

Episode 45:
Let's Be Diplomatic

Transcribed by:
@banana_l0rd

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

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

M: Because unlike therapy, worldbuilding is free! I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

C: I'm Cass Morris.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller, and this is Episode 45: Let's Be Diplomatic.

[intro music plays]

M: Welcome back to another exciting episode of World Building for Masochists, where we're going to be talking about espionage and diplomacy in your worldbuilding. But first, do we have any announcements, friends?

C: Well, those Hugo nominations are still open!

M: If we haven't reminded you enough, and if you haven't voted then clearly we haven't, we are in fact eligible for Best Fancast, and if you think our semi-intelligent prattle is worthy of such a nomination then please put us down for that, we would be ever so thrilled.

R: And yes, if you are a nominator, that is open to you, and I'm just gonna put a pitch out there for folks who have never done a supporting membership with the Hugos before, with Worldcon: it might seem like, why should I even bother, pandemic year, are we even gonna have Worldcon, if we did would I even go? But here's the thing, if you are a supporting member then you will get to vote, and if you get to vote that means you get a fantastic packet of all the stuff that's on the ballot, which actually can kind of make up for the cost of that membership with all the free stuff you get to read, so there is a benefit even if, God forbid, travel is still not happening this year or it's something you couldn't do anyway, I think nomination membership is closed now at this point, but you can still look into that whole supporting membership thing and you'd get to vote later, so just as a heads up for any of our listeners who didn't know about that. I didn't know

about that for a long time, and then I discovered it, and I was like, this is actually kind of amazing! It plugs you into the community in a totally different way, so check it out.

M: The value of what you get in the Hugo voting packet in terms of, here's a bunch of ebooks of the stuff that's nominated, it pretty much does pay for what you paid for the supporting membership, so it's definitely worth it I think.

R: Yes.

C: I was today years old when I found out I would be getting that, so awesome.

R: Yes! It's great!

C: That sounds exciting.

R: You can load up your Kindle for weeks' worth of fun reading. Or months if you're like me and it's taking a really long time to finish even one book right now.

M: I was gonna say, I still have books from the 2018 Hugo nominations that I've yet to read. But they're there, I have them, ready to go.

C: You could read them at any time.

M: At any time.

R: And perhaps you will.

M: Perhaps I will. Someday.

C: It's Schrodinger's TBR.

M: Exactly, and I am so good at building that up.

C: Anyway, so those nominations close if you are an eligible nominator, they close on Friday, March 19th, you've still got a little bit of time, and we're including links on our Twitter, there's also a fantastic spreadsheet with all sorts of things you might consider in all the categories if you're feeling spoiled for choice and having optional paralysis as I tend to do, I keep opening the nominating ballot, and getting intimidated, and just closing it again, but if you're with me, listeners, we can do this together and we can get some good things on that ballot.

M: That would be lovely.

[4:08]

R: Well, excellent, and I am excited to dive into our topic for today because I feel like diplomacy and espionage are fantastic plot devices, fantastic elements of worldbuilding and revealers of worldbuilding that maybe next to stabbing people parts of plots don't get quite as much love as they should. Because you can't always stab someone.

M: But diplomacy and espionage do involve a fair amount of stabbing.

R: They do involve some stabbing. But you have to do other things first before the stabbing can happen.

M: Anybody who, like me, listened to the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* radio show far too often, there's a bit that exists only in the radio show version of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it's not in any of the books or all that, which is, he has a bit of, "The history of warfare is divided into retribution, anticipation, and diplomacy," and this is a thing that just lives rent-free in my head in Peter Jones' voices for decades, it's like, [British accent] "Split down thusly: retribution — I'm going to kill you because you killed my brother. Anticipation — I'm going to kill you because I killed your brother. And diplomacy — I'm going to kill my brother and then kill you on the pretext that your brother did it."

[R laughs]

M: Yes, do the math, listeners. And that's why diplomacy is so much fun, because you can do all sorts of wild, crazy plot things with it and have it be just this joyous convolution of plot machinations.

R: And stabbing, eventually.

M: And stabbing. But it has to be tactical stabbing, you have to...

C: Carefully targeted stabbing.

R: Right. Right. You can't just go about stabbing people willy-nilly, it has to be carefully planned and, dare I say, executed.

C: That's the real difference between war and diplomacy! Is your stabbing willy-nilly or is it very focused?

M: [You'll](#) be sitting there with your whole plan, and then you just stab an old man through a curtain, and then the next thing you know, everyone in Denmark is dead!

C: And Norway invades.

[6:28]

R: Learn from these mistakes. On that note, are there any books or series that you feel like have really good diplomacy and/or espionage in them that you would point to as... good stabbies, I don't know.

C: I feel like one of the examples that leaps to my mind is Jacqueline Carey's Kushiel series, because the heroine in that is a spy, and that's the background of her whole thing, and she gets involved with all kinds of diplomatic ventures both above and below the board, as above and below the sheets considering the nature of those stories, and I really like the diplomatic and political scope in that world and in those stories. But I was also thinking about how many books more recently do focus on diplomacy to avoid the war as opposed to winning the war, and that got me thinking about previous guest of the podcast Melissa Caruso, and *The Tethered Mage* and *Obsidian Tower*, the series that start with those two books, which are a lot about that, about figuring out a way that involves as little stabbing as possible. Not necessarily no stabbing, but minimal, how do we get out of this problem with minimal stabbing?

