothing at all had changed.

Neither way mattered much. The evening and the morning still come and go like the rain and the ash. Houses rise and fall. Friendships are made and broken over nothing. The Nenn would still need grain. Taurein would still need water.

Someone would have to drive the cart.

And it would be Mohgen. It would always be Mohgen.

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STAFF PICKS



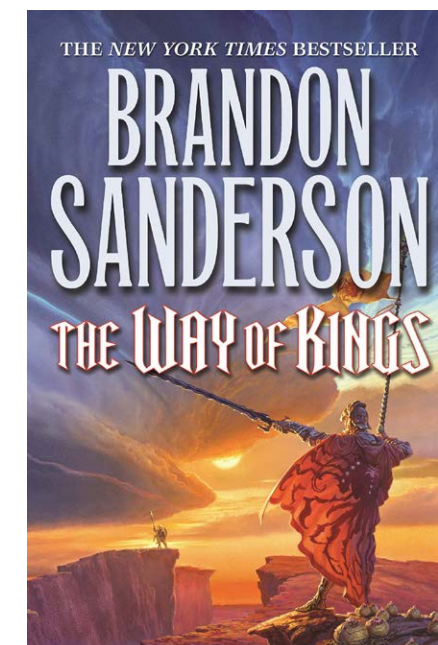
IRON WIDOW

by Xiran Jay Zhao

Reviewed by Zaivy Luke-Aleman

In addition to creating interesting videos surrounding the worldbuilding and historical accuracy of Chinese and Chinese inspired settings in television and movies, Xiran Jay Zhao has also created their own world. Their debut novel, *Iron Widow* is inspired by the Chinese ruling empress Wu Zetian, and takes place on a planet where qi-powered mecha fight for humanity. Wu Zetian is a vicious radical hell-bent on revenge and overthrowing the patriarchal system that sends many female co-pilots to their deaths. In their novel, they challenges what is “good,” “evil,” and

“right by society.” This novel was hungrily devoured within three days, and I am so desperate to have its sequel in my hands!




THE WAY OF KINGS

by Brandon Sanderson

Reviewed by Zachary Magid

Brandon Sanderson’s Stormlight Archive series is the result of over a decade of world building, and it shows. The first book, *The Way of Kings*, is a masterful example of how to create intricate, beautiful, lived-in worlds, without sacrificing deep and resonant characters and stories. Perhaps it’s because the book clocks in at

a staggering 1118 pages. Here, Sanderson introduces the reader to the world of Roshar, a world battered by constant, massive storms. These highstorms influence everything we see in the world. There are no windows on the eastern side of buildings, as the winds and debris would shatter them in moments. Grass reacts to any movement, hiding in holes to avoid being torn up and tossed away by the wind and boulders the wind carries. The safest cities are those built into mountains or within cracks in the earth. Animals large and small hide in their shells or in the crevices of rocks, scuttling out during the quiet riddens at the end of the storm to drink the water left behind. All this leaves out the mysterious and mystical stormlight, energy that swirls in the winds and rain of the highstorm, which can be trapped and preserved in gems, which are then used as currency, and to power the mechanical tools known as fabrials. All this and so much more is presented as fact from the point of view of several characters, leaving the reader to find their way through this alien world, picking up information slowly, putting together information from the context given by the characters.



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The physical world is shaped by these highstorms, and as the story unfolds, I came to know a handful of areas well. I stood on the windswept Shattered Plains where ten separate, barely allied armies fight the alien Parshendi. I walked the gorgeous Kharbranth, city of bells, side by side with the genius heretic Jasnah. I ate stew with the kind and hard-working surgeon in the quiet village of Hearthstone.

In this first novel in Sanderson's sprawling epic series, the reader is invited to experience the world of Roshar, and the universe of the Cosmere, the interwoven storyline Sanderson has created to link his different series together. If you're interested in epic fantasy, of sweeping stories and books that double as door stoppers, I recommend *The Way of Kings* as one of the best.

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MONSTER PULSE

by *Hiveworks*

Reviewed by M.E. White

Monster Pulse is a webcomic about kids bonding with fantastical monsters, inspired by the likes of Pokemon and Digimon. While it takes place in “the real world,” it is what TVTropes would call a “Masquerade,” a type of world built within the world we know.

A shady organization tasked by the US government with creating bioweapons has created ghostly entities which possess human body parts, causing said body parts to separate and morph, becoming the titular “monsters.” The ghosts are drawn to growing bodies – hence our main human characters are mostly children and teens.

What really sells the worldbuilding in Monster Pulse is the attention given to depicting how people feel about monsters. Like many monster pet stories, Monster Pulse focuses on the deep bonds formed between kids and mons. How-

ever, the “gotta catch ‘em all” mentality seen in most of these story worlds is subverted. This is likely a matter of difference in medium: Pokemon, for instance, is primarily a game franchise where monster-collecting is one of the main elements of play. Monster Pulse, on the other hand, is strictly a comic and has no need to “gamify” its worldbuilding. Because of this, it's free to explore setting ideas incompatible with genre staples.

The monsters in Monster Pulse are deeply bonded to their humans because they are still, in a mystical sense, connected to the same body. Our main character, Bina, loses her heart and gains Ayo: a dinosaur-like beast with aortic horns crowning her head. But Ayo is still Bina's heart. Throughout the story, Bina wrestles with loving Ayo, as her companion and as part of herself, and hating Ayo, for how much change she has wrought on her life, and for making her face her own mortality: if any harm comes to Ayo, Bina might die. This is in direct contrast to Ash and Pikachu, where the lip service paid to “partnership” rings hollow when Pikachu is usually the only one getting hurt.

The humans are not totally useless in Monster Pulse, either. Abel can send his winged eye Rixis out to scout afar, and see what Rixis sees. But for all the perks, the monsters also create

a fair share of (physical and psychological) problems for the kids - West can no longer eat anything, but will faint if his stomach monster Guuzy is not fed. They all love their monster buddies, but fight to save other kids from the same fate.

As of this year the webcomic is complete, so I highly recommend checking it out.

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THE ETIQUETTE OF DEVILRY

by Seán Gray

 SHORTFICTION  FANTASY

There's an art to conjuring demons. It's the first lesson Marcel learns, scraped together from a penny grimoire and creaking guesswork. Spiderweb scrawl whispers of ancient rituals, promises, and names. Embossed letters warn against gifts of silver during a full moon while woodcut prints portray cavorting demons. There is nothing of the science he is accustomed to here. He finds no rigorous mathematical formulas or empirically tested theories. But there is power in this battered tome. He can taste it on his tongue, light and crimson. It's what had drawn him to this book in the first place.

The trick is extracting it.

Contradictory knowledge abounds. A devil first described on the fifteenth page metamorphoses into an angel by the seventeenth. One chapter declares belief in hobgoblins absurd while another declares their existence a fundamental tenet of reality. Whoever compiled this tome had evidently not considered consistency a virtue. Passages segue between different authors and opinions with abrupt, wild abandon. This is no manual or guide.

It's a madman's war fought through footnotes and scribbled annotations.

Little wonder the Market Witch sold it to Marcel for a single half-crown and two swigs of rum. Trying to untangle such a labyrinthine puzzle could be the work of a lifetime. Solving it in two days should be impossible. A fool's errand. Any reputable scholar would scoff and move on to more illustrious work.

Marcel has no choice. With every day that passes, the noose around his neck tightens. He has too many enemies and not enough friends. If he wants to live, he needs power. He'll have to conjure a devil and trust in its protection. Otherwise they'll find his body floating in the river with a cut throat and an empty purse.

The Mob doesn't take kindly to those who renege on their debts.

It's nearing midnight by the time the electric yellow burn of his desk light drives him to sleep. He's filled half a notebook with smeared ink and ramshackle knowledge. It's a fleeting, fragile beginning, but it'll have to do. Curled up under a threadbare blanket, head pounding, Marcel lets himself feel a little hope. He'll need it for the morning.

**YOU DIDN'T
TRIFLE WITH
PEOPLE WHO
WORE DEVILS
AS FASHION
ACCESSORIES.**

Dawn brings with it a headache and a dry throat. A breakfast of hardening bread and tepid water does little to improve Marcel's mood. It's an inauspicious start and one a thorough review of his notes does not improve. There is no insight in his meandering handwriting, only a faint tinge of rambling mania. Only a few promising

leads prevent the entire enterprise from being a disaster. There's no miraculous breakthrough in sight. Not yet, at least.

