

Episode 160:

Cozy Worldbuilding, ft. Sarah Beth Durst

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[0:00]

M: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

S: Because my cat needs wings. I'm Sarah Beth Durst.

N: I'm Natania Barron.

N: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca. And this is Episode *One Hundred and Sixty: Cozy Worldbuilding*.

[intro music plays]

N: Well, wonderful! We're so excited to be back with you. Although this is my first time here, which is—with this particular arrangement.

S: Yeah!

N: Since I was not part of the podcast the first time you were here. So welcome back! Tell us about yourself and what you're up to right now.

S: Hi! I'm delighted to be here chatting with you guys. I'm Sarah Beth Durst. I write a lot of books about things that talk that probably shouldn't talk. And, um... yeah. [The Spellshop](#) was

my first cozy fantasy. And the next book set in that world, *The Enchanted Greenhouse*, is out on July 15th. And I'm working on a third book set in that same world. And I adore writing cozy fantasy. [The Enchanted Greenhouse](#) will be my 30th book, I've written [plenty of non-cozy fantasies](#) before that.

N: Wow.

S: And yeah! I like to tell stories. And eat chocolate. And that's pretty much me.

N: That sounds pretty amazing. What... And we're definitely gonna get into switching modes, right? Because cozy vs non-cozy, and trends and whatnot. But when it comes to fantasy as a whole, what is it that you love about worldbuilding? Or something new you've discovered, or maybe something about cozy worldbuilding that's given you a different sort of angle into it?

S: I adore worldbuilding. I've been doing it since I was a kid. No, I would get all the scrap paper in the house and tape it together and draw huge worlds. And then fill it with people that had magical powers and talking animal sidekicks. So I've pretty much been doing this forever.

I love that humans have the ability to create something that cannot possibly exist. And then go ahead and fall in love with it. I just think that's really cool.

N: Absolutely. So. Cozy worldbuilding.

S: Yes!

N: This is a very hot topic. I'd say, in combination with romantasy, probably what I've heard most on the apps these days. Especially on TikTok. This kind of—it's kind of interesting, 'cause it seems kind of a reclamation of what was... we had a sort of grimdark period where we had a lot of grimdark, really gritty, gritty fantasy. And then over the last couple of years, we've had a desire for the softer side of it. I would love to hear—we'd both love to hear—

[Marshall laughs]

N: How you came around to that. If it's something you've always played with or this idea of kind of settling into it, and now at this stage, 30 books into your career.

S: I've always loved optimistic fantasy. I've always seen fantasy as a literature of hope and empowerment. I love that feeling when you close a fantasy book and you feel like the book is a little more magical than it was before. That there could be wonder around any corner. Those are the books that I read as a kid, those are the books I read *now*.

Somebody actually once asked me, "How have your reading tastes changed as you've grown up?" And I was like, "eh, no one told me they were supposed to change."

M: No one told me I was supposed to grow up!

S: Yeah! Exactly! I was not given that memo. And I refuse to do it. Just no, thank you very much.

So I've always been very much on the optimistic side of fantasy. I am not a grimdark person. [laughs] I don't think I could write grimdark if tried. I love hope. That is the thread that is through all of my work, no matter what genre I'm doing.

And I do think that my writing, and combine that with the events of the world, led me to writing cozy fantasy. I don't think I would have written cozy fantasy if March 2020 hadn't come along, and I said, "I don't want to be here right now, I want to be somewhere nice with lots of winged cats, thank you, bye."

M: You've reminded me. About a few years ago, many a moon ago, we were on a panel together about "Grimdark versus Hopepunk."

S: We were! That's right! Yes, that was a great panel.

M: And we were sort of the, standard-bearers for hopepunk. Although I kind of feel like just the name "hopepunk" set a lot of people off. Like, it just made them mad.

[Sarah laughs]

M: For reasons.

