

Episode 139:
Too Crunchy, Too Curious

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[0:00]

C: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

M: Because it's better than having a concept of a plan. I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

C: I'm Cass Morris.

N: I'm Natania Barron, and this is Episode 139: Too Crunchy, Too Curious.

[intro music plays]

C: You're welcome. [Laughs]

N: Is it gonna be a two? Like a 2 Crunchy 2 Curious?

C: It should be. Yeah I will.

N: It needs to be.

C: It will be. It will be.

M: Listen, any time you can make a sequel joke, that is a 2 Fast 2 Furious joke—

N: Uh huh.

M: I am there for it.

C: Look, I was actually really—

M: It is a dumb joke, and I am there for it [Laughs].

C: I was really pleased that I found curious, I was like, that's perfect, 'cause curiosity—

M: I mean—

C: Is what we do. It's...yeah.

M: Yeah.

C: You gotta get curious about things.

N: It's the best.

[Marshall snorts, Cass laughs]

C: So yes, you're welcome [Laughs] for that.

N: We do have news. Marshall, we saw each other in person—

M: We did see each other—

N: Last week—

C: Again.

N: Again.

M: Yeah.

N: Twice, in like a month, which won't happen for a while.

M: It won't. Which makes me kind of sad, but I'll learn to live with it, but...[Laughs].

N: Come down to the east coast. We can arrange something over here. Cass and I are only like, what—

M: I mean, I mean—

N: Like four hours apart, at most, but yeah.

C: Yeah.

M: Convince ConCarolinas or RavenCon, that either all three of us should be special guests of some sort, or...or just me.

N: Yeah.

M: And that way I have the excuse [Laughs] to fly.
[Natania laughs]

N: Well, you are the man.

C: Sure.

M: But really all three of us.

N: But, I will say, as an attending guest [of [ArmadilloCon](#)], this is my second year – not my second year in a row, which I kept saying over and over again, just because last year apparently didn't exist for me – but it was an absolutely wonderful con. And it was awesome to hang out with you. It was awesome to meet people and catch back up with people that I don't get to see very often, but I kind of always have...It's weird, so many of my writer friends that I've had for like the last decade and a half are from Austin. So it feels like it's kind of my con away from home.

M: Of course, it is my home con, so these are...they are my people, literally, but it is...I do feel very attached to it, and thus...I mean, that's why I stepped up and did programming stuff and took hold of those reins, because I thought it was a very important thing to do keep it vibrant–

N: Mmhmm.

M: And to bring new blood in that hasn't been coming before and to make it a destination con as much as one can with a regional con like this.

C: And that's super important and there's so many regional cons that are fine, they're good, I go to some of them, they're lovely, but it's so easy to sort of coast on the same thing, the same people, the same guest list. I really like the cons that go out of their way to mix it up, to invite new people, to invite people who maybe don't get invited to as many cons, even at the regional level. And, that's just, it's so, so, so important.

M: I was gonna say, that was one of the mini-fights that I had. There are a large group of people who will come, on their own dime, who are cool people, if you just say, hey, do you want to come, and they do [Laughs] I mean, and that's incredible. But like, I think so many regional cons don't think about that people would do that or necessarily think beyond whatever's closest.

N: I think that and then the coolest part, I think, was our mutual delight and surprise that the worldbuilding panels were standing room only.

M: Oh, my god, they were so packed.

C: Oh, for shit, really?

N: Every single one, dude.

C: Oh!

N: It was—

C: Delicious.

[Natania laughs]

N: I have never been to so many panels – you know there’s always a handful that you go to, there’s like a person, right – no, every single worldbuilding one was people literally having to be turned away at the door.

M: And to be clear, there were worldbuilding panels, because A, I made the schedule—

C: Because you were in charge, so...

[Marshall and Cass laugh].

M: But also, like, so many times when I’m talking to writers about this, there is that sort of common complaint that you have like the worldbuilding panel where you basically cover the basics, again, you know, that you’ve done a dozen times before—

C: Yeah.

M: At a dozen different panels, at a dozen different cons. And I was like, okay, so I’m gonna do a 101, 201, and 301, put that in there, and then I was looking at some of the other things that people suggested. Like somebody suggested magic systems. Somebody suggested, you know, clothing and fabric, because Natania and Rowenna were there, so like, obviously.

[Natania laughs]

M: [Laughs] And I’m like, these are worldbuilding panels, so I’m like, let’s make this Worldbuilding 108, let’s make this Worldbuilding 207 [Laughs] and just played with that. And every one of them was packed to the gills.

C: So exciting.

M: And I think that speaks to the hunger that so many hopeful writers have—

C: Yeah.

M: For this sort of thing and the information that we had to give them.

N: Yeah.

C: And I think it's really cool to do that. Like, I've been on lots of con committees and things where they've talked about, oh we need to stop doing the 101 panels. And it's like, I'm not sure you should stop, because there's always gonna be somebody who does need the 101.