So he sighs and opens the grimoire once more. It's still quiet outside, and Marcel soon settles into a steady rhythm. He hunts for commonalities and scours for signs. Even in this deranged text there must be some kind of pattern that he can deduce—a thread that he can pull until the whole mystery unravels. He can feel a greater truth leering at him from just outside his reach. It's infuriating.

He knows of only one person who can help him, and her price is always high. The thought is dangerous. A frantic ransacking of his meager lodgings produces only a handful of coins. It'll have to be enough. Marcel has already bartered or pawned what few possessions he used to own. Braving the market in search of a savior could very well get him killed ahead of schedule. A glance at the grimoire hardens his resolve.

Furtively, he steps outside. The bustling crowds swallow him whole and spit him out battered and shaken. There's too much noise and it drums, drums, drums along to his burgeoning headache. Marcel's mouth is dry, and his stomach is a storm-swept sea. Every step he takes sets it tossing and turning.

He needs to sit down. A nearby crate provides the support he needs. Slumped against a wall, Marcel tries to ignore the panic fizzing through his veins. It's too warm and his skin is burning. He doesn't know where he is, and he doesn't care. Marcel closes his eyes and tries to breathe. Leaving his apartment was a mistake.

Someone kicks him in the shin. The pain jolts Marcel back to his senses. Hissing, half-blind from the light, he tries to find his assailant. He does not have to look far. They loom over him, a blurred shadow, posture entirely unimpressed.

"Move it bum. I've got a crowd I need to wow, and you're in my way." There's something familiar about the voice, but disoriented; he can't place the connection. So instead Marcel staggers to his feet and prepares to stand his ground. It's stupid, but anger cuts through the terror crawling inside of him.

He opens his mouth to shout some obscenity when he recognizes the speaker. She's smaller than him, clothed in an ensemble woven from discarded cloth and tarnished metal. A shapeless hat conceals much of her chestnut hair. She wears a cloak of rippling air, a heat haze shimmer that hurts to behold.

The Market Witch.

Marcel swallows. One of the most dangerous women in the city is standing right in front of him. She could kill him with a single word if she were feeling generous. He'd heard stories of what happened to people who upset her. Of men turned to stone or driven mad. No one crossed her. You didn't trifle with people who wore devils as fashion accessories.



Lyanna

Marcel knows that he should apologize and run away with what little dignity he has left. He doesn't need another enemy. Maybe he can book passage on a ship sailing far away from here. Or he could return to his apartment and try to finish decrypting the grimoire. Desperate ideas, but desperation is all that he has left.

Instead, Marcel starts talking. "I need your help ma'am." The words tumble out, a roaring flood.

"I bought one of your wares the other day, a grimoire, and I can't make heads or tails of it. If I don't figure it out, then I'm dead and I quite like living. So please can you—"

The Market Witch leans close and with a pinch of her fingers steals his voice. He can feel his mouth moving, but no sound comes out. Marcel raises a hand to his throat and tries to ignore the ice in his gut.

"You're that poncy scholar, aren't you? I remember you. Strutting about like you owned the place. Fancy seeing you back here so soon." Something like a predator's smile crosses the Witch's face. There is no humor in it, only teeth and cold menace.

"It's not my fault you don't have the smarts to figure out my wares." The Market Witch looks at him with a butcher's eye. "I suppose I can help you. For a price, of course."

Her gaze turns toward her cloak. “Restrain him for me, dearie, if you please.” Marcel watches in horror as it slides off her shoulders and wraps around his chest. It feels like being engulfed by a blanket of hot coal.

With another flick of her fingers, she gives his voice back. “So Mister Scholar, what can you give me?”

Shaking, Marcel holds out his coin purse. It’s the last of his savings, but he needs this knowledge. Whatever her price, he must meet it. The Witch’s expression tightens, and she croons to her pet devil. It tightens its grip and sets his ribs ablaze. Marcel bites back a scream.

“Oh no, I won’t accept money for something this important.” There’s a sing-song lilt to the Witch’s words. “Wealth is of no interest to me. I could snap my fingers and a demon would shower me in gold. No, I want something more. Something you can’t replace so easily.”

“I-I don’t understand.” Marcel stammers. It’s difficult to pay attention to the Witch while wrapped in her accessory’s smoldering embrace.

“It’s simple really. I want something you’ll never be complete without.” Her feral grin is back, carnivorous and hungry. “Show me how much you’ll sacrifice to learn from me and maybe, just maybe, I’ll teach you.” She laughs, amused by some new thought. “And to hurry you up, if you don’t decide soon, I’ll carve you up and take what I want myself.”

Swallowing, Marcel thinks it over. What can he give the Witch that she’ll accept? A hand? His sight? Better to lose a limb than to be beaten to death in some alley come morning. Somehow he doesn’t think the Witch will accept such a simple trade.

Grim inspiration strikes.

“Take my ability to read and write. Without them I’ll be ruined as a scholar.” His voice sounds small and weak even to his own ears. The Witch taps a finger to her lips, considering his proposal.

“That’ll do. Dearie, return please.” Her cloak loosens and slithers back up to its rightful place. Marcel sucks in a grateful breath and winces. He’s in agony but that’s a minor problem.

He’s found a teacher. Marcel hopes that her tutelage is worth the price he’s paid for them. The Witch touches a finger to his forehead. His headache returns with a vengeance, and his eyes stream.

“You’ve kept up your side of the bargain. So I suppose I’ll have to keep up mine. Come along, Mister Scholar. I don’t have all day.” With an imperious turn, the Market Witch sweeps away. Stunned, he scrambles after her. She cuts through the crowd like a sword, and despite Marcel’s best efforts, he falls behind. Every breath he takes shreds his throat anew, and his legs won’t stop trembling.

The Witch notices that he can’t keep up. She tuts and waves a finger in his direction. An invisible force takes a hold of his battered body and begins marching him forward. Driven like some grotesque puppet, he falls into lockstep beside the Witch.

As she marches him along, he glances round. His gaze settles on a shop front sign. It should spell out the owner’s family name and their business. Instead, the letters shift and tangle together like snakes. Whatever meaning they carry is forever lost to him.

Marcel tries not to cry.

“You’d be best off forgetting whatever knowledge you absorbed from that book.” The witch swerves down an alleyway, and helpless, Marcel follows. “It’s nothing more than occult drivel, good only for selling to suckers like yourself.” She smirks. “Those who truly want to know more always come crawling back in the end.”

The alley ends in a heavysset door. It glides open with one of the Witch’s signals. The strength holding Marcel fades away, and he sags against a nearby wall. It takes him a second to realize that she’s watching him with a solemn countenance.

“These next steps must be your own. No one can be forced to walk this path. You must choose it willingly. That is the truth at the heart of our art.” There is a somber tone to the Witch’s words. An ancient weight.

“Are you willing to trust me?”

Marcel gives her a smile, empty and tired. He pushes off the wall and takes a step toward her.

“What choice do I have?”

That garners a laugh from her. “You’re smarter than you look.” She hooks her elbow through his own. In his rumbled attire and her eclectic outfit, they look ridiculous, like some distorted mockery of the well-to-do couples that prowl the promenades in all their finery.

“Courtesy is everything in our profession. This is the first and most important lesson that I can teach you.” The Witch’s breath is hot and rancid on his cheek. “A demon you disrespect is a demon that’ll eat you. Divinities help you if you offend another practitioner. If you wish to turn back, do so now.”

There’s a chill in the air, expectant and hungry. A phantasmal audience waiting to hear his response. Marcel grits his teeth and looks the Witch square in the eye. “I won’t turn back. I’m not afraid.” He’s lost too much to give up now.

The Market Witch says nothing and turns her attention back to the door. “Then step inside my parlor, Mister Scholar, and I’ll teach you everything I know about the etiquette of devilry.”

Marcel nods, and together, they step into the dark and endless world awaiting them.

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THINKING SIDEWAYS ABOUT DIPLOMACY

by Robert Meegan

 FANTASY  HISTORY

The earliest diplomacy was undoubtedly negotiated by the leaders of rival tribes and dealt with matters such as “you hunt on that side of the creek and we’ll hunt on this side of the creek.” We can be pretty confident about this because these are the kinds of agreements that kids on a playground produce. For additional evidence, the oldest surviving written treaty is the *Stele of the Vultures* (right), dating back to ca. 2460 BCE. This limestone slab includes the text of the treaty, which begins with a history of the disagreement, fully illustrated with carvings of a great battle.

