



ISSUE 1 | 2024

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

WATERWAYS
Oceans & Seas, Rivers & Lakes

COLONIAL SHANGHAI

A case study of building port cities

GALLERY OF WORLDS

Five artists, five imaginative realms

THE FLEXIBLE APPLICATIONS OF WATER

Exploring hydrology's impact, from rivers to realities

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

"Water is a very powerful thing. Cultures as old as time have worshiped it. It flows throughout all the lands connecting the entire world. If anything had mystical properties – if anything had magic – well, I'd say it'd be water."

As cheesy as the show could be at times, I've always appreciated the painstaking adherence to optimism and wonder that *Once Upon a Time* had. With this line in particular, they propose an interesting, surprisingly real world argument that there is magic all around us in the form of life-giving, landscape-changing water. It has been the subject of analogies and metaphors for ages, a calming and cooling force on the body, a well established biological backbone, and a seemingly never ending scientific marvel whose properties are well observed but constantly being studied and rethought. Like us, it shifts, changes, and evolves while still—somehow—being that constant force we've always known it to be. It's paradoxical in its known and unknown qualities, but it's undeniably mighty.

The past few years have been tricky for all of us to navigate, each of us being swept along the waterways of life, never knowing just what falls or

rapids lie ahead of us, but we're here. We've persevered and we can finally look back at what we've overcome. There's a strange, mystical beauty to those rough and unpredictable waters that now lie squarely in our rear-view mirror (viewed from a safe distance!), and we ought to take pride in our strength in having ridden through it all.

If there's one thing I wish for you, dear reader, to get out of our latest issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine*, it's that there is magic, wonder, and hope out there, no matter how tumultuous and unknowable the way that leads you to that realization may be. I hope that you can find within these pages the inspiration to tell your story; I want you to wonder at the possibilities of both the worlds we create and the world we inhabit; and I can't wait to see what sort of magic you work upon your own life-raft as you find the courage to continue to wend your way towards the future right alongside the rest of us.

Keep worldbuilding,
Jaren J. Petty
Editor-in-Chief, *Worldbuilding Magazine*

Call for Volunteers!

With the COVID-19 pandemic growing ever fainter in the rearview mirror, *Worldbuilding Magazine* is restructuring and heating up the presses anew. In order to keep the project going, we are actively looking for volunteers to join our ranks! If you have experience editing, writing, or working with InDesign — or would like to get some experience — please reach out to us by email or by joining our Discord server and letting us know you'd like to contribute. If you know any, please spread this news to any chronic daydreamers and artists of worlds-to-be that you think would like to join us!

Delightfully yours,

—uNoahGuy, President of the Board

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COLONIAL SHANGHAI



THE FLEXIBLE APPLICATIONS OF WATER



GALLERY OF WORLDS



COLONIAL SHANGHAI

A CASE STUDY IN BUILDING PORT CITIES

by Eric de Roulet

 CULTURE

 ECONOMICS

 INDUSTRY

 HISTORY

 THEORY & ANALYSIS

On a summer evening far more humid than I was used to, on an impressively crowded riverboat, the other visitors and I took in the glamorous yet slightly bewildering sights around us. I understood why none of us seemed to notice how sweaty we all were, and all of us couldn't help but have our cameras out; one side of the river was lined with a row of Baroque Revival banks, hotels, and clock towers, like something out of Europe's most picturesque cities. But across the river from this living exhibit of 19th century architecture was a series of futuristic-looking spires, taller and more

postmodern in their design than anything I'd seen on many trips to Los Angeles and other American metropolises.

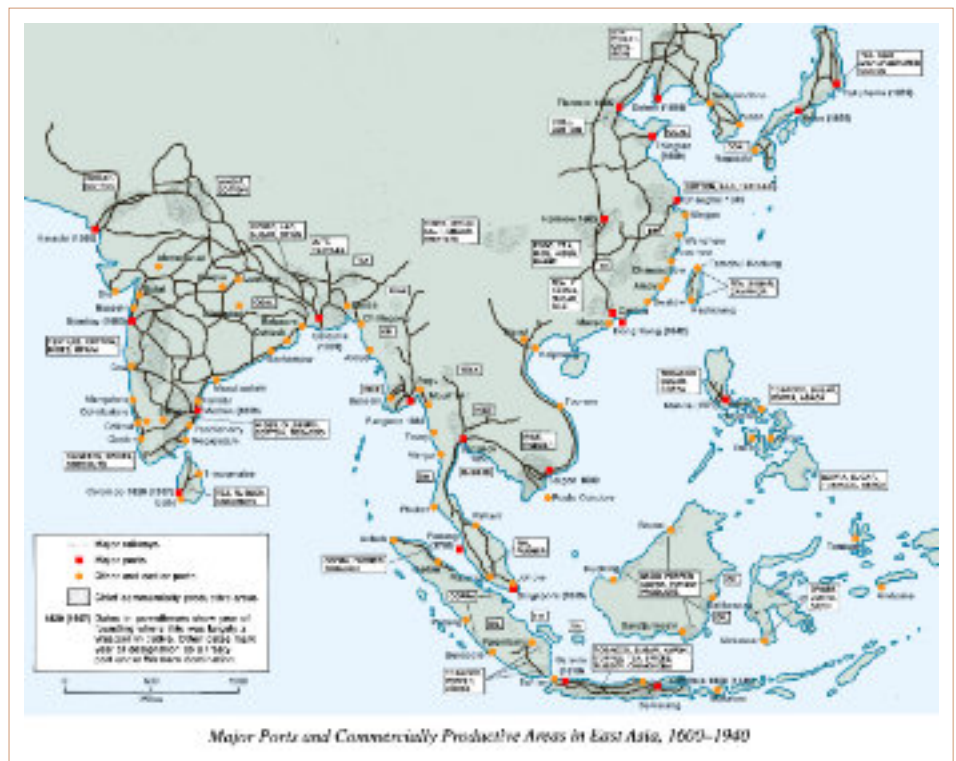
If this blend of mismatched cityscapes makes for a preposterous bit of worldbuilding, this may only reflect the fact that the truth is often stranger than fiction. The scene above is not a work of the imagination but a site of historic legacy: the Huangpu River, a dividing line between former European settlements and a zone of modern development in the metropolis of Shanghai.

Such an unexpected yet historically grounded setting may be the answer to two ubiquitous challenges of worldbuilding: how to build worlds that feel original, and how to build immersive worlds in which readers can readily suspend disbelief. Compelling worldbuilding, after all, can be inspired not only by works of fiction but by studies of fantastic real-world settings. Shanghai is worthy of such a case study, a telling example of how port cities can serve as vibrant, exciting settings where builders can flesh out their worlds' histories and cultures, and where writers can sow the seeds of gripping plotlines.

Shanghai's History as a Global(ly Contested) City

The Bund itself is emblematic of Shanghai's modern history. The waterfront district's best-known name likely derives from the Hindi *band* (embankment), a linguistic import from Britain's earlier colonial holdings in South Asia.¹ Yet there is no etymological relation with the district's Chinese Mandarin nomenclature, the *wàitān* (outer bank) of the Huangpu River. These distinct names — along with the district's architecture — reflect the former division of Shanghai into European territorial concessions separate from the original Chinese city. The skyscrapers across from the Baroque Revival colonial relics are of Chinese make as well, testaments to China's rapid economic growth after the country's leadership embraced an export-oriented market economy in 1978. The city's legacy and rise to global prominence have been the subject of entire fields of study.

Western writers were once fond of crediting British and other European colonists with the development of Shanghai from a “fishing village on a mudflat” into a metropolis “overnight.”² However, it is now known that Shanghai's history and the robustness of its economy extend much further back in time. When Shanghai was founded as a county seat in 1291 during the Yuan Dynasty through the consolidation of five existing villages, it was already an important shipping port in the Yangtze Delta region.³ Though this maritime trade was hamstrung due to attacks by *wokou* (Japanese raiders) and the Ming Dynasty's ban on maritime travel in response,⁴ business resumed under the Qing Dynasty's reign, and Shanghai grew to be China's most important domestic trade port from 1760 onward.⁵ By the 1830s, the volume of shipping transiting through Shanghai was roughly that of London.⁶



Far from being built from the ground up by European colonizers, Shanghai was likely coveted by Western powers for its already-established status as a trade center.

China itself became subject to Western interests in the 18th century as European markets' desires for China's exports of silk, porcelain, and tea weren't met with a commensurate Chinese demand for European products. Early Qing China did, however, have a growing epidemic of opium addiction. Leaders of Portugal and later Britain, which both had colonial holdings in India, concluded that importing opium to China could close the trade deficit between their countries. Meanwhile, the US followed suit with opium grown in Turkey.⁷ The Qing government tried to suppress opium usage as it was growing into a financial and public health crisis. By 1820, imports neared 1.5 *million* pounds annually and were continuing to increase,⁸ and by 1838, private customers' opium purchases amounted to more than double the government's budget.⁹ High Commissioner Lin Zexu appealed to Queen Victoria directly by letter, but his message never reached her, and the issue continued to escalate until Chinese authorities forcibly shut down opium-dealing facilities in Canton (Guangzhou). Charles Elliot, Chief Superintendent of British Trade in China, wrote to the British government recommending the use of force in defense of its interests,¹⁰ launching what would be known as the first Opium War (1839 – 1842).

Though the Qing Dynasty was a large, populous empire, the British navy proved superior to the Chinese one technologically and in terms of sheer firepower. So it was that in 1843, Hong Kong was handed over to Britain, and Shanghai and three other treaty ports were opened to Western trade through the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing). Within weeks of Shanghai's opening, foreign firms flooded into the city. Merchants from several Western countries entered Shanghai within a few years of the Treaty's ratification, and in 1848, Britain established a settlement outside the walled city, near its harbor, where foreigners were not subject to Chinese law.¹¹ The French Concession and other

foreign communities followed, as did foreign-owned factories and China's first Western-style bank.¹² Between the expatriate population and the Chinese citizens moving to Shanghai to participate in the expanding markets there, the city's population reached one million in the early 1900s and continued to increase at an explosive rate¹³. Shanghai had grown into a global, cosmopolitan city and China's premier industrial center¹⁴, though not without palpable disparities between the Western entrepreneurs and the Chinese laborers and middlemen who supported their businesses.

Shanghai's history of prosperity, deprivation, diversity, and conflict offers builders a wealth of lessons for breathing life into their worlds through their port cities. Examining Shanghai's case in detail can reveal key insights about the geographic and political contexts of port cities, the types of conflicts that are likely to surround them, and the complex sociocultural environments that can develop within their limits.

Takeaway 1: The Port City-as-Economic Powerhouse Trope isn't an Accident

Shanghai's success as a trade hub is undoubtedly related to its geography. The city is situated along both the Pacific coast and the Yangtze River, the world's third longest river and a critical route for domestic trade in China.¹⁵ It also hosted a sizable textile industry early in its history thanks to local silk production in the lower Yangtze region¹⁶ and cotton imports from the island of Hainan to the south.¹⁷ Internationally, Shanghai was a key hub for regional trade, all of this long before its subjugation by Europeans. While other Chinese ports are individually closer to Japan, Korea, eastern Russia, or Southeast Asia, Shanghai is fairly close to all of these markets and is well positioned as an intermediary point among them.¹⁸ Shanghai's central location for economic development and access to Chinese

markets was widely acknowledged. The Qing Dynasty deemed it superior to the prestigious city of Suzhou as a regional customs station, the British East India Company expressed interest in establishing a trading post there as early as 1756, and in 1844, Sir John Davis, the British governor of Hong Kong, described Shanghai as “the most promising of the newly opened Chinese ports.”¹⁹ In fact, Shanghai’s economic

clout and reputation is such that even in the 21st century, China’s government has been more inclined to invest resources into its further development than into other ports such as the nearby city of Ningbo (despite its water depth being quite suitable for a deep-water port)²⁰ or the historically prominent city of Quanzhou in Fujian Province. For worldbuilding purposes, it’s useful to consider



why port cities like Shanghai grow into globally prominent economic centers while others can fall into obscurity.

At the most basic level, port cities enjoy the economic heft that they do for remarkably ordinary reasons. Maritime shipping has long been an especially energy-efficient and cost-effective means of conducting heavy freighting,²¹ in part because topography and the expense of building transit infrastructure can limit overland trade.²² Maritime shipping also has yet to be made obsolete by advances in other transit technologies. The advent of the railroad, for example, complemented maritime shipping; merchants and infrastructure developers alike found it more efficient to concentrate trade and shipping in relatively few port cities than to connect rail infrastructure to numerous smaller ports, contributing to the centralization of shipping traffic.²³ Since then, the commercialization of air travel worldwide, massive highway projects like those in the US and high-speed train networks like those in China and Japan have all provided incentives to concentrate maritime freighting in already successful port cities.²⁴ For further evidence of the global economy's dependence on maritime shipping, one needs to look no further than the Suez Canal blockage in March 2021, in which the wayward container ship *Ever Given* single-handedly disrupted 12% of global trade — an estimated \$9.6 billion USD of trade per day — until it was dislodged.²⁵ Though maritime transit is clearly not without its risks, a sapient, innovative species is likely to develop maritime travel in any world with navigable waterways.

That being said, imports and exports are far from the sole sources of business in port cities. Though some port cities often begin as little more than shipping centers, the labor force needed for shipping and logistics inevitably provides a market for the services that those laborers need, and a port city's growing

commercial operations can spur the development of the manufacturing and financial industries there.²⁶ This growth can be accelerated when governments choose to concentrate development in relatively few port cities, whether for mere efficiency's sake or to better compete with other countries' trade hubs, as seen in modern China's drive to develop Shenzhen and Guangzhou in hopes of outshining British-controlled Hong Kong in the 1970s and '80s.²⁷ One way or another, it's not uncommon for the urban centers connected to ports to outgrow their maritime industries, as can be seen in global financial supercenters such as London, Hong Kong, and indeed Shanghai today. In modern settings, the growth of non-maritime urban industries and of the infrastructure necessary to service massive container ships can result in the port and the city increasingly becoming separate entities,²⁸ though in other cases the two remain quite integrated with each other.²⁹

If shipping and its supporting industries tend to be concentrated in a few key port cities, a remaining question is which ports are most likely to grow into economic powerhouses. The field of international economics answers this question with the *gravity equation of trade*: bilateral trade (measured in the value of imports or exports) is directly proportional to the GDP (gross domestic product) of each country and inversely proportional to the distance between them. A long distance between ports not only increases the cost of shipping but also decreases the likelihood of business contacts being established in the first place, particularly in settings where communications technology is limited.³⁰

For the mathematically inclined, a basic form of the gravity equation of trade is provided below. (This author empathizes with humanities-inclined readers who are likely to gloss over this part and welcomes them to do so. Those who are *more* mathematically inclined are welcome

to consult the Further Reading section of this article to explore the gravity equation in greater depth.) The variable i indicates the first trade partner (a state or economy), and j the second one, in a bilateral trade situation. $\alpha > 0$ and $\beta > 0$ “because bilateral transactions increase in the size of the trade partners,” and $\gamma > 0$ because a greater distance impedes trade.³¹

$$\text{trade}_{ij} = (\text{GDP}_i^\alpha)(\text{GDP}_j^\beta) / \text{distance}_{ij}^\gamma$$

An observant builder might note that this model is rather simplistic and that a city’s trade prospects ought to be affected by its access to resources and multiple other environmental, historical, and political factors. A port city’s prosperity is meaningfully tied to the power and reputation of its host state as well as its geographic position.

Certainly, ports of some sort can be built on any strip of coast where waterways are broad and deep enough to accommodate large vessels. But for builders who are still deciding where their

world’s most prominent ports ought to be located, the case of Shanghai is quite informative. The gravity equation of trade can be used to pick out likely candidates for economic powerhouses once the locations and political prominence of states have been determined, and a city that gains popularity as a commercial center may accumulate momentum that accelerates the growth of its fortune and renown. Of course, this fame can attract the wrong kinds of attention from political rivals.

Takeaway 2: Someone Will Want to Conquer Your Port City

That Shanghai was among the five treaty ports to be opened to European merchants and investors through the Treaty of Nanking demonstrates how coveted it was by the Western colonial powers. Shanghai had access to local sources of silver and generated considerable wealth through commerce, and in the Age of Colonialism, it was well understood



that the accumulation of wealth and the expansion of territory could go hand-in-hand.³² But during the first Opium War, Shanghai was targeted at least as much for its strategic location. When British leaders were planning to invade China as a punitive expedition for its measures against opium sales, they concluded that attacking the capital Peking (Beijing) directly might prompt the Daoguang Emperor to dig in his heels rather than surrender. Preferring incremental measures to coerce the Emperor into negotiating, they settled on blockading Shanghai to disrupt China's domestic rice shipments. From Shanghai by way of the Yangtze River and its tributary the Bei He River, they could also block access to the Grand Canal, the main thoroughfare for food shipments from southern China to Peking³³, as well as threaten the historic capital of Nanking. The case of Shanghai demonstrates how key port cities can be doubly desirable to would-be conquerors, drawing attention for both the wealth they hold and the access they provide to other goals and destinations.

It is often the fate of port cities that as they grow in prominence, they attract the interest of outsiders for both benign and malevolent reasons. One example is Mombasa, which in the 14th century was an independent city-state in its golden age. The city had trade networks with inland Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India, and China. Mombasa's leaders tried to cultivate peaceful relationships with powerful allies for its protection, but without an army or meaningful defenses of its own, this favor-trading was insufficient to protect it from the imperial interests of the rising Portuguese empire.³⁴ Another notable case is the city of Tripoli in Libya, subject to "a seemingly never-ending procession of foreign rulers" who desired access to its agricultural resources on the edge of the Sahara³⁵ and trade caravans extending to the Sahel in addition to its favorable proximity to Egypt.³⁶ Given that successful port cities are both well-known to

foreign traders and well-situated for access to resources and markets, their mere existence in a fantasy setting is sure to be an exciting flash point for states' opposing geopolitical designs.

