

Episode 7:
“Just Add Magic And Shake”

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[00:00]

M: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

A: Well, see, the planet's sorta in alignment so...?

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

A: I'm Alexandra Rowland.

M: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

R: And this is episode 7: “Just Add Magic And Shake”

[Intro music plays]

A: Hello everyone, how is everyone today?

M: We're doing pretty well.

R: We're here!

M: We've all had some busy weeks, I believe.

A: Yes indeed, we're returning from a couple weeks of not recording because I was in Ireland for Worldcon and you guys were doing cool...things...also...one presumes...? Sorry, I didn't mean that to come out as snarky as it ended up! I started that sentence and I was like —

R: They were not as cool, that's for sure.

A: I was like, I don't know how I'm ending this sentence! And then it came out way snarkier than I intended, I apologise.

M: We were both doing different levels of parent things and those took up a lot of time.

R: We were.

A: Hey, parent things are really cool.

M: Parent things are cool. I got to drive across country with my son and then drive back without him so that was good.

A: Oh, you ditched your child, very good!

M: I ditched my child.

R: And this was on purpose? It was not forgetting him at a gas station in Nebraska or something?

M: It was at his dorm in Manhattan, so he's living the big life now.

A: Wonderful, very cool.

R: Excellent.

A: So today we are putting the fantasy in fantasy worldbuilding, I think, at last because today we're going to be talking about building magic systems and I think we're going to be discussing a little bit our fantasy world which one day we should get around to naming — not today because names are a whole different kettle of fish. Do you guys have somewhere you want to start?

R: Well, I feel like there's one of those questions that's probably been asked by many a nerd before us and that is 'is magic necessary in a second world fantasy?'

A: Absolutely not, and here's why: because [KJ Parker](#) exists in the world, and KJ Parker does beautiful fantasy books with zero magic as far as I can remember. Although I will give you a warning he is not great with women so just bear that in mind. Also all of his characters are assholes. So if either of those things bother you don't read his books, but I really like them anyway.

M: I'm inclined to agree. I remember when I was first giving one of the [Maradaine](#) books to beta readers when I was very early in the stages and this book had, even though there's magic in the world, this book had no magic and people were really confused — does that make this fantasy or not? If there's no magic? But yes, of course.

A: Of course, of course. In my books — we're all going to be doing the 'well *my books rawh rawh rawh*' (the *rawh rawh rawh* noise sounds almost exactly like an old white man talking about his sexist, racist masterpiece that he's been obsessing over since he was 15. Which is probably the point)

M: We try so hard not to do that, but you know...

A: I feel like we don't try that hard at all but it's fine because at least we have a blast whilst we're doing it.

M: Ok / try hard. [Laughs] Even when it's super relevant, I love it when books do this and I'm like 'Oooh oooh! Oh I'll shut up now'.

A: So with my books I have a fairly low instance of magic. Like, no more than 10% of a population has magic but only in places where there is magic because not everywhere in the world has magic. But I think we'll probably get into talking about methods and things later on. Rowenna, do you want to chip in and talk about 'well in *my book*'?

R: You know I'll put a pin in my book for a while and come back to that. I agree with both of you that magic is not necessary for fantasy. I also think it's interesting to think about, well what do we even mean by magic? Just because something is non-Earthy doesn't necessarily mean that it's *magic*-magic. So I'm in the middle of Naomi Novik's [Temeraire](#) series right now and there are dragons. That's the big sell, it's Napoleonic era with dragons. But the dragons aren't really magic per say, like, I wouldn't define them that way, they're an animal that exists in the world, they're intelligent, sentient, they have a lot of cool abilities but they're all just described as just part of this natural world that exists. So it's like if someone in a world not-earth didn't have cats, and then wrote a story about cats, and said what is this magic being called cats? I mean cats are pretty awesome but...

A: Do you guys think that lately in our genre, in our industry, there has been a tendency for fantasy books to be lower magic?