According to the Stele, the unnamed ruler of the city-state of Umma had the unmitigated gall to send his people to farm the area known as the Gu’eden, the beloved fields of the Lagaš patron god Ningirsu. Fortunately for the people of Lagaš, they were led by the indomitable warrior Eannatum, who had been sired by Ningirsu, suckled by the goddess Ninhursag, and named by the goddess Inanna. (Clearly,



 STEELE (KIKUYU3, WIKIMEDIA)

Eannatum understood that moderate inflation of credentials is perfectly acceptable in a political résumé.) It then describes how, despite his wounds, Eannatum commanded the army of Lagaš to a great victory, piling the enemy dead into twenty mounds.

After this introduction, the Stele gets to the meat of the matter, stating that the ruler of Umma swears an oath before six separate gods that he shall never again send his people to trespass beyond the markers delineating the border. Each oath is described in detail, including the rituals required. Finally, the text concludes with a full recapitulation of the general *awesomeness* of Eannatum, including all of his titles, the other great things that he'd done, a reminder that he was the one who kicked Umma's ass, and the disclaimer that he was responsible for putting up this stele for the glory of Ningirsu.

In short, Eannatum of Lagaš pretty much created the template that the next forty-five hundred years of politicians would use to describe their own diplomatic triumphs.

While fictional worlds often have rich national politics, they frequently fall short in the area of international relations. Too often, the relationship between nations is reduced to the options of “at war” and “not at war.” If multiple nations are warring, some may be allied together, but the terms of the alliance are rarely stated.

There are roughly two hundred countries on Earth at present—the precise count depends upon whom you're asking and how you ask the question. The state of affairs between any two

countries is unique. Factors such as history, geography, trade, and language ensure that there are not only endless subtleties in international relations, but that those relationships are constantly shifting. Even if we're talking about a small corner of the world, today's friends may be tomorrow's enemies. That sort of change can have profound effects that resonate down to the level of individuals.

The idea behind *thinking sideways* is that we can explore the real world and then bend what we learn to make our own worlds richer and more realistic. We'll be using some of our favorite tools to find sources old and new. While we're gathering ideas, we'll try to have some fun wandering down the bottomless rabbit holes of history.

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

Since we started out by talking about the treaty between Lagaš and Umma, we should probably talk a bit more about the diplomacy of peace. If you look at international relations through the lens of history, you'll find that a goodly number of treaties involve the end of wars. There are several reasons for this. One is that humanity spends much of its time trying to kill each other. Another is that killing each other on the national level tends to be difficult and expensive enough that eventually nearly everyone is willing to give it up, at least for a while. Probably the most cynical reason for the abundance of peace treaties is that they are much like the warranties that come with cheap electronic products: not worth the parchment that they're written upon.

EANNATUM OF LAGAŠ CREATED THE TEMPLATE THAT THE NEXT FORTY-FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF POLITICIANS WOULD USE TO DESCRIBE THEIR OWN DIPLOMATIC TRIUMPHS.

One problem with peace treaties is that the terms are often imposed by one side upon the other. Eannatum was, if not benevolent, at least moderate enough to ask for nothing more than a return to the previously existing status. However, more often than not, the victorious party decides to make the treaty punitive. The Treaty of Versailles ending the First World War was a particularly egregious case of “victor's justice.” This was made worse by the German people's belief that they had not been defeated, but rather pummeled into exhaustion.

The Hundred Years' War provides another example of a peace with unacceptable terms being imposed. The origins of the war are complex and involve the claims that English kings had upon French territory dating back to their conquest-era titles as Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou. By the time that the war started, England was on its seventh king since the start of the debate and France was on its thirteenth.

Some twenty years into the war, at the Battle of Poitiers (19 September 1356), the English captured the French king, John II, and a number of nobles. After the captives were brought back to England, John II signed the first Treaty of London in 1358. This was a simple document as these things go and stated that the king and nobles would be ransomed for the sum of four million écus, the rough equivalent of sixteen metric tons of gold. Unfortunately, the English, and perhaps John II himself, had greatly overestimated the French adoration of their king. The Estates-General, which was the national assembly called to raise the funds for the ransom, chose instead to press for reforms.

Edward III, the English king, was undoubtedly annoyed by France's refusal to pay his hostages' ransom and showed his frustration by having John II sign the second Treaty of London the next year. This kept the conditions of the first treaty and added that the French royal princes would be held hostage in the English court

and that the provinces of Anjou, Aquitaine, Normandy, and Maine would be surrendered to England and that Brittany would come under English control. Perhaps to no one's surprise, the French prince regent (Dauphin), nobility, and populace all rejected this offer.

To show his dedication to the peace process, Edward III later returned to France in 1359 and proceeded to wreak havoc across the provinces of Artois and Champagne as well as the Beauce Region. A new series of negotiations began, this time with the Dauphin involved, and the Treaties of Brétigny and Calais were worked out. These reduced the ransom to three million écus (still two years' worth of revenue for the French crown), the Aquitaine, as well as Calais and a few minor holdings. Once 600,000 écus had been paid, John II was released in 1360 and allowed to return to France to raise the rest.

As if this all wasn't enough drama, John left his second son, Louis, who was the Count of Anjou and Maine and who likely had some strong feelings regarding the eventual outcome of the negotiations, as a replacement hostage. Louis eventually grew disenchanted with the arrangement and escaped back to France in 1363. Upon hearing this news, John II did the last thing that anyone expected and voluntarily returned to England to resume his place as a hostage, saying that his honor and that of France was at stake. He died of an unknown illness soon after his arrival in London. The war would continue at various levels of intensity until 1453—ninety years later.

Looking across the long history of peace treaties makes it clear that while failure is at least as likely as success, the worst way to ensure that a peace treaty endures might be to give it a long-term objective. The Treaty of Nicias in 421 BCE laid out a fifty-year peace between Sparta and Athens, ending the Peloponnesian War. Peace lasted just seven years before fighting began again. The Treaty of Dara had the same

fifty-year horizon. This document, which took two years to draft, put an end to twenty years of fighting between the Byzantine and Sassanid Empires in 562 CE. It managed to remain in force for ten years before another twenty years of war between the two empires erupted. But even that was an improvement over its predecessor, the spectacularly misnamed Perpetual Peace, which was signed in 532 and which only lasted nine years.

When building your world, consider the possibilities *beyond* just having two (or more) nations at war or peace. Perhaps there are neighbors who are nominally at peace, but one of them is living under the onerous terms of the “Final Peace” which ended the last war, but which has imposed ruinous reparations. If these are falling upon the nobles or lower class rather than on the throne, they might incite rebellion within the defeated country.

On the other side of the map, several nations might be trapped in a decades-long war. Various nations might be induced to cease hostilities through separate peace treaties, only to eventually get sucked back in when the overall strategic situation changes. This type of war tends to run hot and cold with periods of intense campaigning interspersed with generally quiet interludes. If many nations are involved, it’s likely that there is a steady turnover in leadership. A new person might be more interested in making their name as a great hero, or conversely, may be more open to accepting a cessation of hostilities that doesn’t result in the outcome that inspired their predecessor to start the war.

YOU NEVER GIVE ME YOUR MONEY

The concept of trade long predates recorded history. As soon as one group could make something desirable that others could not, there was an impetus driving the exchange of goods. Shells (and beads made from shells) are beloved by

archeologists because they are durable objects that can be traced back to their source. Evidence on all of the inhabited continents show that these beads were traded hundreds of kilometers from their sites of origin for as long as modern humans have resided there.

The idea that trade could be used as a tool of diplomacy probably occurred to people almost immediately. When you’re looking for leverage, a fulcrum is a necessity and trade certainly fits that description. Irrespective of whether you are hunter-gatherers or a superpower, keeping your people fed, clothed, and happy are high priorities if you want to remain in charge. With this in mind, it’s not difficult to imagine how one tribe might offer favorable trade terms to another in exchange for support against a third.

The other almost inevitable idea about trade was that someone would come up with the idea of taxing it. Certainly by the Old Assyrian era from 2000–1600 BCE, the idea of import and export duties had appeared. We know this from the roughly 24,000 clay cuneiform tablets discovered in Kanesh and Ashur. These tablets not only describe the duties, but also provide detailed instructions on how to smuggle goods into Kanesh in order to avoid paying the taxes. To give you an idea of their contents, one tablet says that if the back roads are being watched by customs agents, packets of tin should be smuggled in by concealing them in the carriers’ underwear. Modern drug mules and smugglers of tropical birds can take pride in the fact that theirs is an ancient, if not particularly honorable, profession.

The creation of trade tariffs created the opportunity for trade negotiations. A government now had new ways to reward their friends and punish their enemies. The Athenians were among the first to truly appreciate how useful this could be. As a polis (city-state) heavily dependent upon imported food, Athens encouraged the establishment of a Greek free-trade system

which ensured that they could purchase grain as inexpensively as possible while exporting luxury items at the highest price. This worked out well enough to raise Athens to the height of its power around 450 BCE, when most of the Aegean Sea was lined with Athenian allies or dependencies.