[Sarah and Marshall laugh]

M: I feel like the term "cozy fantasy" has slipped in like, it's *kind* of the same thing but people get less mad. I mean, there are still people getting mad about the term "cozy fantasy." But it's not—

S: People like to get mad.

M: People love to get mad. They do.

S: They need more chocolate.

M: If they had more chocolate and talking animals, they would be less mad.

S: That is *exactly* my theory! Yeah! You've just summed up my entire theory of life. You need more talking animals and chocolate and then the world will be a better place.

M: Exactly. But I feel like cozy fantasy doesn't quite hit that same rage button the way the name "hopepunk" did. And I think it works better as this sort of inverse to what grimdark is supposed to be. Where, grimdark is like: [pitching voice deep and gravelly] "We've been in this war for nine generations and my name is Bonesteel Daggerclaw." [Laughs] And some people love that, and good for them. But I think we had hit a point for a little while where it felt like that was the mode fantasy was in, and I'm glad we're sort of out of that and into the reactions in other directions. 'Cause I feel we need that more.

[6:23]

S: I enjoy it. I mean, I like that feeling that things are gonna be okay. And that if you choose hope, it's not that you're choosing this weaker, softer, mushier thing. Hope is a strong choice.

Hope is a weapon. Hope is something brave to choose, especially when the world is falling apart. And I like stories saying that, especially in times where things are, you know, falling apart. [Laughs] It's good to have that hope to cling to, even if it's just a fictional world for a couple hours. That can make you stronger, to retreat into some place where people are nice. [Laughs] To hang out!

N: Well, and I think, the cozy concept ironically was taken from [cozy murder mysteries](#), too.

S: Yes.

N: That's another, a previous genre. And I find that so amusing. Because what a wonderful tension to have. It's low-stakes murder. Right? [Laughs]

S: Yes. Right?

N: The person's already dead, everyone's so nice that it's hard to imagine anyone could be capable of doing these things. But eventually, you know, good wins out at the end. And that's kind of the most important part, right?

S: Yeah.

M: I mean, you sort of have to love the sense of that genre, like "And the murderer is... Jonathan!" [With a British accent] "Oh, fair cop, you got me!" [laughs]

N: Yeah.

M: "Take me in!" It's like, they're never like, "And I'll kill the rest of you and escape!" No.

S: No.

M: It's 'cause they've been fingered. And. Which is a delightful thing. And along those lines, I've really been enjoying watching [Poker Face](#) of late, which is sort of like a version of a cozy mystery.

S: I've been watching that as well, yes!

M: The cozy murder mystery. Because there's usually a murder and even though our main heroine has no authority to get or arrest anyone.

S: [Laughs] She shouldn't even be there.

M: She shouldn't even be there! But like, because she has her special power of always being able to tell when somebody's lying to her, that she just sort of stumbles into solving the murder. And like, [sighs] "I gotta solve another murder."

S: It does make me think a little bit of [Murder, She Wrote](#) with Jessica Fletcher.

N: Yes. Yeah.

S: She's just randomly near so many murders that obviously she's a serial killer and has been hiding it this whole time, because no one statistically would be near that many murders.

N: [Brother Cadfael](#) too.

M: And solves them all!

S: Right?

[Marshall and Sarah laugh]

N: Yeah.

S: That's right!

N: It's a good thing. So where do we think—where do we think this came from? Because I'm so interested in how these things are cyclical. Because a lot of earlier fantasy, especially post-[Tolkien](#) had some aspects of cozier stuff, but I feel like a lot of this came from the [RPG](#) world. And sort of this very character-driven, kind of emotionally-driven... But we know that in these stories, people are gonna be okay. For the most part. I mean, there's evil DMs out there, but for the most part.

[Marshall laughs]

N: A lot of—there's been a lot of crossover. You read things like [Legends and Lattes](#) and it feels like a [D&D](#) world. Right? It feels like, you know, this could happen behind the scenes in our group adventure here. Or do you think it came from somewhere else, that it just, you know, combined these things and just happened to hit upon a zeitgeist of people needing, like you said, sort of "post" pandemic, um, desire to have things be simpler? Because God damn it, they're so complicated. [Laugh-sighs]

S: Yeah. I mean, I think we've always had this kind of... You look at [The Hobbit](#), really.