[05:10]

M: I think for one you're just in general seeing more people writing books that question what fantasy is and do more choosing versus presuming against the grain of what was at one point

traditional fantasy. So you'll see lower fantasy books like, say, Seth Dickinson's [The Traitor Baru Cormorant](#) which, I read the first one and there's no magic in that whatsoever, I don't know if there's any in the second book or not but it seems to be a no magic world from what I've seen. I mean, and again, that is pure fantasy but it is definitely a grounded realistic fantasy with no magic, but that doesn't make it not fantasy and we're seeing that more and more nowadays.

A: And actually when you look at the actual characters in [Lord of The Rings](#), Gandalf technically has magic but you never see him do magic, right? So would we classify Lord of The Rings as a low magic setting?

M: I think in the sense that magic isn't small there because the magic that does exist is massive but it is extraordinarily rare, that those who have it are few and far between.

A: Yeah.

R: Right, because you have the ring which a magical object, which is so central to the story. Like, you couldn't really pull magic from Lord of The Rings and have Lord of The Rings be the same story.

A: That's true.

R: But I think it raises a really good question about, magic can be central to a story or it can be an outlier to the story, do you think that that's true of a fantasy world? Can magic be no big deal in the world that it exists in?

M: I think the key thing when you're defining how magic is in your world and how it works is, there's two different spectrum you need to look at. The first being how powerful magic can be and the other is how common it can be. Because those can be two very different things altogether, you can have magic be minimal but everybody has it, you can have magic be huge and almost nobody has it, or it can be huge and everyone has it, or anywhere in between on those two axes.

A: Yeah, I would definitely agree. And also it's really cool to set up a magic system which at first glance seems as low impact as possible and then kind of interrogate the ways in which it actually isn't low impact because it might change everything. In the...'**in my book rawh rawh**', in the manuscript that I just finished — from now on, I demand that whenever we start talking about our own books, you have to preface it with saying '*in my books*' in a funny voice.

[R laughs]

A: So in the manuscript I just finished writing I have a magic system which is just that people who live in this country, about 10% of them, to varying degrees of strength and proficiency, when they touch a metal they know what metal it is. That's it. And at first glance it's like, well that's pretty much useless. Except at second glance it's really not, because that can change their entire history of metalwork, it can change how swiftly they develop steel technology, it can

help them find counterfeited coins, all sorts of stuff. So me, trying to invent a low impact magic system, totally failed.

R: Well, and I think that that's a good point though, right, because a lot of the other things that we talk about with world building, you change one thing and there's a ripple effect. And it just ripples out and touches everything else and I think that magic is one of those things that absolutely can ripple and touch everything else. Falling into a trope of there's a sorcerer in a tower casting spells, yes, but what does that mean for so many other parts of a magical world? I guess one thing that I think about is how do you have reliable, powerful magic in a world and not have it be a major factor in cultural and political dynamics? How do you have minor magic and not have it be a factor in how people just live their lives? You know, even the potato farmers, it's going to have some impact on how people are just living day to day.

M: Why are your mages not just ruling the government?

A: Yes!

R: Exactly!

M: What is the reason behind that? What is the cultural impact on having magic? Are mages adored? Are they specifically kept out of government? Are they strung up and hung whenever anyone finds them?

A: Because they're terrifying?

[09:30]

R: And I really love Melissa Caruso's [The Tethered Mage](#) series for that and I think hearing her talk about or write about her inspiration, a lot of her inspiration for the series came from that idea, of if you actually have people with magical ability that is a resource that governments are going to want to control. And so her whole story built from the idea that if someone is born with magical abilities they basically get requisitioned by the government and tethered to a guardian and they have to serve the Empire. So there's this question of, well, how do you actually deal with that as human people if everyone has magic or if only some people have magic, it changes the game.

A: Yes. I don't think that there is any way to completely write it off, right? There's no way to build a magic system and not have it impact it. Anything you do is going to have some impact, so the first step is just to accept that fact in your life but I think that most of our listeners have already accepted that because they're listening to a fucking podcast called Worldbuilding For Masochists.

[R and M laugh]

A: So that's fine!

M: And this is episode 7, if they haven't figured this is where we go with this sort of thing then I'm not sure what's going on.

R: We should just warn you to drop out now if you're not cool with that!

A: Hello new listeners! Save yourselves, run away now!

