

Episode 62
Otherworldly Worldbuilding
ft. Seanan McGuire

Transcribed by:
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M: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

R: And we're wondering why we do this to ourselves.

S: I'm legitimately incapable of not over-analyzing everything that is put in front of me.

[M & R Laugh]

S: To the point that playing D&D with me is something like taking a graduate course in—

[C, M, & R Laugh]

S: I'm Seanan McGuire.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

M: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

C: I'm Cass Morris, and this is Episode 62: Otherworldly Worldbuilding.

[Intro Music Plays]

R: Well, welcome listeners, and welcome to our guest today, Seanan McGuire. We are so excited to have you here. Would you mind introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about your work?

S: Hello, I am Seanan McGuire. I live in the Seattle area. I was the first person to attend the University of California Berkeley, go Bears, on a dual folklore and herpetology major... which is basically the dragon's degree.

[M Laughs]

S: It's kind of a nightmare thing. I read too much and I write too many books, which takes us to telling you about my books. I write too many books.

C: I think you write an awesome number of books. [Laughs]

R: No such thing as too many.

S: You know, that is actually not what my publishers say. They would like me to chill out and take a brief vacation so that publicity can figure out what the hell to do with me.

[R Laughs]

R: So tell us of these many books.

S: I... like... literally, the tell me about your work question is vague.

[M & R Laugh]

S: I've published more than fifty traditionally published novels in eleven years. It is a freaking nightmare. I am at this point three separate people. I primarily work in urban fantasy but I've also done a great deal of work in portal fantasy, biomedical science fiction, modern fantasy, and superheroes. Chill is not in my vocabulary.

[M Laughs]

S: But I still use it. Marshall and I share a publisher, and he gets to watch me give them all minor nervous breakdowns on a regular basis.

R: Excellent. What is the latest thing out from you that people should be watching for?

S: Well, giving that we are recording this on Monday, October 11th, and there is no possible way that you have it edited and out by Tuesday, October 12th—

[C & M Laugh]

S: That would mean... yeah, I literally have a book coming out tomorrow.

R: Woo!

S: As we're recording this.

C: Happy Book Birthday!

S: Thank you. Sleep is for other people.

[M Laughs]

S: And that is the second of the *Up-and-Under* books, *Along the Saltwise Sea*. The *Up-and-Under* is sort of an Ozian children's fantasy world written in an intentionally archaic style. And this is a quadrology of books that started out as epistolary insets in *Middlegame*, which is one of my novels that came out in 2019.

R: Very cool.

M: Very cool.

R: Happy Book Birthday for the umpteenth time. But, you know, it's never too many times to hear it, Happy Book Birthday.

S: Never too many times. And my brother says that getting the book that you wrote as a book inside a book published is actually a Nerd Olympics Category.

[M Laughs]

R: That's goals.

C: That's goals. That's like bookducken. Like—

[Everybody Laughs]

S: I like bookducken.

R: It's a bookducken!

S: If I can nest just one more I get some kind of special award from the American Library Association. And that award says "Please Stop" in big, friendly letters.

[C & R Laugh]

M: In terms of author achievement badges, that is next level.

[3:59]

R: So I feel like we asked the right person on to talk about otherworldly worldbuilding. But before we get there, I always love geeking with our guests about what do you love with worldbuilding? What do you like?

S: I like it when things make sense. I really... Everything should be answered like you had a five-year old in the room. But why? But why? But why? Because 90% of the time the moment that things fall apart is the moment that the author got tired of asking why. I genuinely think that one of the best works of zombie media in the last twenty years was the second *Resident Evil* movie. Because it is the only zombie film that actually stopped to consider the transmission vectors for their virus, and then asked themselves what that would mean.

Most of the time I'm coming out of things going, "I just wanted the exposition fairy to talk to us for another ten seconds. And if they had I would think that this was a work of unending genius. And as it stands I kinda want to bite somebody."

[M & R Laugh]

R: But then the question is, is that a transmission vector for something?

S: It would be a transmission vector for something. But *Wreck-It Ralph* is my favorite Disney movie pretty much ever. I adore *Wreck-It Ralph*. And yet the whole thing just starts to fall apart if you ask yourself why Felix didn't just clock him a little bit with his hammer.

C: Would've been a very different movie. Would've loved to have seen that.

[C & R Laugh]

S: Yeah, all he needed to do was whack Vanellope. You hit something with the hammer, it is immediately repaired to its original condition. He has now fixed the damage to her programming that is keeping her from leaving the game. And they can evacuate Sugar Rush without trying to fix anything.

M: Then he wouldn't have to have done the sacrifice into the Diet Coke pit... it still gets me.
[Laughs]

S: It's a beautiful moment... but they should have thought about it harder!

M: It's one of those... it's an animated movie, I am a forty-eight year old man, and it still makes me misty. Just...

[C & M Laugh]

S: It's beautiful. It's a beautiful film, and it's a beautiful moment. But if I can jam a hole in your entire core concept in less than five seconds, you have done something wrong.

[C & R Laugh]

R: It's like that part in, speaking of animated movies, that part in *Frozen* where the trolls should've been like, "No, that's a bad idea. Why would... no. Lock her up for it? No, love, it's love, the answer's love."

C: "We thought you'd get that being her parents, but..."

R: "Come on... well, okay. Go ahead and ruin your lives."

S: Yeah, how did they jump so quickly to "you've frozen everything forever" if they've never had that kind of ice magic around?

R: Oops.

C: My problems with *Frozen* are many.

S: Maybe she's just frozen everything for six weeks for a nice vacation.

[C Laughs]

S: It's a work stoppage for Arendelle.

R: It's just... I... you know, in some ways it is an interesting study in human psychology that we go straight worst-case scenario, right?