Megara was another trading polis. It was also a former ally of Athens that had shifted its allegiance to Sparta. To make the situation worse, when Megara defected, they massacred the Athenian soldiers who had been stationed in the polis. Finally, Megara proceeded to plant and harvest crops on the *Hiera Orgas*, literally the “sacred meadow,” which was a circle of land on the border between Athens and Megara. This land had long been dedicated to Demeter and Persephone by the Athenians, and Megara’s use was considered to be desecration. (Shades of Umma and Lagaš—one nation tramping upon another’s holy land is always grounds for a turf war. If you need an excuse for a conflict in your worldbuilding, this one works regardless of the era.)

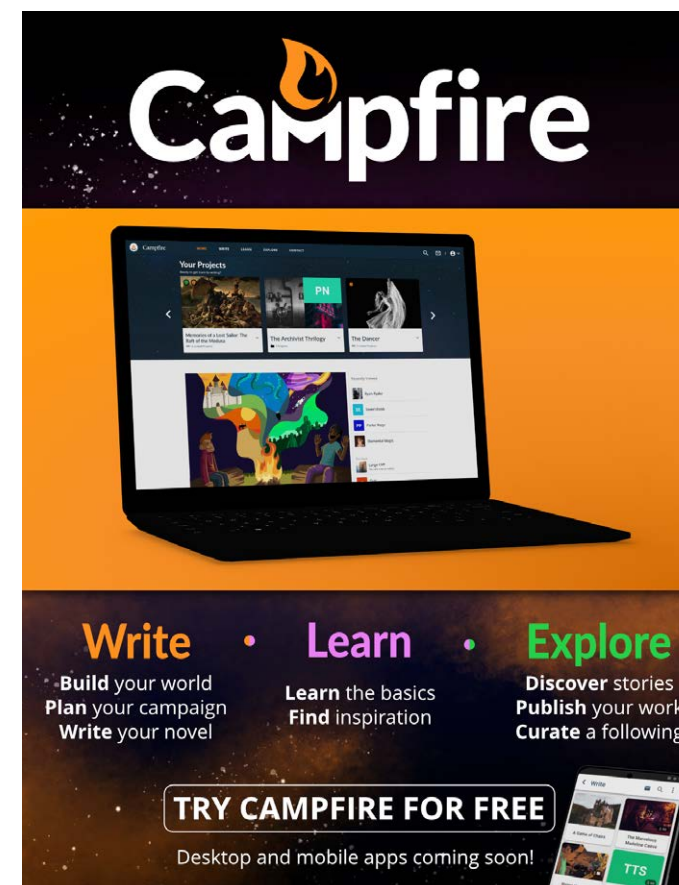
Despite these outrages, Athens was not eager to attack Megara directly. The Greek poleis had been fighting the Persian Wars and then the First Peloponnesian War for roughly fifty years. All sides were tired of the constant warfare, and Sparta and Athens had signed the Thirty Years’ Peace in 446 BCE. To avoid war, Athens was inspired to develop a new diplomatic tactic: the embargo. In 432 BCE, Athens issued the Megarian Exclusion Decree, which banned Megarian trade with Athens or any of its allied poleis.

This was a crushing blow, robbing Megara of much of its market. They did not take this well and appealed to Sparta for assistance. While Sparta was also apparently reluctant to go to war, its allies were eager to blunt Athen’s power, and the Second Peloponnesian War was underway in 431 BCE. The Thirty Years’ Peace had

lasted less than fifteen years and serves as more evidence that anything named by its duration almost certainly will not actually last that long.

Some fifteen hundred years later, in the late 1070s CE, the Normans under Robert Guiscard would conquer all of Southern Italy. With momentum in their favor, the Normans decided to continue their advance eastward with an eye on Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor, Alexios I Komnenos, called upon his long-standing ally, the Venetian Republic, for aid in 1081. The Venetians did their part, immediately sending a fleet to the Byzantine city of Durazzo, where they routed the Norman fleet twice.

While the Normans eventually captured Durazzo after a prolonged siege, the Venetians had undoubtedly met their commitments. In gratitude, Alexios issued a *chrysobull*, an imperial order, granting the Venetians a number of



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benefits. Two of these would do much to determine the futures of both the republic and the empire. The first was a grant of a substantial number of shops, factories, and warehouses in the market district. The Venetians in this district would have free access to the harbors and the same rights and protections as citizens. The second was the right to trade any goods anywhere in the empire without paying any taxes, duties, or other charges. These concessions were enormous. By making them, Alexios was mortgaging the future revenue of the empire in exchange for the immediate protection of a fleet.

This trade agreement bought Byzantium 120 years of peace and prosperity, an era that came to end in 1204 when the Fourth Crusade, transported on Venetian ships, sacked Constantinople¹. Venice would go on to last another 593 years, finally falling to Napoleon in 1797. If nothing else, the Treaty of 1082 between Byzantium and Venice suggests that the diplomacy of trade concessions should be undertaken with the long view in mind.

The success of Venice and other states like it shows the benefits of soft power. Using your military to squeeze another nation costs blood and silver. Using your merchants to do the same fills the coffers with taxes and keeps your people happy. While it's never hard to find leaders who are willing to bang the war drums, the most successful nations are led by those who are able to take advantage of commerce. While this has been done by great naval powers such as Britain and Spain, it's also been done by far smaller countries such as the Netherlands. Strategic treaties and alliances can create valuable monopolies and give leverage. This rarely works for landlocked powers unless they can defend themselves from stronger neighbors trying to seize control of the trade. The Mali Empire of the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries was able to dominate control of sub-Saharan trade. This was originally based upon their own gold, but later included salt and copper which was transported between the West African and Arab nations.

As you build your world, consider where a small nation might be able to use diplomacy to gain control of a commodity. If it is important enough, it's possible that far stronger powers find themselves in the position of jockeying to declare their support. There is storytelling potential in a small nation that can force others to do its bidding.

CAN'T BUY ME LOVE

Until the spread of democracy, even when nations weren't busy with trying to make peace or arranging trade deals, there was the little matter of succession to worry about. Of course, the best way to deal with that was to produce offspring, one of whom could be the heir, while the others served as understudies against the all too likely event of an unfortunate early demise. Another concern had to do with the legitimacy of the birth. Even nations not considered especially prudish had a rather prissy insistence upon passing on the throne to an heir born from a marriage both legal and spiritually blessed.

At the same time, marriage was an opportunity to bond two nations. As anyone who's ever watched a sitcom knows, in-laws provide endless opportunities for subplots. If nothing else, the conversation around the table during holiday dinners would be rather strained if you had declared war on the person sitting next to you. Having a relative in another court also offered opportunities for gathering inside information and for backdoor communications.



FROM THE AMARNA LETTERS (WIKIMEDIA)

Arranged marriages for diplomatic purposes are an old tradition. The Assyrians and Egyptians both engaged in the practice, often with each other. As was common with these marriages, the participants were often very young. Each member of the lucky couple would be ceremoniously anointed, often without ever seeing the other, and would continue living with his or her father until of a suitable age. Both cultures practiced polygamy, and while the primary wife was normally of similar age to the husband (generally for the purposes of producing an heir quickly), it was possible, and even common, for brides to be decades younger than their husbands.

To illustrate how this worked, consider the relationship between the Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III and the country of Mitanni beginning about 1378 BCE. Amenhotep III was about twenty-one years old when Shuttarna II, the king of Mitanni, sent his daughter Kilu-Hepa (and an utterly jaw-dropping dowry) to ensure that he could count upon Egyptian support in Mitanni's war against the Hittites. Later, an Egyptian ambassador told Shuttarna II's son Tushratta that Amenhotep III expressed an interest in marrying Tushratta's daughter, the niece of his current wife, as well. Since Tushratta was likely no older than twenty-five, the girl, Tadu-Hepa, was certainly just a child. A few years later, she was anointed as Amenhotep's wife and eventually travelled to Egypt. Soon after she arrived, Amenhotep III died and his son, Akhenaten, married her.