Whenever a port city is occupied and not merely pillaged or razed, this is likely to be the end of one conflict and the beginning of another. As the conquerors subjugate the city's residents and repurpose its land and amenities for their own use, this is sure to engender resentment among the original residents — even if their new overlords claim they are creating economic opportunities for all. In the case of Shanghai's International Settlement, the Western expatriates who benefited from the opportunities that the city presented to them were fond of insisting they had built a modern piece of the West distinct from the "alien empire" surrounding it.³⁷ The concentration of wealth and privilege in the International Settlement and French Concession on one hand, and the humbler circumstances of the neighborhoods inhabited by migrant workers and refugees on the other, produced a dichotomy which has persisted into the 21st century in the minds of Shanghai's residents.³⁸

The same qualities that make a city a tempting target of imperial interests can result in their becoming hotspots of internal conflict as well. In the 1920s, after China's Qing Dynasty fell and the Republic of China began its endeavors to rebuild the country, the Republic centered its drive for further industrial expansion in Shanghai,³⁹ whose businesses and enterprises employed roughly 300,000 people at the time.⁴⁰ The country at large, however, was troubled by a corrupt ruling party (The Kuomintang/Nationalist Party), petty warlords occupying the countryside, and continuing exploitation and humiliation by Japan and Western powers. These tensions helped give rise to the Communist movement in the mid 1920s where the Communist Party's intellectual founders saw Shanghai's

concentration of industrial labor in the city — along with its class disparities — as providing a key staging ground for organizing and protesting.⁴¹ (Abuses by the city’s British residents and municipal police also gave substance to the Party’s anti-imperialist rhetoric.⁴²) Shanghai and other coastal urban centers of southern China became the targets of the ruling Guomindang (Nationalist Party)’s efforts to root them out in a sweeping persecution campaign,⁴³ interrupted only by Japan’s full-scale invasion of China starting in 1937.

For builders and writers, a successful port city is an opportune focal point for conflict and dramatic tension. Such a city’s fame and prosperity can readily attract unwelcome attention from outside military interests, and the rapid development of a thriving economic center can produce social problems that in turn may arouse political unrest or a full-blown revolution. An invasion or civil war doesn’t have to be the end of the story, however; the sudden demographic changes and sociocultural shifts resulting from such a conflict can showcase a setting’s cultural differences and yield the seeds of new plot points.

Takeaway 3: Your Port City Won’t be a Monoculture

The new Shanghai that developed after the Treaty of Nanking was popularly portrayed as a land of opportunity and progress, a “Paris of the Orient” romanticized in film and press. The city’s reality was far more complex, a tale of two or three different cities in which foreign residents of the self-governed International Settlement and the French Concession kept the new earnings from Shanghai’s growth for themselves⁴⁴ and resisted allowing the city to become a cultural melting pot.⁴⁵ Still, the Chinese residents had incentives to integrate into the foreign concessions regardless. Though only foreigners could purchase property in the foreign concessions, Chinese locals could still

rent there, and soon “compradors” — Chinese merchants acting as cross-cultural middlemen — seized upon the city’s economic opportunities. These compradors learned English as well as Anglo-Indian and Portuguese vocabulary, developed their knowledge of the world beyond China, and adapted their routines to the Western calendar to facilitate business with the foreign elites.⁴⁶ However, that these compradors and Chinese laborers formed the backbone of the International Settlement’s economy did not afford them equal rights or dignity. Though some of these compradors made decent fortunes in this context, many other Chinese residents lived in abject poverty, some not far from hotels and horse-racing venues.⁴⁷ Further, the city’s “Shanghaianders,” British settlers and their descendants, persist-



ARC REALTY COMPANY

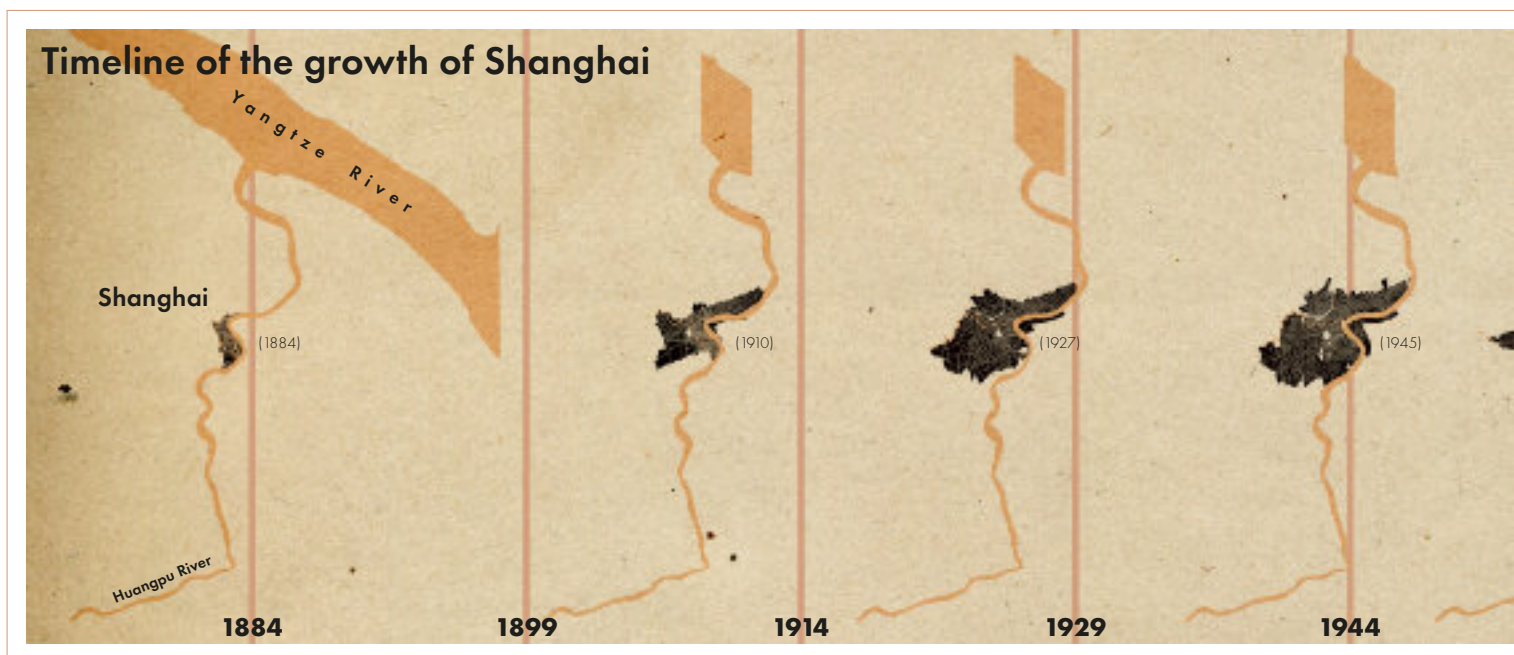
2. Settler Crusader,
(Shanghaiander self-imagery from the frontispiece,
ARC Realty Co., iii, May 1928)

ently excluded the Chinese (and non-British foreign populations, including Russian and Japanese immigrants) from social venues and political processes alike, even as a number of Shanghailanders availed themselves to Chinese brothels or kept Chinese concubines.⁴⁸ Persistent racism and exploitation hid under the guise of the city's cosmopolitanism.⁴⁹

Shanghai's multicultural environment was not only the result of its situation as a European sphere of influence. During late imperial and early modern China's extensive history of internal strife, the city served as a new home for refugees of all sorts. During the Taiping Rebellion, rebels' attacks on Confucian places of worship and other cultural centers across the Yangtze River basin drove cultural elites and ordinary people alike to seek refuge there, establishing Shanghai as a regional cultural and intellectual center.⁵⁰ Further, the city attracted a mass influx of Russian expatriates in the 1930s from Harbin⁵¹, another Chinese city once deemed a "Paris of the Orient," in the aftermath of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria⁵². Shanghai also hosted a prominent Jewish community as early as 1845⁵³ and was a sanctuary to more than twenty thousand European

Jewish refugees from the Holocaust — though the city's Japanese occupiers forced them to live in ghettos from 1941 until the city's liberation in 1945.⁵⁴ The same factors that make a port city attractive for international travel and commerce can also contribute to the development of ethnic and cultural enclaves within city limits.

The circumstances of Shanghai's Jewish enclave and the disparities between Chinese and expatriate communities both demonstrate that a cosmopolitan city won't be free from tensions between cultural or ethnic groups. These conflicts don't only have to be rooted in inter-ethnic tensions or cultural gulfs, either. The seasonal, fluctuating business that port cities receive often leads them to rely on temporary migrant laborers who are vulnerable to exploitation by employers.⁵⁵ Further, city administrators may choose to confine them to poor-quality housing in segregated districts.⁵⁶ In other cases, migrant workers settle in cheap, low-quality housing near their work sites in concentrated numbers or else in peripheral informal settlements if real estate costs near these places are prohibitive.⁵⁷ This situation creates a clear class-based disparity between



the manual laborers who are essential to shipping logistics and the mercantile business leaders who accumulate most of the wealth from these activities. One way or another, the social dynamics of port cities present builders with a key opportunity to breathe life into their cities' cultures by detailing these intergroup conflicts — and the evolution of these conflicts over time.

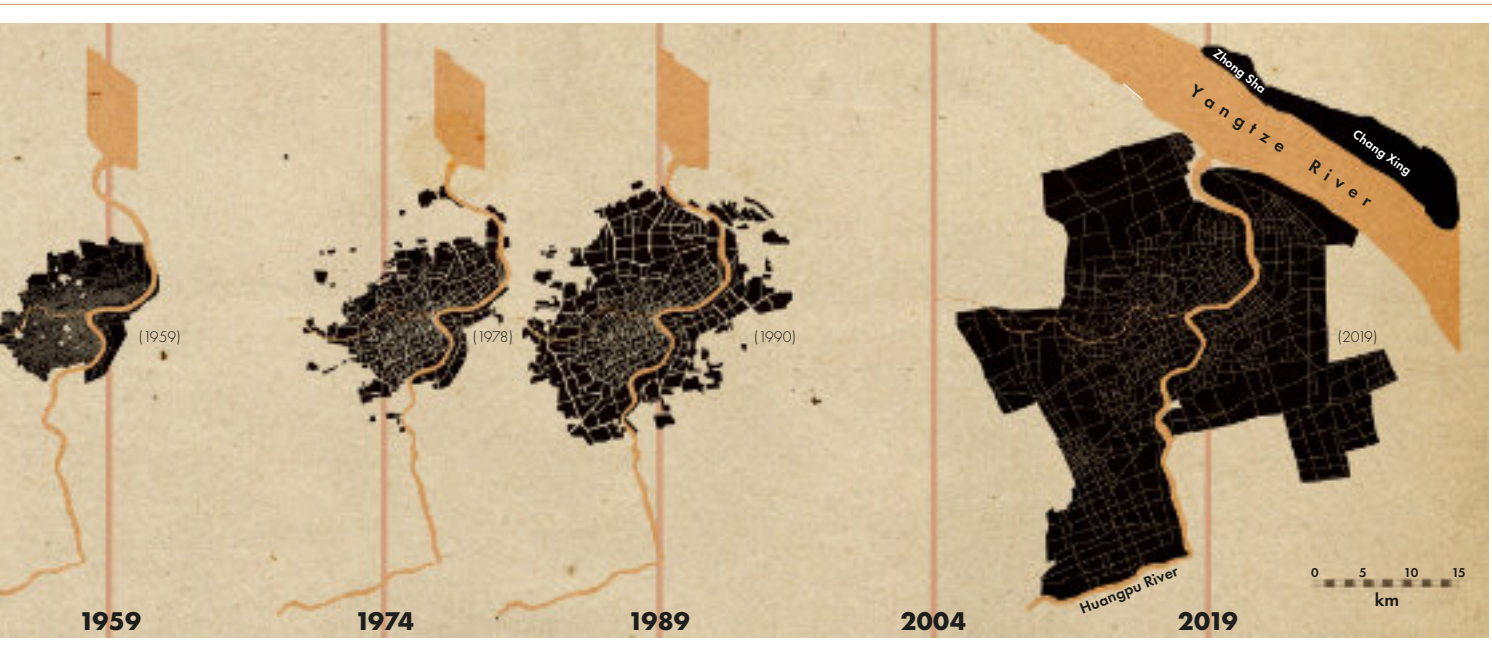
On a brighter note, while intergroup tensions in such settings are virtually inevitable, reconciliation isn't impossible. Gordon Allport and other social psychologists have proposed the *contact hypothesis*, which states that given enough time, intergroup prejudices can be reduced through the familiarity that comes with contact. This reconciliation process is further helped along if the groups in question enjoy relative equality, if they have opportunities to work together toward a common goal, and if governments or other institutions support their reconciliation.⁵⁸ (Allport originally devised this hypothesis when social scientists were trying to better understand the troubled race relations of the mid-20th century US, but recent research has demonstrated that the same principles apply to group differences that are not based on

race or ethnicity,⁵⁹ including locals' attitudes toward asylum-seeking migrants.⁶⁰) For builders, the process of conflict resolution itself can be the seed of many a plotline, whether a protagonist's quest to unite two factions against an external threat or a *Romeo and Juliet*-esque romance. Or persistent disputes between factions can add context to an ongoing blood feud or a believable premise for a revolution.

Conclusion

For both builders and narrative writers, port cities can be far more than stopping places for characters to anchor ships and purchase supplies. These cities have long been dynamic, often contested sites throughout history, and they can serve just as well to flesh out the geography, commercial operations, cultural differences, and all sorts of conflicts in a second world or piece of historical fiction. Shanghai is merely a single example, albeit an exceptional one. Studying any real-world context outside one's own can be the path to designing an intricate, less derivative setting that captures readers' awe or is simply satisfying to build.

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Further Reading

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- 10 Ibid., 39–40; Ibid., 50–52; Ibid., 85–86.
- 11 Wolfgang Keller, Ben Li, and Carol H. Shiue, “Shanghai’s Trade, China’s Growth: Continuity, Recovery, and Change since the Opium Wars,” *IMF Economic Review* 61, no. 2 (2013): 341.

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- 24 Example US cities include Seattle, Washington, which remains a key hub for trade with East Asia, and San Francisco, California, which first grew thanks to the Gold Rush and subsequently became a strategic military base and then a cultural and technological center. Both cities owe their development to Western settlers’ exploration (e.g. the Oregon Trail) and transcontinental rail. A comparable Canadian case is Vancouver, which was a small hamlet before it was selected as the terminus for the Canadian Pacific Railway. All three cities are sites of notable natural harbors as well. “Washington,” Office of the United States Trade Representative, accessed May 3, 2023; “San Francisco,” *History*, last updated August 21, 2018; “Canadian Pacific Railway,” *2007 Wikipedia Selection for Schools*, accessed May 3, 2023.
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Graphics Acknowledgements

- p 62 Supplied by the author.
- p 63 Edited from the original, “East Asia ports and resources, 1600 to 1940s”
- p 65 US Government commercial map of China (Wikimedia).
- p 67 Street scene, Shanghai, 2017. Supplied by the author.
- p 69 Shanghailanders "settler crusader". This unusual cultural artifact, a poster from the Asia Realty Company in Shanghai (May 1928), illustrates the irredentist European, Christian identity of the British-heritage Shanghailanders. Image source: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651233>
- p 70 Urban development of Shanghai, 1884 – 2019. Timeline compiled from individual diagrams published in “Shanghai: A history in morphological maps”, *UQ|UP Research Paper 4* (2019).



MAYIM

by Judah Naujokas | Edited by Andrew Booth & Keller

 NATURE

 RELIGION

 FANTASY

From a high ledge next to our mountaintop camp, new lands lay before me. They were empty of life; a sandy, rocky valley stretching for miles, broken only at the horizon by a line of sandstone hills that ascended into tall, red mountains. But these empty stretches of arid ground were carved by weaving channels, empty canals flowing across the land. It was as if an enormous grapevine was growing and spreading itself through the valley.

My father stood above me, shielding his eyes from the sun with his hand.

“You are looking upon the *Flood-Delta*, Samaria. It is where our very own river begins. Those channels are dry riverbeds running through the desert — for the Manasseans, they are the *Naphtali*, the holy roads of pilgrimage and trade. We will take them across to the mountains, where the people of this kingdom reside.”

“So we are almost there, to Manasseah?” I tried to keep my excitement from showing. After weeks of nothing but sun and heat, we were almost to our destination.

My father’s eyes fixed on my face, probably seeing some sort of tell or twist in my expression — my father had a talent for reading those sorts of things. But he looked away quickly, instead moving to gesture to the valley below. “We are already in Manasseah, Samaria. All of the land — from the Dry Mountains on which we encamp to those on the horizon — is within their domain.”

“But I thought you said we still had to cross the desert to the mountains?”

“I only said that the people reside in the mountains. The Flood-Delta and its Naphtali are central to their kingdom — the mountains themselves are only a refuge from the heat of the dry season. Soon the rain will come. You will see.”

“I will see? Can’t you just tell me?”

“Better to learn from your own experience than through my words. Come back to the tents. The Manasseans are nocturnal,” he said, looking back up at the biting sun. “So we must be as well.”

Taking one last glance at the view, I followed him back to the hastily assembled camp the caravan had made.

—

At sunset we set out into the Flood-Delta, following a small channel that began as a small streambed at the very base of the mountains. It was at first shallow and narrow, as if only a trickle of water had been enough to shape it, although it grew deeper and wider as we traveled. The widest areas had enough space for multiple caravan wagons to rest side by side from bank to bank. The bottom of the bed transitioned from loose sand to an armor composed of layers of old and dry river rocks worn smooth by hundreds of years of floods and fast-moving water tumbling them end over end along the river floor.

As we walked the bed, it became apparent that the route we chose was a main artery of the Flood-Delta, with other branches of the Naphtali intersecting with ours, other travelers beginning to emerge from these passageways to join our pilgrimage. Soon the bed was thronged with people, seemingly travelers and merchants like us.

—

As we continued down the bed, workers with flickering lamps and small scaffolds worked to layer new material on the riverbed walls and repair any cracks that formed.

“Those workers labor to repair the system the Manasseans use to collect the flood waters. The water is then held and tightly controlled by the *Waterkeepers*. It is their greatest treasure.”