M: Welcome! Welcome to our bizarreness. So I just did an AMA on Reddit and somebody asked me about what order I do things in, in terms of how I structure things together, and they had world building magic systems as separate items? Which I found fascinating because I'm like, those are so fundamentally woven into each other I don't even know how to separate them. We're taking till now to talk about magic but I honestly think it's a thing that is so woven into the very fundamental nature of the universe you're building, I mean it's like gravity. It's a thing that you've got to know what those sorts of impacts are as you're starting out. I don't know how you could do a world build that's essentially "this is medieval Saudi Arabia except I've sprinkled magic in" and have it be everything else the same but there's magic, because how does that work? Because magic is going to fundamentally change every other aspect of culture and the world.

[12:02]

R: so if we're thinking about magic, what kinds of magical systems can we play with? Like what kinds of magic can worlds do?

M: really, they can do all sorts of, you can do all sorts of forms of magic. You're not seeing too many books that will have multiple forms of magic or magic like things, um I have to do it "in my book"

A: In my book also...

[laughter from more than one person, not sure exactly who]

M: Sorry, I had to do it. In my book I actually have very many different things that I put under sort of the bigger umbrella of mysticism that you can create effects or power or such, that is such extranormal or outside of human basic ability and only one small portion of that is quote unquote magic, the others have different names and I get, I have characters who are very scientific about magic and mysticism so they talk about it in a very, very analytical and scientific way and they love to name things because when you have academic-y science-y characters they're gonna get academic and wonky about what they're doing with magic and how it works and how it affects the world and I think that's a thing that I don't see as much of. I mean I've seen it some, but I'm amazed how people will write worlds where magic is somehow utterly divorced from science and technology in the sense that people are just like no, we're just gonna keep it arcane because we don't know how it works. And we're gonna pretend like that's somehow better. As opposed to, you know, applying scientific method to it.

A: Yes, yes, I completely agree. And also a thing that kind of bothers me as well, is that in a lot of these fantasy settings, the magic will replace religion. Like, they just won't have religion because they have magic instead.

R: Instead of tying those things in.

A: And I think that's really interesting and I don't think that is how the phenomenon would play out in real life because religion is there to - and we're going to have to have a whole other episode on this - but religion is there to answer some fundamental question that you have about the universe around you, right? And if magic is there, it's just there and it's gonna be commonplace and you're not going to question it too much. Like, we don't wonder 'why gravity though, like why??' it's just a thing that happens around us and we don't really think about it too much.

M: Well, that also leads back to what we were talking about with cultural impact, does magic have a strong cultural factor in which the people practice it day to day. One thing I think J.K. Rowling - I'm not crazy about a lot of her worldbuilding choices in terms of the whole world because she has a 'hide magic underneath normal world' build which... tends to have a lot of problems - but I liked how in the magical world, magic was just so commonplace that it replaced every bit of manual labor you can imagine, just because why wouldn't it, because magic is as common as breathing for them.

A: Yes, for sure. I think maybe it might be useful for our listeners if we stop and define some terms?

M: Sure.

A: Are you guys familiar with soft magic versus hard magic?

M: Not specifically. Why don't you share it with us, Alex? [laughs]

A: So, soft magic versus hard magic is a set of terminology that I think was introduced on the Writing Excuses podcast? So soft magic is the sort of magic that Gandalf does. It's very numinous, it just sort of happens, this is also the sort of magic that Crowley and Aziraphale use in *Good Omens*, they just sort of will things into existence and it happens. There's no rules to it, there's no limitations, it's just sort of... [silly voice that sounds like it should be accompanied by them wiggling their fingers spookily] *magic!* Whereas hard magic has rules and restrictions and limitations. Hard magic is the sort of magic system that Brandon Sanderson leans on very heavily in his own work, for example, have you guys read the *Mistborn* series?

[R laughs]

M: I have not. It's on my massive to be read list. But I am at least familiar with the fact that he has a very complicated and rule-based magic system that people rave about.

