

Episode 48:  
“That Belongs In A Museum”  
With Marina Lostetter

Transcribed by:  
BananaLord

C: You’re listening to World Building for Masochists.

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

ML: Because it’s better than rotting our brain on Youtube all day. I’m Marina Lostetter.

C: I’m Cass Morris.

R: I’m Rowenna Miller.

M: And I’m Marshall Ryan Maresca, and this is Episode 48: [imitating Indiana Jones] That Belongs in a Museum!

[intro music plays]

R: Marina, welcome to this show, we are so excited to have you on...

M: Thank you.

R: And to talk a little bit about things that belong in museums and many other exciting topics. Would you like to tell us a little bit about you, and your work, and any other fun facts that we should know before continuing on?

ML: Sure, I am the author of the *Noumenon* series, which is a space opera trilogy, and the upcoming *Helm of Midnight*, which is the first book in the Five Penalties series, which I like to bill as *Hannibal* meets Brandon Sanderson’s *Mistborn*, so it’s got lots of fun artifacts to talk about, and then later this year I also have another book coming out called *Activation Degradation*, which is a space thriller.

R: You are busy!

M: I am.

R: Excellent. And something I am always curious, especially for folks who have crossed the line and do both sci fi and fantasy, what do you love about worldbuilding? What's your worldbuilding geek out?

ML: I love to build worlds just to break them?

[everyone laughs]

C: Yes!

R: That is an excellent answer.

ML: Everything about presenting a world and this is how it works, doesn't this make so much sense, and then you get deeper into it and you're like, "Wait, no, that's not how that goes. No, stop, what's happening?" And then there's some dark secret.

M: That's the part that I always struggle with, because you make this beautiful world, you do all the intricate work, and then you're like, "And now I need to take a hammer to it." And part of you is like, "I get to take a hammer to it," but part of you is like, "But no, it's pretty in its case and I don't want to break that because it's..." But no, you gotta take the hammer to it.

C: The world isn't worth more if you haven't taken it out of its packaging. You can't resell that on eBay, Marshall.

[laughter]

ML: It's true.

R: Marshall, were you the kid who would build things with Legos and then you didn't want to take it apart ever?

M: No, I didn't do that...

R: Not so much?

M: I was not that one, no.

ML: My husband does that. To this day!

M: Partly because there was absolutely no space in my house that I would have been allowed to get away with that, my mother would have been like, "Mm, no, you gotta put that away now."

R: Clean that nonsense up. I love it. I feel like this is setting us up well for some exciting conversations, building things and then breaking them!

ML: And then breaking them.

R: So I take it that artifacts have quite a place in your story that is coming out. Is there anything that you can tell us without it being a giant spoiler?

ML: I think so. So enchantments are the base for the magic system, all the magic is in objects in *Helm of Midnight*, and the main ones we focus on in this book are enchanted death masks, so when somebody dies, if they were a specialist in something, you can imbue their death mask with that special knowledge, and it's a very complicated process making sure the mask is enchanted, yadda yadda yadda, and the plot actually revolves around the death mask of a serial killer that was illegally enchanted, and gets stolen in the opening scene, and is used for very nefarious purposes.

[laughter]

C: I love everything about that.

R: Where are we storing these death masks? It seems like they should...

ML: Yes, and they are...! His mask was in a vault, and then it came out for the chief magistrate's jubilee, and was on display during the party, and basically Chapter 1 is a heist goes down and...

R: It's always those parties that get you, I'm telling you.

ML: Yep.

R: Champagne starts flowing and... enchanted death masks just walk away.

M: I read just that description of the book and I was like, ohhhhh, we gotta get Marina on the show for this.

[laughter]

M: I needed nothing more than just the description, I was like, nope, this is it, this is the goods.

ML: Awesome.

C: Honestly, who among us hasn't at a party started accidentally cavorting with forbidden enchanted objects?

ML: Exactly!

C: That was my entire grad school experience.

ML: That's what parties are for.

M: Is it even a party if you don't accidentally summon a dead spirit of a killer?

R: Accidentally, mind you.

C: Not by my rulebook!

R: Accidentally. Purely by coincidence.

M: I mean, when you do it on purpose it's a different kind of party.

[5:14]

R: So what I love about this topic is just how many things can be artifacts. You have an ordinary thing, you throw it in a river for a couple hundred years, it comes out again, suddenly it's an artifact, it's special, it's something unique and wonderful, and I feel like that dovetails in with so many aspects of worldbuilding so well because it imbues this sense of history, and this sense of where things have been, and that your world isn't static, it's constantly changing, and developing, and moving further away from that time that that artifact was new.

ML: Absolutely. So one funny thing is it doesn't even have to be 100 years, so my dad grew up on a homestead in Oregon, he wasn't the homesteader but they grew up on a homestead, and they basically didn't have any trash service or anything like that so there was a trash pit that everybody within 100 miles on their little homestead came out and threw stuff in. And we used to go up there when I was a kid and go through looking for old bottles and things, just for stuff, and a few years ago the trash spot that my dad used to use as a child was designated as an archeological site, so we're not allowed to go in there and take bottles out of there anymore because the trash that my dad threw away is now archeological evidence.

C: Those bottles are too special now.

ML: They are! It's literally one man's trash is another man's treasure. It seems like a far off time and place, and my dad is like, "It's the 60s, it's not that long ago," but things have changed. And there's decades worth of trash beneath his from other things.