R: Yes, I was actually thinking of Melissa's books because I think that she does such a good job of conveying the stakes that are there with diplomacy, that she has these worlds that are imbued with a lot of magic, and very bad things can happen if they go to war with each other because it's a potential for mutually assured destruction kind of situation sometimes, so I think there's a really good example in those books of how much you can do with the stakes with diplomacy. I think we sometimes think of diplomacy as being less important or less high stakes than the life or death war battle stuff but it's not, and I think that those books do a really excellent job of showing that, and of all the intricate, complicated relationships between countries, and between people, and then within countries, people not trusting one another there, that you have an element of politics happening both inter- and intra-nationally, so those are good ones.

M: This is where the fact that I am so far behind on my giant TBR pile shows itself, because if I had read *The Goblin Emperor* by now I'd probably say *The Goblin Emperor*, but I can't say that with any sort of authority because I've yet to read that one. But that seems to be the one, when you ask people for political fantasy, that seems to be one of the big go-to answers. Though that one might be more infrastructure than diplomacy and espionage, but I feel like those things are all deeply intertwined, you can't have a political infrastructure plot without there being some diplomacy involved.

R: You have to have some pretty serious isolationist policy going on if you have absolutely zero diplomacy in your nation that you've created. You have built a bubble at that point and somehow are completely self-sufficient and keeping everyone out of it, because we use diplomacy for a lot of things. And we've talked about and probably beaten into the ground way too much our dead horse of, you know, people are a lot more interconnected than we often give them credit for, even lower technology societies. There's still another group of people over there, and we still know about them, and we still talk to them, and we still interact with them in some way. So it's hard to avoid diplomacy unless you're living in a bubble.

M: And not only are there the people over there, but they talk to the people on the other side over there, and that keeps going until you hit water.

R: And then you cross the water, and then you go talk to the people on the other side of the water, and it turns out they've got some pretty kooky ideas too, so fantastic, it's a party, have a snail.

C: And the thing is, even a story as simple as *The Princess Bride*, which does not have particularly deep worldbuilding, those cultures are not well established, it's very much fantasy medieval pastiche, but there's still a diplomatic plot there because part of why Humperdinck is gonna murder his bride is so that he can blame it on the country next door and start a war. It's that, "I'm gonna kill my bride on the pretext that—"

M: "I'm gonna kill my bride on the pretext that you did it."

C: Exactly, yeah! So even in a story that's that worldbuilding-light, these elements still exist, they're part of how society functions in a lot of ways.

R: And one of the fun things about that book is I think it knows that it's doing that and plays against that trope, because there's a whole chapter— if you've never read the book *The Princess Bride*, the conceit is that it is the good parts version, that he is "abridging" in air quotes a book that doesn't actually exist, he's actually just writing it, but he takes this whole chapter, I think it's called "Preparations" and it's all the things that Buttercup is supposed to do before she gets married, and it's all of this mostly diplomatic stuff, both with other noble families and also traveling to other places to meet people and whatever, and the whole line in it is just like, "And this is the most boring crap ever and so it's been cut."

C: Except raise your hand if you were really disappointed that there wasn't an unabridged version because you totally would have read that.

R: Yes, yes.

C: I was seriously sad when I was like, oh, wait, it's a joke! Darn!

R: No, I want to read about packing and unpacking the hats!

C: Exactly!

R: I want to read that!

M: Where he was going, "Here's all that worldbuilding nonsense that is just stuff for the test, and we're just gonna cut that, because you don't need to know all the ins and outs of the diplomacy between two countries, you just need to know there's two countries."

R: And so all you get is, between one thing and another, a year passed.

C: I wish I could get that in a book sometimes. Damn you, Goldman, no one else can get away with that ever again!

R: It's a great trick!

C: It's awesome!

[13:28]

R: But often we cannot get away with simply turning the page quite literally on that element of worldbuilding, and I think one of the most interesting questions to ask is, what role does diplomacy serve in a world anyway, how formalized is it, and what elements of formal diplomacy are being discussed, are being handled at some kind of international level?

M: Part of that boils down to how formalized the concept of the nation or the state actually is, and then how formal is each other's recognition of that nation or state. It's one thing if you've got a city-state that's got a king and a bunch of advisors, if the next city over at least acknowledges that city exists and we're not energetic enough to take it over so we might as well talk to them, and then that right there just starts the process of acknowledgment of each other's existence and validation, and then boom, you have diplomacy.

R: I think that some of the greatest failures of diplomacy in history that we can point to stem from a misunderstanding of whether or not a group is in fact a formalized glob of people in some way that we should be recognizing and talking to as an established quote-unquote "nation". Because nations can look different depending on where you are and what part of history you're talking about, they are not always countries with borders drawn on in Sharpie on a map, that's not always what a nation looks like, and a nation can be a lot of things, it can be...