[16:43]

A: Yes. So in *Mistborn*, for example, a certain subset of the population, certainly no bigger than 10% - much less than 10% actually, it might be, like, 1% of the population - has the ability to use this magic, except they need fuel for it, so they swallow shavings of metal and then they quote-unquote 'burn' the metal and having that metal inside them powers the magic that they can do. There are some magic users which can only use one kind of metal and there are some, the mistborns, which can use all eight types of metal, and they're super powerful, so you can combine - each metal has one effect, and I don't remember what they are, but it's something like

iron lets you pull a metal towards you, steel lets you push a metal away from you, that kind of thing. So if you can combine them in interesting ways then you can do flips through the air and travel at great speeds by just flinging yourself from the iron railings on houses to a horseshoe that you threw down in the middle of the street and so forth. It's really nifty. Both of these are really cool. I feel like, of the high magic systems that I am seeing lately in the fantasy genre, people are tending toward hard magic lately rather than soft magic, but they're both valid and cool and you can play with them in interesting ways.

M: I wonder if you see a lot more people leaning towards hard magic right now because if you do any sort of workshop or writing group or anything like that nowadays and you're writing fantasy, you'll usually encounter a teacher or somebody else in the group who'll push hard like, "OK, what are the rules of magic? You need to define that" and I think therefore we've had a generation of fantasy writers who've sort of had that drilled at them, for better or for worse, that whatever their magic system is, they need to know the rules and define them well. So you're seeing more people writing books where their magic is strongly defined instead of a loosey-goosey 'I wave my hand and it works'.

A: Yes.

R: And I think that that's a good question, too, of craft, are you going to... I kind of, as a writer, always want to know what the rules of magic are in my worlds. That doesn't mean that the reader has to know what they are or that they're explicitly defined in the books-

A: Or that the character needs to know.

R: Or that the character needs to know, because I think that you can kind of get into some difficult ground for if there are no rules for your magic then anything, literally anything, can happen and you can write some weird plot moments where it's like, well then, why didn't they just get out of that because magic, because magic hand wave! So I think that even in magical systems that read as though there are no rules, I think often there *are* rules that the author is setting for themselves ahead of time or has kind of evolved naturally just to keep themselves in alignment with writing a sensible plot.

A: Yes. I would agree. And also I think that when teachers are asking this question in workshops, I think that they might mean something different by 'rules' than what the student hears.

M: That's true.

A: Because, like, even soft magic has quote-unquote 'rules'. It's not a rule-based magic system but we understand the ways that it works. It's like, does your magic system have limitations? This is an opportunity to choose versus presume. That's really what the question is about. It's not about, like, your magic system must be a hard magic system, it must have rules and limitations, it's just, have you thought about how this works, are you choosing?

R: And I think, too, you know, everything has limitations. Even if you say, well, my magic system can do anything, who can do it? You've already made a choice there if you say, well, it's people. OK, so you're telling me that the crows in your world aren't magic and they can't do magic stuff?

So you set limits without realizing that you're setting yourself those limits, and I think that you can get into the question of limits, like any natural resource, you know, my personal energy as a human at some point gives out, does that affect how your magical system works? You mentioned the *Mistborn* series uses a form of fuel in terms of metal; if there's anything alchemical or potions-based, are there any really rare items that are going to form a limit within the system? And just in terms of limitations of practitioners, we often talk about practitioner limitation in terms of, like, the Harry Potter 'send them to school so they can learn lots of stuff' but I think there could also be natural limitations or magical limitations of, you know, if you try to do that thing you kill yourself, or you try to do that thing but that offsets all kinds of other things, so I think we often talk about personal limitations as always overcomeable, and I think that that's a choose versus presume that you can kind of, like, no, there's hard and fast, you hit a point and that's as good as you're gonna get.

A: And also, the great thing about this is that limitations... So, an absolutely limitless magic system isn't actually very interesting because then your characters don't have any conflict, and conflict is what makes a story interesting, right? So having limitations, even if it's something as simple as eventually you run out of energy, is an opportunity to create plot tension because you get to push your characters to that limit. It's like a Chekhov's Gun, right? If you set up a limitation on your magic, even as simple as that you run out of energy eventually, then you get to play with that later and you get to see what happens when that limit is reached. So speaking of limitations, stepping away from the hard magic versus soft magic and getting more into types of magic, do you guys have any favorite types of magic or anything that we can brainstorm about?