C: I've been helping my dad clean out his garage, which has been an excavation effort in and of itself, but among the things we uncovered were some old, old files of my grandparents. And it was boring stuff, it was tax information, and bank statements, and things like that, but among them, my grandfather apparently kept a very detailed journal of the things he owned, the objects

in his house, for insurance purposes, he had a little notebook, it was great, it had sections for furniture, and movable goods, and all kinds of stuff. And we kept it, and I swear to God, Rowenna, I thought of you...

[M laughs]

C: Because I thought in a couple hundred years, there will be historians who would kill for this kind of information! And I know I was one of them, but then Rowenna was the next human that popped into my head.

[everyone laughs]

C: It would be like, "I want to know how many chairs you owned!"

R: And it's true because inventories are huge in historical research! You have household inventories and you're like, this is how I know what people owned, what people wore, and how much stuff was worth, because someone was anal enough to write it down.

C: And somehow it got preserved.

R: Right.

M: And it's so easy to just not preserve information at all, even over the course of a century. How much does the average American not know about their great-great-grandparents because nobody wrote it down?

ML: Right. So I was thinking about this the other day, my husband was reading Caesar's surviving — he's only got, like, two histories that are surviving — so he was reading about all the military things, and he'd go, and then the whole army would get to a river, and he'd be like, "And then overnight we'd build a bridge," and then you'd move on, and my husband was always like, "Why?! Why are you not telling me how you built this bridge?" and I'm like, "Well, you know, he's writing it for other military people at the time, who know how you build a bridge." Today if we're like, "I went and used the microwave," I'm not gonna stop and tell you the intricacies of how a microwave works, I'm presuming I'm talking to people who know how to use a microwave. So there's a lot of stuff historically that gets fanned out because people who are talking to their contemporaries don't realize that people in the future are like, wait a second, we don't have that anymore, please explain.

R: And it's cool too because those unexplained pieces, that's how you know what was common and what was normal, it's interesting how the empty space still gives you some kind of information.

ML: Right.

R: I think this contrast is so interesting between these death masks that exist in your world, Marina, and garbage.

ML: Yes.

R: That some things we know are important and we're going to set them aside, carefully preserve them, protect them, and some things we have absolutely no idea that they're going to have value at some point, and it's just interesting how sometimes we're spot on with what actually has value and sometimes it's like, eh, get another manuscript, these are a dime a dozen, we have 15 copies, but this shoe that we found in a rafter somewhere, woo!

M: And I always wonder, the places where they have the great archeological finds, are those just the garbage dumps of those towns?

ML: A lot of them are, yes.

R: Yes.

ML: And that's how you know what people ate, that's how you know what kind of dinnerware they used, that's how you know what their fabric weaves were, is it all just gets shoved into the trash pit and then my dad explains that we can't go there anymore.

R: My favorite are the outhouse excavations—

ML: Oh yes!

R: Because people used outhouses basically as garbage, so pottery breaks, you throw it in there because it's garbage, you don't need it anymore, and so now there are cities where there were houses with outhouses, there are excavations of the outhouses where there are people literally digging through centuries-old crap to uncover garbage because we want those shards of pottery, or that broken glass, or whatever to figure out what the material culture of the time looked like. So literally something that was thrown in an outhouse has value.

ML: And the other thing to think about with these things is the good thing about trash is it gets buried, usually that's what happens to it, so it is accidentally preserved, whereas today if we're burning our trash or something like that, it's going away. But when you bury something, whether intentionally or not, you are giving it a chance to be preserved, whereas things that you leave out are just gonna be weathered, and get disintegrated, and that kind of thing, so dirt does a lot to help us see what people in the past lived like. So does volcanic ash, caves, anywhere where you can shield stuff from weather and the elements helps immensely.

M: And then that also becomes that big fantasy trope of here's this big magical whosawhatsit that's far too dangerous and can't be destroyed, so we're just gonna bury it and hope for the best that it never comes up again. But there wouldn't be a plot if it didn't come up again, so

therefore of course it's gonna come up again. If you're really lucky, you break it into three, or five, or seven parts and then bury the parts, and no one would ever dig them all up and bring them all— Oh dammit!

R: Darn it!

ML: Who would ever be nuts enough to do that?

[12:34]

R: And I love those questions of how does stuff get lost, because some stuff is intentionally lost like that, and then you have the stuff that, I don't know, maybe the town got sacked and someone mistook this object of great power for a gravy boat, and they took it home, and they put it in the china cabinet as this nice gravy boat, and many years later someone is looking for the magical vessel of whatever and in fact it's great-great-grandpa's gravy boat.

ML: There should be more of that in fantasy. We don't get enough of that. We get a lot of, "Oh yes, we know where the ancient thing is, we must find it," but there's not a lot of, "Grandpa had this in the basement."

R: Right, because honestly, once in a while you get these stories cropping up of, "Turns out this person had a Van Gogh in their basement."

ML: Right, yeah.

R: Because this does happen, we don't realize the value of these things that we have.

ML: There was this Monet just taped to the wall.

R: Right, or we used the frame for this thing and stuffed it behind the thing we wanted to frame. Oh, whoops, it was worth a lot of money.

M: I feel like we have seen a couple of things, I feel like there was an episode of *Buffy* or *Angel*, I might be wrong, where it's like, "This is the sacred cup of whatever and you were just holding pens with it on your desk, what is wrong with you?!" But I can't remember explicitly what it was. But I like the idea that the great and powerful will morph into the mundane, not in terms of the power that it holds, but in terms of people knowing that that's what it is and...