M: Does it need to be a specific set of land, can it just be a people that might not necessarily be in the same place, but if they have a concept that binds them together beyond just the sense of, this is where we're from, then that can be a nation, that can be what a nation is. Especially when you throw magical bullshit into that and they don't have to be in the same place to be together

C: I would love to see a story that decoupled the idea of nation from land in that way. Because if you think of either the Roma or the Jewish people, they don't tend to get treated with on the world stage as a nation, but what if you had a world where all of the nations were like that, they were people who lived in different places united by aspects of perhaps ethnicity and/or culture and/or religion but not by where they physically were, and if everybody was like that, what would that world look like and how would it operate in a different way than our world that has these very defined borders, and if you do not have very defined borders we are not going to treat you with the respect of a people usually?

R: Right, what does diaspora look like if you don't have firm borders?

C: Yeah.

R: It looks like a bunch of nations in various places all over the world that you have.

C: Yeah, that just wasn't even a concept and... I don't know, that would be an interesting thing to see explored. I also feel like there's an element of what your diplomacy looks like and what role it serves related to what level of things can your society care about? As in, if you're society's still mostly on a subsistence level then your diplomacy with your neighbors, be it neighboring clans or whatever you have, might be a trade level, I will trade you these goats for these sheep. As opposed to where you get to the more baroque cultures where it's like, there could be a huge diplomatic incident over somebody using the wrong fork at a dinner or something, what level of things does your diplomacy care about and what are you discussing over these tables and things that you're having relations?

M: That right there is always a fascinating thing to me that once you have cultures and cultural mores that are complicated enough, then the idea of what is a grave insult between one culture to the next can be more and more minute, and you can do all sorts of crazy things with the idea that is just a common— might just be otherwise a social mistake suddenly gets escalated to a grave insult. I'm reminded, and I talked about this on the podcast before, the idea of just what the rules are of being a guest in somebody else's house in what you're supposed to eat can be radically different from culture to culture, and there's cultures in the Middle East where if you eat everything that they put in front of you, that's a grave insult — I think it's in the Middle East, I could have it wrong — but there's some cultures where if they fix you a plate and put it in front of you, if you actually eat everything, that's an insult because you're basically saying, "You did not give me enough," but there's other cultures where if you don't eat everything, then you're saying, "Your food is no good for me," and that's a deadly insult, so I think if you don't know the specific rules of where you are, doing the exact same thing can be exactly what you're supposed to do or a grave insult.

R: And then there are the cultures that will just keep putting more on your plate, if you clean your plate there's more on it, so I don't know if there are grave insults there but there is a potential for indigestion, so dangers at every corner when it comes to plate filling. But I think it's interesting when you have this potential for, if you say or do the wrong thing, you can screw all this up royally, then you end up creating these niche roles for people who can navigate both cultures.

And so I think another interesting question for me in terms of developing whatever kind of government, or group, or diplomatic office, or whatever, is is there a person whose job is to guide people through those negotiations? How formalized is that role? Is it just somebody who happens to have lived in a place where they're familiar with both, or is it people go to school for years to learn this stuff because it's just that complex and we don't have people just existing in the world who know both? Or do we have people existing in the world who know both but we

kind of ignore that that's the case in order to only give these roles to people who've been to school and have the right pedigrees, and credentials, and whatever, when Bob who actually immigrated here from that country could probably do just fine, but he's a vegetable seller so we don't pay attention to him.

[20:50]

M: How much of diplomacy is the art of the code switch? That you're able to be that bridge between two different cultures, two different methods, and be able to speak in a way that both sides understand? Not just on a pure linguistic level, but on a far more intrinsic understanding level?

R: Yes, when you say this, it really means this, so here's what you just said.

M: That reminds me, there was apparently just a thing where to some people, ending an email with "Best," that's a grave insult apparently to some people, which is news to me because that's how I end all my emails all the time.

R: Yep, I'm really sorry if I've been insulting everyone, I apologize. I did not know.

C: Yeah...

M: But then somebody else responded of what to them the code was, like if you said, "Warm regards," that's actually, "Go fuck yourself," and I'm like, that's...

[R laughs]

M: That would not be what I would have thought but OK.

C: I'm just gonna start ending all my emails, "I have the honor to be your obedient servant," and they can decide whether I mean that or I'm challenging them to a duel.

M: I would presume the duel, at least with you, Cass.

C: At least for fun, I mean, I'm really bored in quarantine so...

M: Could stand a duel right about now. At least it would give us something to do!

R: I mean, if you're doing a pistol duel, it is socially distanced.

M: There you go, there you go.

R: I think it's interesting too when stories entrust part or all of their diplomatic efforts to people who really don't know what they're doing. Which seems like such a dumb move, but we actually

do that in the world all the time, that we give this power and this responsibility to people who actually don't know what they're doing at all. But not only can it be fun from a plot perspective, but it can let you show things from a worldbuilding perspective that someone who actually knows what they're doing is not even going to think about or do. So while it seems like a dumb move, it actually is certainly justifiable for how we do things in the real world and can be fun for your worldbuilding.

M: I'm thinking, how often is the ambassador to whatever country just some friend of whoever's in charge who's just like, "Hey, you wanna live in India for a couple years? OK, you're the ambassador." And what's your qualifications? Your qualification is you're the one who's going, that's your qualification.

R: Congratulations.

M: Congratulations.