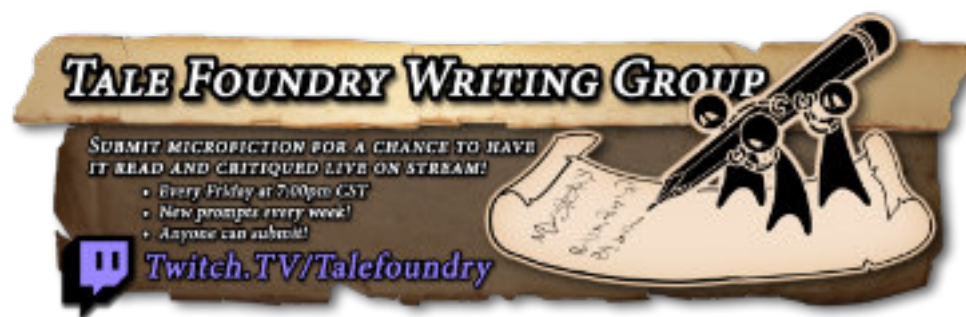
At the edges of my vision I saw figures standing on the high banks of the riverbed far above the common rabble. They seemed to be warriors, given the plates of steel that protected their chests and the short spears they held in front of them. Their outfits were bright and colorful, almost as if they were decorative soldiers meant as art pieces to be put on display. But their eyes betrayed their purpose, carefully following the movements of the crowd through the riverbed passages as their polished armor reflected the light of the torches they carried. I felt a pair of eyes on me staring unashamedly. I lowered my eyes and kept my gaze on the rocks that I walked upon, desperately hoping not to trip or do anything to draw more attention.

My father slowed his pace, matching my gait. “We are not in danger. I would not have brought you here if I believed that. But I would not like to be scrutinized in any way. The *Waterkeepers* keep tight control of the water, distrusting even their own citizens. As foreigners we must be extra careful.” He exhaled slowly as we passed the last of the soldiers.

As we passed a new group of Waterkeeper guards, lightning lit up the sky and colored the sea of white linen clothing a cold blue. All around us people stopped in their activities looking up towards the sky. My father grabbed my arm.

“Dad? What’s going on?” Still looking up to the sky, he put a finger to his mouth. Only a short moment later the sky cracked with thunder.

“Samaria. We have to go. The storm is here early.” Around us, other people seemed to come to the same conclusion my father had, starting to yell at porters to lash goods tightly, as if preparing for a race. My father took the ropes that hung off his backpack, tying and twisting them tightly around his shoulders and waist. I copied his motions with my own pack, trying to tie the ropes the way he had taught me. “Are you ready?”



“For what?” I asked, feeling cold beads of sweat as the hair on my arms stood on end, my heart pumping. “Can you please tell me what is going on?”

He paused before turning around to kneel down next to me. He spoke while checking my pack and tightening the ropes, making sure of the right fit.

“In the wet season, these riverbeds are filled and roads turn into waterways. The storm that will begin this year’s wet season is here earlier than expected. We must get to the mountains and out of the channel before it floods with the new rain. Thank the skies that we are not far from the mountains, but we will have to run. Just follow me and stay close.” He tugged on one final rope and finished his inspection by sliding two fingers under the straps that went over my shoulders, making sure it was not too tight. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Without another word, he turned and began jogging down the channel. As I followed him more people began running in the same direction. Not many seemed outright panicked, but I could see the cold fear in their eyes. The lightning flashed again, thunder following a few seconds, a crash that made the whole world seem to vibrate with its strength.

“Faster, Samaria. We need to go faster.”

I didn’t respond, focusing on moving. The scent of danger was nipping at our heels, a sharp earthy smell of fresh water colliding with sun-dried soil. Rain.

We ran together down the riverbed, following the turns and twists as I began to feel more drops of rain like ice on my warm skin. The rain began to fall in earnest, waterdrops speckling the dry sand like splattered ink. Water began to spill over the high banks of the channel, funneled down across the flat desert into the deep riverbeds. A series of little waterfalls formed, splattering their way over the multitudes of people who started running with us. The riverbed started to fill with the water, turning the rocks and sand underneath our feet into a quicksand that sucked and grabbed at our ankles, threatening to pull us down into the mire. The water rose as we kept moving, turning from a muddy trickle into a rushing stream. Thankfully the channel we traveled in sloped upward, finally narrowing until the high banks on either side had flattened out into dry ground.

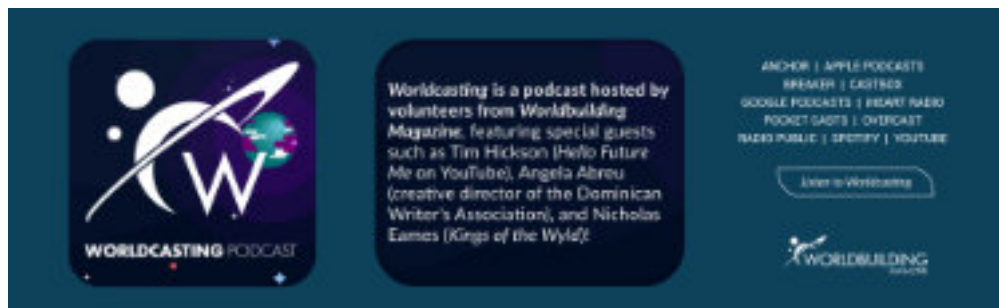
We stood on the rocks, breathing heavily, struggling as my lungs felt tight — burned by the startlingly chill air the storm brought with it. As my father’s breathing slowed, he went to undo the straps and ropes that kept my pack tight against my back. I was still focused on my own breath, trying desperately to slow the beating of my heart. After so long in the dry, dusty air of the desert mountains, the shock of the cold storm air in my lungs was almost as great as the glacial wetness of the rain that was still sheeting across the Flood-Delta. The icy drops shimmered on my eyelashes. He opened the top and checked that the food, water, and other survival supplies were still there and undamaged. I unslung it and set it down, moving to help with his own pack. The glass bottles were still there, and no red stains had bled through the cloth wrapped around them. They were safe.

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The house was carved into the side of the sandstone hills. Its roof extended out from the side of these hills, covered with smooth tiles worked into a pattern that spiraled and sloped down over one wall. In the dry season it would have been difficult to see the work for anything other than fanciful decoration. But in the deluge of the wet season, its utilitarian purpose was exposed — water drained down the natural rocky gutter in the side of the hill onto the roof, spilling into the pattern of the tiles until it fell off the roof into a great cistern on the side of the house. The hushed conversation that floated out through the stone windows competed not only with the sound of the falling rain but also with the sound of a rushing waterfall falling into a *catch-pool*, its bottom shrouded by the depth of the rising water.

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As we stepped inside, I felt warmth rise from the room and rout the cold wind from the storm. A small hearth flickered and burned, carved into the rock walls of the room, its smoke seemingly routed outside by



a hidden pipe or chimney. Thick curls of incense swirled about, its scent banishing the petrichor of the rain hitting the sand. It was a room full of the faces of strangers.

“Elezah! It has been too long since you last graced us with your delightful company.” A woman sat in front of the others in the house, sitting on a cushion with her legs crossed. Her dark brown skin was deep in color, almost black. She would have almost faded into the relative gloom of the dimly lit, smoky room, but her presence commanded attention. Her eyes were piercing gold and she seemed to follow me with her gaze, even as she addressed her father.

“Exactly one year, to the day,” said my father. The two of them looked at each other, almost some sort of standoff between two enemies in a dramatic opera. I had a great deal of trust in my father, in his abilities to protect both me and his cargo. But in this woman I saw more than just a merchant — she brandished power in her poise like a sword. For a moment my trust flickered and I wondered what a lowly, provincial trader of the likes of my father was doing seeking her audience. But then I saw a twinkle of amusement behind the woman’s eyes. They both smiled then, and the woman relaxed her pose, standing to grasp Elezah’s arm.

“Thick curls of incense swirled about, its scent banishing the petrichor of the rain hitting the sand. It was a room full of the faces of strangers.”

“It has been too long. Come now, sit down and relax with us.” She spoke slowly, taking care with her sentences, as if she had all of eternity just to enunciate each syllable of each word.

“Too long? Do we not meet at the same time every year?” My father was gruff by contrast, not speaking quickly, being too well-versed in conversation for that, but it seemed he spoke entire sentences in the time she took to speak her words.

“Ah, what is the point of such pleasantries with a barbarian such as you, Elezah.”

He laughed, hearty and deep, an odd expression from him. He seemed more jovial and friendly with this woman than he ever was at home. I silently wondered if it was part of his strategy of trade. “Thank you for your great hospitality, Delaiah.”

She clapped her hand and a man quickly came forward from the back of the room with a small ceramic cup, steam rising from it. The man proffered it to my father and he took it with a slight bow of his head in thanks. I saw it was a red liquid, spiced with something peppery and

sweet and aromatic, something wholly different from the rich amber benzoin of the curling incense smoke.

My father gestured for me to step forward to stand next to him. “Delaiah, this is my daughter, Samaria.” I stepped forward at my cue, looking up cautiously at the woman, only now realizing how tall she was as I moved next to my father.

“Coming to learn to trade and take over the family business I presume?” She smiled at me and held her arms out as if to gesture to the land around us. “Welcome to Manasseah — I assume this is your first visit, given the way your mouth has been slightly gaping this whole time.” I quickly clenched my jaw shut. “And of course, by the fact that I haven’t seen you here before with Elezah. I am Delaiah, one of the *Mayimi* authorized by the Waterkeepers to trade our water, but I am sure your father has told you that already.”

I swallowed my anxiety before responding — “Actually, *Mayima* Delaiah, he has told me very little.”

Delaiah smirked, “I should have known better. Probably said something about how it is better for you to learn from experience than from his words, is that right?”

I smiled and nodded. It seemed that for all my father’s veil of joviality, Delaiah did know the man well. It was strangely heartening — even in such a foreign, distant land, there was still a friend to greet us. Then her golden eyes flashed, catching my own gaze and she smiled at me, baring a set of teeth that were straight and ivory-white, except for her canines, which looked larger and sharper than normal, with gleaming ivory points. Abruptly it was as if she was wholly alien and dangerous again, a predator she-cat regarding a helpless prey-creature. But then the moment passed, she looked back at my father and I could not be sure if I had simply imagined the sharp smile and predatory gaze.

She gestured to the floor, two new men appearing from the shadows in the back of the building holding two cushions for us. “Then sit with us, and learn.” I noticed for the first time that she was tall, as I first noticed, but not slender. She had broad shoulders and arms that were muscled but unmarked by the rigors of hard labor.

My father and I sat cross-legged on the cushions, facing Delaiah and the rest of those in the room. The men and women who sat behind her looked at us. They did not deign to introduce themselves, instead slowly turning away and conversing quietly among themselves in half-whispers and languages that I did not understand.

“It’s a good season for you, Delaiah. A big storm. An early storm.” My father took a sip of the red liquid Delaiah’s servants had brought him. He kept his eyes open, trained on the Mayima.

“You always time your arrival so impeccably, don’t you Elezah?” said Delaiah, still settling down on her cushion.

My father raised his eyebrows at her. “I’m not sure if impeccable is the exact word I would use. The storm did not sweep us away, but it certainly attempted the feat.”

“Well, even we of the Flood-Delta cannot predict and control the wild power of the storms.”

“That would be power indeed. We would not have to worry so much about the measure of the water. It could simply be commanded into existence.”

“*Abruptly it was as if she was wholly alien and dangerous again, a predator she-cat regarding a helpless prey-creature.*”

“Always such an idealist, Elezah.”

“I can’t help it. You always make light of me, but don’t you wish for such things too?”

“You ask me the same thing every season, Elezah. The answer today is the same as all other days.”

There was silence between them for a few moments before Delaiah broke in, “I am sure you will be courteous enough to give some sort of idea of what you have brought me this time.”

“I may enjoy relaxation, but I am still a man of business.” He held his hand out to me and I pulled one of the wine bottles out of his pack, placing it gently into his hand. “No special preparations for this one. I brought it straight from the wagon storage, and pulled randomly from the boxes of my own vineyard. It is a perfectly average specimen from our harvest.”

A servant stepped up, holding a wooden chalice in his hands. It was a cup that spoke of Delaiah’s high status and wealth — I noticed it drew more than a few eyes of those behind her.

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Delaiah uncorked the bottle herself, drawing it out with a satisfying pop. She held it to her nose for moments before dropping it into the

hand of another servant. “Do you remember when you brought me a bottle of wine that had been corked, Elezah?” she asked innocently, even as the mischievous glint in her eyes was relit.

My father grimaced. “You never forget to remind me. Always something about the smell of mold never leaving your nostrils.”

She didn’t reply, instead taking a sip from the chalice her servants had refilled. “It is good. As always. Very good. But there is something about this one. Not as sweet, less of the fruit of which I and the rest of my kin are so fond.” She took another sip, looking away as she swirled the liquid around in her mouth before swallowing. “More astringent. Problems with the harvest, Elezah?”

“You wouldn’t ask if you didn’t already know.”

“Don’t you want your daughter to know what we discuss?”

“She does know.” He turned to me. “Samaria — less sweet, less fruity, and over astringent. What is our dear Mayima noticing in our product?”

I wasn’t sure if I should answer truthfully. I knew that the grapes were underripe. We harvested them earlier than planned as we didn’t have enough water to protect them from an early spell of uncharacteristically hot and dry weather. The farmers needed to choose between gambling on the grapes lasting through the weather or harvesting them before they were fully ripe. My father was not a gambling man, and neither were the farmers. “Go ahead, tell her what you know,” coaxed my father, gesturing towards Delaiah. She turned her head to me, attentive and smiling sweetly.

“Mayima Delaiah, increased astringency and decreased sweetness and fruit notes point to underripe grapes.”

My father looked at me and then back at Delaiah. “It is a good storm, Delaiah. Your wet season will be bountiful for your people.”

“More for us to share with those downriver, yes?”

He smiled at her again, but this time its emotion did not quite escape from his lips. “It’s not sharing, Delaiah. I offer the fine wine of my land in exchange for the fine water of yours. I believe the word for it is trade.”

“Underripe wine.”

“Underripe because we did not have enough water, Mayima Delaiah,” my father said, using her honorific for the first time. “You agree that it is a fine wine, even for its minor drawbacks. Imagine what we could make with a steadier supply of water, a supply that would allow us to harvest at the proper times.”

Delaiah swirled the wine in her cup before taking another sip. She sat, eyes closed, seemingly savoring the flavor. Patiently, my father waited for her response, not taking his eyes off her face.

“Six and a half baht is my offer, Elezah. It is one more full measure than last year.”

My father smiled again, but this time it was a predator’s smile. “A generous offer. I accept — wholeheartedly. As always, I appreciate your swiftness when it comes to negotiating.” He changed his smile into a smirk. “Even if it takes a while to get to the negotiation part.”

“You know how I despise such banal little details, Elezah. Until next year.”

With that, we were dismissed. We stood up, my father gesturing at me to take our cushions. I picked them up and turned to go out the door, but my father shook his head and motioned at me to follow him as he walked further into the room, into the group of people who were sitting behind Delaiah. To my surprise, there was already a space waiting for us in the very back of the crowd. We sat on our cushions, taking our places among the whispering people. Slowly, I realized that these people were not Manassean, but were other merchants, just the same as us, from lands all along the river valley.

“What are we doing?”



“It is tradition. We’ll stay here until Mayima Delaiah finishes her negotiations for the night. Don’t worry, we came near the end, so we will not have long to wait until we can go. It is a privilege of my long trading history. New merchants and unknown traders have to come first.”

I looked to the front of the crowd, to those closest to Delaiah. They did look tired. “Do they have to stay here all night?”

“Yes. It is said that it is this way so that those newest can learn and observe all the meetings.”

“They have to sit on cushions and wait for everyone else? There must be at least fifty people in here. It must be exhausting.”

My father raised his eyebrows as he sipped his tea. “It is.”

We had to wait for only a handful of other merchants before everyone rose to leave, leaving cups of tea and cushions behind. As we filed out the door, the overwhelming storm scent blew away the vapors of the trade house, the rain washing the incense smoke from the linen fabric of my clothing.

We did not stay to see the celebrations for the coming of the water, instead making our way back across the Naphtali by raft.

Back at the camp we sat again on the overlooking ledge. The rocky overhang that once sheltered me from the scorching rays of the desert sun now provided shelter from the cold downpour of rain. The dry, empty land that had once sat in front of me transformed into a land teeming with life and activity, small boats and large barges floating and navigating through the Naphtali.

“Of all my lessons, I want you to remember that meeting most of all. Our land is relatively independent. But none on the Dahar River can be independent of the Manasseans. Mayima Delaiah, along with all of the other water traders, probably hear a hundred different stories of sadness, poverty, and starvation every day. Most of those get no offers at all. Whether or not that makes the water traders callous or greedy is for you to decide for yourself. But what you should remember is how I traded with our dearest Mayima. It was not about us, our woes, or our people's woes. I made our case by showing and demonstrating how sharing their water with us will benefit them.” He pulled out a different bottle from the bag and set it next to the first. It looked identical, most likely from the same harvest. “Open this bottle for us and taste it with me.”

I did so, taking clean clay cups from the bag for the new wine. I poured it into the glass, noting the same dark red color as the one we tasted with Delaiah. But as soon as I brought it to my nose, I could tell it was wholly different. This wine was sweeter and less astringent, with a full complement of the fruit notes our vineyards were famous for. “Where did you get this? It’s perfect! Did one of the vineyards escape the heat?”

My father smiled again, his eyes lighting up mischievously. “No, Samaria. This is the wine of our harvest. Only our personal vineyard was picked when underripe. We would not waste our grapes, our most precious resource, with sloppy harvesting practices.”

“So you lied to Mayima Delaiah?” I asked, not thinking about the danger of such a question being asked out loud.

But my father did not chastise me. “Well, I did pick out the bottle randomly from the boxes of wine from our very own vineyard. I did not lie about that. But ours is only one vineyard. We had plenty of water to keep the vines cool. But we could not very well let them know that, now could we,” he said, gesturing to the lands before us.

“A small town of foreigners overheating or suffering from dehydration? We would not even be allowed an audience.” He swirled the wine around in his own cup, watching the liquid spin and aerate. “In all likelihood, we would get even less water in our trade than last year if we had shown such a high-quality wine. But if our famous sweet wine, that which is so beloved by the highborn of the Flood-Delta, was to be turned sour by a lack of water...” He turned the cup over, emptying it onto the sandy ground. “Do you understand, Samaria?”

I did understand. It made sense, especially from what I saw of the Manasseans and their guards that watched the Naphtali roads. “Why didn’t you tell me, father? Do you not trust me?”

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?

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WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

He placed his right hand on his forehead and sighed before looking back at her, making sure to catch her eyes with his own, holding her in place with his gaze. “Samaria, if I didn’t trust you, I would not be telling you what I’ve just revealed. If the Waterkeepers knew of our deception, we would be cut off completely. Our town, its vineyards, and its people would wither to nothing more than dust and rotted wood.” He approached me and grasped the clay cup from my hands. “This wine is nothing but the product of their whims. Their thirst for the flavors of our vineyards would not stay their hand of vengeance that would follow any defiance by those downriver, small or subtle it might be.”