M: Yeah.

C: But, you don't have to stop there, and scaffolding the experience is what's gonna be so valuable to your returners, to your people who are already beyond the 101 level, because yeah, I'm with you, I could do the general worldbuilding panel on complete autopilot at this point. I can do the lecture.

M: Yeah [Laughs].

C: I've got a lecture that I've given several times. Then it's sort of just like, okay click – and it's teacher-brain – I can sort of click in and be like, alright, I will say these things, they will probably make sense, and we move on. But I like the panels where I actually have to think about an answer, because like oh, no one's ever asked exactly that before. Huh, okay, give me a second.

N: And we had a good combination of that. We really did. The whole time, I was like, we should market this. We should turn it into something even more, because it was not just the attendance, because the attendance was great, but it was really good questions and it was really good conversations after, which I think is one of the reasons I love cons like this – but there is no other exactly like this – but you could have conversations out in the hallway after the event and have those sit down, have a drink or a snack together and continue the dialogue and that was so cool. And I was like, man, we could give people certificates for going to them. We could have like a passbook, like get stamps in them if they go. It'd be kinda cool to do like a world...but I think we do need... I do think that some smaller groups would be helpful for some people if we did a more intense – I know they do the Writer's Workshop – I think it'd be cool to have an arm of that that's worldbuilding workshop, but we'll see. I can't leave a successful thing alone without trying to tinker with it and change it into something else, but...

[Marshall laughs]

C: I feel you, I feel you.

N: But we did–

C: This is how we end up on con committees.

N: Yeah [Laughs]. No, no thank you. We did, however, record a podcast, and all about "Traveling Light", our amazing anthology, and... are we gonna do the thing?

M: Well I think–

N: [Laughs] The bonus?

M: By the time this actually airs, we'll have already put it on.

N: Yeah, that's true, so yeah—

[Marshall laughs]

M: As a bonus episode.

N: So as a bonus episode for our Patreon – if you haven't downloaded it yet, or had the notification, or if you haven't become part of our Patreon for five dollars a month – you'll be able to listen to that. We had some wonderful guests from the anthology, really great conversation, and yeah. And a new world creation piece as well from Lindsey Carmichael, which was super cool.

C: Aw, delightful—

N: Who is a delightful human being in every possible way.

C: I'm looking forward to listening to it.

M: I was gonna say, isn't Lindsey just the coolest?

N: I love how she's like, oh by the way, I have a bronze Paralympic medal in archery—

C: Yeah, BT-dubs, I'm an Olympic champion.

N: And I'm the only woman since like 19-whatever to ever do this—

[08:08]

M: Eighty-four, I think it was? [Laughs]

N: Yeah, eighty-four—the last woman to do this—

[Editor's note, [it was 1996.](#)]

C: Just...

N: And she had these beautiful, glossy pictures of herself. I took some of them as well. So, yes. We all contain multitudes. But I don't contain any sportsing— [Laughs]

C: I don't contain that one, no.

N: Any sportsing awards. No! That's not true. I was the most flexible person on record in elementary school. I broke the machine. It's like a thing you push. This sounds very bad.

[Cass laughs]

N: But that's fine.

[Marshall and Natania laugh]

C: No, I'm glad you specified in elementary school, that's—

M: I don't think they had that machine when I was in elementary school— [laughs]

C: We just used the box, we just had a...

N: It was the box. And I pushed the thing till it fell off the other side.

C: Oh, we didn't push ours, you just had to lunge over it and then hold.

N: Oh, see, we had a little gate, almost like a measuring tape-y thing. And you had to push it and they'd measure the very edge. And I actually knocked it over. But other than that, it's hypermobility which is not great when you're in your forties, it turns out.

M: I don't know if this box thing was after my time, or if I have just simply blocked the memory from trauma.

C: It was part of the presidential fitness whatever.

N: It was one year that I got the—

M: I mean, I'm pretty sure I blocked most of the presidential fitness thing from memory. [laughs]

C: As well you should.

N: Yeah.

M: Cause, yeah.

N: I have one from the year that I—trying to think—it would have been eighty-nine? The year of our Lord Taylor Swift. [sighs]

[Marshall laughs]

N: Okay!

[Marshall keeps laughing]

N: So, this is a very cool topic. Do we have any... is there...

M: The fact that that just came to you, off-the-cuff, was just. Chef's kiss. Love it. [Laughs]

N: I am a Swiftie, I have to admit. So! This is part two, which has an even better title, Too Crunchy, Too Curious.

C: Yes.

N: We had a lovely conversation two weeks ago which somehow has already passed, which does not seem possible. But we wanted to get down—

M: That was *before* ArmadilloCon. [Laughs]

C: Whoah, really? Wow.

N: I know! So bonkers. Just as our caveat again, in case you are tuning into this and you maybe didn't hear last week's episode, the point of this is more of an appetizer. A bunch of appetizers.