[C Laughs]

R: Like, I don't know this ice magic, it must be the worst possible of all outcomes. It's not just a fun winter vacation for skiing.

S: Everything is ruined forever.

C: I want to see the version now where instead of being a princess she's now the leader of a union and she's like, "No, when I say we're going on strike, I mean everything stops. We're all going on... everything."

[M Laughs]

R: It's a snow day.

[C Laughs]

R: Enforced. So now that we've eviscerated some favorite Disney movies for our listeners, you're welcome.

[M & R Laugh]

[7:32]

R: Seanan, I'm always interested to hear other writers' process on worldbuilding. We have a variety here. But for you, are you a get everything laid out ahead of time worldbuilder? Do you enjoy spreadsheets like Marshall does, or are you more organic in the process? What does it look like for you?

S: Well, right now it looks like I was not given a PG rating before this so I'm really hoping it's high, because it's fuck around and find out.

C: Oh.

R: Oh yes, yes.

[M Laughs]

S: That is my general policy on all things. I do an inordinate amount of research and work first to try and make sure that the structure hangs together. And that's when the spreadsheets come to the party. Though I am less interested in spreadsheets than I am in private wikis. I want to have everything coherent and in one place. And I really like being able to justify extremely expensive tax-deductible folklore books. Which...

[M Laughs]

S: You kind of need some documentation or your accountant's like, "Why did you need an Arn Thompson guide? I don't understand." Because it's pretty!

R: Because I needs it.

[M Laughs]

S: I needed it. I needed it to feel joy.

M: Critical to the process.

S: But, you know, so there's that. And once I have the world in place, I like to just sort of let it run like it was some sort of sim machine. And keep asking questions. How is this working? What is the consequence of this action? Why is this happening? Why has this been happening? Can I make it stop happening? Oh god, how is there a sequel?

[M & R Laugh]

S: I am not good at making it stop happening, but I am very good at sequels.

R: Well, if you can't have the one, the other's a good consolation... so.

S: It really is.

C: That works.

[9:11]

R: Since we're kinda talking about other worlds and portal stuff and you've done portal stuff, is there anything different or unique for you worldbuilding portal stuff?

S: So the thing about portal stuff is that you can actually ram yourself into the Heather Problem. Which I think is super fun. Have you encountered the Heather Problem on this particular podcast? Or the Tiffany Problem.

R: We've encountered the Tiffany Problem many times, yes.

M: Tiffany Problem, yes.

S: So the Tiffany Problem is a big deal, and it comes up more in portal fiction because in portal fiction you are usually starting with our world, with a primary first world fantasy setting. And then you're going from there to a hard secondary at absolute minimum. You're going not just to the *Harry Potter* level: it's connected to our world, it's aware of our world, but it's not our world. You're going to Oz, you're going to Wonderland, you're going to a completely different set of rules. There is literally no reason that portal fantasy has to be stuck with fantasy.

And we had an absolutely brilliant book a couple years ago, that sadly the sequel never materialized to, called *Ninth City Burning*. Which was a portal fantasy setting where it was Earth versus a militant Narnia. Like high-tech Narnia. They were out for blood and we broke through the portal, ran into them, and discovered that the reason we don't do portals is because the people on the other side want to murder us.

[M Laughs]

S: All the time. But while that was definitely fantasy it played more into science fiction tropes. It had a lot of the accoutrement that we associate with science fiction. *Once Upon a Time*, which was a Disney show on ABC and was completely knickerbockers.

[R Laughs]

S: That show had no chill, it had less chill than I do.

C: Wild, absolutely wild.

S: It was. But one of the things that they did really, really right... was that they acknowledged all of these Disney movies are in different sub-genres. If we want to have them all fit together into a single universal setting we need to allow for science fiction. Dr. Frankenstein is eventually going to show up and have a fight with Wreck-It Ralph and that is just the corner that we have backed ourselves into. And allowing that gave them, weirdly, a more coherent and logical world than they would have had if they had tried to restrict themselves to a set of rules that didn't actually work with the rules they already had. So the hardest thing about building your portal is deciding what is on the other side of the portal that differentiates it from this world. Because obviously you don't want a portal fantasy that is just, "I went through a hole into modern day New York and did some taxes."

[M & R Laugh]

S: What differentiates it while also figuring out what the similarity points are?

M: I feel the inverse portal is not done enough. Where people from a magical world end up here and [Laughs] just have you tried Italian food?

C: The *Enchanted* model?

M: Have you tried Italian food? It's amazing. We have nothing like this back home. [Laughs]

S: That is the entire basis of *The Tenth Kingdom*.

C: Oh, I love that mini-series, I love it so much.

S: It's a fantastic mini-series and it's one of the better cases of "we have decided to try and make all of the fairy tales make sense in one setting."

C: It's fantastic because first the fairy tale characters come to modern, well it was 1999, but then-modern New York. And when they do travel back to fairy tale world it is— You've got the medieval next to these 1940-styled stories and somehow it all works. Somehow it feels like, "Yeah okay, that all makes sense. They're just in a different part of the kingdom so they have a totally different aesthetic." Sure. Sure.

S: And weirdly that is more how the world actually works than the Planet of Hats setup that you tend to get from fantasy, or from *Star Trek*, or whatnot. I say that even as I will reject worldbuilding that makes no sense with great vigor.

[M Laughs]

S: More vigor than people want me to have, frequently. I'm in a D&D campaign right now. It's a homebrewed D&D campaign, and it's mostly been D&D aesthetic. It's mostly been running around in that pseudo-medieval, this time period never really existed but it would look good at a ren faire, setting that D&D kind of exists in.