We have all of this information thanks to the Amarna Letters (left), clay tablets written in cuneiform and containing diplomatic correspondence. These include detailed lists of the dowries for both women as well as some rather amusing complaints by Tushratta about how Amenhotep III had failed to reciprocate with suitably splendid gifts. Later, when the Hittites invaded Mitanni, Tushratta appealed to Akhenaten for aid, calling him brother

¹ Robert Meegan, "Thinking Sideways About Wooden Walls," *Worldbuilding Magazine* 3, no. 5 (October 2019): 12–19.

and son-in-law. Unfortunately for Tushratta, Akhenaten chose that time to die suddenly and no aid ever came from Egypt, where Akhenaten's primary wife, Nefertiti, was busy dealing with a struggle over the regency. By the time that Akhenaten's heir, Tutankhamun, was old enough to claim the throne, the country of Mitanni was no more.

This sort of multigenerational dynastic marriage networking would eventually become something of a sport in Europe. For example: William I, the Count of Hainaut, Holland, and Zeeland, would marry Joan of Valois. She was the sister of Philip IV of France. Together, they would have eight children. Their daughter Margaret would go on to marry Louis IV, the Holy Roman Emperor. Another daughter, Philippa, married Edward III (yes, the Edward III who gave France all that trouble in the Hundred Years' War) and became one of the most beloved queens of England.

While Edward III was off in France fighting the Battle of Crécy in 1346, Philippa served as regent. When her uncle, Philip IV of France, called upon David II of Scotland for help by attacking England from the north, Philippa proved quite capable of assembling and dispatching an army to take care of the incursion. Later, she would accompany Edward III on campaign as he prosecuted the Hundred Years' War. Somehow, amidst all of that, she managed to find the time to bear thirteen children. Although history has all but forgotten her, Philippa was the prototype of the modern supermom.

Philippa's daughter Joan was betrothed to Prince Pedro of Castile. On her journey to the wedding, the marriage retinue ignored multiple warnings about the bubonic plague and partied like college students on spring break, even bringing along their own troubadour. Joan, along with several others, contracted the plague and died before reaching Castile. Pedro went on to wed three other women, perhaps

bigamously, and produced six legitimate (and at least four illegitimate) children. Showing that he didn't hold Joan's death against England, two of Pedro's legitimate daughters married two of Philippa's sons, John of Gaunt and Edmund, the two most powerful dukes in England.

John of Gaunt's marriage became particularly important when Peter's illegitimate brother, Henry II (not to be confused with Henry II of England, who reigned two hundred years before, or Henry II of France, who reigned two hundred years later), killed Pedro and seized the throne of Castile. John made a counterclaim based on *jure uxoris* (literally, by right of his wife) and almost certainly had the military capability to make this claim stick if he had not needed to return to England where his nephew Richard II was making a mess of things.

As proof of the power that a good set of genes could bring to a royal house, John's son (and thus Philippa's grandson) Henry would depose Richard II to become King Henry IV of England. From that point to the present, every ruler of England could trace their ancestry back to John of Gaunt. John's daughter Philippa admirably held up her end of the family line by marrying John I of Portugal and giving birth to Prince Henry the Navigator, who is widely credited as being one of the prime movers behind the Age of Discovery.

Not all diplomatic marriages are as significant as that of Edward and Philippa. Most fade into history without notice. From the perspective of a worldbuilder, that's fine. If we liberally salt our international relations with various intermarriages, it's fodder for future mischief. While a royal marriage may not have seemed particularly important three generations ago, there's now a succession crisis when the current ruler dies childless and distant cousins begin maneuvering for the throne.

Or perhaps an heir is married to a Philippa or Nefertiti and instead of the throne being inherited by someone whom everyone viewed as weak, there is now real power in the land. Who would have guessed that the third child of a minor house would turn out to have both brains and a spine under that pretty face? This is the sort of unpredictable misfortune that upsets the best-laid plans of the great and powerful.

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

The examples above show that international diplomacy has a lot in common with a 1960s rock music festival with peace, love, and dealing all getting top billing. If we're going to create a fantasy setting, how can we use that in our worldbuilding?

For better or worse, many fantasy worlds draw upon Europe for inspiration. In large part this is because it's familiar territory, both literally and figuratively, for Westerners. They've had at least some exposure to its history in school, and the concepts fit the common fantasy tropes. Things go wrong when the worldbuilder unconsciously overlays the map of modern Europe over the top of feudal culture.

Modern Europe consists of roughly four dozen countries, well below the historical average. From the collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century through German and Italian unification in the late nineteenth century, the number of polities—areas that could be said to be reasonably self-governing—was in the hundreds at any time. In the late fourteenth century, France, which had managed to come through the Hundred Years' War, still had more than fifty kingdoms, duchies, counties, and other random fiefs. These all were vassals to the king of France, but the land area that they controlled was collectively greater than the royal domains.

A PODCAST BY WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE



Worldcasting is a podcast led by your host Tyler "Dino" Sylva, and his rotating panel of guests—other members of the *Worldbuilding Magazine* team plus special appearances by people such as Tim Hickson of *Hello Future Me*, plus Ed Greenwood, creator of the *Forgotten Realms*!

Together, the worldcasters draw upon their varied backgrounds and experiences to discuss worldbuilding in its many forms. Each episode tackles a different topic such as magic, religion, naming places, and more!

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At various times, the number of polities in the Holy Roman Empire comfortably exceeded *fifteen hundred*. Obviously, these states varied in size from that of modern nations down to little more than a knight’s household. Just the region that is now Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and French Flanders and Artois consisted of seventeen duchies and counties. Given the innumerable internal and external alliances required, it’s no wonder that Emperor Ferdinand I had fifteen children whom he allotted out in arranged marriage. There are limits to a child’s willingness to tolerate her father’s wishes though. Ferdinand’s fourth daughter, Magdalena, founded a convent and two of her sisters joined her there, the three having apparently decided that a life of celibate piety was better than the alternative of a diplomatic marriage.

INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY HAS A LOT IN COMMON WITH A 1960S ROCK MUSIC FESTIVAL

Instead of creating our world with a few large countries that behave with the unity of purpose of a modern democracy, let’s *think sideways*.

Perhaps one of our countries has a strong ruler, but it contains large duchies and counties with ties to neighboring countries. It is perpetually on the edge of splintering, and there is a succession crisis now that the current ruler is old and childless. The marriages of previous generations have created multiple contenders for the throne. Players are jostling for position. Will anyone be able to put together enough support before open warfare breaks out?

Somewhere else, another country is a veritable breadbasket, producing an abundance of grain. One of their larger neighbors is eyeing them hungrily. Can they make arrangements with a distant power to trade food for security? Is their new vizier clever enough to play multiple partners off against each other, preventing anyone from getting dangerous ideas?

It’s not necessary to lay out all of the many parties and their relationships. Such a reckoning would only reflect an instant in time anyway. If we put the details of even a few in place and drop hints about the hundreds of others that might be just outside of view at the moment, our audience will realize that they’re in an intricate, shifting world that’s bigger and more interesting than they imagined.

SUGGESTED READING

Nicol, Donald M. *Byzantium and Venice: A Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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WORLD ANVIL COSTUME CHALLENGE WINNERS

hosted by World Anvil

 CONTEST

We’re happy to announce the winners of World Anvil’s Costume Challenge! Each winner created an article about a piece of clothing or uniform from their worlds but only two could win the prize. We had a great time learning about each one of the winners’ pieces and are thrilled that we get to share them with you as well!

If you’re interested in participating in future contests, swing on by World Anvil and keep an eye out for the next one.

DARE ALDAMU

By Orpheus C

The Dare Aldamu is the traditional armour of the Naar Iilhia. Today, the seven-ray sun adorning their shield is synonymous with safety, a symbol of heroism and bravery across the Danatelian Lands—though this was not always the case, and behind the shining armours hides a dark and cruel curse.

The Naar Iilhia are a group of holy warriors, known and admired for their prowess in combat. They are monster hunters, mage slayers,

and defendants of the Danatelian Lands. They specialize in eliminating dangerous threats that ordinary soldiers may have trouble facing. The Naar Iilhia get their godly powers from the Ever-Burning, the Danatelian goddess of chaos and destruction. By spilling blood in her name they are blessed with her favours- though the threat of losing oneself to the madness of the goddess is ever-present. To protect themselves, Naar Iilhia turn to Deïmon the Bright, goddess of the sun and patron of these holy warriors, and pray for her guidance and protection.

A Dare Aldamu is the most prized possession of every Naar Iilhia. Only they may take care of

it: the armour itself is a sacred item, which the profane cannot, lest they be cursed by the sun goddess herself.

“I tried to touch her cape, and almost lost a hand doing so! Despite this first encounter we ended the night having a lovely chat, and I learned much about her people. Dare Aldamu are a painting of their very essence, and all are as similar as they are unique.

— Journal of Abelard Sattar, explorer extraordinaire.