C: An amuse-bouche? [laughs]

N: Yes! A bunch of amuse-bouches, some canapés if you will.

[Cass laughs]

M: Small-plate offerings.

N: Small-plate offerings.

[Cass cackles]

N: We are not going into the main courses tonight. We are not going to be—

C: Mm hm.

N: We are not delving super deep, but we are going to be—yes, amuse-bouche is perfect. Enough to whet your whistle. [laughs] And dig down into worldbuilding concepts.

C: Yes.

M: Just a little pinch of each one.

C: A leetle peench.

N: As a treat.

C: A leetle peench! [everyone laughs] Just a joke from the Discord, thank you.

Yes. So, this is our back to the basics. What we're doing is talking about the questions that it's fruitful to ask when you're worldbuilding. Or the rabbit-holes you might find it worthwhile to go down, as you're doing these things. And in the last episode, we focused on the physical world, the actual cosmology and 'how does your sun work?' and 'how do your continents work?' and all that stuff.

Now it's time for the world of people! The world of *people!* Who are truly, the—usually—the most interesting part, I hope— [laughs] the story—

N: Unless there's dragons. And then...

C: Unless there's dragons. Dragons are people!

M: [laughs] Dragons are people.

C: And that's a good point. Your people don't have to be *human* people. And with anything we're going to talk about today, there might be multiple answers to some of these questions. For the different civilizations in your world. If you're looking at a place that isn't a really tightly-focused, single city, you know. Almost a bottle-episode of a story. What do they call 'em? Like a closed-door mystery. Like a locked-room mystery. Yeah, if you've got multiple kinds of peoples then you might have multiple kinds of answers to these questions.

N: Mm hm.

C: But these are sort of the base things that we take so much for granted as humans. We think of them as normal because they're the things that we grow up with. They're the things we expect. And this is the core of our "choose, don't presume" ethos. These are the things that it's easy to presume.

N: Mm hm.

C: But... Poke it! Squish it! Peench it. See if you actually want them to actually be what you think it is—

N: Boil 'em, mash 'em, stick 'em in a stew!

C: [whispering in a sing-song] Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew. Boil ‘em, mash ‘em, stick ‘em in a stew.

[Marshall laughs]

C: We’re on fine form tonight, y’all. This is good. [laughs]

M: We’re *definitely* on fine form. I mean, this ties into the thing I was saying last episode. Which is, you can make the presumption, and then ask yourself, “is this what I want it to be?” and the answer... “do I need to poke at it?” is a valid answer to that question, I think. That, like, no, it’s fine. I can just keep the nuclear family and let heteronormative families be the norm, because I don’t need to poke at other things like that just for the sake of this story.

Or, you could say “I’m gonna poke at it a little, because why not?” But there is not a wrong answer to any of these questions. Including, “I don’t need to know that,” or “I don’t need to challenge the presumption on that.”

N: And I think depending on which levers you’re pulling, helps define what your readers are going to find fascinating about *your* world, because these are the things *you* care about.

I was looking over this list and thinking of when I was first writing my first fantasy world, the world of Waya, w-a-y-a [pronounced WAY-uh] in the sixth grade. A lot of these were the things I was thinking a lot about. Like, what was the family structure like? I wasn’t thinking of gender yet because repressed religious trauma.

But money? Oh my gosh. What is cooler than thinking about what people could use as money instead? I remember even in early elementary school that we had these books where you could pop out fake coins and pretend to have money. And of course, we’re Canadian—my mom’s family is Canadian—so I always had Canadian money and American money. So these are all fiddly little things that I think we really love to make our own and feels like we have a sense of ownership when we’re fiddling with them.

C: It’s fun to think about which of these things—and we’ll talk through them, listeners, we can see them in a list, *you* can’t see them in a list yet, but we’ll talk through them. But which of these basic building blocks you are most drawn to, because for me, from an early age, it was religion. It was *gods*. It was that kind of weirdness. That was what I gravitated towards the most. It was what I wanted to poke at and play with the most.

Which made very much sense because I was a budding young Pagan at the time, and very much exploring my own sense of spirituality, and making choices about what I believed at the same time. Very ironically, at the same time I had to go through Confirmation as a Methodist. Oh, that had the opposite of the intended effect.

[Marshall laughs]

C: Whoops. [laughs] But, I think we all naturally gratitude more towards some of these than others. And that can both be worth leaning into—as I certainly do—and making sure you don't have spots that you're just not being aware enough of, not giving enough thought to. Even if you end up going “no, I don't want to poke it, because if I poke it that will cause too many problems that are not related to my plot, and I get distracted, and stuff and things. We've all done it!

M: I mean, that's what threw me so off in the abandoned work in progress I was working on last year. It was not working and part of why it was not working was that I had too many weird—being weird about the worldbuilding that did not help the story at all. It was just me being, “Well what if they had this? Well what if they had *this*? And then, I gotta explain that, then. And I spend this entire detour on something that's like... did that advance the story at all? No. It did not. These are the challenges of overthinking things.