“That does not explain why you would not tell me beforehand.” I could not imagine that he or any of those of our village would not trust my loyalty to my own family. Could they not trust me to not betray all I held dear?

“You don’t understand me, Samaria. You were not a partner with me in our meeting. You were a tool.”

I was quiet, even at his admission. There was something more honest in what my father was telling me — more honest than anything I had seen or felt in a long time.

He waited a few seconds, perhaps for some sort of outburst or interruption from me. When I did not provide one, he continued quickly, looking as if he hoped to smother any other potential arguments with his next words.

“Of course I could not tell you anything before the meeting. You were there to believe in my words for me. You were the one to be honest with Mayima Delaiah, as I could not. I had to be sure that she believed our words. The best deceit is hidden within honesty, as I had hidden it within yours. I had to make sure we got that water. If it meant lying to my own daughter, so be it.” He drank from the cup he took from me, a slow sip meant to savor the quality of our product.

It was the same wine that I had tasted, smooth, sweet and full-fruited. But in his face I did not see pleasure or satisfaction, only nausea and a hard swallow of the liquid. He set the cup down and turned away, walking out into the rain. I followed closely behind. He stopped at the very edge of the cliff, looking down at the precarious drop into the Flood-Delta, only a single wrong step away.

“I will not apologize for my lies to you, although I am sorry for them. You will hear many adages and lessons on the importance of honesty

and the wickedness of lies throughout your life. Their words carry wisdom, and I would be a poor father indeed if I did not admonish you to be honest. I am honest with you now, in hope that my honesty proves my sincerity to you. But all people lie. Deception is as easy on the lips as the truth is. At times it can do more good than honesty can ever hope to accomplish.”

He shifted his stare outwards then, looking at some point beyond even the snowy tops of the cliffs opposite us. “Deceit is not only a part of our work, but fundamental to it. If you want to follow in my footsteps, to work in this delicate balance of power that we call our world, you must learn this lesson.”

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THE FLEXIBLE APPLICATIONS OF WATER

by Zaiyv Luke-Alemán | Edited by BTN/Dylan & Matthew Redding



THEMED ARTICLE



RESOURCE

Fun fact, when I was in college, I almost drowned. And the reason why I survived is because I remembered my classes on hydrology.

Back in ye olden days, I was an undergraduate thinking about becoming a geology student. Originally I was there because I like opals, but something else kept me in the program (at least for a little while). For those unfamiliar with geology, the reason might seem ironic; I was fascinated by water.

We had a lesson about rivers and how they curve. There are really interesting rivers, some of which look like simple creeks. For example, there's a narrow waterway in England known as the Bolton Strid. While it seems like a pretty normal looking strip of water, it actually moves incredibly fast. Its surface is calm while the currents beneath are powerful enough to have shaped underwater cave systems, contributing

to its unusually high death rate. Currents are most powerful in their middle and at the bottom (making the iconic V-shape of a riverbed), and are weakest at their edges. Rivers like the Bolton Strid build their power through that highly centralized narrow shape, the water being much deeper than it appears due to the carving force of the current.

When I was visiting some friends over a summer vacation, we went to a river to play. A week before, my friends had swum across the river to an island and wanted me to try too. What we hadn't considered was that it had rained recently and the current was stronger than when they had swum it. I'm a naturally independent person who does not like to be rescued. Halfway to the island I start to realize how tired I am. And I start to realize... I won't be able to swim up river to it. I look back to where I came from and... I'm not going to have the energy to swim back. As someone who was

WORLDBUILDING KEY

Interested in the worldbuilding scale provided for this article? This scale was developed to communicate the extent of worldbuilding within their stories. An example of softer worldbuilding is MTV's *Teen Wolf*, and a harder example of worldbuilding is Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*.

SOFT ●○○○○ HARD

The worldbuilding is largely aesthetic. World elements usually look like (or are) Earth with few adjustments.

SOFT ○●○○○ HARD

Might rely more on already established tropes to inform the audience of their world/magic/science. There may be world details sprinkled in, however it is not evident that they belong to a carefully crafted system as opposed to one that is loosely defined.

SOFT ○○●○○ HARD

Stories like these may not take place on Earth, and often have a magic/science system the audience can generally follow. The worldbuilding may have small details that make it feel unique, which may be explored in shallow depth.

SOFT ○○○●○ HARD

The worldbuilding is large in either scope or scale, from which an audience could replicate similar spells/devices and remain consistent with the system it borrows from. At least one of the worldbuilding's complex systems is explored in depth.

SOFT ○○○○● HARD

Complex in both scope and scale. The systems and setting are detailed enough that the audience could replicate similar spells/devices and remain consistent with the system it borrows from. Explaining the setting can take a long time, and learning it can be difficult.

once confident in my swimming abilities, I am immediately humbled.

I had some instinct that if I called for help from my friends, I would panic. I would wave my arms around and drown while praying my friends would notice in time to save me. There's no lifeguard here, just the peaceful flow of water on a sunny day. My friends haven't even noticed what's happening. Everything slows down as my heart rate speeds up.

And I suddenly think of hydrology.

I remember how currents move through rivers, how they're powerful enough to shape landscapes. While I don't have the strength to swim to safety from where I am, I might have enough to swim if I'm closer to the shore. So I

take my remaining energy and, in a counterintuitive move, I get to the *middle* of the river. I tread water there, letting myself be taken by the current. And just like I remember from class, my speed picks up and I'm carried down. Water often carries debris to their curving edges. The force of the river erodes* the bed and pushes out these materials, sometimes moving boulders when they're strong enough. When I start to realize I've drifted from the river's center as much as I can, and I feel its current pulling me back towards its center, I know I can't stay any longer. I take my last bit of energy and swim to shore.

My friends are laughing on the island amongst themselves, completely unaware of what's happened. I'm trembling, not from the cold. When they come back and ask me why I didn't

join them, I don't mention what happened. I'm not sure why, but I didn't tell them about it until months later. I'm always thankful for my interest in hydrology. The things we're passionate about may seem silly, odd, or boringly mundane, but in rare instances they can be lifesaving.

Some of the things I love about hydrology are related to the way that water moves the earth, how it's literally used to shape diamonds, and how water keeps a record of our history intact. While worldbuilding with a team of people, we talked about water as a living library¹. We meant it in a magical sense, as in the water could reveal memories, but it does bring me back to how water interacts with the earth.

Water as Preservation

A really fascinating article about this focuses on the research of Robert DePalma². With an unparalleled stubbornness, he set out to prove an asteroid had caused a major extinction event on earth, finding evidence of tektites, or superheated glass, caused by the impact of an asteroid. Creatures that existed around the time of this asteroid belong to the K-T boundary (marked by a black line in geology), a mysterious moment of extreme damage to the earth full of acid rain, erupting volcanoes, and the very landscape of hell. The creatures of this time are hard to find fossils for, and within it is the hidden evolution of many reptiles into mammals.

What does water have to do with this? If you're familiar with paleontology, the answer is no surprise. Fossils are often made of the combination between silica and water. It's actually part of the process to create opals as well as other gem-like items such as amber (which is actually a type of fossilized resin). But, many common fossils are a much simpler interaction of mud: water and soil, silt, or clay (not necessarily silica) compressed and preserved

over millions of years. Usually, the pressure of compressed rock over time will flatten these fossils. DePalma discovered a mudslide that perfectly preserved many fish stunningly in 3D. In addition, he was able to find microtektites and tektites, or in other words, evidence of the asteroid's impact. As he investigated, he realized he wasn't just working in some general time around the K-T boundary. The fossils he was discovering *were* the K-T boundary. This incredibly rare find, protected from erosion, is due to a valuable natural archival process of the earth: a mudslide.

Water, in another form, is still also a wonderful preservative. In a famous example, we have Ötzi, a preserved murder victim over several thousand years old once encased in ice³. His frozen state, trapped in a glacier that eventually melted enough to reveal him, kept his body and some of his items intact. He is, as of today, the oldest preserved human ever discovered. What might have once been a mysterious death became a *cold case* recognized by the world ten years after he was found, and over five thousand years after his murder. For anyone hoping to build unique murder mysteries, this is definitely worth looking into. How can the elements influence evidence, whether that be the distortion caused by bodies found in rivers, or the preservation of bodies found in glaciers?

While these kinds of world elements can serve many different purposes, I like to think of it in the context of revising history. One of my favorite short stories that explores this is "The Virtue of Unfaithful Translations," by Minsoo Kang. In it, researchers realized that a moment of historic peace, which prevented a bloody war, was actually the result of two translators purposefully mistranslating and creating misunderstandings between two violent leaders. What was once considered a monumental moment of two world leaders suddenly became an example of political puppetry.

The Virtue of Unfaithful Translations by Minsoo Kang (2015)

WORLDBUILDING: SOFT ○○○●○ HARD

Within the context of reexamining the past with new evidence, what kind of histories are built into your worlds? What kind of existing powers, legacies, and precedents dominate your setting? And how could undeniable physical evidence never before revealed disrupt the status quo?

For example, what if Ötzi wasn't an unnamed person, but someone whose body went missing thousands of years ago that everyone thought had ascended to godhood? Not only had he not ascended, but he was also murdered! Who then gained from claiming Ötzi had ascended? Perhaps his murderer was considered a prophet for having witnessed a divine moment. After proclaiming this the "truth" of this godhood, said "prophet" then had a temple built for him. Generations of priests and nuns inherit this temple that amasses wealth and power, unknowingly because of a moment of passionate crime. And the revealing of that body? What would it do to the religious landscape? To what lengths would people go to prevent this from being revealed?

What kinds of tales can you build around hidden histories long thought lost? How might you use mudslides, fossils, or icebergs to tell your fascinating stories?

Kinds of Water

What kind of water people have access to also affects what kinds of resources they have available. This isn't a look at everything, but just a quick sweep of some underutilized perspectives in regard to water.

Salt

Salt water is often found in the ocean, though occasionally in lakes. Some notable saltwater lakes (like in Melbourne, Australia and Utah, United States) are often red or pink in color, making them visually striking. These lakes have algae or bacteria with high carotenoids, a type of pigment that ranges in color. Depending on the conditions of these kinds of lakes, the water's color may be seasonal or permanent. In Australia Lake Hillier, for example, is always pink.

Other salt lakes, like Chaka in Tibet, are a result of tectonic plate movements and a lack of trees. This lack of trees prevents salt water from being converted into fresh water, making it highly saline. The lake is iconic for its mirror-like clear waters, often attracting tourists. Like Chaka, the Rann mudflats of India are producers of salt.

The workers of Rann's salt farms are often migratory, in part due to the wicked monsoon season that keeps people at bay when not harvesting. The intensity of the monsoons can carry debris that creates surreal imagery in the dryer season, like a ship's mast laying in the salt desert⁴.

There are different techniques for harvesting salt. In lakes with a high abundance of it, sometimes one can simply pick up the crusting piles on the edges of lakes. All one might need to do is dry it to use it. Even colored salt is usually safe to consume in reasonable quantities. Other salt farmers collect salt by evaporating seawater, either by leaving out collected salt water in the sun or boiling the water. Unique salt harvesting techniques like that which can be found in Korea would use barrels sunk into the earth, working with the tidal cycle to collect salt⁵. How might salt harvesting techniques or an abundance of this resource influence your worldbuilding?

In places with less access to salt, the scarcity of it may make it incredibly valuable. Across sev-

eral empires in ancient West Africa, for example, salt could sometimes be exchanged for gold⁶. In this case, salt was mined rather than collected by lakes, but it makes us consider the value of salt, both as an additive in flavor as well as a valuable preservative. Salt was also implied to be as valuable as gold in ancient China, and in Rome and Korea it was sometimes used as a form of payment for soldiers.⁷ For Korea, in particular during the Joseon era, the availability of salt fluctuated in relation to the weather, making the resource harder to come by.

Fresh

Fresh water, great for many farms and importantly, for drinking, is plentiful on land. If you're building lakes and rivers, consider that you most likely also want to have a thriving plant ecosystem nearby. Today, we have water purifying technology that mimics the way trees convert salt water into fresh water. This is especially true for trees like mangroves, which sometimes crystallize salt on its leaves through its purification system. However, other kinds of plants may be killed off if salinity is too high. For those interested in solarpunk, a dive into the water cycle can be helpful in identifying how characters shape their societies and technology in rhythm with the earth's natural systems.

Deforestation can be detrimental to the water cycle, sometimes leading to desertification. When deforestation is a result of animal agriculture, runoff (partially made up of fecal matter) can poison local waters. The importance of plant life in retaining topsoil and reducing erosion might be helpful for farm-based societies to consider in a solarpunk setting.

Infamously, the American Dust Bowl led to an economic crisis in the 1920s known as the Great Depression, due in part to neglecting soil quality. This poor soil prevented the earth from

properly retaining water, thus the “dust” of the Dust Bowl. The reintroduction of native plants and plant matter (sometimes called rewilding) is an important consideration for maintaining fresh water.

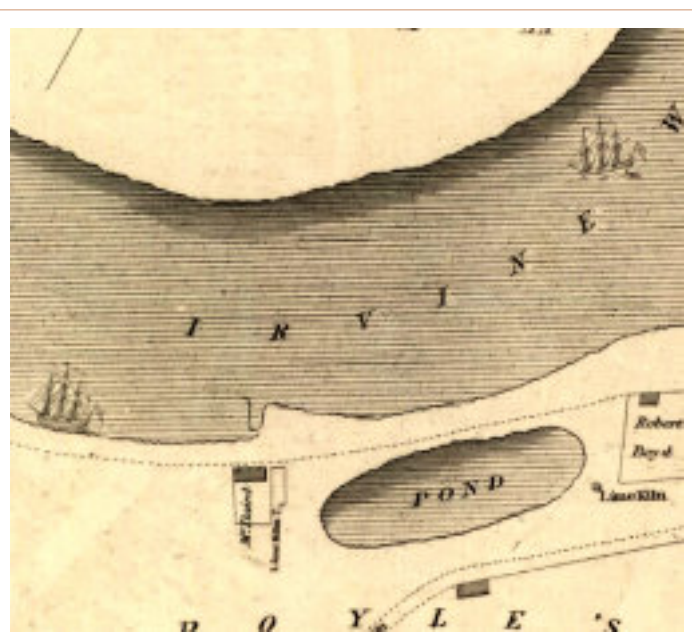
Alternatively, is your society facing a malicious water-hoarding overlord who plans to profit off of poor water management like the iconic *Mad Max*? What are drastic changes to a landscape that may affect your characters over long periods of time, either knowingly or by accident? And how will your characters survive?

Mad Max: Fury Road (2015)

WORLDBUILDING: SOFT ○○●○○ HARD
TECHNOLOGY: SOFT ○●○○○ HARD

Brackish

Like all things, there is not a clear either-or. We often think of water as either salt water (sometimes called saline) or fresh water. Brackish areas, such as the Hudson River or the River Thames, are a mix of both salt and fresh water. It can also occur in a variety of other places



including underground water tables, lakes, marshes, and seas. Many brackish ecosystems are a unique mix of freshwater and saltwater fauna and flora.

Estuaries, like rivers, can connect inland goods to the ocean, making them great places for trading. Some famous civilizations were founded near estuaries, like ancient Egypt's delta of the Nile River. Even earlier the city of Ur (located in modern day Iraq), just a bit east of ancient Egypt, was founded near the Euphrates River's estuary. However, the region between Ur and Egypt is perhaps better known as the Fertile Crescent. This area of land created many important civilizations. Considering our previous discussion on the availability of water and its interaction with technology, it's no surprise that agriculture and irrigation sprung out of this Fertile Crescent region made up of rivers, estuaries, and seas.

The unique qualities of estuaries, such as their plentiful sources of drinking water just on the border of the sea, make them incredibly valuable to many kinds of animals (including humans) and plants. They are a hotbed for mating season and tend to attract migratory flocks. So too, do estuaries attract human travelers

from all over for trade, exchanging of ideas, and learning of languages. How do brackish waters influence your ecosystem? How can areas like estuaries affect your city's relationship with global trading of goods or ideas?

If you don't use water in your worldbuilding, what unique properties of your elements share similar qualities? How can your alternative element be used to create technology in ways that are different from water's capabilities?

This article is not remotely close to covering the vast and fascinating effect water has on the earth (or even culture). We have not talked about tsunamis, bog bodies, the explosive interaction of water on lava, or expanding ocean floors. And that is nowhere near all of the awesome topics hidden within hydrology. What kind of worlds will you build with hydrology in mind? How will creatures adapt to your landscapes? How will the combination of time and water influence your characters? What technology or magic will you build out of this incredibly *fluid* force of nature?

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End Notes

- * Erosion is the process of weathering on a surface by elements such as wind or water. This process can wear down rocks, sometimes cutting off chunks or smoothing down surfaces.
- 1 The world referred to is the setting for the following anthology: *Quislaona: A Dominican Fantasy Anthology*, edited by Zaivy Luke-Alemán, New York: Dominican Writers Association, February 2023.
- 2 Douglas Preston, "[The Day the Dinosaurs Died](#)," *The New Yorker*, March 29, 2019.
- 3 Gina Dimuro, "[Meet Ötzi The Iceman, The Oldest Preserved Human Being Ever Found](#)," *All That's Interesting*, January 21, 2022.
- 4 Ocean Film Company & Sreya Chettarjee, "[India's Surreal Salt Desert](#)," *BBC Travel*, Sep. 19, 2019.
- 5 "[Korea's Rich Salt History: A Look at the Little Known Culture of 'Jayeom'](#)," *Gastro Tour Seoul* (blog), accessed March 9, 2023.
- 6 Mark Cartwright, "[The Salt Trade of Ancient West Africa](#)," *World History Encyclopedia*, March 6, 2019.
- 7 Kim Eui-Han, "[Salt: White Gold](#)," *Everyday Life in Joseon-Era Korea*, Boston: Brill, January 1, 2014.

FORECAST

by Dudley Mutatina | Edited by Andrew Booth & BTN/Dylan



FANTASY (LOW)



WRITING



MAGIC

Belding

Belding hated having damp feet, but he dragged himself down the flooded street anyway. Water sloshed in his boots. The crowds lining the street huddled under umbrellas, too busy protesting politics to notice him. Neither the frequent flashes of lightning nor the torrential downpour deterred them in the slightest. “Bunch of idiots wasting their time,” he muttered. No one paid him any mind as he headed towards the house, but he still turned his head every few seconds to ensure he wasn’t being followed. Better safe than sorry. Belding nonchalantly tapped his chest to the rhythm of his heartbeat, creating a clone of himself that he stationed at the street corner. The real Belding popped up his collar and continued through the thunderstorm.