C: You gave a lot of money to my campaign.

R: Yup.

C: So you get to have this job now.

[23:53]

R: So we've talked about some of the above board elements of international relations: your diplomacy, your diplomatic convoys, your people whose jobs this might be to go make nice at the more formalized elements of diplomatic interaction, but what about the less above board, the in the shadows, the cloak and dagger element of diplomacy, its fun cousin, espionage?

M: The root of espionage is the idea of, you have information that we don't have that we want, so therefore we need to send somebody to go get that information.

C: We either know you won't give it to us, or we don't trust you to tell us the truth or the full truth, so we have to get at it another way.

M: Right. Or we think you're gonna do something, and we want to stop you from doing a thing, and rather than just saying, "Hey, don't do that," we have to come up with a whole plan. And in terms of formalization, I always like having there be an actual— Like in the Maradaine books, Druth Intelligence is a thing that exists, and I like having it be a very formalized organization with structure and all that. What are they doing? They're doing all sorts of things and I don't need to work out the full structure of what they do, and how it works, and all that, but I like the idea of having a formalized system so then you can at least allow there to be a level of competence that has to exist just because there is a formalized institution, not saying the formalized institutions necessarily are competent, but...

C: I'm sorry, Marshall, are you saying you don't have a spreadsheet for Druth Intelligence and where all their operatives are?

M: Not all the operatives.

C: Oh, OK. At least some of them.

R: Only some of them.

C: I was gonna be deeply troubled.

M: Listen, if I made a NOC list then somebody could get the NOC list.

[R laughs]

C: It's fun because I feel like espionage is something we think of as a modern concept, when we think of spies we think of James Bond, we think of gadgets, we think of cyberhacking and all that stuff, but there are such ancient examples. And sort of at the base level, just scouting is a form of espionage, just figuring out where are all of your dudes that might stab our dudes, I'm gonna go look and hope you don't see me, that's a form of espionage. But it can get formalized at a lot of different tech levels, so whatever your flavor of your world or your tech level is at, there could be options, and I discovered one for Rome just this last week and I was so excited.

I was looking up something completely different — this is what research can do for you, gentle listeners — I was trying to find out something about the grain dole, which I couldn't find out because it was one of those things that was so basic, no one thought to write much down about the grain dole, but in the process of trying to find out about the grain dole, I learned about the *frumentarii*, who were technically wheat collectors, except Hadrian turned them into a formal spy network because wheat collectors went all over the empire and talked to people at all levels of society, from farmers, to merchants, to governors, to everybody, and so he, at least according to a couple of sources, organized them to be his spies all over the Roman empire. And I thought that was fascinating and immediately had to stop myself from trying to insert a subplot related to this into my books that already have too many subplots. I will put a pin in that and use the wheat collectors later.

M: The other fun thing is, when you're using espionage, an espionage plot is essentially a heist where what you're stealing is information. Every *Mission Impossible*, that is basically what the whole plot is, and I remain deeply in love with the way every single one of them comes up with these more and more absurd ways information can be impossible to get at, just to then become the horrible thing that we have to overcome, because I absolutely adore, I think it's the fifth one, where it's the whole, he has to change the cards underwater while Benji is walking through the seven steps of things, including the thing that gauges the walk of the person in order to make sure it's the right person, and all that, and this is all just to then access information that was in

this data vault, and I'm like, at what point does that just become not a useful way to have your information stored? Because the actual person who might need that, that's way too much, I'm sorry. It's safer to just be in a card in your briefcase because at least then you can get it when you need it.

R: It's like that version of putting something away in a very safe place in your house and then forgetting where it is.

M: Yes!

R: You've overshot and the purpose has now been defeated.

M: Though a great example of... If you want to have a sense of the way espionage can work in your stories, I cannot recommend enough watching *The Americans*, which is very lo-fi in the way it does a lot of its espionage because it's set in the 80s, but it does not get very tech-dependent, like they will receive coded phone calls and hear things on the radio but that's about as tech as it gets. They're doing some disguises with wigs and makeup, but most of what they do is very low tech, dealing with the people that they want to influence or get to do the things that they want to do, and there is just a ton of neat spycraft things that they do in that show over the course of the show. Not to mention that the whole show is about the toll it takes on them, that their entire life is being undercover spies.

[30:29]

R: And I like that you bring up the element of influencing people, and relationships, and relationship-building as part of a potential for espionage, because I think that often when we get drawn up into the more *Mission Impossible*, James Bond brand of spy story, it is very action heavy, gadget heavy—

M: Flashy heist kind of things.

R: Right, heist kind of stuff, instead of the idea of getting into a culture or place that's not necessarily your own and developing that comfort with being there, or having some niche that you're filling and developing relationships that then lead you to, so there's that kind of spy story too, that you have to be very comfortable with, how does a person like that fit into the world you're building, and what do you do with them, and how do they get what they need from people rather than underwater spy vaults?

M: Yeah. Because so much of what they do in that show is identify a person that they need information or need to exert influence over one way or another, and then crafting a persona that they use then to interact with that person, and then the act of... And many of them are long-term projects that they're working and thus have to juggle these different personas that they have with different people.