ML: Yeah, someone's utter ignorance of whatever the item is.

M: Although *Buffy* did do that with the zombie death mask thing like, [imitating Giles] "Do you like my mask? Isn't it pretty? It raises the dead! Americans."

[laughter]

M: You didn't realize hanging that on your wall would create a zombie apocalypse.

ML: You didn't know.

R: Hate it when you redecorate and create a zombie apocalypse.

ML: But yeah, lots of stuff does get— So you get the accidental misplacement of the object, and then you have things like Akhenaten and his whole shebang where you purposely get erased from history because someone is like, "Hm, I don't like this whole monotheism thing you've got going on, we're gonna erase you and Nefertiti from history if we can by blotting out your name everywhere and covering up your name with other people's stuff," but then once in a while some things fall through the cracks and we find them.

R: I forget, Cass, you probably know, which Roman emperor or someone near an emperor got blotted out and he got painted over everywhere. And he got—

C: It was one of the Severans, I think it was Caracalla's brother...

R: Yes, it was Caracalla's brother, yes.

C: Geta? Geta, was that his name?

R: Yes, and they discovered analysis—

C: Damnatio memoriae—

R: The paint was actually animal dung, so it was this extra layer of, block him out...

C: That is an extra special fuck you to the afterlife.

R: Extra special.

C: Yeah, the technical term is damnatio memoriae and I'm a fan, I think we should bring it back for certain people.

[laughter]

C: [unclear] politics. I think we should just erase them.

ML: That sounds like a good idea! I'm on board with that.

C: My apologies to future historians. You'll thank us really, you don't want to know about the last four years.



R: And they say cancel culture is new.

C: Yeah, no.

M: All the history books just skipped four years, boom, I don't understand what happened.

C: Weird, weird!

ML: Collective amnesia.

M: Although the idea that there is a secret history, either because something got hidden away on purpose or accidentally, or that people just suspect that something happened that got hidden. I keep thinking about the legendary Pope Joan, whether this was true or not, there's the rumor that there was some woman pope who was pretending to be a man the whole time and then gave birth from the papal throne or something, who knows which scandals got buried and which didn't.

ML: Right, and then it becomes rumor, how far from the truth does it get, so if you think about Alexander the Great, half of his stuff is like, alright, that's factual, we know that, or the Gordian knot stuff where you're like, total fabrication obviously, but then there's stuff in between where it could have happened or it could have not happened — his death is questionable, we're pretty sure but we're not quite sure. So there's lots of hidden history that just gets blurred between myth and fact.

M: Or also the history that gets hidden because it's politically inconvenient or doesn't match the social mores of the time, like let's just pencil out all the bi stuff with Alexander for a while and then...

ML: Right, let's not talk about that.

M: Let's not talk about that.

ML: And then there's lots of points in history where you have a conforming of the narrative for convenience and control's sake, like the Council of Nicaea bringing together, this is the canonical version of the Bible and we're just gonna ignore all these other pieces of the Bible because it helps us narrow down our control, and what's expected of everyone, and we can reign in all these cults, and make sure that we all have the same stuff that we're going by so that we can not have all of these little conflicts popping up. At least not for a couple hundred years. And then they'll pop up anyway, but that's OK.

C: And that whole idea of who controls history, and I feel like we talked about this a little bit in previous episodes with the words of history, this brings us now to the artifacts, the physical

objects of history. Who controls that, who controls the narrative? I always come around to the idea of how, in 19 years, did everyone in the *Star Wars* galaxy forget that Jedi existed?

[laughter]

C: That's an impressive campaign of erasure considering that, you know, they were flipping everywhere during the Clone Wars, but things like that, what is easier and harder to erase, the mental and verbal record or the physical record?

[18:53]

ML: Good question. I think in different times, it depends.

M: I think we're even seeing that sadly right now, where events that happened in our lifetime, people are already like, "Oh yeah, that's not how it happened," it's like, we have video that...!

C: Just this week there's been this thing on the internet that no one argued against the Iraq War at the time and I'm like, my ass was 17 years old protesting it.

ML: The collective denial.

C: I was there, I was— I did that?

ML: I think that also happens a lot through simplifying narratives, right? It's really hard for humans to hold really complex often contradictory things in our brains, but life is full of complex contradictory things and so we try to narrow that down into a really digestible narrative. And stories are great because they automatically do that for us, it's fantastic. But in real life that can't happen. So when we try to tell stories about ourselves, we inevitably smooth off the edges, and if we want to tell a story about ourselves that makes us look a certain way or feel a certain way we're gonna discard what we feel is the ugly parts, or the special parts, or if we want to be like, "Oh yes, the Iraq War, nobody knew until way later that obviously there were no weapons of mass destruction so obviously we're going to rewrite this to make us all feel like, ah, nobody knew and that was just a thing we discovered later," when yeah, lots of teenagers were not very happy at the time because we were like, "What the hell. What am I watching on TV, oh God!"

ML: Yeah, so I think that makes some people probably of a different generation looking at it right now feel a different way about the narrative. Versus other people of a different generation who were pretty like, "No no no, this is how we remember it and how we experienced it," so it has a lot to do with the way that humans have to view themselves and tell stories about themselves.