The golden masks worn by all Naar Iilhia are the most striking feature of every Dare Aldamu. Made to honour the Sun Goddess, each mask is unique to its wearer. All are made of gold, and their shapes take inspiration from traditional depictions of [Deïmon the Bright](#).

Dare Aldamu also includes a cape, crafted from vibrant textiles and usually made of cotton and wool. The colours range from raspberry red to deep crimsons, and each features a painted seven-branched sun. They are incredibly resistant, able to shield the Naar Iilhia from even the fiery breath of dragons.

The many layers which make up the actual armour of the Dare Aldamu are all lined with embroidered prayers to the Saohri gods. Most are addressed to Deïmon herself, though a few also call on the favours of other gods such as Kirial the Silent, and Argus the Protector.

Finally, a Dare Aldamu would not be complete without the weapons each Naar Iilhia carries with them at all times. Just like the rest of the Dare Aldamu, these are forged by Dawns during the Week of Forge and Fire. They are all blessed with divine magic, making them some of the most dangerous and sought-after weapons in the Danatelian Land.



GOBERTILU

“The crafting of a Dare Aldamu is intrinsically linked to the initiation every Night must take. This initiation is divided into three steps- the Rising, the First Hunt, and the Week of Forge and Fire. Each part of the ritual will bring you closer to Deïmon the Bright. The Rising is your sacrifice to the Faceless, an oath you will carry till your dying breath. The First Hunt connects you to the Ever-Burning, as you make your first offering of blood. Finally, the Week of Forge and Fire unites you with the Artisan. At the end of this arduous path, you shall be united with all three aspects of our great and loving Sun.

— Teachings of the Dusk

The Rising is the first step in the rite of initiation of a Night. During this ceremony, Nights (a title given to the uninitiated Naar Iilhia) must ritually blind themselves by gazing at the light of the sun: this new life of darkness spiritually binds them to their goddess, a representation of the intimate bond Naar Iilhia share with Deïmon the Bright.

The Night will be brought to the Temple of a Thousand Suns, on the day of the summer solstice. The walls of the room are covered in hundreds of fractal mirrors, with a single hole in one of the walls through which the rays of the sun may pass. The Night must stand in the center of the room, alone, and await the sun to penetrate the room.

“It was almost time. They had sealed Sonya inside, and she was left alone with hundreds of thousands of fragments of herself, staring back at her wherever she looked. Finally the sun aligned with the hole, the first rays slowly spilling into the room. It filled with light as they danced and jumped from mirror to mirror. She took a deep breath, trying to ready herself for what came next.

Nothing could've prepared her to when the light first hit her eyes. She felt the sudden pain, as if the sun herself had set them ablaze. The searing sensation seeped through her body, her insides burning from the inside out. She struggled to keep her eyes open as the pain screamed through every inch of her body, knowing that if she could not stay quiet this would've all been for nothing.

— The initiation of Sonya Fahlon

There are only two requirements for a Night to pass the Rising: they must remain quiet during the entire ceremony, and they must keep their eyes open the entire time. Failing either of these tasks will result in their expulsion from the Naar Iilhia. Those who succeed emerge from the temple as a Dawn, eyes now forever burned by the divine light of Deïmon the Bright.

The next step in the initiation of a Dawn is the First Hunt. Now blind, they must slay their first monster, and use its parts to start the crafting of their Dare Aldamu. First Hunts are extremely demanding, as the Dawn must face whatever beast they hunt with no weapons or armour.

They are usually accompanied by an elder Naar Iilhia, who will stand by the Dawn to help them in case anything goes wrong during the hunt. When the beast is killed, they must return to the Breath of Fire. It is customary for other Naar Iilhia to gift parts of their own Dare Aldamu to the Dawn as a sign of welcome to their ranks.

The last step in the initiation of a Dawn is the Week of Forge and Fire. Once they have gathered the materials they will use to craft their Dare Aldamu, the Dawn will then isolate themselves in the Breath of Fire, a sacred sanctuary of Alty'aetatna Alnaar. The Dawn must clear their heart of all ill intentions, for the Dare Aldamu is meant to protect them from bad influences, and they must not corrupt the sanctity of the sanctuary.

The Dawns will spend 10 days crafting their armour and weapons in isolation, as they fast, meditate and pray to Deïmon the Bright. As the sun rises on the 11th day, the Dawn will emerge from the forge wearing their Dare Aldamu, and present themselves to Deïmon with a final prayer.

“ I salute you, Deïmon the Bright, Alty’tajeal-uni-Dafia the Faceless, who rises in the sky and watches over us. May your light burn the shadows that may cloud my heart, may I learn from your wisdom and never stray from my path. You are the greatest among the sky, the strongest of the Gods, who stand in your light. Life, power and grace to the Burning Sun!

– Prayer to Deïmon the Bright

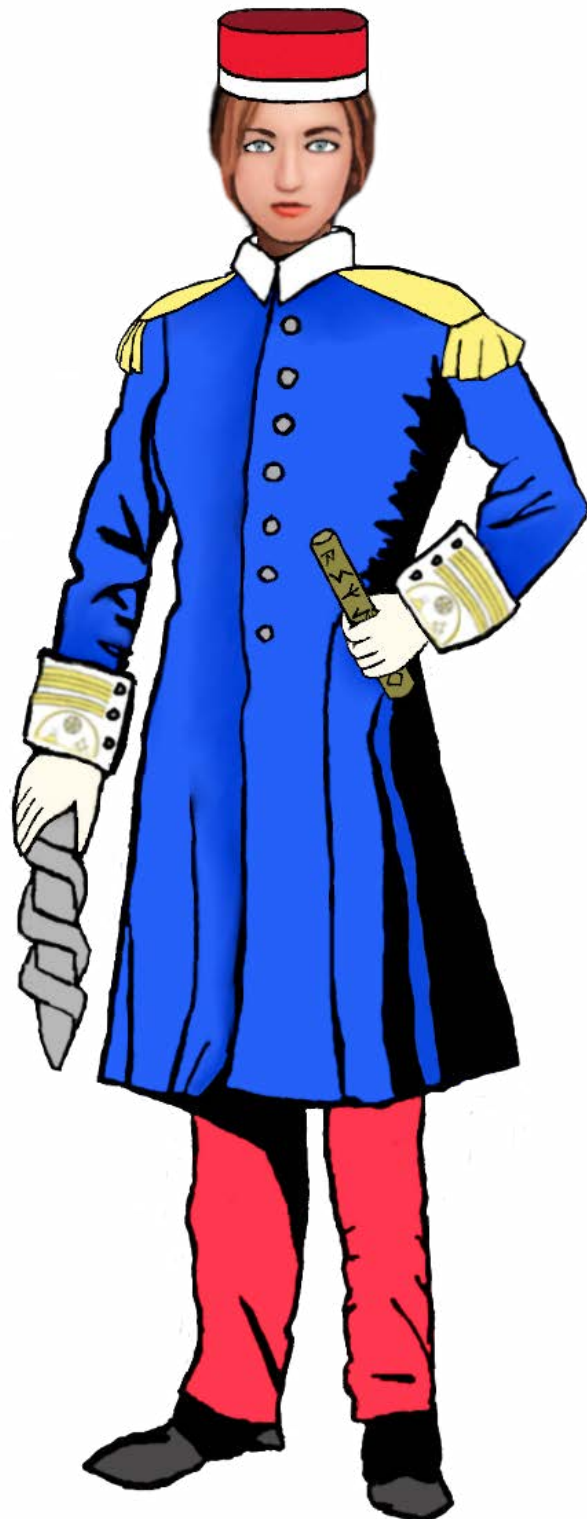
EXCERPT FROM ENGINEERING CORPS UNIFORM

By Amélie I. S. Debruyne

“ The new uniform of the engineering corps: the most advanced military uniform in the world, incorporating state-of-the-art technologies designed by our very own members! Enroll today for the chance to wear it

Check out the full article on [World Anvil!](#)

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AMÉLIE I. S. DEBRUYNE 

ASK US ANYTHING

by Robert Meegan

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

How much should you disguise real-world influences in your worlds? Is it okay to (respectfully) copy real world cultures, religions, etc., or must everything appear unique?

– LadyAnne

A worthy question. The art/science/skill/passion of worldbuilding is one firmly rooted in research. It is quite impossible to make a completely unique world, you will always draw on examples from the mundane world. Be it taking inspiration from cultures and technology, or making use of the laws of physics and biology. Since this is inevitable and cannot be avoided we must turn our attention from whether or not to do it, to how to do it well. In our attempt to answer this, we will draw attention to two keywords in your question. Disguise and Copy.