One of the subplots is that the husband of the husband and wife team — who part of their whole thing is pretending to be husband and wife and living as husband and wife for 20 years to blend into America and what that does to them — but the persona he takes on to to romance and seduce the secretary who works in the CIA, he eventually marries the secretary so she's thinking, "I have this husband and he goes out on business all the time but he works for this organization," but no, he doesn't work for that organization, because... The point where it reaches where she finds out that everything she knows is a lie and also, oh, by the way, you're already in way too deep with Russian agents and you have to flee the country, sorry, spoilers for *The Americans*, but... But the level of depth and doing that they have to go into in creating these personas and the amount of emotional partition they have to do within who they interact with and even with interacting with each other is astounding. The show is entirely about the cost on their souls of what they have to do.

C: I think you see that a lot too in my all time favorite spy I think, too, which is Garak in *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*.

M: Oh yes.

C: The humble tailor.

M: Plain, simple Garak.

C: The humble tailor. It's fantastic because it's obvious from go that he's a spy, except you're never quite sure exactly who he's still functioning for, and exactly when he's lying, and exactly when he's telling the truth, and which part of him is honest, and which part isn't. I mean, through the whole series, and they slowly reveal some things about him as it goes on, but you also see these moments where lying has become so much a part of who he is and what he does that he almost doesn't know how not to do it.

M: Yeah.

C: It's instinctive, it's so much how he operates in the world, and it gets used in lots of different ways, the Cardassians still use him sometimes, and the Federation uses him sometimes, he's been abandoned by his initial structure that he was in, and it opened up so many fun plotlines in that show. And so much snark.

M: The idea that we're, like, 95% sure that he's not an active spy of any sort, but he's so inured with being a spy that he can't not do it, even when it's the fact that, yeah, you're an ex spy who now has to be a tailor.

C: He's not reporting to anyone anymore but it's like, you just are a spy, even if you're not in a spy organization anymore, that's just at your DNA level, you're a spy.

M: You can't not do it, so...

C: My all time favorite line of his is when he's told, like, 18 different stories about his background and Julian Bashir finally asks him which of those were true and Garak says, "They were all true." "Even the lies?" "Especially the lies." What a good line! What a fantastic...! "Especially the lies." Everything. And then as part of both, I suppose, espionage and above board diplomacy, how much truth do you reveal, to whom do you reveal what truths, and the best spies are going to have kernels of truth in their lying, and that can be fun to play with from the author's perspective—

M: And the best diplomats as well.

[35:44]

C: Yeah, exactly. For both diplomats and spies, whatever side of that coin you're on, from the writer's perspective you're also sort of toying with the audience in that way, with the reader, how much do you deliver to them? How much of the truth did they see at what point in the book?

R: So I think that it's fun that those elements, the human elements and emotional elements, the playing with truth versus lie, it doesn't necessarily matter what level of technology a world is at or what level of formalized nation building, that stuff can be there, then you can fold that stuff in, but I do think the level of technology and those kinds of things can affect, how is that actually going to work, then? Diplomacy changes when you have to cross oceans to do it and you don't have planes. When it's gonna take several months to get an answer back, how diplomacy works is gonna change. I guess I was thinking about that in relation to our conversation about how these things have always been there, but how do they change and shift depending on what you've built the rest of the world to look like?

M: Certainly an ambassador that has immediate communication back home is a very different kind of ambassador than the one that just will go somewhere and has to operate independently and make decisions without having the luxury of checking back home or anything like that, but they're basically acting with complete autonomy in terms of what their mission is, they have their mission parameters of what they can and can't do, but they're on their own, and they have to be on their own and be comfortable with the choices they make being alone without being able to write back home and get an immediate answer.

R: It's a very different thing to go to that country over there and negotiate a treaty than it is to be like, "You go phone in every few hours and we'll talk."

C: I feel like the isolated diplomat or spy is both in a more dangerous position without backup, but they're also in a more trusted position, if you're the governing entity, you have to trust that person a lot knowing that so much is down to their discretion and decision making.

M: How much of diplomats and ambassadors is sort of like a benevolent hostage exchange? To a degree it is like, you have our guy over there, we have your guy over here, and we'll talk to each other but if bad things happen, it's not going to look good for your person.

R: And also just the act of hosting someone and allowing them to be there is itself an act of diplomacy, like in the past week we've seen some of the European Union nations have kicked out their Russian ambassadors, and that's a thing, that's a message, "If you kick our guy out then we're kicking your guy out, and that means you're not sitting at our lunch table anymore," kind of level of message sending.

C: And a few years ago when we kicked the Russians out, but it wasn't from all of the embassies, it was like, we're gonna kick them out of San Francisco and Houston, the others can stay. What level of message are you saying? That seems oddly calibrated but thought goes into that. We're taking 20% of your diplomats away, that'll show you.

M: Also the question of what is an embassy? Does your world have enough — I don't necessarily want to say advancement — but does it have enough concept of what formal diplomacy is that an embassy, a space within another country that is technically a little island of your country sitting there, that you're safe from their laws or what have you if you're in their embassy, is that even a concept in the world that you're building?