M: Well, I definitely - and this is leaning towards the more hard magic sort of thing - but I definitely like to find a big idea of how magic works and then use that as the central spike that everything else radiates out of. I have something that I'm still just fiddling with on a worldbuilding level and haven't done any proper writing with of using, rather than just certain metals, using the full periodic table of the elements as the basis of magic, and so all of the magic choices then come from that, if every single element has some certain ability and then mages are people who can then use the different things of that and combine them in interesting ways, but there's definitely a lot of weird choices, and some of them have basis in either history or fiction or folklore and some of them you can just make out of wholecloth, but we certainly have a lot of different terms for different kinds of magic that people gravitate towards, like necromancy is a very specific thing that a lot of people like to use, and the methodology in which magic works can then be affected by what kind of magic you're choosing to do. Because, say, something like necromancy: oftentimes people writing that, a) you need the dead bodies because... necromancy...

R: [laughs]

M: But also, that tends to lean towards a more arcane, ritual-specific sort of magic where you need, you know, symbols and chants and certain items. I was about to do a whole "in my books" ramble that y'all don't [???].

[24:36]

R: [laughs]

A: We've already done it, like, three times each in this episode.

M: I've done it, like, three times and I could keep doing it over and over again because I have a lot... Not only *in my books* do I have- is magic fueling a lot of- I have a lot of different kinds of magic systems and the way in which they have different limitations and butt up against each other and interact is a key underlying thing going on in all of them.

R: So I think it's really interesting that a lot of magical systems are really focused on affecting physical reality, so you have, you know, healing mages or you have magicians who can control the weather or can control an element like fire or water or can cause physical harm, and I think that those can be really a lot of fun to play with. I think it's interesting that for me some of the earliest forms of fantasy writing, like Edmund Spenser, a lot of his magic in *The Faerie Queene* was all about illusion. Like, the magicians create something to make people believe something else. And so a lot of it is still physical, like he makes almost like an automaton kind of thing that's to trick the main character in one certain part, but the whole point is to create illusion to manipulate people into doing what you want them to do, so I think that's interesting to think about, magic as a play on perception or emotional reality as well as just physical reality. And *in my books*-

A: [laughs] You did it!

R: I did it! But the whole magical system is based on the idea that there's good fortune and bad fortune and some people can kind of control those in one way or another. But part of that is, as the main characters learn as they get into other parts of the world and it's controlled in different ways, is a perception thing. So you have someone casting, you know, a spell over you, it doesn't change the physical reality but it changes people's perceptions of what they're hearing or what they're experiencing in a positive or a negative way, which makes them act differently, so you can kind of manipulate people.

[26:55]

A: Oh, very interesting. One of the coolest magic systems that I have encountered lately was in R. B. Lember's *Birdverse* series, because she has these mind healers who are sort of affecting the physical reality of the mental state of someone, but it's kind of halfway between physical and emotional, right, kind of in the way that therapists do with drugs [laughs]

R: [laughs]

A: But also with talking to you. So that's super fascinating. I also think it is useful to discuss the source of magic, like is it an external source, is it something from that world that you are picking up and using like a resource and shaping and then wielding, or is it something that comes from inside you...

R: You could have a religious source, you can write a book where gods are real and that's where magic comes from. I guess I'm thinking, oh gosh, Tamora Pierce's *Wild Magic* series way back in the day when I was a teenager, but the idea was that the magic had actually sprung from the gods, which is an external but not necessarily a natural external.

A: Yeah, so think of what D&D class you want to have in your world, right.

R: [laughs]

A: And you guys are laughing, but I mean it, because you have, like, clerics who get their magic from a god, you have warlocks who kind of have a pact with some supernatural entity, you have wizards who get it from books and rituals and spells...

M: Well, I think a) I was thinking about this and I think this is why we're seeing a lot more hard magic systems in general, is because today's fantasy writers are all people who grew up on D&D.

A: True.

M: And so they're used to having their magic be very rule based because that was basically a lot of their introduction to it. And I think it can be very interesting to have magic have many different sources within the world. It is always interesting one of the big choices you have to make on a worldbuilding level is, is magic a thing that anybody can use if they put in the time or effort to learn it, is it a thing that certain people get just intrinsically, like it's a genetic thing or it's like blue eyes or something, or is it a thing that isn't necessarily a learned thing but you have to earn it or prove your worth in some sort of way that's intrinsically different from just learning it like you're learning chemistry.