[M Laughs]

S: And we entered a new region... and for reasons that basically seem to boil down to the people writing the campaign thought it would be cool, the new region is full on Art Deco, 1920s, flapper-silhouettes, all of this stuff. And my first response was, "How are you justifying the underwear?"

[M & R Laugh]

C: Solid question.

M: Excellent question.

R: You know, that is some difficult technology in terms of underwear, I just...

C: Yeah.

S: Well, the downfall of the corset was pretty much brought about by the war, by needing the metal from the corsetry stays to use for the war effort, so bras were developed just because we couldn't afford corset metal anymore.

R: And you have the development of the elastics that will let you do things like a slip-on girdle instead of lacing yourself into a corset. And, you know, I have yet to find a pre-modern day material that will do that with quite as much aplomb.

S: I have not made friends with either my GM or the people that wrote this campaign by my continual harping on the fact that the underwear makes no goddamn sense! You can't just wake up one morning and decide it's time to start the Jazz Age. That is not how any of this shit works.

[C & R laugh]

R: But where did the jazz come from?!

S: There is no jazz!

R: There's a whole— You can't have the, without the— Yeah, no. I'm sorry, now I am angered too.

M: Have you done the evolution of music work? I don't think so.

R: Exactly!

S: Yeah, exactly! The fact that this is straight up—

R: Back to the African American and ragtime and— no. Anyway, anyway.

S: This is straight up worldbuilding as excuse for aesthetic and that is one of the quickest ways to alienate me.

R: And you know, I love aesthetic and I firmly believe you can start with the aesthetic that you want to have, but then you have to scaffold under it all of the “but why, and how?” and “but really? Really? Really.”

S: And remember that sometimes illogic is the most important worldbuilding tool you have. You know, I was a child in the 1980s, I grew up in a bedroom the color of Pepto Bismol because I was a girl-shaped child in the 1980s. And bizarrely enough, you can directly source my bedroom to Hitler. Because it was his choice to mark the gay men with pink triangles that reversed the order of childhood color coding. So all of my pink crap is entirely because Hitler caused people to start thinking that pink was for girls.

M: See, I did know that in the 19th century, pink was the manly color—

R: Sometimes.

M: But I did not know what the transition point of that was.

S: Yeah, it is a fairly clearly delineated transition point. And so I look at my pink My Little Pony castle, and my pink Barbie stuff, and all these people saying that little girls are innately attracted to pink, and I’m like, mmm, no. But does that make sense? Do you really want to say an incredibly giant war criminal is the reason you have color coded the feminine children in your world in one way? You don’t. But that is straight up how the real world worked.

R: When it comes to it, people actually make very little sense sometimes.

S: Yup.

R: But that’s more fun!

S: Yep. You still can’t have the frickin’ jazz age without justifying it, I’m sorry.

[R laughs]

M: Though I do love sometimes when somebody’s like, “This bit of worldbuilding doesn’t make sense, how does this happen?” and the writer in question will then have loaded in the chamber this, “Well, you see, seven centuries ago...” [laughs] and go on their whole little rant, and you’re like, “Oh. OK, you did do the math, excellent.”

[M & R laugh]

C: Marshall? Are you the writer you’re talking about right now, Marshall?

[R laughs]

M: I’ve been that person, but I’m not the only person who’s been that person.

C: No, certainly not.

M: Many people— [laughs]

R: I feel like this is an “I am Spartacus” moment right here. [laughs]

S: I spent three years on the phone with the CDC to raise the dead.

[M laughs]

S: I mean, I’m definitely that writer.

M: It is pretty much the reason this podcast exists.

C: And I think it’s something, and we’ve sort of talked about this on the podcast sometime before, modern writers have this expectation because of social media and things, readers will ask you these questions. So you sort of have to have some of your answers loaded in the chamber ready to go, even if they didn’t quite make it on the page, like, “No no, but I did think about this, I can show my work.”

S: And sometimes the questions will not come at you in good faith, or they will come with the assumption that you didn’t show your work, and then your blood pressure will go up and you’ll have to buy more Magic: The Gathering cards to bring it back down. She says, nonspecifically.

[M laughs]

R: So we started out thinking about this episode topic being like, oh, it’ll be Halloween, it’s spooky season. So y’all like Halloween, right? I’m not the only dork who’s like, “I love Halloween,” right?

[18:27]

C: It’s the best. I love it. I love it.

R: Marshall, do you enjoy Halloween?

M: I enjoy Halloween, but also I’m just not the person who will do decorations, just because I’m fundamentally lazy about decorating. [laughs]

R: I feel like you’d make a feast though, that would be your Halloween celebration, it would be a pumpkin-based explosion.

M: Also in this household, we do Día de los Muertos. So many years there will be decoration in the sense that the altar will be done that takes up one entire wall of the downstairs, and also we will do a Día de los Muertos event, and I will make a mole, and it’s absolutely lovely. Obviously we’re not doing that this year because we’re not gonna have 80 people in the house, but... that’s how we’ve done things in the past.

S: And I am absolutely a Halloween kid, which has made the last couple years super fun. We have a local policy of we extend Halloween by one day for every day that Christmas decorations appear in the store before September 1st.

[M & R laugh]

S: So in 2019, we didn't finish 2019's Halloween until May of 2020.

[R laughs]

S: I do not actually know how long Halloween is going on this year because I was not going into stores by May of 2020. But last year, listening to all of the people who couldn't be bothered to socially distance and actually follow all of the damn pandemic rules talking about, "Oh no, Christmas will all be canceled, this is horrible," and I'm like, "Y'all already killed my holiday. You canceled my holiday two months ago because you couldn't keep your damn mouth covered." So I've got a lot of Halloween-based bitterness right now.

C: Well, it was just insult to injury that it was a Saturday last year and we lost it! That was just— That doesn't happen that often! Man!