R: It requires a level of formality but it also requires a level of, "We don't completely trust you and we all know this about our relationship. We're getting along however and we need a safe space to retreat to, we need laws that are going to protect us within this space that we are occupying, and we need laws that are going to protect us from any kind of malfeasance on your part because let's be honest, we're having this conversation because we don't completely trust you, or else we wouldn't have to have these conversations."

M: Because part of that is the idea that your laws about a thing and our laws about a thing are very, very different and we don't fully trust the way your laws work, so over here in our little island it's gonna be our laws within this building, and we have agreed that you can't touch anything that happens in this building.

C: I feel like that whole concept spins back to what we were talking about earlier with, is this a formal job, is there training for it, or is it less structured than that? Do you have formal diplomats, perhaps people who have married into the other culture, have we traded you a duchess, and that person may not have formal status but she also may have access to some stuff that a formal diplomat wouldn't have access to. I think you can play with those levels of formality as well.

M: And how much interaction do the formal diplomats and the people doing the espionage have with each other?

R: And how much are they supposed to have, and how much do they actually have?

M: How much are they supposed to have, and how much do they actually have? Which was another— I'm gonna bring up *The Americans* again because it does it so damn well. There is a whole running subplot of within the Russian embassy in Washington D.C. and there's one point where they know that they have spies that are doing a thing somewhere in the city, and then the diplomats find out, "Oh my God, we can't do this thing," but they have no way of telling the spies don't do the thing, so the only thing they can do is they get a bunch of cars, spray paint a message on the side of the car, and just drive the cars around. [laughs]

C: Subtle.

M: Because it's like, we cannot be subtle, there's no being subtle right now, we have to basically put out a bullhorn, don't do the thing. The thing is a trap.

R: "It's a trap!"

C: And do your spies know each other?

M: Yeah.

C: That's one of the things I love in *Good Omens*, where Aziraphale and Crowley are for their respective sides but the book mentions that the English and Russian attaches also meet at this park to feed the ducks and trade information, and is that part of the game, is knowing who the other side is, and how much you can give to them, and how much eases the way, and how much you really shouldn't say — there's all those levels of social negotiation.

M: How much of spycraft is just really back channel diplomacy, that it is this weird social game where we're going to share information but not through formal channels? How much of it is just the informal channels of diplomacy?

R: Yeah, and frequently how much do people who are outside the formal network actually know things that are very valuable, and even if they are not formal diplomats or official spies, are engaging with the same thing? I think of innkeepers or anyone who is coming into contact with a lot of people and starts to piece together things that are happening, and I think that's fun stuff that often happens in fantasy novels and other novels too, is the informal nosy neighbor version of the spy who's putting things together and often ends up knowing things that are plot-vital in many ways.

M: And how much is people who can't do things formally using that informality to their advantage, even though they're not supposed to know it exists, they know it exists? To go back to Garak on *Deep Space Nine*, there's one where they're like, "We can't officially warn Cardassia about a thing, but we can just be talking about it while Garak comes and measures me for a suit."

C: It's fantastic, it takes, like, four seconds and he's like, "Alright, I have what I need, I'll be on my way."

M: "Yes, I understand completely what this is about, because they're being as subtle as a brick bat right now."

[45:24]

R: So what happens when magic enters this equation? If we're moving this out of our world and into a fantasy world, how can you throw a monkey wrench into how diplomacy and espionage work with magic?

M: Like we were talking about with Melissa Caruso's, if magic becomes world-ending level of warfare between two cultures, then you have to do a Cold War sort of thing if mutually assured destruction is what's happening, so thus you have to rely on diplomacy and espionage rather than outright warfare.

R: One of the things I love about her books too is that so much, I think, of diplomacy is about impressing others with your influence, that's why you want the nice embassy because everyone says, "Oh, that's the such and such embassy, they must really know their stuff, they must really be hot stuff."

M: They spent all this money just to build a building over here.

R: Right, so they must be important. The way she expresses that importance is people, especially in one of the countries, will use magic to show off. You don't show up to the mages' invitational diplomacy dinner without having it all out there, you're showing off what you have, and I think that magic gives you such an opportunity for influence, show off who you are, show off the power that you've got, and intimidate friends and enemies alike into playing nicely.

C: I think magic can also affect the mechanics of how your spycraft works, if you think about the ability of magic to enhance ciphers and things like that. Or defensive espionage, I've placed a curse on this thing so if you come in here and try to get at my super secret vault, there's a magical curse upon it and that will rebound on you. There's so many fun things you can play with in magic-ifying the tech of espionage.

R: Yes, I just finished reading CL Polk's *Midnight Bargain*, and one of the fun things in that one is that in normal-looking books, there's secret messages hidden that you can only put there by magic and only decipher by magic, and so there's this whole network of people who have access to this information because they know it's there and can use magic to locate and read it, whereas other people would have no clue.

C: But then on a diplomatic level too, if you have magical means of communication or transportation that are faster than real-world options, that plays into what we talked about earlier

with how fast can you get word back to the home office, how fast can you negotiate a treaty, how much do you have to trust this person, do you give them access to these magical portals, do maybe only certain levels of diplomats have access to this magic, or can everyone who's representing your country have it? There's all sorts of things to explore there.

R: Yeah, what does your diplomat look like if they never have to leave their country to speak to people? If the way that you do that is they have a magic mirror or crystal ball, that that's how you communicate with people in other places, they have a line on their end and you just Zoom, basically, only it's magic.