N: Yeah.

S: I mean, what is cozy fantasy but we're hangin' out in the Shire having Second Breakfast a *lot*.

N: Dreaming about your books and your armchair while you're chasing down a dragon. Yeah.

S: Yeah. I do think it goes all the way back to *The Hobbit*. I was thinking about this and the difference tonally between *The Hobbit* and [The Lord of the Rings](#). You never worry about [Bilbo](#). Bilbo is gonna be fine. Yes, there's a dragon, yes, they're going on an adventure and it's dangerous. But you don't really think that the trolls are gonna eat Bilbo. Whereas Frodo doesn't make it fully back. You know? There's much more real peril and trauma in *Lord of the Rings*. So *Lord of the Rings* is epic, but *Hobbit*? That's sort of a proto-cozy-fantasy, I think.

So I think it's always been there and we've always had these optimistic fantasies. I'd call [Howl's Moving Castle](#) by Diana Wynne Jones.

N: Yeah.

S: [The Forgotten Beasts of Eld](#) by [Patricia McKillip](#). Some of [Robin McKinley](#)'s work like *Beauty*, even *Sunshine* where she's baking the giant cinnamon rolls while she deals with the vampire guy over in the shed?

[Sarah and Natania chuckle]

S: So I think it's—it *has* always been there, just not with this name. And then you combine that with this... You know, when the pandemic began in 2020 there was this real feeling of helplessness that came with the whole thing, and I think that's a main reason why so many people started playing [Animal Crossing](#) and why a lot of people started turning to comfort reads. It's that need to have that soothing escape. So I think all these things combined and with what you said, with the RPGs and so forth. Feeding into the stories, it just became a moment. Which is lovely. Because I like it. [Laughs]

M: I think another element that, to add into all those, I think we as readers and writers started really questioning what fantasy *could be*. I think there's a lot of, y'know, it does not have to be this sort of faux-Renaissance, faux-Europe sort of thing. We can set it in something that's more modern in terms of technology. We can set it in something that culturally looks like something else. And I think also the idea of also, like, it doesn't have to be this "save the kingdom" sort of adventure. It doesn't have to... It can *be* just the low stakes of "hey, what if we just stayed in the Shire and had a beer brewing competition?" [Laughs]

S: Yes! I think that sounds good.

M: And didn't worry about what happens with some Ring or doesn't. Frodo's got that. But we've got some real drama with who's got the best beer.

S: Yeah! I think you're hundred percent right, though, that it is expanding what fantasy can do. That we're not just talking about the Chosen Ones. We're not talking about the "save the world," we're talking about "save a soul," "save a heart."

N: Mm hm.

S: Which, I would argue, is just as equally important and very relevant. These are the stories of—okay, at least the ones I'm telling—I'm really fascinated by talking about the lives of ordinary people in these fantastical worlds. And how do they find happiness when all of the rest is going on around them? How do you set up your jam shop, or your coffeeshop, or your tea shop, or how do you become a fully-realized happy person while grand things are going on? Or cataclysmic things are going on?

Whichever way you want to take your world. 'Cause you can really do anything you want with the world in cozy, so long as it feels safe. Like a sanctuary.

N: Yeah.

S: That everything is gonna be okay. Even while the volcano's doing its thing over there.

N: 'Cause there's definitely levels to it. And, [the romantasy that I write](#), it is cozy. I'm building a world, it's complex magic, it's complex relationships, it's based in [Jane Austen](#). You're not reading Jane Austen and worried that something horrible's gonna happen at the end. Right?

S: Mm hm.