M: Wasn't it also a full moon?

C: It was also a full moon!

[M laughs]

C: Yeah. Yeah. And they took that from us. I'm still mad too. Yeah.

S: You're like, "I didn't know I was opening a can of worms this big when I asked an innocent question, and now all the Halloween girls are rioting."

[M & R laugh]

R: It's true.

S: So... we're grumpy.

R: I will still sit in my house in a costume eating Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, but...

S: That's fair, you do you.

[R laughs]

S: I'm watching an inordinate number of horror movies, as I always do, but last year was the first year in a decade that I did not do Halloween at Walt Disney World. And I'm not going this year either. And I have a lot of hate. I have so much hate to share right now.

R: Will Reese's Peanut Butter Cups help at all, or...?

S: No, they'll just send me into a sugar coma.

R: Aww.

[M & R laugh]

R: Sometimes they help me.

S: That is good.

R: But we were just kind of thinking about how much of our traditions around Halloween pop out of the idea of the world splitting open at this particular time of year and allowing in spooky things from other places, and other worlds, and we kind of... blossomed out from there. But yeah, Halloween kind of gets to play with that liminal space of otherworldliness in the real world, without even having to get into writing fantasy.

[21:51]

M: [spooky voice] The borders—

R: Yeah, that absolutely connected to the fact that we are really sliding into the end of the year at that point. We have finished the harvest, everything is sort of wrapped up, in the Celtic traditions we have Samhain and we have the thinning of the wall between the worlds, though that was not as big a deal as modern Wiccans want to make it out to be. And that has spread quite a lot, the idea that at this end of harvest, the end of the growing season and the entry into the dying season, is sort of when the dead, the ghosts, the fae, whatever you want to talk about, can come back through.

C: There's something really seductive and interesting about that idea that there's a certain time of year when things could be abnormal. When the world that we all trudge through all the time might just shift apart a little bit... and all these elements of fantasy that we enjoy in our fiction could become more real than they are the rest of the year. I think it's, I don't know, it's a way for a lot of people to play with that line of what reality is and what it means, and where we believe in certain things or not.

M: And a lot of portal fantasies have played with that, of you just have to have the timing right, where it's the right day of the year, or the right phase of the moon, or the right stars in the right place, or all these things combined, and that's when the portal will open, so you can plan for that right moment so that you can get through and be in the magical place that you wanted to be.

R: Or oops, didn't want to be.

S: You're saying that's a common element, I literally can't think of a portal fantasy that focuses on that element other than the *Halloweentown* series from Disney.

R: You know, I can remember a couple of kids' books from when I was a kid and... oh gosh. There was a magic tree in a park, and I can't remember what the title of the book was, but that was, I think it was you had to be at the right time and then the tree would let you through. I don't know, it's been a while since I was a small child reading that one.

M: It's one of those things that I, and this might be the whole — what is that, what's that effect, I'm forgetting the name of it — where it seems like I remember a lot of stories where that was the case, but I can't think of one anymore. But it might be that my memory is just combining *Halloweentown* with everything else.

S: Yeah, that is very possible, but we get that effect a lot when we're talking about the construction of worlds. This idea that everything has this element — vampires have always been allergic to the sun or whatever — and it really just came from one thing that managed to hit at the right time and make a big impression.

C: Mandela Effect, that's what you were thinking of. Mandela Effect.

R: Yes, the Mandela Effect.

M: Mandela! That's where I was.

C: I do know it is a part of, in Roman history, there were days of the year that were considered nefasti because they were more open to the underworld. And there were days where you invited the good spirits to come back and have a walkabout, really, because they deserved that, come see what your descendents are doing, have a walkabout. You brought the good spirits in. But then there were other days where it was like, oh no, the bad spirits could come through on these days, so we all stay inside and we throw beans over our shoulders to ward them off because that seems like it'll work. Don't know why, but it's what they did. [laughs] But it was pretty random days of the year too, they were, like, three days in August, and November, and May. It had no association to star position, or phase of the moon, or anything, it was just like, no, obviously on August 11th, that's when this happens.

M: With something like that, I always imagine that August 11th was just the birthday of someone that they were just mad at, just like, "We're just gonna make it that he's gotta stay in his house all day!"

[M & R laugh]

R: I like that you bring up that it can be a good thing when the veil thins, and things can come through, or we can go through; or it can be a really bad thing. Depending on what you're talking about and what your, perhaps, risk tolerance for the supernatural is. One of the things I always think about is how people might have felt walking home from seeing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and being like, "You know what, actually that was really fucked up, that was terrifying, there are fairies everywhere, I don't like it, I... I'm gonna go home and shut my door now because I'm feeling uncomfortable." While for us, we're like, "Fairies! That's fun! Haha, fairy court! Wheel!" "No, fairies are not fun, not fun at all, they're scary assholes, and I don't like them, and I don't want to think about them being in our world or having access to me, so hold on while I go hang some things up on my doorway." Because we do have the "we go through" stories and then we have the "stuff that comes through to us" stories.

S: Yeah, those are very interconnected a lot of the time. Doors swing both ways.

C: And I guess the question is, how much of a threat to the status quo is it? Whether it's someone leaving the given world, the assumed real world, I guess, or something else coming through. Is the threat that something's coming through, or is the the threat that something might not be able to get back to the status quo? Different ways of envisioning it.

[27:11]

R: Yeah, and are there doors that you want to keep open, or are there doors that you want to shut and make sure that no one opens ever again?