R: And if you think about then how the artifacts and the objects that tell the story come into play, an object means nothing until you explain its importance.

ML: Yes.

R: So you can in a lot of ways erase the meaning of the history of something, even if you can't get rid of the object itself. And not that many objects aren't pretty easy to get rid of, but even if you can't, even if it's too large or too culturally important, you just change the story, and the story changes, and all of a sudden it means something different than it did before.

ML: Yep. I think we're seeing that with a lot of — the United States especially — with statues of certain people...

M: Ohhh!

ML: Who might have had a certain narrative applied to them and now are having a different narrative applied to them. And all of them can be different degrees of true or not.

[M & R laugh]

ML: It was amazing to me how many people didn't know that Christopher Columbus was arrested for atrocities during his lifetime. That's been my one big viral tweet, I tweeted, "How do people not know this?" and... they don't know! They don't know!

[laughter]

C: Do you realize how bad you had to be to get arrested in the 15th century?

[everyone laughs]

R: And even more banal stuff, we look at some things like this has been beloved throughout all of our time, and in fact the thing could have been quite controversial or people wanted to reject it at the time, like the Eiffel Tower, if I remember correctly, we think of as this beloved landmark of Paris that exemplifies France — they didn't want to keep it, they were like, "That's coming down after the Fair, right? That's— We're not— That's not— No."

M: We don't need a giant antenna in the middle of the city, thank you.

R: So how a thing changes and becomes a different story, different part of the narrative just over time, and how we adopt things that were not originally part of the plan.

C: Or how our modern viewpoints change what physical record is there. All of the Scandinavian graves that they've unearthed that's like, "Ah yes, that's a very masculine warrior," and then they check the bones and it's like, "Wait... why was this..."

ML: You constantly have to reevaluate this and then you have to reevaluate it again when you have a new perspective.

C: "Why was this female body buried with a spear? Hmmm." "Why were these two men buried together? They must have been best bros!"

[laughter]

ML: Oh, that's my favorite. The letters that are like, "I would love you like my wife," and then they're like, "Oh yeah, that was just a common thing that dudes said to each other."

M: Just dudes being dudes. It was what...

R: And I love it's like, they find one, the one woman buried with weapons and it's like, "Well, maybe it's some sort of anomaly or perhaps, uhhhh, yeah," and then they keep coming up, and you're like, OK, so in fact these artifacts are telling us something that we actually have to shut up and pay attention to because they are speaking louder than our preconceived notions can even shout over.

ML: And then we even have to reevaluate again because of gender bias. You know, we can't tell from bones what gender a person is. We can tell what they would have been assigned at birth, right. So there's always new layers that you're popping up with. There probably was a trans emperor in Rome that people are realizing today, oh wait, this narrative that we had about this dude, maybe not a dude.

R: Right, and for a lot of things, if we don't have a written record of those people, we don't even know what their definitions of things were. And a lot of the definitions that other people placed on them were from their perspectives, so even when you have some written histories, often of many people in the ancient world, they're written by people who are applying an outside lens. So sometimes the material culture people leave behind is the most honest and only real window we have into how these people lived, and what their actual lives, and perhaps if you really poke at it and dig hard enough, what their worldview was, what did they actually believe or think.

M: And how did they change what they wrote down or what they created of their history based on changes of what they wanted to think about themselves? You brought up Columbus earlier and I keep thinking about how nobody cared about Columbus until at some point somebody's like, "We need to do a campaign to make Italian Americans feel better about themselves, what can we do to boost their morale?"

R: "Who have we got?"

M: "Who have we got? Let's play up Columbus a bit and see if that makes them feel better."

ML: I don't know why you would ever pick Columbus, but they did so that's where we're at.

[laughter]

ML: And that's another thing, who is telling stories about who? Because you tell stories about yourself but you also tell stories about other cultures, so you have to look at what minority groups are being left out of the storytelling, who's getting to tell their own story versus who's getting talked about, and that objects can be helpful in getting to the realness of it because like you said, that's where all of the firmness is. History itself, written history, is very ephemeral in the sense that it can change a lot, we can have different ideas about it and different analyses of it, and then when you get back to the physical object, there's more definitive things we can learn about it.

C: But yeah, that material culture can teach us a lot about the people who don't get written about. About the everyday citizens, the poor, the marginalized that we don't get from what's passed down in the written record.

ML: Yes. Even women's history. Even in modern times, we know lots of women's history was just swept under the rug.

R: Well, it just wasn't important because they weren't doing important things. Important.

C: Right. Like clothing people, that seems extraneous.

ML: Lots of air quotes, yes.

[27:19]

R: And then who's finding this history if we have material history, artifacts to find? Who is discovering them and who in a fantasy world can do that?

ML: That's a good question.

M: Part of the challenge when you're doing secondary world building and you present something as, "Here is the history of the world," when you then go back and be like, "Oh, that thing I told you before about the history? That's not true. It's actually something else," and I've found, at least with genre, there is a tendency to reject that sort of thing happening just because, unless you thread the needle well, just because genre readers are trained to take whatever infodump they get as an objective truth rather than a subjective, "This is just what we think happened 20 years ago."

C: If you tell me the mythical emperor Sean reigned for a thousand years, genre readers will go, "OK, yeah, I accept that," and if you say, ah, but what if he didn't, what if it was twelve people named Sean or something, it gets complicated and you do have to do it well so you don't lose the reader, I think it's a delicate balancing point to play with.

ML: Absolutely.