C: It is. Sometimes you have to learn where to stop. Where to... We build till it hurts, not till it, you know, exsanguinates.

N: Like I was just saying earlier, as little as necessary, as much as—no, wait, as little as possible, as much as necessary. Right? Seriously, I am nerding out about this concept in my work life. But I think it also, in terms of the reader, we can't give the kitchen sink. I mean, there is some place for that—

C: Mm hm.

N: There are some incredibly talented writer—

C: Yeah, Patreon. [laughter]

N: Yeah. [Laughs] There some writers, who, though, that's kind of their style. But that's generally not enjoyable to read. When it comes down to it on the page, you've got to find that liminal space. It's hard to define, it's hard to put your finger on. Yeah, it's cool stuff.

C: So let's start with the thing that we begin our lives— [Natania laughs] —as our entire world. You know, when you're a very small child, this *is* your entire world. And that's family. What is family look like? What are the things that make up a family? And how do we define our concept for us in our worlds?

M: This is one that it can be really fun to do 'weird,' or if nothing else, make a sort of found-family thing be the centerpiece of your story, if not how your world works. Because found family—a found family is just fun to do—but also because that tends to fit the way certain stories work so well. Here are these people who were not born together, did not grow up together, but yet they chose each other, and that's nice.

C: We love the ragged band of misfits. We love the adventuring party—

M: Yes.

C: That's very much genre tropes. That fits that found family concept.

N: But I think, even in more classical literature and myth and legend, family concepts are very different, and if you're writing historically, or fantasy, it's fun to learn about that stuff. I'm always amazed when I learn about—I'll never forget learning about the avuncular relationship in Celtic societies when I was in college. I was always like, why is everybody raising their nephews? Like what's up with that? That's really weird. But the idea that your uncle would be more important, almost, than your father, because they raised you, even so...I remember when my nephew was born, and I told my husband, I was like, your sister's son, in many cultures, is considered as close to you as your own child. There is just something kind of neat about that.

Like, of course King Arthur, the Orkneys' nephews to Arthur are some of the most prominent figures in the entire story going all the way back to the beginning, and a big part of that is that they were raised essentially in Arthur's court. They're his first relatives, they're the closest to the throne and there's this family blending that happens when that's a possibility...But also the idea of communal families, I think, is very, very lost, especially in American culture, and it's something that I really haven't played with myself. But I love this concept of the community as family, instead of just...

You know, wet nurses were a thing for a very long time, right? We can't even stand the thought of a woman breastfeeding a child, but there were professional baby-feeders and they weren't related to...Sometimes you could hire them, other times they were related to you. You had even grandmothers able to still nurse their grandchildren, because they were still having children. So you create a very, very different thing. You also have ideas of these collapsed generations, right? Another big theme in Arthuriana, you have people having children super young, so the generations are like fifteen years instead of twenty years. Those are all fun things to play with that can really change our perception of what family is shaped like.

C: It's interesting too, because I think the instinct is to want to find the definition of family, the concept of family, that is helpful, societally good, like that communal aspective thing.

[20:17]

But of course, in many times, that is not true of families, either in the particular or in the societal structure. And of course, I'm going to talk about Rome here. The Roman idea of the family was hugely expansive. It included the entire household. It was not just the people who were, you know, genetically, biologically linked to you. It was servants and enslaved people as well, who were part of the family. The *pater familias* was the head of that entire system.

It's very weird for us to think of it like that, right? Like, that's not something we're comfortable thinking about. "Oh, you're enslaving people, but you're also considering them family?" Well,

yes, because family had a very different definition. It was a lot about the power that the guy at the top had. I mean, he could as easily kill his children, as he could kill an enslaved person. There were some conditions that had to apply—

N: Or wife—

C: But the *pater familias* had the power of life and death—

N: Yeah. [Sighs]

C: Over everyone inside his familia. And it's just a very alien place for our brains to go, when we look at things like that, where the definition of family is so different. And what family means. What "family is a power structure" becomes.

N: Mm hm.

C: It's very different from our modern society. Not that there certainly aren't power dynamics in modern families. In such a codified, legalistic way. It's a little wild to look at things like that.

M: I was gonna say, is it a specific legal definition, or is it just a vibe? That can be radically different.

C: Yeah.

M: So, just, what is considered a relationship? What is considered a marriage? Is the person you are designated to breed with and have children—is that necessarily the same person who is your emotional partner? Or your regular sexual partner? Are these things necessarily expected to be the same thing? Or are there different connotations for different kinds of partners you can have? And are all of those acceptable? Are none of them acceptable? Is there only one form that's acceptable within a culture? Or can that depend?