C: Sauron's palantirs were just... He was trying to put together the Middle Earth UN, that was all, we just vastly misunderstood his purpose.

R: Yes, he even had a [kitten filter](#) on there.

C: [laughs] Of course, in a magical world your diplomat could actually have been turned into a kitten.

R: Yes, which, I want that short story now.

C: That would be fantastic, me too.

R: Someone please write that.

[C & R laugh]

[49:31]

R: Or as we were talking about a couple of weeks ago with Kate Elliott, the Magical Nudity Gate.

[M laughs]

R: If you have instantaneous transport, I cannot imagine that diplomats would not use it. But then we have the complication of, you come through the door naked, so...

M: But I think—

R: I'm just imagining that this becomes a cultural thing then, where all diplomatic meetings, even if you don't need to use the Magical Nudity Gate to get there, have to be done in the nude.

C: To show that you're not hiding anything!

R: Exactly!

C: Like, "I'm here, I'm honest, this is my vow to you that what I say is true, it's all out there."

R: You don't bring anything else into the meeting.

[C laughs]

M: This is how strong and confident we are.

[C & R giggling]

M: But I think, joking aside, I think the existence of something like the Magical Nude Gate, you're creating a world where diplomacy is going to be your primary form of engagement because that's going to be so much easier, going to war with somebody else is going to take a whole lot of logistics where you actually have to, "Ugh, we gotta get a boat, and go over there with guys and swords, and that's gonna..."

C: Seems like a lot of work.

M: It's a lot of work, can we just—

R: Compared to just sending John through the MNG, that'll take care of it.

M: He'll talk it out. Because that is going to be your fallback every time if that's going to be the easy thing to do, because you can just send a convoy, or you can send a whole diplomatic... what's the word I want? I think it's also "convoy"...

C: Delegation?

M: Delegation, that's the word I want! You can send a whole delegation or you can even— As I've been thinking about this, I've been thinking that rather than having anything resembling standard warfare, you would probably have things like athletic competitions, you would have the Olympics rather than having a war because you would just send a bunch of athletes, they already look great so, you know...

[everyone laughs]

C: I was picturing meetings, like we were saying, if your meetings were conducted naked, but the image that popped into my head was from *The Avengers* when Samuel L. Jackson is talking to all those people through the thing, except they're all naked.

[R laughs]

C: It's like, "I recognize that the council has made a decision," and they're just all naked. That's just what popped into my head just now. But I'm also picturing, suppose someone gets

information and they have to get home right away, I'm just picturing a diplomat or a spy rushing down this hallway tearing off all their clothing, throwing themselves through the gate, and then coming through on the other side, and just storming through the hallways again, being like, "I don't care, no time for pants, gotta get this information to the person who needs it!"

[everyone laughs]

M: You gotta tell people right away, you can give me a robe later!

C: Some poor page is following them like, "Please, please put this on!"

M: But again, as we talked about back then, you would then create a— How much of a cultural taboo is being naked in that world anyway if that's...

C: If my spy shows up naked, I dismiss everyone immediately because she's got something to tell me. It's like, alright, [clap clap] court's over, everyone out!

R: You know that would be an idiom in that world, "this is as urgent as a naked spy!"

[everyone cracks up]

C: I love it, I love it!

[53:10]

M: So speaking of James Bond...

C: Good, good transition.

M: Good transition. But so much of the Bondian mystique is this, I'm going to go to a casino, and be suave and debonair within the casino, and thus win at baccarat just because I'm that awesome, but if magic comes into play where you have to win a game of chance but can you use magic to influence the game of chance and things like that?

But I'm reminded, there's one episode of *The Magicians* where at this point magic is being kind of fritzzy and if you do too much at once then you're gonna screw up magic for a while, but there's a whole card game thing where they have to win the card game where it's basically they're just playing war where whoever has the high card wins, but you're allowed to use luck and probability magic to influence which card of yours comes up to win the most, but once you start playing with probability magic in the room, then things get weirder and weirder in the room because so much weird probability magic is flying around. But then Quentin, who's the main character there, who even before he was trained as a magician was always doing card tricks, his final move is to do a big spell that just blows out all the magic in the room, but then he can just do a regular "I'm good with my hands" card trick to then win the hand at the end. But there

the whole point of the game of chance is using magic to win the game of chance, the expected what you're doing is futzing around with your probability magic.

R: And I love the idea too of, what room is there with espionage for playing with magic? Wouldn't you like to be a fly on the wall? But if you have shapeshifting magic, you could!

M: Yeah!

R: You could just do that, you could be a fly on the wall, or a mouse, or a bird sitting outside the window, and talk about an effective spy, but then if everyone has that, does that become this dangerous game of literally cat and mouse where the other side's spies are turning into cats to hunt the... It's just, it's turtles all the way down with that one, but it's turtles that could be pretty fun to play with.

M: Or do you have, you have spies who are using scrying magic to listen in places but then you also have your anti-scrying wards to keep that from happening? Do you have... How much of spycraft is just, we have telepaths and they're going to find out what you know, find out your secrets so we can use that as leverage against you?