First off is Disguise. For this example, we will assume that the goal is to make a setting similar to one found in the mundane world. But since you are a worldbuilder and not a historical fiction writer, you can't simply research one place or time and call it good. To best 'disguise' real world influences, pull your research and inspiration from many sources. Say you want to make a setting featuring a mighty civilization in a sweltering jungle. Look at many examples and see what similarities they share so you can work those in your setting. For example, the Khmer and the Maya both built advanced civilizations in tropical rainforests. Both were heavily dependent

on irrigation to water the crops that fed their people and had massive monuments made of stone. This information and more will help you create a base to build your world on. This method is quite research intensive, but if you didn't enjoy reading about other times and places you wouldn't be a worldbuilder, would you?

Now we turn our attention to the next important word, Copy. As mentioned before, creators of historical fiction can do this just fine, but we are worldbuilders. There's nothing wrong with feeling an



abundance of inspiration from one specific source. But care must be taken to avoid what the Inter-dimensional Commonality Cataloging Endeavour calls 'The Theme Park Version'. This is when a world puts on display only the most superficial elements of a society and simply makes up the rest. This is not only lazy, but it can cause great consternation among the people whose heritage is being mangled. One way to avoid this is with diligent, comprehensive research, but you knew that already. Another way is to alter some fundamental aspect of what you draw inspiration from, leaving it similar to its mundane world counterpart, but still different enough to call your own. Say you want to make a setting inspired by the Land of the Pharaohs, let's call it Ancient Beegypt because I'm told puns are very popular right now. There are many ways to maintain the aesthetic of the Pharaohs while still building a world of your own. What if the Nile River were more violent and unpredictable? Perhaps the Nile of Ancient Beegypt resembles China's Yellow River, catastrophically flooding every couple of centuries and doing great harm? What if, rather

than being ruled by Pharaohs, Ancient Egypt is a democracy, with Senators and Representatives plying the Nile, looking for votes? If you're working in a fantasy setting, introducing a magic system will doubtless spark a few changes. So will introducing new technology. Worlds like this will hinge on the changes you make. Consider them carefully.

To reiterate my first point, no world can be completely unique. It can, as you have said in your question, 'appear unique'. The underlying foundations of a world are, quite tragically, often completely overlooked by an audience. There will be those cultured souls who dive deeper, but most will enjoy the world as a mere backdrop to the story being told. This, as much as it hurts my soul to say it, is fine. A setting that is familiar enough to draw in an audience but unique enough to be your own is a difficult tightrope to walk. There's no real perfect way to do it, but there are plenty of good ways.

In a world with a hard magic system, how would that change what natural disasters are like? For example, would healing magic mean that plagues don't happen at all?

— Anon

Well to start with, I suppose we should define what Hard Magic is. To be concise (because my editor has sent this part back to me FIVE TIMES), a hard magic system is when magical abilities are governed by known rules that are stable. There is some flexibility here, but a coherent and well-understood ruleset is vitally important. To continue on, we may as well define what a natural disaster is too. A Natural Disaster is an event driven by the forces of nature that causes great harm and damage to a society. These are events like earthquakes, floods, and asteroid impacts. One important thing to note for our discussion is that they are not initiated by any kind of intelligent thought. They are simply the mechanics of nature acting on their own. Now that that is out of the way, we can move on.

To understand the impact of a hard magic on natural disasters, you must compare the power scale of your magic to the scale of the disaster. For example, a tornado is a funnel of rapidly rotating air that are formed in powerful thunderstorms. The most powerful tornadoes are capable of destroying well-constructed buildings and scouring entire towns off the map. While dangerous, tornados are a very localized phenomenon. To compare, let us now look at a hurricane. These are massive storms hundreds of kilometers wide, capable of devastating a large area with heavy rains, high winds and floods when it moves from the sea to land. As I'm sure you can imagine, the amount of energy needed to stop a hurricane is exponentially higher than that needed to halt a tornado. A similar comparison could be made to the difference between stopping an avalanche and an earthquake. A magic system capable of stopping a hurricane would be immensely powerful and require deep thought on the effect such power would have on a society.

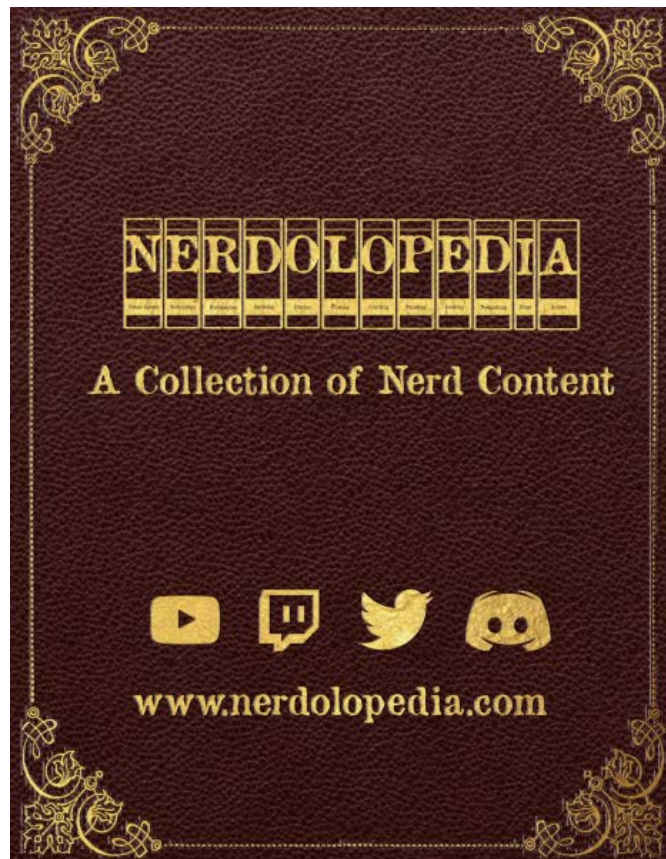
However, that is only one way to think about it. Perhaps even if that much raw power is available in your world, it is rare. A hard magic system could still alter the effects of natural disasters by predicting them or mitigating their effects. If you are blessed enough to live somewhere with predictable weather, you already know how very useful this is. The ability to see foul weather coming gives people time to prepare for its arrival. Forseeing fires, floods and celestial impacts (in the short term OR the long term) is a powerful tool. Once a disaster arrives, magic might be able to soften the blow somehow. Theoretically, a runes-based magic system would find a great deal of use in a 'Float Glyph'. When a flood comes, people could crowd into a structure marked with a Float Glyph to ride out the high waters. If they can be activated quickly a civilization living on earthquake prone land could use them on structures to help ride out the shaking. People chase comfort and safety, a Hard Magic system would be put to use if it is capable of such things.

There are two major things that need to be addressed about this. What is the cost of all this magic, and what happens when it is used to alter the environment? So far I have been discussing magic in a rather simple way, because magic is such a varied thing. In your system, what are the costs of using magic? What resources does it consume? Deflecting a hurricane away from a city is all well and good, but how much effort does it require? Is the magic-user bankrupting the city to protect it? Or even more sinisterly, does such powerful magic require a blood sacrifice. The costs of magic are important and so is its effect on the natural world. For example, say there is a spell that can prevent earthquakes by stopping the underground faults from moving in a certain area. That's all well and good, but all that built up energy doesn't just disappear. Is it trapped by the spell, building up more and more force as time goes on? How much shaking will be halted before the spell fails and unleashes an absolute beast of an earthquake. Does the spell shunt energy to a different part of the fault? One area is protected at the cost of another's suffering. Working of the chain of events after the casting could provide some fascinating worldbuilding opportunities.

People are driven by a desire to harness and tame the world around them. It's true in the mundane world and it will be true in yours (unless you create a people with a different psychological makeup than humans, which is great fun). Tools both technological and magical will be used to fix any problem they can. Good luck working out what that means for your setting.

I'm working on a world that I want to tell stories in. Not like deep lore, but like fairy tales and bedtime stories and stuff like that, but I don't know where to start. How do you tell stories about your world in your world?

— Anon



What a splendid task! Though I am sad to disappoint you, since I must tell you that fairy tales and bedtime stories are their own kind of deep lore. While creation stories and the rise and fall of emperors can tell you a great deal about the setting, fairy tales will tell you much more about the people who populate said setting. Their hopes, their dreams, their fears and what they care about most. Before you start weaving your little tales you must know two things. How close to the truth are they and what purpose do they serve?