Avina opened the door after the second knock. She pulled him inside and bolted it shut.

“Think you could ease up on the rain?” Belding’s jacket was soaked through.

“It’s late April. No one’s gonna suspect anything.” She stood by the window and peered through the drapes. Belding joined her.

The house overlooked the main road leading down to the community center just across the river. The water threatened to spill onto the bridge. Officers herded dedicated supporters and

disgruntled opposition alike to the staging area for the governor's address.

"How'd it go on your end?" she asked.

"Four plus me. Everyone's at their stations."

Police lights flashed in the direction of the governor's house. Just across the street, mixed in with the crowd, one of Belding's clones popped up its collar.

Avina smiled wide. "Right on time."

Belding dropped onto the couch. "Now it's my turn to be all warm and cozy."

"You know what keeps me nice and warm?" She pulled on a black rain poncho. "Money."

He closed his eyes and smiled to himself. "Then it's about to get toasty."

Edvin

Edvin adjusted his tie in the mirror and ran a hand over his shaved head, the edges perfectly trimmed. Despite being in his twenties, his parents never let him grow it out. Said it made him look more distinguished. Every time he came home to make a public appearance, they immediately took him to their barber.

At least he had a say over the suit. It was tailor made and fit him perfectly — light gray looked good against his brown skin. He straightened his posture and forced his face to smile. Maybe looking good would give him the confidence he needed to get through the day.

"You almost ready?" Marietta crossed her arms and leaned against the doorframe. Lukas lingered awkwardly behind her. Lukas stood a good foot taller than the both of them, despite being the youngest.

Edvin sighed deeply, his weak attempt at a smile fading. "Physically, yes. Emotionally, no."

Rumors about Edvin's clairvoyance circulated the news. People accused him of rigging the election in his father's favor.

“Governor and psychic son had unfair advantage over competition”

“I knew he couldn’t be trusted.’ Candidates come forward”

“Local medium caught in large political scandal”

Today, the whole family was making a public appearance to deny the rumors and allegations. He knew better than to be public about his ability. People who had insight into the future frequently went... missing, soon after their powers became public knowledge. Moments like this, Edvin wished he had a less interesting ability, like flying or telekinesis.

Marietta and Lukas joined him in front of the mirror. “I doubt they’re even gonna believe me,” Edvin said, “it’s already in people’s heads. How would I even prove I’m not?”

“We’re beyond trying to prove you don’t have any powers,” Marietta said coolly, “the primary goal is to prove you and dad didn’t mess with the elections.”

“We have extra security, too. So, at least you don’t have to worry about anything bad happening,” Lukas added.

Edvin closed his eyes. If he had better control of his ability, maybe he could have predicted what the day would bring. It definitely would have put him at ease. But every attempt turned up blank. When he tried focusing on the future, all he saw was a rush of water pulling him deeper into its depths. He clutched his chest and steadied his breathing. All he wanted to do was move abroad under a new name until the whole thing blew over.

“Kids? Oh, there you are.” Their mother walked past the door, putting on her earrings. “Let’s go, the motorcade is waiting.”

“Remind me to never get into politics,” Edvin muttered.

Marietta placed a hand on Edvin’s shoulder and smiled sympathetically. “After this, I doubt they’d ever let you run.”

Avina

Conjuring a storm this size took a lot out of Avina, but it would be worth it once their plan succeeded. She pulled up her hood and slipped outside. She immediately became one with the rain,

weaving her way between people like a fish in the ocean. It made her feel alive, and as long as she kept the rain falling, no one could detect her.

Despite all the rain, there was still a large turnout. What were people so worked up about? Whether the governor's kid actually cheated or not, what difference would it make? Avina would never understand the die-hard political fanatics.

She moved towards the beginning of the motorcade, closest to the governor's house. Large crowds pushed up against the security personnel blocking street access. No one noticed her. To them, she was just a sudden gust of wind and water.

The first car passed through the gates. It was a decoy, carrying only security. The second was also a decoy with more security. The third carried the wife and daughter, followed by another decoy. Then came the one she wanted. Right in the middle, the target and the other son.

Avina focused on the following car, and her heart skipped with glee as a bolt of lightning struck the engine. People scrambled back as the car swerved and came to a stop, smoke rising from the hood. The cars behind it slammed on their brakes. She floated to catch up to the rest of the motorcade and did the same.

Her plan was working flawlessly, but it was still too early to celebrate. The next step would determine their success or failure. The target car swerved and rammed into the bridge railing. Security yelled at everyone to move back. Avina waited with bated breath. Even the rain seemed to slow down.

After a minute – that felt more like an hour – the driver's door finally opened. Avina smirked and seized the opportunity without hesitation.

Marietta

Marietta knew from the very beginning that this wasn't a regular storm. Spring rain had a calm, caring nature about it. This storm was near impossible to see through and lightning flashed like it had a vendetta against the world. She scanned



the entire street as they left the house. She blinked a few times and the storm cleared from her vision. She narrowed her eyes and zoomed in on the main street leading to the community center. Her eyes registered each individual person. Nothing out of the ordinary. Though she never understood the loyalty – or hatred – that got people to stand in the pouring rain all day for a political figure.

An attendant held an umbrella for her and her mother and ushered them into their vehicle. Her mom sat down with a long sigh. “Please don’t do that in front of the cameras. We don’t need another scandal on our hands.”

Marietta blinked and returned to normal vision. “Just wanted a better look at the crowd.”

“I can’t wait to get this over with.”

The car lurched forward. Marietta leaned her head against the window and watched the water cascade down. Between the rain and the tinted windows, she could barely make out the people outside.

“You children shouldn’t have to deal with all this.” Her mother placed her hand around Marietta’s shoulder.

Marietta was about to respond when a call came through the driver’s radio. “*Six and seven are stalled out.*”

Marietta screamed as lightning struck the car. The lights flickered off as the car screeched to a halt. She turned to her mom wide-eyed. “Edvin.”

Lukas

Lukas climbed into the car after his brother. He swore cars were getting smaller. His legs pressed against the back of the front seat. Fortunately, it was just a few minutes to the center. He shifted uncomfortably until finding a decent sitting position.

Edvin’s leg bounced up and down as he stared blankly ahead. Lukas wasn’t sure what to say. What could he say? He didn’t know what it was like to have an ability like the other two.

He opened his mouth to offer words of encouragement, but was interrupted by a flash of lightning from the front windshield. A loud crackling sound shook the entire car.

“Shit!” The driver exclaimed. Lukas and Edvin held on to the grab handles as the car swerved violently and crashed into the bridge railing. Dark smoke billowed from the hood. Lukas exchanged a concerned look with Edvin.

“That was some wicked lightning.” The driver undid his seatbelt. “Get out before this thing blows.” He opened the door and a huge gust of wind and rain filled the car. Lukas shielded his eyes. The driver cursed under his breath as he stepped out — although it almost looked like he was pulled out. The door slammed shut after him.

Then they were airborne. Lukas’s stomach lurched as the car plummeted nose first into the rushing river. They landed with a loud *splashing* sound. Lukas rubbed his head after it banged against the front seat. He looked to the empty space next to him. “Edvin? Edvin!”

Large cracks spiderwebbed in the windshield and murky water quickly seeped in all around him. His heart raced as he pushed against the door, but it didn’t budge. Not even the windows would open. By now, the entire car was submerged. He awkwardly scrambled to the front and began kicking the windshield.

Edvin

Edvin held his breath as he was engulfed by water. It had an almost living presence to it. He couldn’t explain why or how. Even more strange, it felt like he was... being carried off? Did they drive into the river? His lungs were about to burst.

He suddenly hit the ground hard, landing face first in the mud and gasping for air. Two sets of hands were immediately on him. He tried screaming out, but someone covered his mouth. They hoisted him to his feet. Two men in gray rain ponchos stood on either side. Neither looked at him, and their hoods obscured most of their faces. Who were they? How’d he end up outside of the car? Where was Lukas?

In front of him, a woman stood. Or at least, he thought it was a person. She appeared to be part of the rain itself. She smiled.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance. I’ll keep this short: you work with me, I’ll work with you. Do what we say, and the rest of your family will be left alone.”

What was she talking about? Edvin writhed but the two men tightened their grips.

The woman tilted her head. “I recommend you cooperate. Nod if you agree.”

Whatever was going on, he had to play along. For the sake of his family. He nodded slowly. The woman clasped her hands together. “Smart decision. We’ll chat more later. Gotta tie up some... loose ends.” She winked. “Oh, don’t worry. So long as you don’t give these fine gentlemen any trouble, your family will be fine. Most likely.”

A violent gust of wind sent rain whipping around them and she was gone. The men half dragged, half carried him off. Edvin tried to get a read on them, but both of their futures turned up empty. They were oddly lifeless, yet surprisingly strong.

The day just kept getting worse.

Valencia

Valencia held the phone away from her ear as her husband shouted at his staff. “*We hired you for a reason. Go do your fucking job!*”

“Roldo, what’s going on over there?”

“*I’ll figure this out darling, don’t worry.*”

“Figure what – Roldo?” The call ended. She dialed Edvin’s number, but there was no answer. She tried. Lukas. He picked up after the first ring.

“*Mom?*”

“Lukas, sweetheart, are you boys okay? What’s going on?”

“*Lightnini... car... in the riv... got out but... phone’s...*”

“Lukas, you’re breaking up. Where are you two? What’s going on?”

“I’m... k... vin’s gone...”

“Hang tight. Your father and I... I’ll figure some – Lukas?”

Valencia’s heart sank and her face grew hot. She buried her head in her hands and took slow, deep breaths to contain herself. All these years, they’d tried so hard to keep Edvin’s ability secret. She knew something like this would happen if people found out. If only she hadn’t married into a family with abilities. Her parents had warned her.

“Mom?”

Valencia brought her head up. “Get me out of this car.” She pushed against the door but it refused to budge. “I’ll walk there if I have to. Unlock the doors,” she demanded the driver.

“The locks are busted, Madam Percival.” The driver slammed into his door to no avail.

“The lightning must have messed with the interface,” Marietta said.

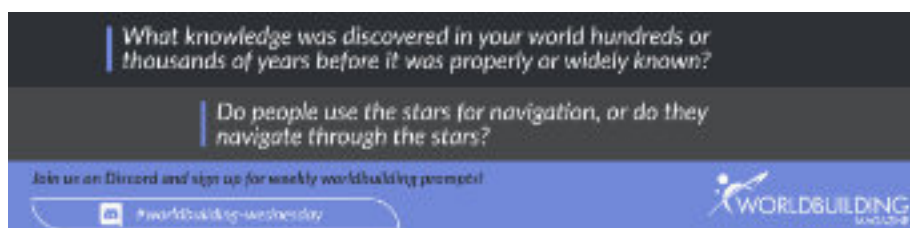
“Then turn this car around.”

The driver turned the keys in the ignition, but the engine merely sputtered and gave out. The car merely swayed gently from side to side, as if floating.

Marietta’s eyes switched from brown to black as she looked around. “The whole street’s flooded. We wouldn’t go anywhere even if we wanted to.”

“That’s impossible. It’s just another thunderstorm.”

“This isn’t a normal storm, mom.”



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?

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#worldbuilding-wednesday

WORLDBUILDING WEDNESDAY

Roldo

Roldo had quit smoking three years ago, just before swearing in to his role as governor. After that first year sober, he'd felt like he was given a second chance at life.

The three packs in his coat pocket weighed on him, despite two being empty. Smoking was the only thing that eased his nerves as of late. He hated that it worked. Being associated with an outed clairvoyant only worsened an already stressful position.

He leaned against the side of the community center. A secluded spot below a covering where no one would spot him. He instructed his advisors to not bother him unless they had an update. They'd never find the boy. But there was no way he could ever tell them. Or Valencia.

Roldo's hand shook as he brought the cigarette to his lips. He held the smoke in his mouth for a few seconds before blowing it out. If only his problems could float away like that. "God I hope this works." He went to take another drag, but a strong gust of wind ripped the cigarette from his hands.

"Smoking's bad for you, you know."

She appeared as silently and suddenly as ever. Roldo still couldn't tell if she was fully human or a spirit, only ever appearing like an apparition in the rain. She held the cigarette between her fingers and examined it curiously.

He held his hand out for her to return it. "All this thunder and lightning seems a bit excessive," he grumbled.

"I don't tell you how to do your job." She casually flicked the cigarette into the mud and chuckled. "Though you clearly need all the help you can get."

Roldo resisted the urge to snap at her, knowing full well what she was capable of. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a briefcase the size of a keychain. As he tossed it to her, he reverted it to its original size. Not nearly as useful an ability as summoning an entire thunderstorm, but still effective when it counted.

"It's all there," he assured.

“I should hope so, or who knows what might happen to him. Or worse: your career,” she mocked. She clicked it open and smiled at the bills inside. “When it comes to making it rain, you’ve got me beat, old man.”

“Will... will he be...” Roldo clenched his fists and stared at his feet.

She slammed the case shut with an overdramatic *snap*. “Now you want to play the concerned parent?”

“Just... don’t hurt him. Ok?”

She laughed. A cold, icy sound. Roldo looked around nervously to make sure they weren’t being watched. “I’ll hold up my end. But I can’t guarantee anything after he’s out of our hands.”

“Hold on. But you said—”

She saluted him as the wind picked up around them. “Pleasure doing business with you, governor. May we never meet again.”

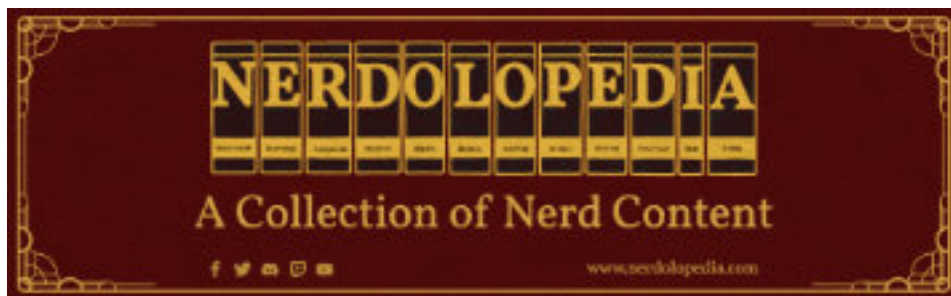
She was gone.

The rain in the courtyard finally let up and an eerie silence followed. Roldo’s entire body trembled. He had made a mistake. But there was no going back. This was the only way out of his situation. If he ever wanted a chance to run again...

“Governor Percival.” One of his advisors ran to him. Their umbrella did little to keep them dry. “Police say they might have a lead.”

It would lead to a dead end. Roldo had made sure of it. And while he may never be able to face his family, he still had to face the people. He had a re-election to win. And an image to save.

He straightened his tie and followed the advisor. “Show me.”



Belding

The commotion outside didn't quite sync up with the livestreams. Not that Belding expected it to. Most news stations cut their feeds at the first signs of trouble. Which, wouldn't that be the best time to record? People loved a good show.

Fortunately, Clone Number One had a clear view from an adjacent rooftop. It live-streamed the chaos straight to Belding's phone. There was something comedic about watching them splash about. The drivers and security detail all argued with each other. Firemen tried desperately to pry open the car doors. The other son narrowly escaped the sinking car and was now being examined by a medic. An excessive amount of security surrounded the car with the wife and daughter. As if any of them would be worth more than the target.

The back door opened and footsteps scuffled into the main room. "I told you dunderheads to be gentle!" Belding looked up from his phone and grinned wide. "Why, 'ello govna! Edvin, right? Can I call you Ed? Big fan."

The governor's son narrowed his brows in confusion. Or maybe it was anger. Fear? Sadness? The tape over his mouth made it hard to tell, but any of those would have made sense.

"Oh, come on. I've waited my whole life to say that. At least pretend to laugh." Belding jumped up from the couch and walked towards them. Ed flinched, but Belding's clones maintained their grip. He smiled proudly. It had taken him years to perfect the art of cloning.

"Don't worry. As I'm sure my associate told you, we won't hurt you. Assuming you play nice." Belding examined Ed closely. His suit looked expensive, despite the mud and grass stains. He was certainly well kept. Composed, even in the face of danger. Belding expected nothing less. "Sorry about the suit though. Hate to see a fine thing like that go to waste. But you probably saw it coming, right?" He laughed to himself.

Part of Belding felt a little guilty. As bad as his relationship with his parents was, he couldn't imagine one of them trying to sell him on the Dark Trade. The kid hadn't done anything wrong. He was just born into the wrong family with a highly coveted ability.