C: Is it common practice too when you start a meeting, cast a spell that's like, alright, any bird creatures in here that aren't actually birds get revealed, so...

R: Clear them out.

C: Do you cast a protective shield against telepaths, yeah.

R: Or do you cast a spell that requires only truth?

M: Yeah.

C: Ah, I love that!

R: And then how does that affect culturally then, if you know—

C: I love truth serum magic like that, that's fun.

R: No one can go to a diplomatic meeting and lie, it just doesn't work.

C: But you can also still then be choosing your words so very carefully, like, all these things I have said are technically true. I actually used to do that in a roleplaying game because the character I was playing, her deception was crap and I knew if I had to roll deception I was screwed, but if it was some other skill, if it was like, technically nothing she said was a lie, then I could roll one of the skills I actually had a lot of dice in. "OK, alright, I guess that works." They got very annoyed with me.

M: It also depends on how your truth magic works in that situation. Is it that you simply cannot lie, or is it the kind of truth magic where the truth is just gonna pour out of you whether you want it to or not?

R: Yes, is it the verbal diarrhea kind of truth magic or just... Or if enough people are telepathic, because then you have instead of someone taking notes in the room or a stenographer, you have the telepath sitting over there like, "That's not accurate. That's, no, that's not true. Him right there."

M: Yeah, in *Babylon 5* they had commercial telepaths that that was the basic function of them. They couldn't dig into people's brains to find their secrets, that wasn't allowed in the code, but you hired them when you had a negotiation or a meeting to basically like, "Yes, he's telling the truth. Nope, that's a lie."

C: Or the Betazoids in *Star Trek* tend to be a diplomatic species because they're empaths, so they can't pluck the truth out of your head, but if they're in a meeting they'll be like, "Well, that guy's lying." They can tell when deception is happening, even if they don't know exactly what's going on, and that makes them as a race, they've made that their skill, they trade on that skill.

M: That was Deanna who was only half Betazoid. Because the full Betazoids were fully telepathic.

C: Yeah, that's true. Well, not with all species as I recall. Like, it doesn't work on the Ferengi.

M: They couldn't read the Ferengi, they couldn't read the Ferengi, that was the thing. Plus, also always naked for some reason.

C: We keep coming back to that.

[M & R laugh]

R: All I got is nudity now!

[everyone laughs]

C: Just a head full of naked diplomats, just...

[R makes sound of distress]

C: That's just all that we've got. Could that be a power move? In a world where all your diplomats had to be naked, could making them be attractive by the standards of your culture be part of the job description?

R: Or the opposite.

C: Mmm. Then they won't look too closely at you, maybe.

R: Yep.

M: Or is that part of just the gamesmanship of who you send? "This one, we want you to stall for time, so maybe send Jim to this one because they'll want to keep Jim in there for a while."

C: That's true. They like talking to Jim. Boy, this MNG, we have just opened up a floodgate for ourselves.

R: We really have.

C: I like it, though. I like it.

[59:50]

R: Well, I think that there are certainly more topics to be explored between diplomacy, espionage, and everything in between, but I feel like we have given plenty of room for thought and a couple of fantastic short story ideas that I would love to see someone send me to read.

C: Do it.

R: Magical kitten dictator. Dictator? Diplomat. I am so tired.

M: I do want the magical kitten dictator, though.

C: Well, that's just Yzma from *The Emperor's New Groove*.

R: That's true.

C: The kitten diplomat's a different thing entirely.

R: Different thing entirely.

M: What if diplomacy is just sending kittens?

C: I would sign up for that.

R: Yeah. I mean, I wouldn't ever get anything done. Nations would fall into ruin. Wars would break out everywhere, but kittens, so I'm happy.

M: Or no wars because everybody has a kitten so they're like, "We were going to invade but [baby talk voice] look at his face!"

C: I mean, trading animals has been a part of diplomacy in the past.

M: That's true.

R: This is true.

C: You know, like, here's your panda, it's useless but it's got a lot of prestige so that's part of our diplomatic arrangement.

R: But it's really cute when it plays in the snow!

M: Or the whole myth about piranhas came about because the government in South America wanted to impress Teddy Roosevelt so—

C: I did not know that! That's amazing!

M: They created a whole thing where they basically got a bunch of piranhas and all but starved them for, like, a week so that when Teddy Roosevelt showed up, they're like, "Look what they can do to a cow in seconds!" Which they did because they were so hungry.

C: And that shows they had good intel on Teddy Roosevelt.

R: Yes, they did.

C: That's some solid diplomatic work right there.

M: "He's gonna be impressed by fish that can eat a cow in seconds."

[C laughs]

R: Well, who wouldn't be, to be honest?

M: But they knew that was their target audience.

R: Yeah, that was catnip for Teddy.

M: So certainly a key aspect of diplomacy is doing your intelligence work ahead of time and that requires espionage, and boom, I just wrapped up the show.

R: Perfect, thank you.

C: You did, full circle.

[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 goes up on March 17th and we'll be talking with C. L. Clark about in-world songs, poetry, and metatext. We hope you join us for that one. 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 you just want to tell us how cute we are, there's a number of ways to contact us. We're on Twitter as [@worldbuildcast](#) and our email is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. We also have a Discord chatroom linked on our 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]