The nature of your world will inform the nature of the fairy tales. Is a story of a queen taking a ride on the back of a whale to bring a gift to a dragon a flight of fancy or is it something that actually happens regularly? Fairy Tales are, by definition, short. Even if they are about a true event, they will often strip out events to make a narrative that's easy to follow. In our gift-bearing Queen example, her actual journey could have taken a whole year full of detours and difficulties that would be great stories on their own. But the tale told at bedtime is simple, short and to the point. As time goes on, new elements can be added until the tale barely resembles the events it attempts to portray. When making fairy tales for your world that are about a true event, look at how far away they are from the event itself. If it is fairly close in time, the tale will still be boiled down to its base elements. The further away in time, more

story elements will find their way in. While this is important in itself, it pales in comparison to our next topic.

I'm certain you've already answered this question in your head. People tell stories because they like stories, right? That is...partially correct and also very wrong. Stories are told to pass along information and Fairy Tales have a way of holding children's attention much better than a lecture. Are these stories warning the children about the dangers in the world? Are they scary stories to prevent them from acting in a certain way, or are they inspiring ones to provide an example to follow. The way a story is told can have a great affect on the moral it is attempting to impart. Lets take a look at our whale-riding, gift-bearing queen. If the story has the Queen make all kinds of ridiculous demands that she suffers for, the story is about humility. If the story has the whale do everything in its power to help the Queen, it's a story about perseverance. Does the dragon represent the power of nature, or does the queen's journey represent the importance of keeping promises, even when challenging? Before you sit down to write your fairy tale, consider who is telling it and what morals they wish to impart. Frugality? Obedience to Authority? Don't Go Into the Woods Because That's Where the Monsters Live? Knowing this will help guide you as you write out these fascinating little bits of worldbuilding.

What knowledge was discovered in your world hundreds or thousands of years before it was properly or widely known?

Do people use the stars for navigation, or do they navigate through the stars?

Does your world have any original musical instruments or inventions?

Join us on Discord and sign up for weekly worldbuilding prompts!

#worldbuilding-wednesday



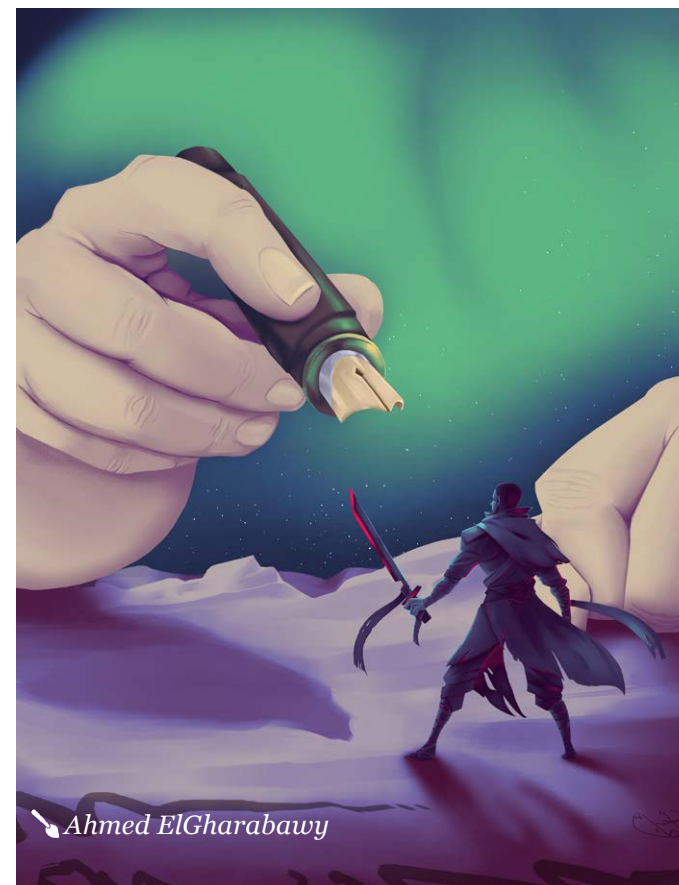
THANK YOU

A NOTE FROM OUR TEAM ABOUT 2021 AND BEYOND

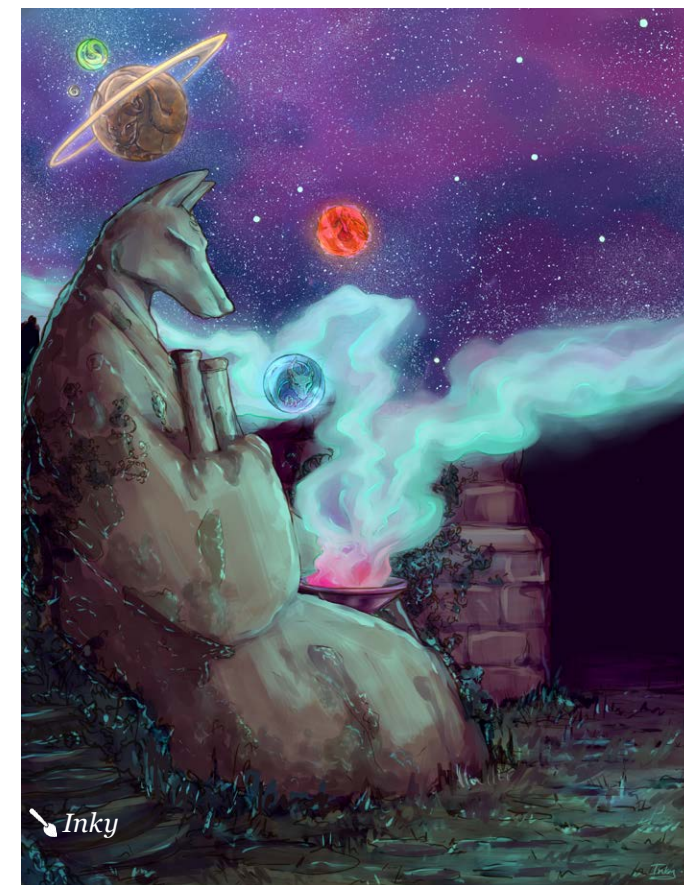
This year our team published another four issues of *Worldbuilding Magazine*. We had a blast and want to thank everyone who read, shared, and learned something from the magazine. However, as much as we love this project, it is quite a commitment. We're all volunteers, and some of our key people are leaving to start families, or pursue careers/personal projects. While we're thrilled for them, the fact remains that *Worldbuilding Magazine* will not continue in its current form (and may cease entirely) if we do not find new volunteers with time to spend on this project.

The magazine has gone on for five years now. That's far longer than any of us expected back in 2017, and we're proud of what we've accomplished together. Despite this news, we're hopeful for our future. The next season of our podcast will return in early 2022, and there will be at least one more magazine issue next year (release TBD). While we create it, we'll be seeking to onboard new layout designers, artists, editors, and anyone else who wants to volunteer.

To the staff and contributors listed here, all of whom volunteered during 2021, thank you. To everyone reading, we hope you've found something to inspire you in this year's issues of *Worldbuilding Magazine*.



Ahmed ElGharabawy



Inky

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- Matthew Brooke
- Orpheus C.
- Steph Williamson

HOW TO JOIN

VOLUNTEERING FOR WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

If you would like to join our team and help create more issues of *Worldbuilding Magazine* (or at least be a part of our epic final  if things don’t go the way we hope) you can reach us on any of our [social media](#) accounts, [Discord](#), or via [email](#). More information is on [our website](#).

The people we need most right now to continue the magazine are layout designers (currently using Adobe InDesign, but we’ve considered moving to Affinity Designer if that’s what most people want to use), artists, and editors (developmental or copy editors). If you don’t fall into any of those skillsets, but still want to help, reach out anyway! If we can find a place for you in the magazine or podcast, we will.

Thanks for your time, and for reading this issue of the magazine.



Lyanna



Ghranze

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WITH SPECIAL GUESTS

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Orpheus C
World Anvil Winner

Amélie I. S. Debruyne
World Anvil Winner

JOIN OUR TEAM

An illustration of Lady Justice, the personification of the law. She is depicted as a woman with red hair, blindfolded with a white cloth. She wears a white robe with gold trim and a gold sash. She holds a sword in her right hand and a pair of scales in her left. Blood is dripping from the scales and the sword. The background is a dark, stylized architectural setting with columns and arches.

JOIN WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

The *Worldbuilding Magazine* team is made up of volunteer writers, artists, editors, and organizers who all have a passion for worldbuilding in one form or another.

If you would like to contribute to this project, simply contact us and tell us what you're interested in doing. We're always looking for people to help out!

[Learn About Our Team](#)