N: Yeah, and I think connected to that too is: how do loyalty and duty play out in those things? Because I think in terms of character motivations and family, something that I often think I see not done very well is defining that. Either people act like they owe too much to the family, and you're like, "I don't see what's so great about this family" or they act like their family doesn't matter at all, but you've never given me a reason to *not* care about your family, right?

So when you're building those structures—we'll talk about power as well—but there are, what you were talking about Cass, just a second ago, there are going to be power structures inside of a family. You can think of *The Godfather*, the Italian family, the connection to the mob and all of this stuff. Your duty and your loyalty to that is more important than anything. Your children, your wife, your girlfriends, whatever. But in other places you're expected to kind of leave, right? There's not that intense magnifying glass on everything you do. But then other people—many cultures, even today, where your individual accomplishment directly reflects your parents. So

when you do not become the doctor, the lawyer, the engineer, you reflect badly on the family. And that's *many* cultures. I'm sure there are so many people who are like, "yeah, that's mine!" Yes, and. Yeah.

[Cass laughs]

M: I'm just thinking—I think it was in, of all places, Frank Zappa's biography. [Laughs] Where he was saying, parents with their children—and he's specifically talking in the sixties and seventies here—they are so strange. "We fucked! This came out! Watch it do homework."

[Cass and Marshall laugh]

N: That is very weird.

C: I saw somewhere that one of my friends, yesterday or today described it as, "it's kind of weird, it's like here! I made my own roommate." [laughs]

[Marshall laughs]

C: Sorry, Marshall.

N: Mm hmm. And I can't kick 'em out. Apparently that's, like, child abuse or something. [Said in a joking tone.]

C: Legally not allowed. I have to keep this roommate for eighteen years, barring certain other circumstances. Yeah.

[Marshall laughs]

M: I have made a person and I am legally obliged...

C: Obligated. Yeah. You know, it's interesting, talking about the mafia families and things like that. There are concepts of family that expand beyond even biological family, out into the clan, into a somewhat larger but still tightly-bound society. And I'm thinking, specifically, of [The Green Bone Saga](#). There are biological connections in them. There's a lot of things like that, but it's not all direct biological connection. But the bonds function in similar ways, just spreading out farther.

M: Regardless of who your parents were, your loyalty to No Peak or The Mountain are paramount to anything else that goes on in your life. And that is family as well, in terms of both duty and what you're given for that loyalty.

C: Yeah. Protection, support. The things that we hope we get from family. These larger networks sometimes also give you.

N: And then of course, conversely, that can be a positive thing, but it can be a terrible thing. And depending on how your character is navigating that world, and what they're thinking about those things. Obviously as someone who writes a lot about peerage and England, and all of that absolute trashfire of imperialism—

[Marshall and Cass laugh]

N: Colonialism—it's always amazing that there's always someone who pops their heads up and says, "maybe, is this a good thing?" And maybe they become the black sheep of the family and they're cut off from all of their—that's the worst thing that you could do. So much of family and power comes in inheritance.

C: Mm. Mm hm.

N: And it comes by... you are the value of... I mean, anyone who's read Jane Austen... [uses a British accent] "Oh, he has forty thousand pounds a year!" He is defined by the amount of money that he has per year, or ten thousand pounds. That's pretty crazy.

C: And the competition for inheritance. I mean, fucking *King Lear*, right? There are so many stories where the competition for inheritance is a big part of that story.

N: Yep.

M: Yeah.

C: Whether or not it's for a throne, or just for some kind of land or something else.

N: Which I think is a brilliant segue into the next concept, which is gender. Because! I am reading this amazing book. None of you can see it, but it's called—

[Cass laughs]

N: Marshall knows about this—it's called [*Mutinous Women*](#).

C: Oooh.

N: And it's about the establishment of Louisiana. And my absolutely batshit crazy French ancestors. Not even going to get into the full detail of it. But it just comes down to the fact that if you were a woman living in about **seventeen twenty, seventeen ten** in France, you got the short end of the stick. It didn't matter if you were noble, if you were poor, if for whatever reason, if you did not have access to money, a dowry, a meaningful marriage, and a skill, you could just be thrown in prison for any reason possible. And potentially, during this very short time, just have your ass thrown over to Louisiana, and nearly die and starve to death. And being put on a

barrier island infested with rats. This woman does so much amazing research. I'm not exaggerating!

[Marshall and Cass laugh]

M: Cass has so many questions.

C: But it's just a fascinating transition. In forty years, from [Les Filles du Roi](#), who were—

N: Oh, exactly. Which is what got me—

C: Women who were transported to Canada—but who were given dowries and given all this stuff.

N: Yes.

C: And they were seen as virtuous.

N: Same king!

C: Oh my gosh, that's *fascinating*.

N: Same king! But. What happened is that there was this stock market explosion. This Scotsman named [John Law](#) came and basically created a speculative stock market for selling, quote-unquote, Mississippi. Which is what they called that whole region. All these people became stupid rich. But it also collapsed the economy. And you have, unfortunately, surprise surprise, Louis the Fourteenth bankrupt the entire country! And then died.