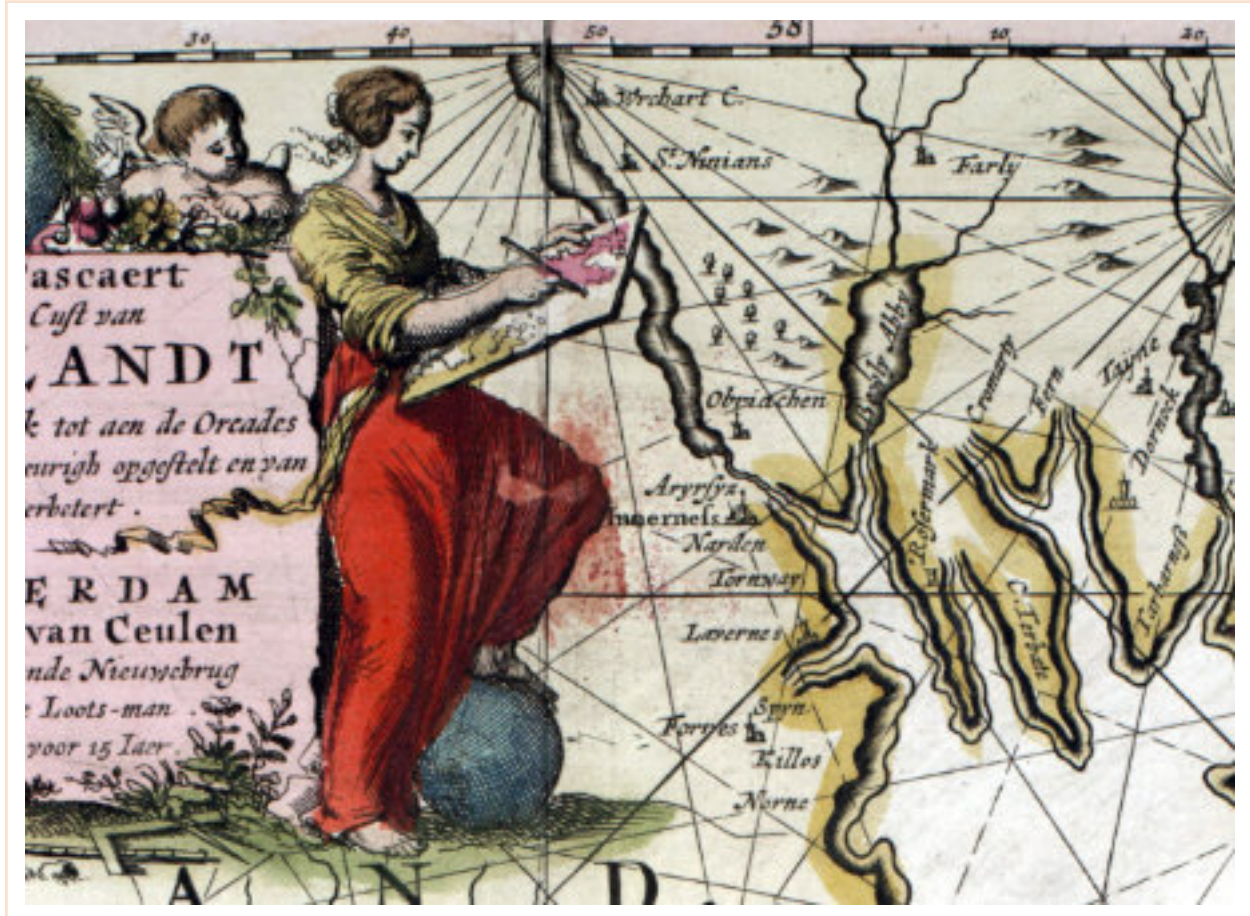
But the other half of him couldn't stop thinking about the reward. Clairvoyants went for *fortunes* on the Dark Trade. One as high profile as Edvin Percival would go for at least a few million. Belding had already been contacted by numerous buyers. He was confident he and Avina would be able to milk as much money out of him as humanly possible, on top of what they were getting for pulling off this gig. He smiled even wider at the prospect.

The back door flew open a second time, accompanied by wind and rain. Avina held the briefcase up for them to see. "Good to go."

Any lingering guilt faded away. Belding placed a hand on Ed's shoulder and gave a sympathetic smile. "Hey, believe me when I say it's nothing personal." After today, the kid would be none of their concern.

Nothing more than another paycheck.

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GALLERY OF WORLDS

Compiled by Ike Riva

A Map of the Merdonian Empire and Surrounding Lands (c. 1327–1330 NCA)

digital art

— Dakota B.

This map depicts the Empire of Merdonia and the surrounding lands during the reign of Emperor Josephus I of Merdonia, c. January 1327 NCA (Neo-Classical Age), just before the Third Merdonian War (the central conflict of the story). Though a minor character, Zephyr will be part of a small ensemble (a la "Merry" or "Pippin").

To create this, I used Photoshop CC, and downloaded assets: digitized iconography (K.M. Alexander) and a vintage border (Tom Chalky) to provide historical realism and grounding.

The work [Mythic] is a fantastical mythological dramatization of the English Civil War, taking Northern Renaissance Art paintings (specifically the work of Pieter Breugel the Elder) as inspiration for other events and periods. So, whenever I do work on artistic elements for worldbuilding, I do research of the specific period. Including material details in your worldbuilding adds believability. Take the time to find the primary source and use that as your springboard.

It took me eight months to get to this version – why? Because I wanted to understand how maps were made, what they looked like, and

why they looked like that. Going through this process not only gained an appreciation for cartography for me, but it offered the chance to gain feedback and help from people who knew better about Earth science. They gave me notes on plate tectonics and biomes, river placement, city placement, and I couldn't have completed this without their help. Don't be afraid to ask for help!

Art is just as much a communal effort as it is a solo endeavor. You can't do this by yourself. Feedback and research help art more than living in your own head about your own ideas – you have to share them with someone else. So take the adventure – find the research, live in it for a while, and ask around. It really does work.

In Starlight

digital art

— Braken

This art is a piece set in the world of Song and Inks, a fantasy world which has a magic setting based on sounds – more precisely, the music of the spheres; the sound of all astronomical objects in the sky, refracting in and on all objects in the world. The stars scream and shine, and the mages hear the fabric of this melody, attune themselves to its movements and nuances, and are able to add little accents, notes that would change the fabric of the world around them – and the more voices join the chorus to create a spell, the more this spell is effective; the louder it echoes.

Esper, a mage, is the main character of this story, and the subject of this painting. As such, she is heavily influenced by the entire setting

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K.M. Alexander's Fantasy Map Brushes

Design Goods by Tom Chalky



A Map of the Merdonian Empire and Surrounding Lands (c. 1327–1330 NCA)

around her, but is also able to influence it through her own Voice. But Esper lives in changing times, in an old Republic that is just on the brink of collapse. What would the apocalypse – the destruction of a world system– mean in a being that is entangled to such an extent to the fabric of the world?

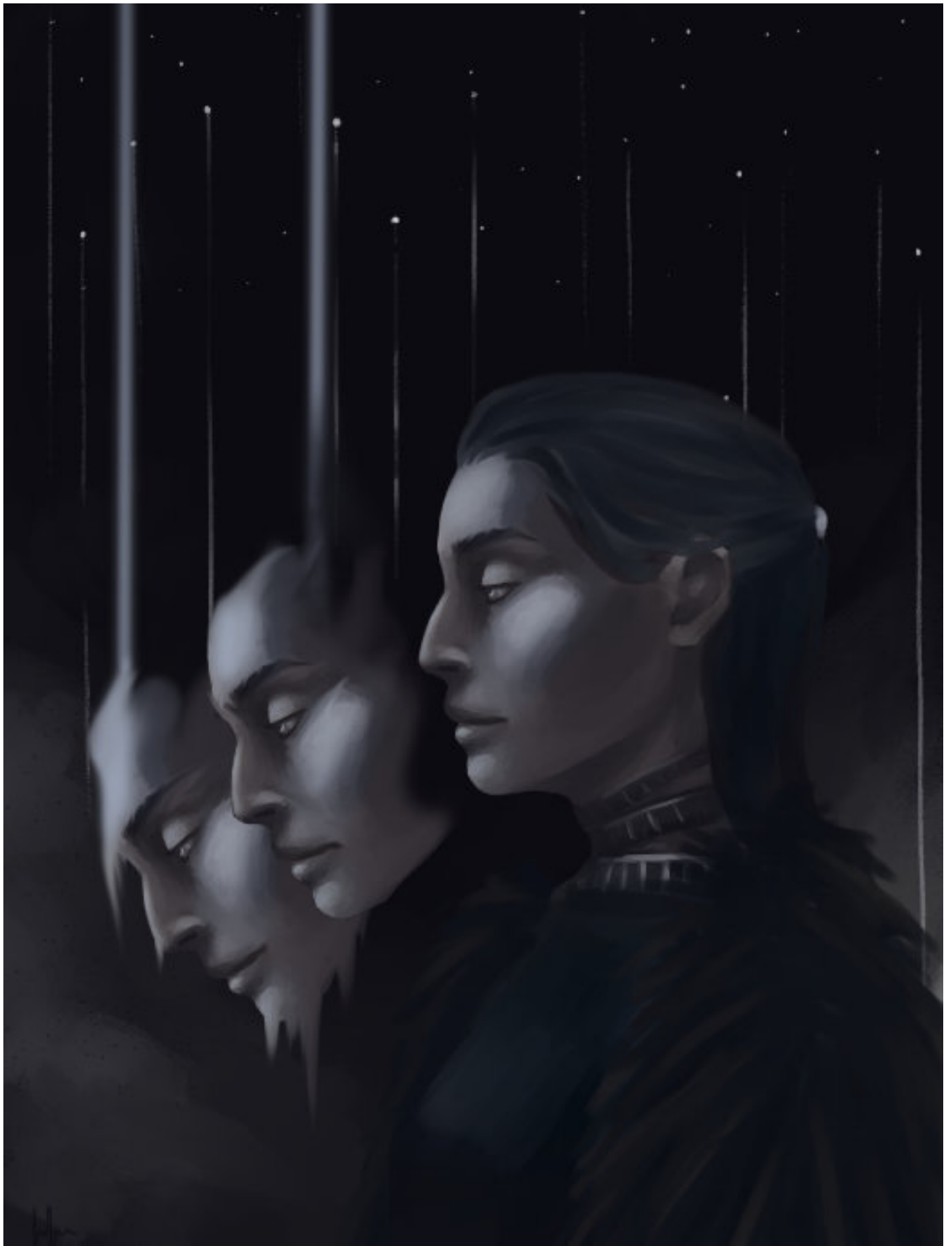
When I paint for *Songs and Inks*, I try to depict the mythos, the effect the characters, the magic and the world would have, more than actual scenes of the novel. In a way, I try to represent the way my characters in this world would, themselves, do art and express their own vision. Here, the Stars, representing both her deities and the idea of a structure she has always known, and their Voice, the magic that is the very thing she has dedicated her being to, fall upon the main character, tearing away her different emotions, her different representations of herself, untying her sacred

garments. The result of this cataclysm isn't shown – which of the faces was the real one? Is this change a good, or a bad thing?

When I work or look at worldbuilding art and visual representations, I try to see what it shows about the world. More than the subject depicted, what matters is the way this subject is depicted: the angle of the “shot”, the color palette, the mood, and mostly the style. What does it say about the world, what clues of more general realities are in there? What is interesting is to see what the visual medium adds to a worldbuilding that is often mostly based on text. I especially like recurring motifs in an artist’s depiction of a world, and which elements the artist seems to favor. When I paint

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@drawbraken on Instagram



In Starlight



for a specific world, even when I am not the creator, I seek to build a form of visual library that would both bring interest and coherence to the way people watching the art imagine said world. I especially like when, after reading the story, the art suddenly reveals more or gains sense. The way the eye is directed by the art composition especially tells us what the artist wanted us to see first, what are the elements that are the core of the scene, and perhaps of the world.

A Sword of Atlain


India ink, various inks on vellum

— *themightycaolf*

An *Anverian* knight, kingdom of high chivalry and honor. She wears quality wargear, with a few special additions: an equestrian helm worn over a secret helm, splint greaves, and cuir-bouilli for the lower cannons and greaves. A fine protective panoply, against foes be they fellow knights or beasts. Though unseen, the sacred name of her revered god, *Merius Titeros*, abbreviated as *MT*, is etched within the equestrian helm, a small little personal charm to remind her that her goddess is always near.

To create this particular image, I looked to history for inspiration, typically this means going to manuscriptminiatures.com and trying to find anything that popped out at me. As for the process of putting ink to paper, I simply sketched it with pencil, then drew over it using a mix of Zebra G-pens with Noodler's India ink, a Tombow Fudenosuke Hard Tip Brush Pen, and Pigma Microns for fine detail. I work traditionally, save the off chance I color something. What do I think is good visual worldbuilding? I've not decided on what's good but when it comes to visual worldbuilding I like, I like to see the thought put into something beyond what convention tells us should be. It's not enough to simply say, "These people make clothes out of reeds, so I drew someone in a reed cloak", how do the reeds fit to their body?



A Sword of Atlain 

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ManuscriptMiniatures.com

[@ThemightyCaolf](https://twitter.com/ThemightyCaolf) on X

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How does winter-wear differ from summer wear? How do they style buckles, leather ties?

I cheat a little and reference real world historic examples often, most of the reasoning is already put there for me, but this is a means to mitigate what I often feel a lot of settings are lacking visually — intent. I see a lot of artists start creating a design thinking like a designer: "How will the audience view this silhouette? What colors compliment each other? What is utterly practical?" In my opinion they should don the glasses of the people in their setting, their justifications, their reasoning, their intent. There's no reason to paint the world of another people through our reasonings and logic when these systems and ideas differ from person to person, culture to culture, and time period to time period.

Ichthys Station

digital art

— *SpiderQueenLong*

This piece shows "Ichthys Station," a key location in the lore of ChangedStars. When the Human Empire vaulted itself into the final frontier, it did so for conquest and exploitation; this shipyard was their forward base for these operations. After losing a war of aggression to an interspecies alliance and human rebels, the station was reconfigured to be a diverse urban center and travel hub between the various regions of charted space.

When drawing structures and vehicles, I consider who made them and why: the ideology & culture of those factions, what values and evolutionary constraints/resources impact their designs, and what functions they serve. Spaceships in all Sci-fi settings are uniquely tailored to the peoples that made them. In ChangedStars, Human ships are traditionally boxy and greebled, functional and brutal. These ships are run to the bone, decades past their shelf life, and hacked into yet more roles and

longer service with patchy repairs. Thren craft are organic, ancient, and evoke nature and harmony, favoring softer shapes and curves. Murai vessels are akin to their hives: hexagonal interiors and many-limbed practical exteriors.

The crux of ChangedStars is the fusion of these manifestations and evoking the multifaceted interactions. Trinity vessels, such as the one prominently approaching the station in the foreground of this image represent the new culture of comradery emerging in the wake of war, rehabilitation, and union.

Even in a scene showing no people, the echoes of culture and history of the setting, scars of its conflicts and contradictions, as well as its triumphs, is inescapable.

This is ChangedStars.

The Flames of Sias

watercolor on paper

— *Christine M. E. Hansen*

I do not write typical stories. Worldbuilding, for me, is as integral to the story as the plot itself. In fact, many would probably consider my world, from which this piece derives, to be entirely worldbuilding! Personally, I do not think there is any real distinction between worldbuilding and "storytelling" or "plot-building." Treating them as separate entities I think is what leaves a lot of modern fantasy and sci-fi authors a bit unfocused or even disconnected. Too often, I read a work and it becomes clear that the author drafted their world and plots separate from each other. Often, these authors create their world and then map a plot onto it as a secondary element. Sometimes it is vice versa, and the world is just eye candy. And it becomes rather obvious that is the case. I treat them as a singular entity. The worldbuilding tells as much story as the plot does. So, I speak of the "world-story."



Ichthys Station

My world-story is a mythopoeic collection of legends from the creation of the world by the gods, the making of one of the chosen families of humanity at the very start, and specifically the history and genealogy of said family to its very last member. The story spans roughly a thousand years (give or take), and centers on many different characters, events, and tribulations.

The legends initially were designed as background for a planned novel, which I have abandoned in favor of just letting the “worldbuilding” tales, which informed it, speak for themselves. As a result, while much of the collection was plotted and outlined, I have actively allowed for my artwork to actually shape and change elements. For instance, this very scene above. Dragons were not a major

feature of my work until recently, when I specifically began painting multiple scenes depicting dragons in battle and conflict with each other and with people. This is one such scene, which I spent hours (spanning over two days) painting with inks. I used three colors of inks (red, white, and black) and then diluted them with water to blend. When I finally finished this piece, I looked at it and a story came from it. I saw riding the back of that dragon, the secondary main antagonist, the pseudo-deity Sias, who now rides and terrorizes the world in the climactic final battles on his black dragon, destroying towns, homes, holy sites... This was a whole new scene I had never outlined or plotted out prior.

It is part of my philosophy that while we do want to plan out our work, to develop that cohesion and coherence, we should never be strict about it. Visualizing your work and allowing those visuals to inform and even

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[christinehansinga at Deviantart](#)

change the shape and character of it (even radically to the extent that your plots change) is an essential element of storytelling and worldbuilding. Gardening is always more important than outlining in my view. Imagine the outline as the fences for your garden. They are guidelines or rails. But sometimes the garden, to truly be healthy, outgrows those confines and goes beyond them. Flowers best flourish when given room to grow (but do pull the weeds out). And in this case, some of those flowers came from visualization. Visual art often can be the source of seeds (and the water) for your world-story garden. Do not neglect it.

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The Flames of Sias 

ASK US ANYTHING

by B. H. Pierce

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 do I introduce a religion in my story?

Well, to answer that question I'm going to have to make a few assumptions. First, I must assume that the religion is important to the world. A religion practiced in a single valley in an isolated mountain range wouldn't really be worth introducing. Second, I must assume the religion is important to the story. If it's in one chapter in a nine-book epic what's the point of throwing it in? Finally, I have to assume that it is well-built and filled in. If it is both important to the world and story, but all you know is the name of a few hymns and the names of three of the seven gods in the pantheon you have more work to do. By assuming that all three of these things are true, we can move on to actually answering your question.

Introducing a religion into your story can be very helpful to engagement and immersion. Everyone knows what religion is, so you won't have to do much explaining of the basic concepts. However, this is a double-edged sword. Everyone knows what religion is, therefore everyone has an opinion on it. Opinions that can and will vary wildly from your own. Authors bring their own preconceptions and biases to their work, so you must be aware of what your own are. For example, say you have a prominent character in your work who is a priest. Now to you, that could mark that character as inherently good

and trustworthy. But a reader with a different outlook might see this character as inherently suspicious. Endeavour to show this religion in the context of the world and setting rather than how you think religions generally are.

With that out of the way, let's talk about how to show off your well-built, integrated religion to an audience. To start with the obvious, **NEVER EVER** introduce a religion with an info dump. Suppose you have a character wear a religious emblem around their neck. Another character asks them what it is and then they launch into a page-long diatribe about their faith and its history. On one hand, this does happen. On the other hand, think of how quickly most people try to escape from such a conversation. No one wants to listen to it, what makes you think anyone will want to read it? Fortunately, religion permeates everyday life, so it will be easy to display your religion without explaining it. People shout religious oaths when they are shocked or horrified (or annoyed). They pray before meals and follow religious codes when deciding how to dress. Homes and vehicles can be decorated with religious icons and temples and churches are often at the center of a community. Using these examples and more, you can put this religion on display until the reader becomes accustomed or curious about it. After that, an explanation of a religious icon is not slowing down the plot, it is answering questions the reader has had in the back of their head for several chapters.

I have a really big river in my setting like the Mississippi with enemy countries on both sides. What would happen to it during war?

A river the size of the mighty Mississippi would certainly have a huge effect on any war fought on its banks. However, the effect the war would have on the river itself greatly depends on the level of magic or technology these countries have access to. Are these countries modern with the know-how to use pollution, poisons, submarines and the like? Are they filled with powerful magic-users that can dry up the river with a single word of power? No matter what scale you are at, the river will be a vital resource for both countries, no matter their tech or magic level. The more advanced you get, however, the more environmental impact there will be. In either case, the river will be a hotspot for fighting and death. So to answer your question, let us first look at how the river will affect the war by its own virtue.