S: And then are there doors that it would actively be destroying the natural order of things to try and force them to close? Any of the gateways to the underworld, if you close the gateways to the underworld, how the heck is grandma's soul gonna get to where she's supposed to be? You're not supposed to mess around with that. A katabasis, which is the process of taking a journey into the underworld without actually belonging there yet, is a major thematic element through Greek myth. It was a fairly standard thing, we had regimented ways of going on a katabasis! They were normal, that was just part of the hero's journey that you're gonna go to the underworld, you're gonna go to hell, have a nice time, we'll see you when you get back.

R: It's so interesting with those too because there are such strict rules that kind of accompany... this is how you get through hell. These are the things you must do and must not do. And I suppose we have, depending on, yeah, with fae, going into the land of the fairies, these are the things that you do, that you don't do. Don't eat the food, it's a bad idea. You won't come back.

S: Talking about reverse portal fantasies, *Hellboy* by Mike Mignola is really a reverse portal fantasy. Hellboy himself came through a portal. He was summoned by someone that wanted the antichrist to end the world. And there's a panel very early in where all the demons down in hell are lamenting because someone has just fed Hellboy a pancake.

[M laughs]

S: And because he has tasted a pancake, now he will never return.

C: I mean, I wouldn't want to leave a place where there were pancakes, so...

S: That's fair.

[M laughs]

R: Pancake is way better than the whole three pomegranate seeds or whatever, right? That's lame compared to a pancake.

S: Six pomegranate seeds, way less exciting than a pancake. Also the fact that it's a pomegranate at this point, we don't know if that's what it was in the original form of the story because welcome to the oral tradition, but the fact that it's a pomegranate means that all of those modern interpretations where Persephone really wanted to stay with Hades are a lot more credible. Because have you ever tried to accidentally eat any part of a pomegranate?

[M laughs]

C: Nah, you gotta work for that!

R: Does not work.

M: You gotta want it.

[M & R laugh]

S: Yep.

R: In fact, why stop at six? I mean, man. Once you've done the work—

C: Once you've done the work—

R: Just downing those seeds like nobody's business.

S: Yep.

C: I like that idea too though that if somebody does stay in the world they were not natural to, what might it upset? What starts to break down if someone is missing from their born world? I like that in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, when Dream gets captured and taken out of the Dreamscape, which is itself another world, another universe that all living things visit sometimes but don't live there. But when he's not there anymore to control his world and its borders, it starts falling apart, and nightmares escape, and the boundaries of dreaming shift. What happens if we remove somebody, a character, from their natural world and put them someplace else?

S: I feel like to make that work you kind of have to conflate the portal world and the Chosen One narrative. Because the world only falls apart in the absence of Dream because Dream is Dream. He is not just some dude. We have other dreams and nightmares over the course of *Sandman* who manage to get out, who live good lives in the waking world, who are happy. But they are also not the arbiters of that reality.

R: I think you have to have, and again that's a worldbuilding question, right? What kind of world do you build that has what kind of character is requisite to be there? And I guess you could build a world in which every person does have some reason for being there, that if they are gone the whole thing just falls apart. But I think that you may start to, it'd be difficult to write without venturing into some kind of twee sentimentality perhaps?

S: Nothing wrong with a little twee sentimentality.

[M Laughs]

R: But you could do it, you could do it.

C: You start getting more alternate realities as opposed to fully-envisioned other worlds. It's... was the other part of the movie of *It's a Wonderful Life* another world that was created by the guy not being there? Not critical to the entire world at least.

R: It's the angel as a trope, at least.

C: Yeah, something like that. Not necessarily critical to the stability of the entire world, but something changes. Where's that line between just an alternate reality and a full other world?

And to me I think it's different rules. Like... there's something different enough about the other world, how it functions, what rules of order and chaos apply, what rules of magic or technology apply that make it different enough that it's considered its own bubble thing. Not just another version of where we live.

M: The rules of time. So often that's a big thing, that the time flowed differently in the portal world. And how much of that, I wonder, stemmed from the idea that we have to make this fantasy story be... it could've just been a dream. And therefore—

[M & R Laugh]

M: Therefore time flowed differently over there and you came back and no time had passed, and... so maybe it was just a dream. I wonder... cause that was the style at the time, that you couldn't just be like...

C: And a lot of those, too, were movies. That the original—

M: Yeah.

R: Oz was not a dream in the original. There are even some movies that... I guess *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* isn't exactly a portal fantasy, but the whole thing is framed as a dream. We got into this trend of framing portal fantasies or fantasy in general as a dream sequence. Even when the original or in the original screenplay it wasn't.

S: Although the saying that the time dilation, or the time distortion, is a trend kind of discounts the fact that the majority of portal fantasies can really be rooted back to the old fae mythology where you took a nap in the wrong circle and now whoops.

You know Oisín is kind of the ur-portal fantasy in a big way. He went off to be the lover of The Fairy Queen for a long time, and he started having nightmares that Ireland was in danger, and would wake up crying that his mother was suffering in his absence because Mother Ireland was not well. And finally his wife said, "You can go home, for five minutes you can go home and make sure Ireland is still there. But do not step off your horse. If you step off your horse you're fucked!" And he went back to Ireland, and he saw that it was still there, and then he stepped off his horse, and aged into dust in an instant. So the idea of differing time flow really does come from those mythological roots of the sub-genre.

M: I do love those old Celtic stories that are always like, "As long as you don't do this, everything's fine." And then it's like, "Well, I'm going to do that."

[M & R Laugh]

S: Welcome to Human Nature 102.

C: Yeah.

[M Laughs]

M: As long as you just wear your masks you'll be fine! Oh. [Laughs]

R: The Celts had human hubris down really well.

M: They really did. But also the time dilation can go the other way. Because there are the types of stories where the person spends a night in the fairy land and then oops, it's been a century.

S: Rip Van Winkle life.

R: Yeah.

C: Versus the Narnia model of you've lived thirty years, and grew up, and had a whole life... then you came back and you're twelve again.