[Cass laughs]

N: And then left a power vacuum. [laughs]

C: And that's how we got the rest of the Eighteenth Century. [Cass and Marshall laugh]

N: But the crazy thing is—to get back to the women—her name is Joan DeJean, which is wonderfully French. She goes through all of these records and initially, it was like “oh, it was just a bunch of prostitutes, these were all incarcerated women, they're a bunch of prostitutes, a bunch of murderers.”

She goes through woman by woman and was able to reconstruct so many of their existences. Nine outta ten times? Fuckin' wrong place at the wrong time. One of them, a governess, was accused of seducing the man, she was actually drugged and assayed, and got pregnant, and she testified to that. But the guy had lots of money, and he said “she seduced me” and the wife was like, “oh, absolutely, she seduced him.” It was this whole thing. Others were noblewomen

whose mothers died and their fathers remarried, happened to have some sons, they were going to inherit instead, that money was not protected and they wanted to be rid of her. A lot of brothers did not want their sisters inheriting anything because those dowries were expensive. They would drum up all of these horrific things, from murder to stealing to debauchery, libertinism, all of the stuff, and because they were profiting off these women in the prisons – does this sound familiar to anybody – they were doing lace work and fabric work–

M: If only these were lessons that we could learn something from [Laughs].

N: It's also like the lady "Les Mis" version of this, because there's this insane warden, who's a woman, who's basically profiteering off of all of this stuff and then hiring people to basically just go out into the worst of the wards and just capture these women–

C: Just snatch 'em up, yeah.

N: And the crazy thing is, they'll sometimes go, in terms of gender, you don't have representation, you often don't have the education, sometimes you're one generation removed from educated people, but you don't have it, so you can't defend yourself...

C: Yeah.

N: And one of the worst ones is that they would often bring someone and accuse them and they'd be exonerated, but then everyone still believed they did the horrible thing. So every time someone did a horrible thing like that, they would bring you in again, and by the time they brought you in four or five times, you were just literally put in chains and locked up and the key was thrown away. It is such a shameful, shameful moment in human history, but it really all comes down to that money. It really all comes down to how women are perceived...And yeah, and like you're saying, the Filles du Rois, they actually had control over their money and they eventually did that in Louisiana as well. Women were able to protect their money, but in the peerage you had the same things happen. Women who were viscountesses – everyone saw *Downton Abbey* – somebody else who was more closely in the line got everything, everything! And how horrifying that is...So anyway, I'm done.

C: It's interesting, it's similar to, but it's inverse of something I heard on NPR just this morning, which was someone talking...they were talking about tax havens. They were talking about all these Caribbean islands and actually the Isle of Man and some of the other British crown dependencies, that are technically independent, are apparently big on this too.

[31:39]

C: That there are a lot of the wealthy sheiks in the United Arab Emirates, who are using these—not for the usual reasons like tax evasions because they don't get taxed anyway, because they're sheiks—but because their daughters can't inherit by the law of their land. So if

they want their daughters to get anything, they have to use these tax havens to funnel the money to them in this other way. That's a gendered inheritance thing, too.

N: Yep.

C: So this is all worth interrogating in your worldbuilding. What does gender mean?

N: Mm hm.

C: What is it, even? I mean, that's a question we're still answering in our own society.

N: Yeah.

C: But for your peoples, what do they think it means? How tied to biology is it? And what is it mean for them in society? How does that affect the lives that people live? The expectations that are put on them, the roles they are expected to fulfill or not.

M: Does the society even make a distinction in terms of the law?

C: Yeah.

M: And if they do, then what are those distinctions? Where do they draw those lines and what justifications did they come up with? As spurious of justifications as they could be. [laughs] As much as, "I just don't want *my* sister to inherit, 'cause I want it all for myself." But even still. There's usually something resembling a pretense of logic, but...

N: Mm hmm. And, not to mention— We love visual gender in our culture. Especially in the West and in the US. We want to be able to identify someone's gender immediately. That has become something important to us. Even though historically, the lines were super blurred, comparatively. The fact that we have such a line between men's clothes and women's clothes and what that means. How even children—having raised a socialized-male child and a socialized-female child, getting clothing and being like, literally two-year old girls wearing non-stretch jeans.

[Cass snorts]

N: The fact that we force little bodies that are supposed to be gendered feminine into less comfortable clothes with sewed pockets, right?

C: But it—

N: Meanwhile, boys have cotton, stretchy waists, and everything. It's just *crazy* the level that we police this in our culture and don't even think about it.

C: And it starts happening with the advent of tailoring. Because before that, you can only gender a rectangle but so much. When what you're wearing are bedsheets... you can drape them in different ways and assign gender to it, but from a distance, from a silhouette, there's not going to be much of a difference 'cause it's a fuckin' rectangle of cloth.