R: Right, right. Because you can certainly have a magical system that almost mimics like an alchemy kind of thing where as long as you put the pieces together in the right order you do magic.

M: Right.

R: Or you could have a magical system where it's like, you know, unless you have this ability, it doesn't matter what you do, you can put the things in the right order and you just have things in the right order and that does nothing.

M: Yeah, you have ones where you're born a wizard, or you have ones where you learn the things to it, or you have ones where you have to first complete, you know, being a priest of whoever to earn the god's favor so that the gods will do what you want when you cast a spell or something like that. Each of those can be very different methodologies in which magic works and what it's capable of. But I think one of the other things that is important to look at is even if there are fundamental laws of the universe of how the magic works, every culture is still going to approach it in a very different way. You're gonna have one culture that's, "OK, we have people who are mages and so we're gonna find them, we're gonna train them, we're gonna make them be part of the government, but we're also gonna keep watchdogs over them so that they're under our control," and you're gonna have the people be like "OK, we know some people are born with this power and so we're gonna find them and we're gonna smother them in their crib and then we're gonna hope that none of them ever show up because they're scary scary things" and each of these can be wonderful or horrible in their own ways, but I think it is important to

look at, even if that magic works as a universal, how each part of the world approaches it and how the cultures of the world you're building approach it doesn't have to be a universal.

R: And I think that that's where all of the stuff that we have spent the past six episodes talking about can kind of come into play and intersect with it, because different ways of living and different environments are going to influence how people fold magic into that and... oh God, I'm gonna do it again, *in my book*...

A: Good job. [laughs]

R: It starts out that the main character really doesn't realize that this magical practice exists outside of her small community but it's because it looks different. Her practicing, it's all physical, it's done a folk way but they use clay tablets and then she develops a way to use sewing for it but it's a physical object. And then she kind of realizes that in other parts of the world that have a more nomadic history, that their history was as goat herders and things like that, that physical objects were less important to them, so they developed magical practice based around musical casting.

A: Ooh, interesting!

R: So it's the same exact thing, they're just using it in different ways because their cultures folded it into what else worked within the culture.

M: And one of the things one can do to play with that is, again, magic can be a universal intrinsic thing but the way people approach it, people can approach it in, say, a very scientific way and break down "OK, this is what we're doing and this is how this works" and all that, and other people might just use it in a very instinctive, natural way like, "I am doing magic through my sewing needle, I don't know how or why, but that's doing it because that just felt natural to me" and it's not a trained thing, it's not a learned thing, it's just an instinct. Again, that's another area where you can play around a lot with how the magic works in your world.

A: Yes, for sure. So we are getting up to the 40 minute mark or so right now, do we want to transition to talking about not so much *in my book* but in our shared fantasy world?

M: The 'in my book', especially in this topic, is so hard not to do, especially because we're talking about craft in a very specific way, about choices that were made, so of course the ones that we're *deeply seeped in* are the ones we're gonna be most familiar with in terms of all the elements that we've put into it that don't necessarily show up in the books, like, OK, in my books magic burns calories but I never say the phrase "magic burns calories" in the book because they don't know what calories are.

R: [laughs] Sure.

A: Right, and, like, *in my book*... another reason we keep using the 'in my book' examples is because this is made up bullshit, right, and so we don't have a scientific vocabulary to talk about it with, so we have to use concrete examples, right? And like you said, the concrete examples that we are most familiar with are the ones that we hold very close to our hearts and therefore have used, so in my book- wait, let me try that again, [deep, goofy voice] *in my book*, the magic

comes from the land and the water, so if you live in a place that has magic for, like, 15, 20 years, you have a chance of developing that magic. If your family emigrates from one place to a different place, after a long time, you have as much chance as anyone else who was naturally born there to develop the magic system of that land. This is something that was really important to me because I realized - I was going to do it along bloodlines, like, "oh, if you are of this place, if you are the race of people that lives in this place you have this magic system" and then I realized that was racist and that didn't really take into consideration the question of when does a person become of the place that they live. So, yeah, magic systems as also, you know, commentary.