Rivers make for excellent borders between countries because they are very visible. When a border is a river, it is very easy to know where one country begins and the other ends. But rivers are not unchanging. By their very nature, they shift course, either slowly or suddenly. A shift in the course of the river could lead to a border dispute if both sides start interpreting the border differently. A sizable river is easy to move supplies on, but provides a challenging barrier for any army to cross. In this battle between countries, securing the river (or crossings over it) may become the initial goal of the war. What happens after depends on the countries involved.

The state of the river after the war will, as said, depend very highly on the magic or technology these countries have access to. Something the size of the Mississippi is tremendously hard to influence or control, so only high tech or high magic will be able to change it in any

permanent way. On the lower end, the river would be very little changed. A few more skeletons may lay buried in its bed and a few war hulks may be beached on its banks, but the waters will take little notice of humans and their petty conflicts. However, an industrialized war machine could start doing some harm. Oil spills and the other refuse of war can poison the river, wiping out animals and plants that live in it. Dams, canals, dredging, and other military projects can change or restrict its flow. A nation will go to extreme lengths to win a war and the health of the river could be viewed as a regrettable but necessary sacrifice. We haven't even talked about all the possibilities of magic. Poisoning the waters and changing the flow is possible here as well, but let's circle back to the river itself. River spirits are a common thing in many cultures. What happens when the river gets sick of the bloodshed and battle on its banks? That's a story in itself.

What are some ways to use floods in worldbuilding that aren't like Noah's Flood?

It continues to amaze me that there are so many questions out there that can be frustratingly vague and frustratingly specific simultaneously.

Let's begin by briefly defining Noah's Flood for those who can't be bothered to look it up for themselves. Noah's flood is a tale about a man who survived a flood that covered up the entire world by building a boat and cramming two of every animal into it. When the floodwaters receded, the world was remade and he released the animals to repopulate. All versions I've read fail to explain why Noah didn't take the opportunity to rid the world of centipedes, but I digress. The simple answer to your question is to have a flood in your worldbuilding that does NOT destroy the world. But since you felt

the need to write in, I suppose I should go into more detail.

The first thing you can change is the scale. A flood need not wash over anything to have an impact on the world. A small flood can be quite devastating to a local area, ruining crops and washing away houses and altering the land around the river. A larger flood that results from the breaking of a dam (either natural or artificial) can scour entire forests from the earth and wash tons of sediment downstream. No matter the scale, the effects are similar. A large amount of water and other matter is moved downstream. But so far we've talked about catastrophic, once-off floods. Rivers grow and shrink with the shifting of the seasons, but some have very regular and noticeable flood cycles. What effect does that have on the river banks? Let us examine two examples of cyclical flooding on Earth for some insight.

The Nile River in Egypt is Earth's longest river, winding through the baking-hot Sahara Desert. Every year like clockwork the river would flood, breaking its banks and inundating farmers' fields. The Egyptians harnessed this flood, leaving their fields fallow while the Nile flooded and deposited rich silt perfect for planting crops.

This yearly, predictable flood allowed the Egyptians to make the most of their fields and build a mighty civilization on the banks of the Nile.

The Yellow River is nicknamed "China's Sorrow" thanks to its own brand of cyclical floods. The silt carried by the Yellow River has a tendency to pile up in dams under the water, forcing the river to find a new way forward. Ice dams that form and break upstream can also release torrents of water to rush downstream. These factors, coupled with the flatness of the North China Plain, lead to catastrophic floods that have killed millions of people through drowning and the following famine. Floods and the suffering they cause often lead to massive unrest and the rise and fall of dynasties.

There you have it. Two ways floods have had an intense effect on the world that fall short of completely remaking the world. I could go into more detail, and offer more examples from history and fiction, but my editors complain when I start including completely necessary footnotes and subsections in my work.

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THE ASCENDANT

by Chuck Etheridge | Edited by Jon K & Opal



WRITING



POST-APOCALYPTIC



SCI FI

Siobahn planted herself in the middle of the cracked road. Daddy took six steps before noticing she wasn't next to him. He stopped and turned back.

"I'm not going a step further," she said.

"Okay." He sat down beside her. He didn't say anything, just sat and rubbed his feet. Then, he gently grabbed her left foot and started rubbing her soles.

"Tickles!" she laughed, eventually remembering she was mad and pulling her feet away.

"Suit yourself," he said. She looked down the mountain through the Snoqualmie Pass, down to where the water lapped the shore, mesmerized by things sticking out of the water, and beyond, to the islands.

"This used to be called Puget Sound. Now it's just all ocean," he said.

"What are those?" she asked.

"The islands?"

"No, those other things."

"Old buildings."

“Why make a building under water?”

“They weren’t always under water,” he said, then tickled her feet in earnest.

She laughed and tickled him back, which was only fair; Daddy was just as ticklish. After a while, both lay back on the road, laughing. Then she sat up.

“You walk so fast you make my feet hurt,” she complained.

He sat up and ruffled her thick, curly dark red hair. “Sorry. But you know Mama’s sick. We have to find something to trade so the doctors will give her medicine.”

“I know,” she said, feeling guilty. She’d insisted on coming on this trip. Their family lived on a little plot of land and grew what they needed, trading a little extra with villagers who were no better off than they were.

Siobahn used her father’s shoulder for leverage to stand. She looked down at his dark, tightly curled hair that stuck out like leaves on a tree. Daddy always said he got his hair from his Bajau grandpa, who was a great diver from across the ocean, and she got her red hair from Mama, who was Irish. “Let’s get going!” She pumped her arms. “Slow poke,” she called over her shoulder.

Her father rose more slowly. “You change your mind a hundred times an hour.”

“No, I don’t. Only ‘bout fifty times.”

He chuckled.

—

“I don’t understand,” she said at the water’s edge.

Scanning behind them, he said, “Just a second. Let’s go this way.” He headed to a clump of bushes and vines and trees, the kind of place he always warned her and her Annoying Brother Darius to stay away from.

“I thought . . .” she said, then stopped as Daddy pulled a branch, and a solid wall of vines parted. She saw a little cave with a log in it.

“You’re the first person I’ve shown,” he said seriously. He withdrew the hollow log. She realized it was a handmade canoe with two paddles in it. He pulled it to the shore, then replaced the vines and pinned them with the branch.

“Wow. You can’t see anything’s there.”

He nodded. “That’s right. Now get in.”

She looked doubtful. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Now hurry. Sit in the very front.”

She did, and Daddy pushed the canoe into the water, effortlessly stepping in, and began paddling with strong, smooth strokes, first on one side, then the other.

Soon, they were out on the water. *Scary. And exciting*, she thought. “Why are we going out here?”

“We usually trade crops for what we need. Sometimes, I need something bigger, like now, when I need medicine for Mama, so I have to go find something.”

She nodded. “And you’ll take it to the base on the mountain and they’ll give you what you need?”

“Usually.”

“You always find something,” she said confidently. Whenever they needed “something big,” Daddy disappeared for a few days and came back with something — usually pieces of shiny metal or rocks. She’d longed to join him and learn how he did it. Daddy hadn’t wanted her to, but Mama had said, after a coughing fit, that “we’re not going to live forever. She’d best start learning.”

“I hope we find something valuable,” he said. “Mama needs lots of medicine.”

Suddenly worried, she asked. “But Mama’s going to get better, right?” She turned to look at Daddy, knowing he never lied to her.

“You need to learn to use this,” he said, handing her the other paddle. He demonstrated how to hold it, how to move the canoe forward, and how to lift the paddle smoothly out of the water.

Then, he showed how they could work as a team, two paddles making the canoe go faster.

It was fun for a minute. “My arms hurt,” she complained.

“Mine too,” Daddy said, but kept paddling. After a while, Siobahn felt guilty ‘cause Daddy was doing all the work. She started paddling again.

—

They’d rowed forever, and her arms were going to fall off. They got to a post rising from the water. She looked down, realizing it wasn’t solid, but it rose out of the water from a huge round thing under the surface. Daddy tied a vine to the metal post. The canoe rocked in the waves.

Siobahn’s eyes were huge. “What is that?” she asked, pointing down.

“My grandfather called it the ‘space needle.’ I don’t know why.”

Curious, she peered down into the clear water. She saw other structures. “It looks like the base! Only bigger”

Daddy nodded. “It does look like the base,” he said. “A long time ago, Grandpa said, there was a whole city down there. The water rose and swallowed things whole.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Grandpa didn’t, either. But you can’t show anyone. Ever.” Daddy’s eyes were serious. “Promise?”

“Promise,” she said, knowing it was important. “But why?”

“When the family needs something big to trade,” he said, “this is where I come.”

“Here?” Siobahn looked around skeptically.

“Here,” Daddy said meaningfully, pointing down.

“Down there?” She was shocked. She didn’t know how far down the buildings were, but they looked far.

“Yes. And I don’t want anyone to know where I go. It’s why we snuck away from the village, and I kept checking to see if we’re followed.”

“O-kay,” she said, not understanding.

“Stay here.” He slipped into the water, leaving the canoe rocking gently.

“Daddy, NO!”

He didn’t look worried. “I might be gone for a while. Whatever you do, stay in the canoe.”

He took a big breath, then dove. She couldn’t see clearly, but she could see him diving down, down, down, disappearing inside a building.

A gust rocked the canoe. She looked around. *Are the waves getting bigger?* She wasn’t sure.

Holding the paddle upright in the water, she checked how high each wave came up on the handle, not sure if the waves were getting bigger or not.

Daddy had been under water a really long time.

What if something happens to him?

Should I look for him? She was a good swimmer, but she knew she couldn’t dive that far.

What if Daddy drowns? What would

Daddy erupted from the waves in a huge splash. He was pretty far away, and lay on his back catching his breath, bobbing in the water, then slowly swam back over to the canoe.

“You scared me.”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said, holding onto the canoe. “Scratch your nails on this,” he said, dropping a green slimy lump onto the deck.

“Eww,” she said, but she did as she was told. The green slimy stuff came right off and she saw shiny metal. She held it up by the metal chain that was attached.

“It’s called a locket,” he said. “It may be gold. I should go look for more.” He let go of the boat.

“Wait!” she called.

“What is it?” he asked, impatient.

“I think maybe the waves are getting bigger,” she said.

“They are,” he said. “That’s why I have to be quick. Only time for one more dive.” He swam away, calling over his shoulder, “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Maybe I’ll run away!” He didn’t hear.

Siobahn was scared and angry at being left, and proud her father was sharing important things with her. *Will I ever be able to dive like that?*

Lightning crackled far away, then thunder. The sky darkened all at once. The waves got bigger. The canoe rose high enough to strain the vines holding the canoe to the post. Siobahn pocketed the locket.

Daddy resurfaced, crawled back in, untied the vine, and headed toward land. He looked determined, digging deep with the paddle on one side of the canoe, then the other.

“We’re going to be okay,” he said. “The wind is blowing onshore. We’ll be okay.”

Worried, Siobahn wanted to throw herself into Daddy’s arms, but knew he needed to row. She grabbed the other paddle.

“Don’t, sweetie,” he said absently. “When the water’s this rough, only one person should steer.”

Suddenly the wind blustered, sprouting larger waves. Then rain. Daddy kept paddling and paddling. *How can he keep going without stopping?* They abruptly washed up onto shore. Daddy tried to get out of the canoe, so exhausted he could barely move.



She helped him out and he collapsed. Hurriedly she had to run and grab the canoe before the waves washed it away. She dragged it to its hiding place, pulling vines aside and, summoning all her strength, shoved the canoe back into its spot.

It was still raining hard, and Daddy lay gasping on the ground.

“Let’s go inside,” she said.

He shook his head. “I”

“Go inside,” she said, firmly. She pushed the canoe in just a little bit further so they could sit in the hollow out of the rain.

After a while, Daddy’s breathing slowed down, and he looked at her in the dim light. “I’m so sorry, Siobahn.”

“Why?”

“For taking you out in this. It’s January, the middle of winter. I thought the storm season was over. It was sunny when we started” He said no more.

“We’re okay, Daddy,” she reassured him, patting his arm.

He nodded. “But it’s hotter this year than it was last year. What my father and grandfather taught me about the storms doesn’t work anymore.”

“We’re okay, Daddy,” she insisted.

He drew a deep breath. “You’re right. We’ll just change things ‘til we get it right. Maybe it’ll cool off by February and we can try again.”

She wasn’t sure she wanted to try again, but was fearful of disappointing Daddy. “Are you going to show Darius, too?” she asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Darius can’t do this.”

She felt pride — she could do something Annoying Brother couldn’t. *But why should I have to do something hard that he doesn’t have to?* “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “My Bajau grandpa said all his brothers and sisters could hold their breath a very long time and swim really deep. Only one of his children, my father, could do it. Darius can’t hold his breath long or swim deep like you can. For some reason, you can do it, and he can’t.”

She nodded seriously, taking it all in. “And your grandpa? He taught you how to dive and find things?”

Daddy nodded. “Yes. He said it was easier when he was young. Remember that ‘space needle’ thing?”

“Yes.”

“When Grandpa first came, that round part was above the water. Now, it’s way below the surface.”

She thought about that. “So the water keeps going up? And it makes it harder to dive and find things?”

“Right,” he said. Then, Daddy pulled her close to him and held her tight.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I can learn. I’m young. I bet I can dive even deeper than you. We can always find things and trade for what we need.” Siobahn sounded determined, confident. She didn’t see the worry on her father’s face.

She pulled the locket out and held it up.

Siobahn beamed. “It’s good, right? It’ll definitely be enough to buy medicine for Mama.”

“That’s right,” Daddy said, hiding his tears in her red curls. “It should be enough.”

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BODEGA

by Halli M Castro | Edited by Zaivy Luke-Alemán & BTN/Dylan



WRITING



POST-APOCALYPTIC



SCI FI

He decides to keep the shop open, after everything. With all the disasters, the social changes, the fleeing of the cities, most abandoned their shops to live the new way of life. To be drifters. But not Grisham. No, Grisham loves his Bodega like he loves a nice hot cup of tea, when he can get his hands on one. He'll leave this bodega in a pine box.

As he approaches it this morning he slides his eyes over every surface, looking for damage, scanning for lifters. It's becoming more and more common for him to arrive and find feral, starving humans ransacking his meager stock, so he's begun carrying a loaded sawed-off shotgun slung over his shoulder. He wouldn't believe this if you'd told him *Before*, but he prefers the bots these days.

He used to keep his place stocked full of carby, sweet and salty snacks, fizzy sodas, and magazines, but these days those things are luxuries, not bodega goods.

Every morning he harvests fruits and vegetables from his rigged-up greenhouse before the sun rises and roots through his old bunker supply for cans to restock. This evening, when he closes, he'll go searching for useful items in the abandoned buildings that surround his. For a while he stocked fresh fish from the channel that splits the city in half, but the fish started dying and rising to the surface a few years ago, some mystery disease had gotten them, then there were none left.

Either way, gone are the days of dealing with suppliers and warehouses and shipping. Grisham doesn't miss the suits. Now he packs his rucksack full of cans and hauls a covered cart full of his spoils for his three-mile trek to the bodega each morning. Yes, he's noticed a clear difference in his muscle mass. No, he doesn't sleep much.

He keeps his place stocked with the things people need on their daily journeys, just like always. Not his fault the world is changing.

Grisham carefully tilts around the edge of the display window up front to check closely for intruders. He's going in either way, but he got a shiny new limp the first and last time he walked in without checking first. He's learned it's best to keep his eyes open. His glare through the window proves the store to be empty and reminds him to clean the exterior of the pane today. It's hard to keep the dirt on the ground these days, turns out grass *was* useful for something.

He grabs the half-empty bag of cat food from his cart and gives it a shake, whistling into the surrounding air. Verona flaps her wings and descends from the roof where she'd been waiting. The large crow — getting bigger and bigger these days...maybe he should scale it back on the cat food — drops a silver, ornate necklace with a smooth jade stone from her huge beak that clatters onto the metal display shelf bolted to the ground outside. He bolted it last week, when he finally found another one after his previous one got lifted. In exchange for the beautiful piece, he drops a large strawberry on top of her food bowl this morning. He slips the amulet into his breast pocket and pats it, finally shuffling into his shop.

The rusted metal bell over the door chimes like it's just as happy these days, he appreciates the optimism. He props the door open and flips his little hand-painted sign to say "open." Penny had painted it, Before. He'd protested back then when she stenciled delicate flowers around the lettering and added purples and blues, but now... now he just looks at it and hopes she's ok, wherever it is she runs off to. He sees his daughter infrequently, but can't seem to keep her grounded *and* happy, so he's decided to keep his mouth shut.

Just as he's checking the locks on the cabinets behind the counter, he hears a scraping footfall cross the threshold.

"Early bird gets the worm, right?" he calls over his shoulder. It's his standard greeting for anyone who comes into the store this close to opening. Usually, they've been waiting close by for him to open shop, and he appreciates the consideration of actually waiting.

He's greeted only by silence and a low buzzing. A bot then. He turns to look and sees the flickering screen of its face with a digital mouth upturned into a disarming smile. It's a Cricket model, one of the ones recalled just Before. Grisham can hear it in that scraping buzz that follows them. They don't work quite right.

"You got a list?" The bot nods and reaches out with a long arm to place a paper scrawled in acrid smelling ink across the counter. The manufacturers always got the proportions wrong on these things, the arms hang too low and the legs shake, bowed at the knees.

"Oil, screws, and a replacement finger joint," he reads aloud, "that all you need?" The bot nods in that programmed, fluid way that they do, that flickering smile growing. "Alright, let's see it." It slaps its hand onto his counter to show off the place it's missing a finger, then drops the partially rusted metal finger itself onto the counter. "Yeah, I've got something that'll work for this. Whaddaya got?"

The expression on the screen goes flat for a moment, then a lightbulb illustration appears. The bot understands. It fumbles with the hatch on its chest for a moment until it pops open with a tight squeal, it reaches in and pulls out a pair of men's sneakers in moderate condition, dropping them onto the counter. Grisham furrows his brow at the set, not touching them, then glances up at the bot with his eyes only. It's not enough for a can of oil alone, let alone the full list, but he *does* have that soft spot for the bots.