But once you start tailoring it, you start adhering it more to the physicality of the body. Right? To the sexual dimorphism in the species. Then that gets attached to all kinds of other things.

M: And what does your society think about those things, too?

C: Yeah.

M: Like, are there different rules for who can wear what, gender-wise, or who *can't* wear what. Or who's allowed to wear nothing, if that's what they choose to wear. [laughs]

N: And is that considered sexy or not?

M: Right.

N: Because one of the coolest articles I read in my sociology class—it basically took—there was an experiment, I think they basically just talked to people—"if someone bursts into your room and you're naked, what do you cover up?" This varies from culture to culture *dramatically*. In the US, it's always like, "Oh! Boobs and nethers!" But in many cultures you cover your face. Because you don't want to be identified.

[Cass and Marshall laugh]

N: Right? That's more important. It's too— Or for others, it's your navel.

C: Hmm.

N: That is considered the most vulnerable part of you.

C: Yeah.

N: And then there have been other times in history when I have stolen in one of my books or two, where bearing breasts was not considered sexual.

C: Yeah.

N: Women wore *very* barely-covered gauze that you could see the nips through! Janet Jackson was, you know, two hundred, three hundred years too late.

[Everyone laughs]

N: But it was not considered sexual, necessarily. But we have sexualized this physical characteristic of a traditionally-accepted female body, to the point where we freak out if there's a nipple-covered... was it a star? Was it a pasty?

C: I can't remember. So as we're thinking about these things, then the question becomes, "Who enforces these laws?" Who enforces laws of inheritance, who enforces gender roles? And this starts getting us into... the other societal structures. When it comes to gender, two of the big ones are going to be government and religion.

M: Yeah.

C: Enforcing that kind of stuff. But there are other things that enforce other things. So, yeah. Government! This is one of *my* favorites.

[Marshall laughs]

C: I love building governments.

N: It's the paperwork, friend.

[Everyone laughs]

C: I love politics. Because it's so interesting. To me, government is the essence of how a society decides it's going to be a society. Once you reach a certain size of community. There's got to be some kind of rules, some kind of protection for the vulnerable—we hope—often it turns into the protection of the wealthy. [laughs]

N: Mm hm.

C: These things mutate. But the rules we collectively agree to, and consent to, and/or fight against. How do we decide that? How do we decide what goes into it, and how does it change over time in response to other pressures? I find that fascinating. [Laughs.]

And it's so much more of a spectrum. I feel like in a lot of science fiction, especially, you'll get a... there is the complete liberal paradise representative government, complete pure democracy on the one side. And the complete evil empire ruled by the dark lord on the other. Very rarely in real life are those the shapes of any government.

N: Mm hm.

M: Yeah.

C: Even a monarchical structure. Even with monarchs. Almost never is it just “one dude” ruling everything. Because you fuckin’ need a bureaucracy, you know? [Laughs] Too many fuckin’ details to keep up with everything yourself.

N, in a British accent: Sooo many privy councils.

C: I know! There’s structures, there’s councils.

[Marshall laughs]

C: There’s things! And that’s where you get in-fighting, and that’s *fun*. [laughs] That’s where you get betrayals, and back-stabbings, sometimes literally. And at the same time, representation—as we can see in our own society—is never really pure representation, either. And representation is *hard*. Republics are hard. Much harder forms of government.

[Marshall laughs]

C: And if you’re writing those, you have to think about, “Ok, how *does* it work? What are the fail points in this representative government that I’m creating?” Because I guarantee you, there are some! [Laughs] So, what are they, and how might someone take advantage of them? HMM!

[38:34]

N: And I think part of that too is what is your individual’s touchpoints for government, right? So many times, we love to study history and be like, oh, and then this day this person died, and this person became cabinet member and he was prime minister and they were...A lot of people had no idea any of that stuff was happening. And just like today, there were people who were like, eh, the government’s garbage, I’m gonna do what I want.

[Marshall laughs]

N: And what are the risks for that, right?

C: Mmhmm.

N: It’s interesting how, especially if you traveled to Russia during the Soviet Union, there are shadow governments in governments. Like you can file your papers with the official government to get your passport, OR you can go visit this guy that we know who will get it to you in 48 hours, and it’ll still work. There are always structures within the structures and sort of those mirror worlds, and I think that’s a super fun thing to play with. I personally—

M: And how much does that overlap?

N: Yeah, yeah! I love not just building governments, but making them fall apart. I love the starry-eyed person who believes in their government and then finds horrible things underneath the ground.

[Cass laughs]

N: Maybe that mirrors some of my experience, I don't know.

C: Millennial disillusionment something, yeah. [Laughs]

N: Something like that.

M: But at the same time, I feel like if you're gonna build corruption, you have to make that corruption make sense at the same time. It's not just like, gentlemen, to evil!

[Everyone laughs]

M: And we're just doing the bad things, because we're bad. Let alone that that's actually not an economically feasible thing to do.