M: A recent book that I think did it well was *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang, where right at the beginning she has a thing where the main character is like, they're talking about some war, it's like, "How did this end?" she's like, "This is how it happened," and somebody else is like, "That's what's in the book but that's some bullshit we put in the book, because that's not what really happened at all," so she immediately sets the stage right there of the information that I'm presenting to you is fact, no, that could very well all be bullshit.

ML: Not so much, yes.

M: And by seeding that early, she allows herself the ability to keep that sort of thing going throughout the series.

ML: Right, and I think that's important. So the building the secret history versus the retcon? Which is kind of what happened in *Star Wars* with the Jedi, right? You start off with a story that's like, "Oh, this ancient order that we barely remember," and then you want to elaborate on this world, and everybody loves a Jedi, and you're like, crap. If I bring back this really rare order that everybody wants these stories about, and we just kind of hand wave that away, it's fine. They just forgot, like you said. There was a really elaborate campaign somewhere that we don't know the story of where they erased all of the Jedi. So everybody's forgotten about them in the span of less than a generation.

R: Another book that did this really well was the novella *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* because the whole concept is basically deconstructing an official narrative. So you go into it pretty blind in terms of what exactly the truth is and what the story is going to be, but it's pretty clear as it unfolds that the whole point of telling the story is to deconstruct a narrative. And they actually, the main character does it through artifacts. They are unpacking stuff in an old house, and there is an old woman there who is helping [them] and hanging out, and anyway, everything is, "Tell me the story about this, tell me the story about this," and so through the process of learning the stories about ordinary objects, she's telling these stories to the monk who's recording everything, and the monk is piecing together what the real story is in comparison to the constructed narrative. And so it's really a cool way of putting together, this is how artifacts can be a part of storytelling.

ML: Yeah, absolutely, I think that's a huge important piece to showing hidden history as well. I think sometimes it's done well with large things, like obviously in *Planet of the Apes*, the big reveal at the end, you're like, ohhhh!

[R laughs]

ML: That's a very large artifact that's very recognizable. So you can do a lot of that and I think it's sometimes harder in a secondary world. When it's our world, you go, oh, I recognize this thing, I know what's happening here! You can connect the dots. But when you're doing it in a secondary world, you have to pay more attention to how you connect those dots and lay that groundwork for that. So in *Helm of Midnight*, I tried to do it by basically the characters telling you

the way it works, and then I have other scenes that show the way it really works, or hints that show this is what can happen, this can't happen, and then it'll happen, and so throughout the different— it's told in three timelines, there's kind of a fourth little story in there too that helps you see that what the overarching state party line is is not necessarily true, so I have, I've tried to lay that groundwork rather than going back later and being like, oh, no, actually I lied.

R: Psych!

ML: Yeah, trying to weave it in from the beginning so that it's clear this foundation I'm giving you is shaky versus later trying to undermine it is really important.

R: And I think that there's something to be said too for how do your characters engage with history and engage with what the official narrative is versus their own curiosity, because it always amazes me how much we love a conspiracy theory. As humans, we seem to be drawn to a conspiracy theory and there are some that just will not die no matter how many times they get debunked, they won't die, and it makes me wonder sometimes, we do in fantasy often treat the official story as this gospel truth, unbreakable thing, but how many people in your world would actually look at it that way, and how many would be like, "Oh no no, no, didn't you know that they faked the dragon slaying?"

[M laughs]

ML: Right, yes, and I do think it's complicated because you're doing the worldbuilding so you have to find that happy medium between, here's what the majority of people believe, and here's the truth, or here's the hint at the truth, or here's the kook with the conspiracy theory, and how do you make sure that all of that is balanced? That's a fundamental craft problem, is the balancing act of it all.

M: I just realized that that would be a great story of, the kingdom has a legend that the king's ancestors slayed the last dragons and everything's safe, but then discovering that's all just a lie, dragons never existed...

ML: They weren't even there in the first place!

M: It's just an elaborate ruse that they cooked up of, "Don't worry, we killed them all, so now we're king."

ML: You're good, you're good.

R: Or you could have variance on who was actually on the grassy knoll. So and so took over the kingdom because they assassinated the evil ruler, but oh no, was he not working alone?

M: Like Marina was saying earlier, that is always the challenge with secondary world fantasy, is building either the events or the artifacts sufficiently enough to then be able to question and

subvert them in a way that your readers go along on the on ramp enough with you to be like, yeah, OK, let's go. Because you can do, say, weird time travel stories surrounding what's actually happening at the Kennedy assassination, and almost every time travel-using show or movie has been like, "What about the Kennedy assassination?" because it's the most fun "what the heck actually happened here" thing to use in recent memory. But to be able to build something in your secondary world history that you can incorporate that much depth that your reader will fully accept and take in enough to then play around with, that the reader will be able to get with you with everything that you're playing around with, that's a scary prospect that I don't know how to pull that off.

ML: It's much harder because you don't have those cultural touchstones of the real world for somebody to be like, "Ah, I see you have undermined this thing that I learned about in second grade." You have to build it up and then you gotta break it down.

C: I feel like this is somewhere where a certain amount of rhetoric might come in almost, in using essentially the same language to describe a situation to make it analogous to our world. Not who was on the grassy knoll but who was in the verdant meadow. If you make that a bit of a refrain in the story, the reader will start to go, "Ohhh, I get it, that's a parallel to our world's whatever." Language use might help key the reader in on what you're patterning your choices after.