R: I absolutely see where you're going with that, though, because I think that the magical bloodline or its distant relation the Chosen One kind of trope, I think that that is worth interrogating and [quietly, drawling but only a little] *in my book* [laughs] that the main character is kind of led to believe that that *is* how it works, that people from her background, her ethnic background are the only people who can do this and are the only people that she knows that can practice magic, and it kind of gets blown out of the water when she actually gets outside of her little bubble and starts to see that other places out in the world actually do have forms of magic. This is like, great reveal, I end the trilogy, there's a scene where she's playing with a small child and she realizes the child can see this magic as well and she's like, "wait, I wonder if actually everyone can and it's just that some of us get trained to and some of us don't? Maybe it's all cultural and it's not actually..." So, yeah, kind of playing with those questions of not only the ethnicity or race or culture but also of the whole Chosen One mentality of, like, are you actually a Chosen One if you can practice magic or is it just that someone snapped you up early enough and showed you how to do it?

A: Yeah.

M: And, to follow up what both of you were saying, it is also imperative to be aware of the potential racist traps that you might fall into in creating magic and creating magic systems. I mean, how many stories are out there set in our world in which Africa or Asia is just made magic because racism and they're otherwise normal world stories where we've done that, that's a trope, that's a horrible racist trope, that I think a lot of fantasy sometimes falls into those same traps, I'm not going to call anyone out specifically but it is certainly a thing that I've seen happen time and time again where the books are basically Fantasy Europe, because so many fantasy books are basically Fantasy Europe, and then they have a Fantasy Africa or Fantasy Asia that's just, they've got all the magic, because they are Fantasy Africa or Fantasy Asia.

A: Right, because orientalism.

R: Right, I was just going to say orientalism! It's so crazy how we fold in actual historical, not even just historical prejudice but formalized trends of historical prejudice.

M: I mean, even *A Song of Ice and Fire* is not immune to that, because, you know, the further east you go in the world, the more magical it becomes until it's these all-magic cities that nobody else even knows about. That's what's in the books and it's... don't be racist! With your magic or anything else.

R: Don't be racist!

M: Exactly!

R: Or just interrogate your assumptions. Why are you doing it this way? Interrogate it, and if it has ties to that history of “oh, that’s why I’m doing this! Because it’s part of my ingrained culture that I had forgotten to think about!”

M: Yes.

A: Yes. So let’s turn from thinking about our culture to thinking about our culture.

R: [laughs]

M: Nice pivot, Alex, nice pivot! [laughs]

A: [laughs] Thank you!

R: So we started out the episode asking, is magic necessary in a second world fantasy, and then we spent almost an hour talking about magic and fantasy, so are we doing magic in our world?

M: Yes.

A: I think we have to do at least a little bit.

R: I mean, we did spend a whole episode on it, I feel like it would be a giant cheat if we were like, “nope!”

M: “Nope!” Especially since one of the things that I came up with for my culture Alex dislikes, so we’re just gonna say magic did that, so...

R: We’re locked in now.

M: We’re locked in! That at least magic exists, even if it’s not necessarily a thing that humans control, it might just exist intrinsically on its own.

A: Yes, so, first of all, we want to look at sort of like the big picture kind of global bird's eye view of the planet what is the source of magic overall? Overall, where does it come from? How magical is the environment, all of the other stuff that we have to be aware that we make choices here that are going to steer us. So what what I would suggest is -- I will donate my method that I use in my world, right? Because I have the explanation that there are different types of magic and different parts of the world for the same reason that water tastes different depending on where you go like you go to San Francisco to water tastes different than it does in New York City -- Marshall, you looked like you were about to say something

M: What if magic is sort of like radiation?

A: That’s how I do it *in my books*.

M: In that... you've got lanthanides and actinides. Those are in the periodic tables, the heavy elements that don't separate easily or are highly radioactive. You can't tap into the heavy elements directly. Everywhere sort of has the low level background radiation. That takes different forms.

[Please note: Auto-transcription takes over at this point.]