R: Yes.

C: Sorry!

R: Oops.

[M Laughs]

R: In the time it took to sneeze.

M: You're going to have to do puberty again.

[C Laughs]

R: Noooo....

C: [Whispers] Not again...

[R Laughs]

R: Well, and the ones too where they seemed to run in weird parallels. But... I guess I'm thinking of Spencer's *Fairy Queen* where Fairyland is a real place. But the real world also kind of exists but sometimes people hop over... it's rather unclear, honestly. But it seems to be running in a kind of parallel, and perhaps the two are influencing one another in some way.

M: I'm also thinking about *Brigadoon* where the village vanishes for 100 years, then shows up for a day, and then just kinda vanishes for 100 years again. So it has that same sort of sense. The thing that I always love about the story is that it's just day two of the miracle, as far as the people in Brigadoon are concerned.

S: Mhmm.

M: A week from now it's going to be 2557 and what's that going to be like for them?

[M & R Laugh]

S: They're going to have a real bad day, and as soon as they come out of the mist they're all going to die of Covid instantly because they have no antibodies.

[C Laughs]

S: Brigadoon can be tracked by the smallpox outbreaks.

C: Poor Brigadoon.

M: I'm sure the preacher thought it was a really good idea at the time. But, you know... [Laughs]

C: Well, the number of problems we can trace to that problem over the course of history.

[M & R Laugh]

C: Sure the priest thought it was a great idea, hmm...

[36:10]

R: So you brought up kind of *Sandman*, but I was thinking too of how dreamscapes themselves... dreams, that is in some ways treated as another world. And in some stories it's actually a place you go to, not just a psychological state.

S: Catherynne Valente has an absolutely ingenious portal world, Palimpsest, which takes place in a sexually-transmitted city. And when people start going there they genuinely believe they are dreaming, because you go to Palimpsest when you fall asleep. But it is a real place. And if you are lucky and if you fuck enough people who have been infected, you can stay forever. I'm not kidding, that is the premise of the book.

[M Laughs]

S: You've got a sexually-transmitted city, you have sex with a stranger that has a picture of the city tattooed on themselves, when you wake up that piece will be tattooed on you, and you can now visit that neighborhood when you go to sleep.

C: Hashtag goals.

[M & R Laugh]

C: The idea of the dreamscape, I think, really plays upon the liminality of the other world. And the changeability that we sort of associate with all of this. The time, the location, is it still going to be there if you try to go back to it or has the portal closed? Dream by its very nature being so shifting... seems like it fits well with all of those other concepts.

S: And the fact that we are currently living through a plague time means that these things appeal to us much more.

[M Laughs]

S: Because we have turned the entire world into portals. Is the city that you remember loving still there? Can you go back? It's gone now. And that is a very big shift in human thought, that

we have been through before, but we didn't think, as a people, that we were going to go through it again anytime soon.

M: This is another one of those things that I have the sense of it being a common trope but I can't think of any specific examples where dreams also sort of represent... not the other worlds themselves, but sort of the border area between different worlds. Because that's a thing that you also just see a lot. It's not that the portal goes directly to another world. But the portal will go to a place where then you can access the other worlds from there. And then you might have access to a lot of other worlds from there. I know that was a thing they did in *The Magicians* for one.

S: Yeah, the misty place is actually a relatively common trope. Not as a full blown doorway... but this is a connective tissue point, this is a way you can access even if you can't fully cross over for whatever reason.

R: I like the... I think a lot of Eastern European and Russian folklore does a concept of when you are dreaming your soul is actually wandering around. But I think then you have to ask that question of where are you going? Because a lot of that stuff does not make sense here. So you must be going somewhere else, either some bordery place or some other place. When you sleep your soul's getting up and taking trips. Which, considering that my days are very boring, I kind of like that idea.

[M Laughs]

R: Yes, go, do something else, have fun.

C: Yeah, but I feel sorry for the souls from other dimensions that have to wander into ours when they sleep. Like... oh dear, okay.

R: Maybe it's exciting for them. I don't know. [Laughs]

C: Yeah, the grand adventure of ordering from Chipotle could be a whole thing.

R: I have never had a burrito!

[C Laughs]

S: And that does actually take us to one of the things that you see come up kind of frequently on social media right now. We are all living the lives that our ancestors dreamt for us. We have more spices than the richest king of all time. Our homes are warm in the winter and cool in the summer, for the most part. Even if we're miserable, we have tiny people in boxes that can sing to us 24/7. We are living the fantasy life. So if you take someone that's from Narnia or wherever and is not living that life, who is used to having a medieval level of technology, or even an Ozian level of technology, and give them the opportunity to enjoy modern comforts without being here long enough to have to learn about things like the American healthcare system or tax accountants. If you take out all of the costs and consequences of our world... this is a pretty great place to visit for fifteen minutes.

R: I mean, when you've been living life with a chamber pot, a toilet is magic.

S: Exactly.

C: It's a very a grass is always greener type conversation—

[M & S Laugh]

R: You can see happening between the characters from different worlds.

S: So Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series is very much a portal fantasy. The tower is at the center of reality and you can travel along it to go to other places. And there is a point where Roland Deschaine, the Gunslinger, winds up in our world. He doesn't stay for long, thankfully, because a lot of people would have died. But he gets here, and he gets a Pepsi. Just a cold cup of Pepsi with ice in it, and he completely loses his shit. Because it is sweeter than anything he has ever tasted before, and it's cold on a hot day, and he's just standing there sucking down coldness and sweet for six pages. And it doesn't get boring because he's so happy. Because you can actually see where in the worldbuilding his sheer, raw joy is fully justified.