M: Yeah, creating almost articles of faith that are repeated and repeated so that then when you break those repetitions, I can see, yeah, that can work, that can work. That's brilliant, Cass, as usual.

R: I think also trusting the reader to some degree that we have an agreement, you and me, reader and writer, that I am not going to throw anything in here that's totally useless, so when I start sprinkling in—

M: [laughs] So many writers don't keep up that agreement!

R: It sounds a little fishy about this official narrative, or some cracks and fissures in this rock solid history, I'm doing it on purpose, and the savvy reader knows this because they know the deal, they know the compact, the contract that we have.

C: I'm not sure that's a promise I can fully make.

[everyone laughs]

ML: It is difficult, but I do think it's important in this kind of worldbuilding. If you're just doing regular worldbuilding and you're like, "This is the world and I'm throwing everything in!" then I think you can do lots of random little fun things, but yeah, if you're specifically showing things being undermined, you gotta be really purposeful with what you're doing, and you don't want to



give them too many red herrings because you don't want them flailing like, "What am I supposed to believe? I don't know!"

C: I feel like this might be a flaw we've started to see in the MCU. Everything is a puzzle box but a lot of those threads don't end up going anywhere and never end up paying off, then the audience starts losing some faith in the storyteller.

ML: Yeah, what are you doing with this, what does this thread mean? Nothing? Hmm.

C: Is this going somewhere? Is this happening? No, nothing, that went nowhere, OK, great, cool, awesome, thanks.

M: Of course you also get the people who presume a puzzle box and with something that has such metatextual complications as the MCU does, be like, "Oh, so they must really be doing this story, so this character is going to show up," and when that character doesn't show up they're like, "Oh, you betrayed the idea I made up in my head."

ML: Oh no!

C: Yeah.

ML: And you definitely can't do too many reverse gotchas, like in *The X-Files*, for instance. I have watched *The X-Files* a billion times. I still don't know where we ended up. Aliens are real? Are they not? Were they here? Was Mulder's sister...? I don't remember, I've watched it so many times, I should know, I should know, but there's so many reversals, and runarounds, and back and forth, and this was real, and this wasn't, that it's such a mess that I don't know if I could ever weave it all into something that's coherent.

R: Yes, and there's something to be said for the story that wants to leave an unreliable impression, and it's this lady or the tiger ending, but that is very difficult to do well and you have to be very obvious that that is what you did, not that you're like, "OK, I'm lost, someone needs to explain to me what happened, I don't..."

ML: "We've gone back and forth a million times."

R: You don't want to make your reader feel stupid. Your reader should never feel stupid.

ML: Right.

R: Or betrayed.

M: Sometimes as a writer, you just gotta pick a lane as opposed to going, "It might be either lane, I don't know!"

ML: Yeah, stuff like that can work well, I think, in short fiction, but longer stuff where you're really putting in more concrete things, you gotta pick a lane, what is it?

M: It's funny you mentioned *The X-Files* because I'm thinking about how in the 90s I watched that religiously but if you asked me now, I can't remember a damn thing about the big myth arc episodes. The ones I remember are the oneshot episodes that were fun, but I don't remember the... I don't even remember what was what with the bigger myth stuff.

ML: You can't because who knows. There's so many it is, and then it isn't, and then it is, and then it isn't, and then it is, and then it isn't, that you're just like, "I don't know, what did we end on, is it or isn't it?"

M: Because they did just keep pulling the ground out from under you.

R: The monster of the week was where it was at.

M: Yeah.

ML: Yes it was. That was, "What is it? Ah, it's that!" Tada.

R: Right, and you could get away with one of those one off episodes with a "Is it or isn't it? I'm not sure," because it was 40 minutes of your life instead of a decade.

[laughter]

ML: Right, and when you just twist the reader — or viewer, or whatever — around, and around, and around again, eventually they just completely lose faith in what you're doing because they're like, "Do you even know? I don't know that they even know."

M: It's one thing to pull the ground out from under your reader, but it's another for there to never have been solid ground.

ML: Yeah.

R: Yeah.

ML: Ultimately, *you* have to know what you're doing. You gotta know in your brain what's happening.

C: You probably don't want your reader having "the floor is lava" as their general feeling for the narrative.

M: I remember when *Babylon 5* just started, there is a bit in the first episode where the alien ambassador gets poisoned and it's shown that it's done by someone putting poison right on his

hand, but he's supposed to be in a special alien suit that has no interaction with... So people were like, "Oh my God, that's a big plot hole!" And the creator, who for a rare thing in the 90s was extremely online at the time, was like, "That's not a plothole, just trust me on this one, it's gonna make sense," and they're like, "OK..."

ML: Go with it!

M: But it basically took that level of him being like, "No really, I know it seems like one but it's not," but only because he had this very locked down idea of what the whole grand story was gonna be.

ML: Right, that's the difference between a plothole and a clue, what the author knows.

M: Yes.

R: Right.

M: And then, to go back to the mystery boxing that Cass was talking about, that's often, "I'm gonna put a clue! I don't know what it's a clue for yet, but it's probably gonna be pretty cool, or not..."

ML: "I guess it means something somewhere."