A lot of them were abandoned After, and oddly enough, began to take care of themselves. He has no idea if this one has come through before, as all of the Cricket models house the same defects, but they come through every so often, and they're just trying to survive. Grisham figures they deserve just as fair a shot as anyone else who's walking through those doors. He nods at the bot.

"Alright, that'll work. Bring somethin' better next time." The bot nods again. Usually, he'd make his customers shop for themselves, but the bots always grab the wrong things anyway. So he exits from behind the counter and rustles through the cans of screws for a small box that'll service a Cricket just fine, turns to his shelves to grab a tin of oil, and moves back behind the counter to unlock and slide open his parts drawer. He finds the bearing easily and places the items on the counter. "You need this installed?" he offers, but the bot shakes its head, programmed, fluid. It then shoves the items in its chest compartment and scrapes its way out of the door. Verona flies in and perches on his shoulder, wary of bots but fond of her companion.

Grisham sighs and shakes his head.

“I’m tellin’ you, girl, those bots have got tenacity.”

“H e l l o,” Verona scrapes in response. He’d taught her the trick a few years ago, it scares away unruly customers if he times it right.

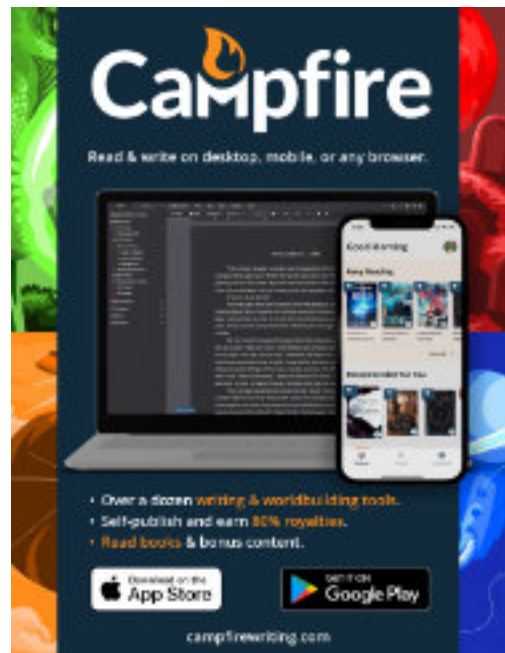
“Sure, what do you know,” he waves a hand at her, and she takes off to the other side of the little shop, a few feet across. He grabs the sneakers and gives them a look over. They’re old, were probably old Before, even. He pulls a length of twine from his drawer and ties them together at the laces and wrinkles his nose at a smell emanating off of them but chucks them into his shoe bin anyway. Someone will want them. Someone always does.

The next few hours are quiet. He stocks his shelves with the goods he’d brought in and waits. A few people pass on rusted bikes or walk wearily. Some turn to peer through the window, but no one comes in — no one of note, that is. Travelers are often wary of the shop, as they aren’t a common find, but those who stick around know he drives a fair bargain. A few poke their heads in to look around, eventually, but he doesn’t make any other sales.

It isn’t until the sun is hanging heavy in the sky, creating heat waves over the broken tarmac outside and glaring into his windows, that the adventurer strides through his door. Grisham keeps an eye on him, he knows the type. Always pulling knives on him and demanding artifacts or books. Frankly, he’s sick of it.

The adventurer keeps glancing at him with intent, and he knows he’s not going to like whatever comes next. This one is young, twenty-two at the oldest, and shifty. He’s not a lifter, though. No, the lifters wouldn’t take so long to get to business. They don’t walk with that purposeful gait, either. Each wide stride is taking him closer to a goal, the lifters never know where their next step will take them.

“Lookin’ for somethin’?”



The boy glances up at him from where he's crouched in front of his counter, sifting through the rows of salvaged cans filled with small metal items, screws, nuts, bolts, and the like. Grisham sighs. His clothes hang loose over his thin frame, and his eyes sit atop deep, dark circles. He looks like he could use some sleep and a nice, hot meal.

"Listen, boy, I'm not having a bang-up day, what do you need? A special weapon to vanquish your enemies? A book of long-lost knowledge? Spit it out."

"Do you have those things?" the boy asks, finally speaking up. He carries an odd accent on his tongue. A traveler, for sure.

"Not sure. Your type usually knows what you're lookin' for." The boy nods at that, looking down at the cans again.

"A necklace," he says to his hands.

"This look like a jeweler to you?" Grisham raises an eyebrow and leans back.

"I was told I'd find it here, but you're right, I'm not seeing it."

Grisham sighs, scrubbing a rough, dirty hand down his face. He finds these interactions taxing.

"What's this piece look like? Maybe I've got it in here somewhere," he says. "If I've got it, it'll be at a steep price, though, so you'd better be ready to pay up."

"Yes, I'd been prepared for that too," he stands up straight and begins rifling through his pockets, searching for something, "It's uh, a silver necklace with a stone amulet, a —"

"Piece of jade?"

The boy's eyes shoot up to meet Grisham's and he nods, a hopeful look flitting over his face. He almost feels bad for the kid. He's about Penny's age, he shouldn't be out on his own like this either.

"Whaddaya got?"

"Right," he squints, shoving a hand into his pocket and pulling a shiny golden ring, a delicate thing. Alright, not bad.

“Lemme see,” Grisham holds out a palm, waiting.

“I’d like to see the necklace first,” the boy challenges, eyebrows rising. Grisham tries his best not to crack a smile. He reaches into his shirt pocket and dangles the piece in front of the boy’s nose, snatching it back just in time when he tries to grab it from him.

“Nuh-uh, let’s see the barter, first,” he tsks, “then we can talk trade.”

Just then, the bell over the door rings again, and a woman enters, scanning the shelves of fruit. One of Grisham’s regulars. He slides his eyes back to the boy. “Well?” The boy drops the ring into his hand, and he turns it over between his fingers. The dainty piece is quite lovely, and he finds himself picturing giving it to his Penny, she’d like it. It’s a simple gold band with little roses molded out of the metal decorating the top. “Alright, you got yourself a deal.” The adventurer lights up, reaching for the necklace and once again, Grisham snatches it out of his reach. “On one condition.” He half expects the boy to groan, with the look that he receives.

“What’s that?”

“You got anything for Verona over there?” He points to the looming bird perched in the corner, and the boy turns, jolting in surprise when his eyes catch the unnaturally large crow. “This was her find, after all.” The boy chuckles, incredulous.

“Yes, actually,” he says, rummaging through his pockets again and producing a small paper bag. “Some seeds I picked up at my last stop.” He drops them onto the counter.

“Yeah, alright, what do you think, Verona?”

“H e l l o,” Verona scrapes out again, and the boy’s eyes widen. Grisham drops the necklace into his hand, and he finally retreats, backing out with a muttered thank you.

The woman steps up to the counter with a crate of his strawberries and folding blade he’d found while looting a few days ago. He knew it’d be picked up eventually.

“Just these?” he asks. She nods. “Whaddaya got?”

STAFF PICKS

Compiled by Ike Riva
Edited by Dylan Richmond



Flogoria

Comic

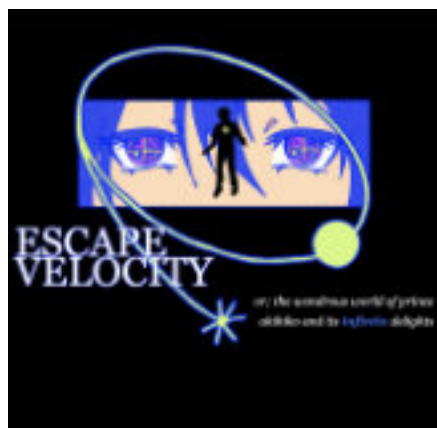
Reviewed by uNoahGuy

It's not that often you see frequent posters of r/worldbuilding actually publish legitimately amazing content in real life, but Sam Moore's (u/uglyink) world of *Flogoria* had me hooked the first time I laid my eyes on his whimsical art style.

TTGG is a new comic series that follows a New Zealander who ends up in an entirely different world with interesting fauna and flora. But, the Flogorian people themselves, with their gaudy outfits and detailed language, kept me immersed in his

worldbuilding. Not only does Moore flesh out his language, he uses his constructed script in "slice of life" ways—like inserted Flogorian adverts in the comic book.

I won't go too much in detail with the story, as only the first issue is out, but I am now definitely subbed for more.



Escape Velocity

Game, Comic

Reviewed by M. E. White

Escape Velocity or; the Wondrous World of Prince Akihiko and its Infinite Delights by itch.io user snattacat is a short game/comic about capitalist malaise in a near future world where our protagonist spends their days watching an infinitely generated anime. Given that we currently live in a world where the capabilities and potential uses of neural networks are rapidly expanding, worldbuilding like this allows us to explore important questions like the existential purpose of art.

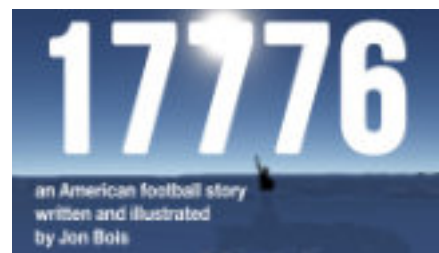


Colostle

TTRPG

Reviewed by UncleCorvo

Colostle is a very small solo TTRPG for people who love journaling and storytelling. Its entire world fits inside the rooms of an unimaginably big castle—the Colostle. Rivers come from the broken piping; continents are separated by fissures on its flooring; titanic human-like fossils fertilize the soil where forests grow.

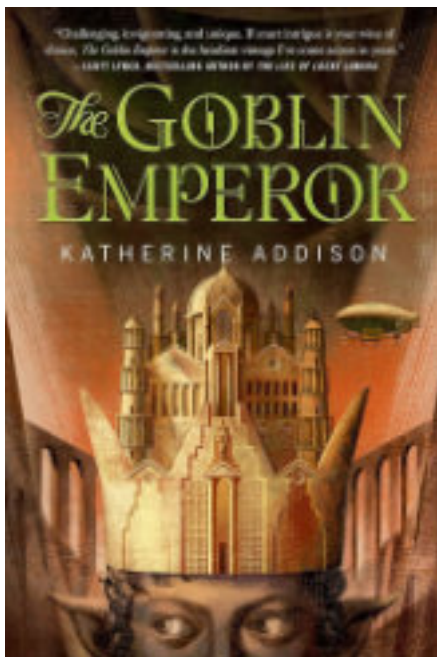


17776

Multimedia Narrative

Reviewed by RedPharaoh

17776 is a fun web experience that uses the medium to its full potential to deliver its story. From html5 magic to short YouTube videos, it tells a fascinating yet hilarious story about a far, far future... and their version of football.



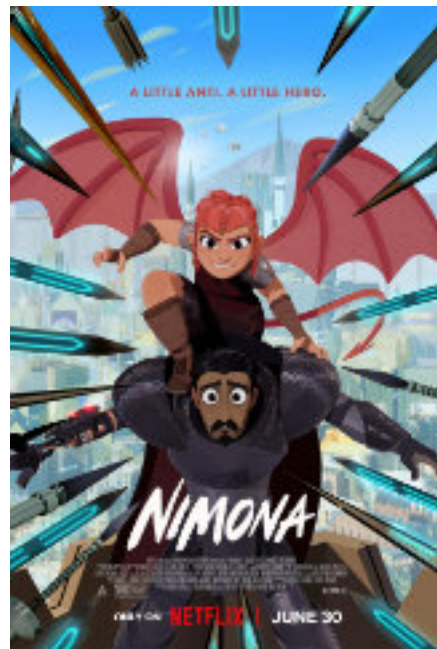
The Goblin Emperor

Novel

Reviewed by Emily King

Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor* is a masterclass in integrating a heavily-built world into a story. Set in the fantastical Empire of *Ethuveraz*, the story follows Maia, a cast-off scion of the royal house who, upon the deaths of his father and brothers, is thrust into a strange new world of court intrigue, and must chart his own course as ruler. Where this story shines is its attention to creating a believable and internally consistent political milieu for its characters to interact with, and its skill in the art of the infodump. While one will certainly be lost in the lore at least at the beginning, so is Maia, and as he grows more aware of his situation, so do we as the audience. Read this if

you want a carefully crafted geopolitical fantasy full of court intrigue and replete with twists and turns.



Nimona

Movie

Reviewed by Andrew Booth

I have to confess, when my flatmate suggested that we spend the evening watching a kids' animated film on Netflix, I wasn't exactly expecting worldbuilding genius. However, *Nimona* quickly proved my low estimate of it wrong, almost within the first ten minutes.

Within the first half of the film, the introduction of a casted and closed society—but one which is queer-accepting, a nice point of difference from several similar ideas in fiction—an overly involved administration on the city's defense force/police service,

and some very interesting and innovative ideas behind weaponry and mechanisms that combine modern surveillance techniques and medieval combat, all give us plenty to bite on as a worldbuilding enthusiasts, and the film walks the fine line between information overload and giving the world proper depth exceedingly well.

While it's not without its worldbuilding holes (is anything?) it makes for a thoroughly enjoyable (and educational) watch, and even though the plot is somewhat traditional there's enough twists and turns to make things interesting.



Greedfall

Video Game

Reviewed by Teddyberserker

Greedfall is a 2019 video game by the small French studio Spiders (*Steelrising*, *Technomancer*). Inspired by Baroque art from 17th Century Europe and the colonization efforts of the Age of Sail, the game sees a merchant protagonist travel to the newly discovered island of *Teer Fradee* where, along with a diverse collection of compan-

ions, they navigate the complex sociopolitical structures of competing colonists and the island's many native tribes. This new world teems with original flora and fauna, lands where protective spirits maintain balance, and complex native cultures to explore. While the more European-inspired colonial nations will be explored in the game's sequel (scheduled for 2024), their settlements on *Teer Fradee* provide plenty of visual worldbuilding, giving each a distinct identity in a setting aesthetic not often explored. To top it all off, the player is given frequent opportunities to resolve conflicts with diplomacy, violence, or cunning providing a morally flexible perspective on a morally black subject.



Templin Institute

Online Resource

Reviewed by MasterThief

In terms of good worldbuilding resources, I will put in a plug for the [Templin Institute](#). Marc, the "man behind the curtain," produces a number of Youtube videos exploring elements of sci-fi, fantasy, and horror alternate

worlds. The [main channel](#) has both short vignettes about nations, factions, people, technologies, etc. and longer-form content—everything from how to build a space navy to how to design a kickass flag. [Templin Direct](#) has short 1-minute videos for the low-attention crowd, but no less well done, everything from the best cover career for a spy in *Star Wars* to why you never want to see an "X" painted on your door. Templin also has a Twitch channel with a focus on grand strategy games. (Full Disclosure: I am a supporter of the institute and one of Marc's Twitch moderators.)



Magic the Gathering: Lorwyn

Trading Card Game

Reviewed by Braken

Magic the Gathering is well known by fans of fantasy for its complex gameplay and extended universe. Each new set of cards is a new chapter of this ever-extending story, often introducing a new plane

(a new world) with its own worldbuilding, rules, game mechanics, and links to the overarching universe.

In [this video](#), Spice8Rack, one of the most prolific analysts of Magic's lore, highlights the intelligent worldbuilding of a card set that easily stands out in *Magic the Gathering: Lorwyn* and its dark continuation, *Shadowmoor*.

The world of *Lorwyn* is interesting because it has very specific lore and a style that separates it from most of the sets of Magic. It is surprising by catering to a different audience in many ways—by playing on the expectations of cute and peaceful English folklore through integrating gothic elements, featuring a developed analysis of the effects of secularism, racism, and eugenics in its fantasy setting, and also by interestingly balancing hyper-sharing and tightly woven civilizations.

The video aims to show the success and failures of worldbuilding that not only link to gameplay, but also to a whole art set and a book, and the interconnection between these elements. How do the mechanics show the different characteristics of the new races built for the set? How does the artwork show the interactions between the different creatures, and the

impact of the events happening in the books? Overall, this video is a fascinating study of multi-media worldbuilding and unique lorecraft

Sword World 2.5

TTRPG

Reviewed by PsychoRomeo

One of the most interesting worlds I've had the pleasure of interacting with recently is the setting of *Sword World 2.5*, a world called *Raxia*. Japan's equivalent to *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Sword World* (written by Group SNE) is a 2d6 TTRPG system where adventurers level up multiple classes simultaneously. In this world, you might find a bestial Lykan Grappler-Enhancer hulking up and throwing an evil Barbarous Bolg across the battlefield. Behind him, a robotic Runefolk Marksman-Artificer is shooting her musket made of salvaged Magitech



parts. And at the same time, a little Tabbit Fencer-Conjurer is trying not to singe his bunny tail as he canvases a swath of the battlefield in a lightning storm. All in an effort to close a daemon portal that threatens the region's railroads!

Want to play? Join the *Sword World* fan-translation Discord

community [here](#).

Note from Administration: Worldbuilding Magazine cannot vouch for the content or opinions presented in this server. Reader discretion is advised.

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Call for Volunteers!

With the COVID-19 pandemic growing ever fainter in the rearview mirror, *Worldbuilding Magazine* is restructuring and heating up the presses anew. In order to keep the project going, we are actively looking for volunteers to join our ranks! If you have experience editing, writing, or working with InDesign — or would like to get some experience — please reach out to us by email or by joining our Discord server and letting us know you'd like to contribute. If you know any, please spread this news to any chronic daydreamers and artists of worlds-to-be that you think would like to join us!

Delightfully yours,

—uNoahGuy, President of the Board

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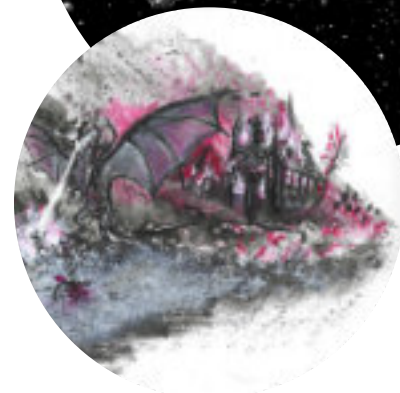
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Logo: Tristen Fekete

Cover: *Half Truths* by PsychMandril

About PsychMandril:

I, Jibin Jolly, am an artist and content creator with a passion for digital concept art, evolution biology, movies, and Pokemon. I have been drawing and storytelling since my childhood and initially wanted a career in art. However, now I also find joy in learning and exploring new things in a wide variety of areas. Currently, I am working on Fake-mon commissions, concept art commissions, wrapping up my four year design degree, and creating my own artwork in my free time. You can find me on various social media platforms under the username PsychMandril or DelusionMandril.

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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!

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