C: I feel like that's a great thing to think about when we think about... if you're building multiple worlds, if you're building a multiverse, what is unique to each world? What do the characters in each world find exciting or boring? And then what would a visitor find exciting or boring? That's probably part of the mechanics that go into that construction.

[41:51]

S: Yes, very much so. With a side order of then if you have to try to explain that world to people from our world you get to run into the impossibility of similes. I tried to explain potatoes in the context of if you've never had a potato before it... tastes like a starchy thing.

[C Laughs]

C: It's like chewing on a pillow, but way better?

S: What do your pillows taste like?

[C Laughs]

R: Also I like it because it's just... it's, if you have really stale bread... and then you fluffed the stale bread. And then you added butter...

S: What's bread?

[M Laughs]

R: Well, you didn't tell me we didn't have bread.

[C Laughs]

S: Why would we have bread if not potatoes? You start asking questions, what's the food? And how's that going to work? And any worldbuilding you do have the option to turn it on its head.

Ruthanna Emrys wrote an absolutely brilliant duology that I hope will eventually expand called *The Innsmouth Legacy*. Which is cosmic horror told from the perspective of the last of the Deep Ones. And what does Cthulhu as a god look like when that is who you view as... not necessarily a loving god, but a non-malicious god? Is Cthulhu innately hostile? He just doesn't care about you. He's not here to hurt anyone, he's just going to rise and destroy all of reality one day. And is that really so frightening if you don't have this thought that humanity is the end all and be all of creation? So watching someone without changing that worldbuilding, taking completely inverted, is a fascinating exercise.

M: That just reminded me of, I think it was a tumblr post from a while ago, explaining what Cthulhu would be like. If you were in your backyard and then all of a sudden the ants on the ground spelled out your name, you would be at least intrigued enough to come and see what was going on. [laughs] And then you would probably stomp on all the ants anyway, but you would at least come and look, and if they're like, "We would like your help. I want this other ant to love me." "Oh, that's easy, I'll destroy the rest of the colony and then there'll be just the two of you." It's like, "No, that's not what I wanted!" "Well, that's all I can do." [laughs]

R: I love those story reboots because I think they help to show us how we've changed the concept of the other world, whatever it might be, over time. None of these are static, that we keep what they look like for millennia on end. We're humans, we change up the story a lot. I think one of the most striking ones is the concept of fairies. We take fairies from these rather scary critters who might really screw you up to these little happy flower guardians. And they live in your backyard, and they put dew on the clovers, and aren't they nice. And this is a total shift in how we think about this particular other world. And obviously now we're shifting again and can do other fun things with it. So I think thinking about any kind of other world as malleable, you get to play with it no matter what the antecedents may be, there's no canon when it comes to a lot of this stuff because we've been changing it for centuries. For funsies.

S: Mm-hmm.

R: So if you're gonna build another world, we've talked a lot about the places that you start and the things you have to think about, I guess one question I have in terms of, you're gonna build another world, you're gonna build a portal that you're gonna slide through: to what extent is it connected to or in tandem with the world that you're starting out with? Probably this world, but that's an option too.

[45:36]

S: That's an option that you have to make. You've got an entire panoply of selections to go from there. There's no hard rule.

R: It seems in terms of plot it's gonna drive a lot, what kind of story do you want to have drives a lot of what kind of a portal world you're going to build.

S: Mm-hmm.

C: Is it a terrifying place? Is it a comforting place? From the viewpoint of your characters, is it the threat or is it the solace, is it the escape, I think is one germ to begin with. It will probably be affected by exactly your subgenre and other considerations. Do you only have one other world or do you have many different ones? I love the Invisible Library series that plays with so many different possibilities on this scale of order and chaos, and a scale of magic and technology. How big is your otherworldly map, I guess?

R: And I think that question of is this a pleasant place or a terrifying place kind of feeds into one thing I've noticed, I think a lot of — not a lot of, but quite a bit of — when we think portal fantasy, our expectations that we have fall into that *Wizard of Oz*, “there's no place like home” model that the protagonist eventually wants to go home, but it's like, but do they? That's a question to ask, do they really?

S: Well, that's partially because a lot of the children-aimed portal fantasy is that child's fantasy of running away, of going to a place where you are fully understood, where you are allowed to be yourself no matter how weird, or unfashionable, or inappropriate to your parents that is. And then the adult fear kicks in, you start worrying about those parents. Your kid has just completely disappeared, are you not upset about this? So I kind of feel like the kid wanting to go is the worldbuilding step, and then the kid wanting to come back is the author going, “Oh fuck, no parents are going to buy this for their kids if at the end of it they just go off to live with the Care Bears forever.”

[R laughs]

C: And that becomes another worldbuilding question of does the door stay open or does it close? Is it a place that you can revisit or do you only get the one chance and that's it? That's another consideration to build in.

S: *Jumanji* is a good example of a portal fantasy where once the door is closed, you just stay gone. And at the time, that was super shocking and upsetting because it ate a dude! It just ate him! Stop eating dudes, Jumanji, or we'll throw you in the ocean!

M: But it'll always come back.

R: I love the end of that book where the kids just take it, and put it back in the park, and you're like, “What hath I begat?” And then you see the other kids going and picking it up and it's like, this is actually kind of sick and wrong but I like it.

[M laughs]

C: Yeah, who created that portal and why?

R: [laughs] Yeah.

C: That's the backstory I want with *Jumanji*. Who made that board game?

R: I want the prequel. I want the *Jumanji* prequel.