R: And I think when you've thought through all the onion layers of your worldbuilding, and played with them, and tested them, that's when you can more easily punch the holes that look like clues instead of looking like you didn't think this through. When everything else is thoughtful, and is fitting together in a way that works for the reader, and is logical, and the whole thing feels pretty seamless, that's when the hole feels like, "Oh, oh, I should notice this," rather than, "I'm gonna nitpick this because you're not a great worldbuilder."

ML: Yeah, and I think that largely lands on — sometimes you're expecting your readers to be a certain level of savvy — but most of this rests squarely on the writer's shoulders and what they can do craft-wise.

R: All of our readers and listeners are savvy and intelligent individuals.

[laughter]

ML: Of course.

R: Yes. And I do tend to assume that my readers are smart people but yes, even smart people are not going to catch things that are not well crafted. You can't blame your reader for your lack of putting together the pieces.

ML: Exactly.

M: That's one of the underlying principles that we're always working with on this show, is that as worldbuilders, it's better to know the answers to questions that will never come up, rather than to create questions that you haven't figured out the answers for.

ML: Yeah, absolutely.

R: So I love that the central artifacts in your world, Marina, are magical, and it just makes me think of how many possibilities there are for imbuing magic into the concepts of histories, and artifacts, and if everything in the museum was also... Maybe also...

ML: Had an ability? Also magic!

R: A little something extra, like the antique shop is not just an antique shop, it's a plethora of magic and spells.

C: Gonna need a lot more security.

ML: Yes, so in this, one of my main characters is a regulator, who's basically in charge of regulating enchantments, and making sure everything is legal, and on the up and up, and there are special items in the world. So it's not everywhere you go is an enchantment, they are expensive, valuable pieces in the world that you can get licenses to get and almost anybody can buy, but there are certain levels of magical ability that are not accessible to the public, that only the state can own, and things like that. It is a complicated, strict system.

R: If you think about, we lose a non-magical artifact in our world, this may be sad, we may as history geeks want to recover it, but it doesn't have quite the same implications and risk that a magical object floating out in the unregulated world there can have. If you lose the key to the magical basilisk cage and it happens to end up in some antique shop, this can go bad places.

ML: Yes it can!

R: So great places for storytelling, bad places for the characters in your world. So that extra impact of how much more can artifacts matter if they're imbued with magic or allow you to access magic.

ML: Right, right. And it definitely gets to be commentary on who has power, and who has access, and how do you get that access, do you earn it, are you just given it? So there's lots of social commentary you can make with it too.

C: I feel like magic grants artifacts the difference between value and ability. If we dig up a thousand year old sword, no one's gonna go use that sword.

[laughter]

C: Technology has moved on, we're gonna have to get—

R: Eh, never say never!

C: OK, probably no one's gonna use that sword. We might make casts of it and sell it to Ren Faire geeks, but the actual sword is probably gonna go in a museum and it's fine. But if you dig up a thousand year old magic sword... Well, I wanna know what that does so I'm gonna keep using that, whatever the object is, a ring or whatever, if it continues to have a useful ability because of the magic then that changes its nature to the present, its relationship to the present, once it's been unearthed.

ML: That's true, absolutely.

R: I love the concept too of a lost thing granting access. So we can't open this sealed book because we don't have the amulet, we don't know where it is. Or that kind of thing, it's such a common trope in fantasy, but also one I think that can be pretty fun to play with.

M: That trope is a lot of fun but at the same time, you have that thing where your plot then becomes a collect the plot tokens thing—

R: Yes.

M: Where it's like, oh, to open the book you need the amulet, but to get the amulet we need to go to here, and then once we go to there we're gonna open a thing that shows the map to the next place, and I always ask myself, who set up this scavenger hunt?

[laughter]

C: The great god Rube Goldberg.

[laughter]

M: On some level I like it when it's at least explicitly like, old man Jenkins made the scavenger hunt because that's the sort of thing that was fun to him, but a lot of times it is lost artifact leads to next lost artifact that just knows to create a path because there's gonna be a quest or something, and that always rubs me the wrong way.

Everyone: Yep.

R: Something I don't know that we've played with enough in the genre, we just aren't gonna find it. It is really and truly lost and we're gonna have to figure out some other way to deal with this problem. There's fun to be had with that too. Instead of finding the magical amulet, we are going

to research all of the archives and similar pieces that we have to see if we can figure out a way to recreate one or whatever, there's fun to be had with that. Or maybe only if you're someone who really enjoys researching material culture, I don't know.

M: Rarely do you see that sort of kitbash engineering mindset for solving the problem, you'd be like, "We need this amulet, and this book, and this ring," and people would be like, "Well, we don't have those, but I found this magic hat..."

[laughter]

M: "And I got a hammer..."

ML: "I MacGyvered it!" We made a secondary world fantasy MacGyver.

R: There really needs to be a fantasy MacGyver.

ML: That would be fun.

M: "I took a Bag of Holding, and I took this, and shoved them together, and that's gonna make a door to get us through this city. It should at least, we'll see."

[R laughs]

M: We talked a bit about how things get hidden by intention or accident, but what about — cities sometimes get destroyed or moved — what about the sorts of things where they city's like, "We're gonna hide from y'all, because the rest of you are terrible and we don't want to deal with you"?

[50:45]

R: Well, yeah.

M: I think that is a common trope in fantasy of the secret hidden city, which I still want to know where they get their food from, because...

R: Details. Or you have the trope of the secret society that was formed for the sole purpose of protecting this item, or this story, or whatever, and...

C: As long as they all look like Ardeth Bay in *The Mummy*, I'm all for it. Bring me all of the secret societies.