C: I don't know man, Project 2025 [laughs]. That does seem like a bunch of dudes just deciding, let's be evil, to be evil. [Laughs]

N: Yeah, I feel like American politics right now, unfortunately—

C: It's jumped the shark.

N: Yeah.

C: Yeah.[Laughs]

M: That's a bunch of guys like, what if we made it illegal that we can't get laid.

[Marshall and Cass laugh]

M: And went from there. [Laughs]

N: Yeah, and again, that comes back to gender and access to bodies and biology and all that stuff, right? Because you control – I forget who the quote is – but it's like, you can learn all you need to know about a culture by the way they treat women. Which I think you can extend to minorities and to queer folk and things of that nature—

C: Yeah, marginalized—

N: But women in the sense of womb-bearing humans. People that are going to be...Like, unfortunately, if you have a uterus [laughs] some of them are gonna be used for meat, that's just

how the species continues, unfortunately, until we can figure out another way around it. Not a personal fan myself.

[Marshall and Cass laugh]

N: Did it twice, not recommended. Love my kids, not a fan of the whole pregnancy thing. Absolutely worst scientific experiment of my life [laughs] both times. But, that said, I think when people get defensive and when governments become very in control of that – not to get too political – but I think listeners by now probably know where we stand on some of these things.

M: They've figured out our bent, I think. [Laughs]

N: I think so.

C: But we're so subtle, guys, we're so subtle.

[Marshall and Cass laugh]

N: And you start criminalizing and prioritizing breeding over the life and interior importance of women and what they can contribute to society, besides having children, that's when it gets... And when you hear people say things like, if you don't have children, you should not have as much of a right to vote, because you don't care about the future... You can't see Cass right now, but she's flipping her fingers off.

[Cass laughs]

C: Not at Natania, at that concept, just–

N: Even if someone who has replaced my husband and myself in the world, it offends me to my core, because I am not the sum of my children. I am so much more. And a huge part of my own postpartum depression was trying to wrestle my own identity away from motherhood, which was never something I dreamed a lot about. It was like, we did it, I'm glad we did it, I love being a mom, but it did not complete me. I am not more Natania, because I have my own opinion.

C: There is a fantastic book I read recently – that I don't wanna fuck up, it's Melissa Caruso's newest – *The Last Hour Between Worlds*, is that the title? I think. Fantastic book. Fucking go read it. I think it's out soon when this episode airs. It's probably out soon. Really great–

M: I wanna say November, but–

C: Ish, I can't remember. It's sometime this Autumn. It's really fascinating, because the heroine, the main character, is a new mother.

N: Mmhmm.

C: That's not the focal point of the story. I don't think we ever see the kid on page, actually. But it's mentioned throughout as sometimes an impediment to what she's doing. Like she's trying to

have an action sequence, but her tits hurt, because they're so full of milk. Melissa did a fantastic job, I thought – as someone who has not done this, but knows how biology works and stuff – of making that distinction. And the character was someone who was trying to be like, I want to still have my life, but I also love this child so much, and how do I negotiate these competing pressures and desires, and it was just...Everyone go read that. It's a really good book, in so many ways. That's just one of them.

M: I'm also just reminded, in the movie, *Fargo*, the main character is the sheriff, who – she is pregnant the whole movie – and while it does affect things about how she's able to move around and all, it is not a plot point of the movie. It's not like she goes into labor two-thirds through. I think that I read somewhere, this is about the first time I've ever seen a movie where a woman is pregnant and her going into labor is not a plot point.[Laughs] It's just like, by the way, she's pregnant, but she's got a murder to solve, so that's what she's focused on right now. How rare that sort of thing is in a story at all.

N: Mmhmm.

M: Okay, we've strayed far from government. [Laughs]

C: We have strayed from government, but it's okay.

N: Well, kind of.

C: Well, all of these things are interconnected.

N: They are interconnected.

M: But they're all interconnected. That ties back to family. When you're defining family, who gives birth and what does society...What does government do to enable or retard that process, or make it easier or harder for families to exist, because–

N: Which families, too.

M: Yeah, right. But unless you go all the way back to making the biology of your peoples just work completely differently than humans do, somebody's gotta be pregnant and give birth, and that's a physical reality that all your family and gender and government structures will have to at least acknowledge.

N: Mmhmm.

C: And it's so interesting because, often I think, the family dynamics mirror government dynamics, or maybe it's the other way around. I'm not sure which is the chicken and which is the egg, but–

M: They're fundamentally the same thing in different scales.

C: Yeah, if you've got a very patriarchal, top-down structure in one, you're probably gonna have a very patriarchal, top-down structure in the other, which is why people in Elizabethan England were vastly uncomfortable in lots of ways. [Laughs]

N: For a long time. I love it.

[45:25]

[outro music plays]

M: Hi, you. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Worldbuilding for Masochists* and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. Our next episode _____.

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[outro music plays]