[C & M laugh]

M: The phrase “Clive Barker’s *Jumanji*” just came to my head. [laughs]

S: I mean, Clive Barker did do his portal fantasy. He did a couple, honestly. You can really make a big case for *Cabal*. But *The Thief of Always* is just straight up portal fantasy, it’s even aimed at young audiences. And that’s the book that begins with the line, “The great gray beast February had eaten Harvey Swick alive.” It’s about kids, they get kidnapped, or rather lured, to the holiday house where you get to live an entire year every day, all the holidays in one beautiful day. But that day actually does last a year and the house just uses you up because it’s stealing your time, and when that time runs out, you get turned into a fish and the house eats your soul. Have a nice day.

C: There you go.

S: That’s very much the Pleasure Island model of portal fantasy, which we take the name of from *Pinocchio*, where you can have everything, you can have joy, and wonder, and magic, but there is a cost.

R: Which I think is fun to play with, because even if there’s not an overtly written cost, I think some of the fun tension of portal fantasy is that there’s some kind of cost. Right? There’s cost to the protagonist in some way, relationship cost, or you’re giving up one set of dreams for another, or you’re choosing between different paths, and I think that there’s something innately human about having that anxiety. Which might be one of the reasons we enjoy portal fantasy, we get to watch someone live it out in real time, actual, instead of having these deeper anxieties living in us, eating at us, someone’s actually doing it and making the decisions. So I feel like we’re coming to the end of our hour, but just do you have any other words of wisdom, Seanan, for building a rich and delightful portal fantasy world?

[50:26]

S: You need to ask yourself, why is it connected to this world? What benefit is the portal world getting from being connected to this world? It doesn’t matter if you’re ever going to answer that question in the story, but you need to know. That is my primary word of anything on all worldbuilding topics, just period. Is it doesn’t matter if it’s ever going to come up in the story, you need to know. Because if you don’t know then you can’t underpin it as necessary.

One of the series that I write is called *Incryptid* and that’s about a world where basically if it’s in folklore or mythology anywhere in the world, it existed or it exists. A lot of things are dead because humans humaned at them and we drove them to extinction. So there is a species of what are called cryptids, which are all the folklore creatures in that world, called the wadjet. And in this case the wadjet experience extreme sexual dimorphism. Meaning there’s such an extreme difference in the appearance of males and females of the species that you can actually mistake them for different species. Male wadjet look like giant cobras. Female wadjet look like ladies. Now the wadjet are primarily found in India. Wadjet was an Egyptian cobra god. And I have had people decide that this meant that I didn’t do my research. Because clearly I didn’t get it right.

And I'm like, "Well, no. This is a series about conservation and things being driven to extinction." What that means is that there were wadjet in Egypt. And we encountered them first, and we decided that was the name of people whose dudes looked like snakes. And then we wiped them the fuck out, because we're dicks.

[M Laughs]

S: So it's less about not knowing and more about the idea that we got there and we killed them, which is a thing that people do. So I need to know that even if no one in the— there is no one left in the world in that setting that knows that this is why they're called wadjet. They just know that we killed so many of the ones in India that they have lost their language and are using human languages, and we call them wadjet. Why do we do that? We don't know, that's just what we know to call them. So you need to answer those questions even if you have no intention of answering them for the reader. It will make your world more realistic and easier to inhabit.

C: That's a fantastic way of putting it. Alright listeners, mark that down.

R: As is our tradition we ask our guests to give us a parting gift before we go. Which is as we're live worldbuilding a world on air we collect trivia from our guests to populate into our world, and our challenge is having to do that without having the scaffolding in place beforehand. So, Seanan, give us something before you go.

[53:17]

S: Can you give me a genre?

C: We're operating in a... Age of Sail technology level fantasy world. So we have magic, we have that level of tech. Other things we've been given have been everything from a rival school of martial arts to mammals that are given as gifts between cultures... any sort of thing like that and we have to figure out how we work it into the broader picture.

S: So one of your primary continental lines of rulership, one of the ones that still practices any form of monarchy, has experienced a complete change of which line is currently holding the throne due to the local equivalent of smallpox. It turned out that one of the lines of descent basically just had a genetic predisposition towards suffering the most negative form of this disease and they all died out. And what was fun about that for them was that this unveiled who all the king's bastards were.

[C, M, & R Laugh]

C: Yes! Yes! Oh my god, I love it. That's gorgeous.

R: Love it.

C: That is trivia and a fantastic story hook all wrapped up in one. Thank you.

S: Thank you.

R: Well thank you so much for coming on, Seanan, we appreciate it. And, listeners, if you haven't read them already, you have 50+ books to add to your TBRs.

S: I'm sorry.

[M Laughs]

R: Don't be. [Laughs]

S: I'm not that sorry. Because as you've heard from the yelling I have very large, very opinionated cats. And when you buy my books you feed those cats. They will eat me. So... I appreciate the help.

R: Buy the books so that Seanan does not get turned into kibble.

S: Oh, they'll eat me.

[Outro Music Plays]

M: Hi you. Thanks for listening to this episode of Worldbuilding for Masochists and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. Our next episode will go up on November 10th, where we'll have the Queen of Grimdark herself, Anna Smith Spark, join us to talk about building grimdark worlds. I would also like to remind you that we are a finalist for the Hugo Award for Best Fancast. If you are eligible to vote for the Hugos, we would love your consideration. And if you want to learn how you can be eligible, visit Discon3.org. If you want to know more about your hosts and the books we write, links to all that information is on our website at worldbuildingformasochists.podbean.com.

We really hope you liked this episode. If you did, please do take a moment to tell a friend, shout about us on the internet, or leave a review on iTunes. If you have questions or just want to tell us how cute we are, there are a number of ways to contact us. We're on Twitter as [@worldbuildcast](https://twitter.com/worldbuildcast), and our email is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. We also have a Discord chatroom linked in the About the Show page of our website if you want to come and chat with us and other fans of the podcast. We'd love for you to share the worlds you're making and help us all build until it hurts.

[outro music plays]