R: You either have Ardeth Bay in *The Mummy* or the really old knight in *Last Crusade*.

ML: Yeah, *Last Crusade*.

C: That poor bastard.

R: I know, right? Poor knight lived in a cave for centuries.

M: If you set up a secret society, then you can have people who set up your plot quests, and so you can have the thing on the back of the Declaration of Independence...

ML: Right, yeah!

M: Then that leads...

C: What I think would be hilarious is a group in a fantasy world that existed explicitly to do that. We're gonna create these fetch quests, not to hide the secret mystical thing, but because we need to give the village youth something to do.

[laughter]

C: We're gonna create these quests to keep those kids out of our hair every generation. "Alright, go find the— What is it this week?" Flipping through the notebook, "Uh, the Sword of Changing! Yeah, go find it. Go."

R: It's like a really complex Big Brothers, Big Sisters program.

C: I love it. I love that.

M: Every couple of years there's just some kid in the neighborhood who's just too much, and so therefore we tell him he's the chosen one, and we send him off...

C: Send him away!

M: Send him away.

[R laughs]

C: Either he will come back having grown and matured or he gets eaten by something, either way we win, we come out on top.

M: I would really love a chosen one narrative that that's the twist of no, you were just a lot.

[everyone laughs]

ML: We just didn't know what to do with you, I don't know... I do like the secret society thing a lot. There may or may not be secret society stuff in *Helm of Midnight* and *Five Penalties*.

C: Ooooh!

R: Always fun, always fun. Which honestly, in some ways that's another craft point of we as readers know the trope so when you bring us into a secret society, we're like, oh, ears perk up, OK, we know to pay attention now. So you can consider in crafting those tropes people already know.

M: We know the old man moved the scone on the wall and it opened up the passage behind there, that's some good stuff that's about to happen. We're gonna pay attention.

C: Bunch of people in robes meeting in one place, oh, yep, there's...

M: Why do we have the robes? They're just comfy, to be honest.

ML: We like them.

R: They really are.

ML: That is a good point, if in your secondary world you don't have the Statue of Liberty that you can point to and go, ahhh, you do have these other tropes that are reader touchstones that you can rely on, it's very true.

R: Or subvert them, but be careful.

ML: Or subvert them!

M: "This is just our book club, what are you talking about?"

[laughter]

C: "This is just what we wear for this..."

R: Why not?

C: The robes have pockets for all the books.

R: "Oh, I'm sorry, you guys wanted the secret society meeting? No, Tuesdays it's garden club. Sorry."

C: "Come back Thursdays at 8 PM, you'll find them."

R: "Very busy community center here, so..."



[everyone laughs]

ML: And then on Thursdays it's a support group for all the children who were sent off on pointless quests and then... Hansel and Gretel are big attendees!

[laughter]

M: They run the meeting.

C: Founders actually, the founding members.

R: Yes. Well, I think that we are coming to the end of our episode and I want to make sure we have enough time for Marina to leave us with a little gift, as is our tradition that when we have a guest on the podcast, they leave us a little bit of worldbuilding trivia to slide into our second world that is a part of our podcast.

ML: Yes. I was thinking since we were talking about artifacts, obviously it should be some sort of an artifact, and the secret society thing fits right in because I was thinking there could be a cult whose holy book is the enchanted diary of a 12 year old girl, and whoever reads from the original pages is instantly deaged to a 12 year old. So what's fun is this could also play into these poor children who were sent off on these pointless quests...

[laughter]

C: It's just an endless loop.

ML: An endless loop.

R: And I love the idea of deaging to 12 years old because that is simultaneously glorious magic and curse.

ML: I know, right?

C: Yeah...

R: It's the worst possible middle school, ahhhh, but still, youth.

ML: Exactly how I feel! That's the worst time in my life, I would never want to go back there, but also so many possibilities, everything is open!

R: Right, I love it, I love it.

C: If I was gonna go back there, there had better be a magical item at the end of that quest for me. That's the only thing that would get me to go back to being 12 again.

M: But I could also see that as a cult using that as their immortality trick, you're on your deathbed, it's like, "Read the book!"

ML: "Read them the book!"

R: "No, I can't! It was so awkward!"

[everyone laughs]

ML: Somebody on their deathbed, "I would literally rather die!"

[everyone laughs]

C: Excellent.

ML: Oh, 12. What a time.

R: Well, thank you so much, Marina, it was delightful having you on, I think we're all looking forward to reading *Helm of Midnight*.

ML: Thank you.

C: Very much.

R: So thank you again, and thank you for the magical diary of a 12 year old.

ML: You're welcome.

R: Which we will treasure. Or hide. Or lose. We're not sure yet.

C: Or pass off to the unsuspecting.

ML: Oh, accidentally reading that book would be terrible.

[laughter]

[outro music plays]

M: Hi, you! Thanks for listening to this episode of World Building for Masochists and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. Our next episode will go up on April 28th, where we'll be talking about modesty, and immodesty, and what that can mean for your culture. And speaking of immodesty, we have some exciting news that we'll be sharing and talking about in that episode. We really hope you liked this episode; if you did, please do take a minute to tell a

friend, shout about us on the internet, or leave a review on iTunes. If you've got questions or just want to tell us how cute we are, there's a number of ways to contact us. We're on email as @worldbuildcast and our email is [worldbuildcast@gmail.com](mailto: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]