N: 'Cause romance, cozy romance, is its own thing as well. But, when we were talking about Tolkien, I was thinking about how [The Chronicles of Narnia](#) starts off cozy, and then doesn't hold that throughout. Like, the books get progressively darker. People lose their sanity, they have transformational but very deep and life changing events. And then at the end—it's literally the apocalypse. [Laughs] And as a young reader I remember missing that feeling of the, especially the first two books. Well. Part of [The Dawn Treader](#) maybe. But by the time you get to [Silver Chair](#), it's just, like, over.

S: Right.

N: You're like, "Oh."

[Marshall and Natania laugh]

M: Here's trauma!

N: This is trauma. This is depression. This is mental illness. This is family abuse. Like... This is totally—

S: Right? And I'm like, I want to have tea with faun Tumnus. I mean. [Laughs]

N: Exactly!

M: Mm hm.

N: But the kids themselves, even, become so much more complex.

And I think there's this mistake that some people think that because [a book is] cozy, the characters aren't complex and they're not dealing with difficult things. I don't think that's true. I think that you're dealing with the average—every person has difficulties. Every person has limitations and struggles to get to happiness.

Right? Because happiness is not a destination, it's a perception of things. And I think that what you're saying is beautiful, that it's like "saving a heart or saving a soul," that's the glimpse of the little world that you want. You don't necessarily need [the Ring](#) going to [Mount Doom](#) or slaying the dragon, you want that moment that is changing that person's life or someone else's life.

S: Yeah!

N: And that's kind of what we hunger for. Most of us are not going to be the chosen one.

S: Exactly. Yes!

N: Maybe Marshall. But not me.

[Sarah laughs]

S: Not me. I don't want the Ring. That's a lot of responsibility.

N: I would have stayed in the Shire. [Laughs]

S: The Shire sounds great. Second Breakfast? Eleventies? I'm there.

[Sarah and Marshall laugh]

M: I just want to put together a theatre troupe and put on fun shows and nobody needs to pick up a sword, ever, except for stage combat and that's it. [Laughs]

S: Yes. Yes. But you're right, it's not like these characters aren't going on their own personal quests. I mean, there is an emotional journey that every character in every book is going on, otherwise it's a very boring book. So there are dragons that they're fighting, but they just might be internal dragons. Smaller dragons. Things that other people might not even realize that *are* dragons, that they're fighting.

And I think there's something beautifully empowering about that. That you don't have to be the Chosen One. You don't have to save the world in order to make your corner of it better.

N: Yeah, I think that's pretty cool. It's a good lesson. It's one of those lessons that's like, if enough people felt that way, right? If more people valued—what is it, good cheer? Anyway, that lovely Gandalf quote. The world would be a better place. If more people were like hobbits, basically. [Scribe note: Natania is likely referring to Thorin Oakenshield's [last speech](#).]

[Sarah laughs]

N: 'Cause even they had their scouring of the Shire, right? But even then you get this idea that of all the cultures, they're gonna go back to life so much easier than everybody else.

S: Yeah.

N: They're so much more resilient because they have this sense of home and of joy, right? 'Cause joy is the other part of cozy as well.

S: Absolutely.

N: It's hope, but it's also joy. And I think that for me, as a queer writer, wanting to write a series that celebrated queer joy—I wrote a [queernormative](#) world because I did not want the conflicts to be about who people loved.

[Scribe note: for more on building queernormative worlds, see [Episode 26: Take Pride in your Worldbuilding featuring K.A. DOORE!](#), [Episode 78: Reimagining Relationships w/ FOZ MEADOWS](#), and [Episode 148: Horny on Main: Smutting Up Your Worldbuilding](#).]

S: Yes.

N: So that's kind of the safe space I'm building as well. Which I think is interesting if that's not the case, because for me that would *not* be cozy. I can't imagine a world where "characters are fighting the social norms just to get together" as being cozy. [Laughs] I mean, maybe you could do it.

S: Mm hm.

N: Maybe not for me. But yes.

S: I think joy is a huge part of it. I think choosing joy is a very subversive act.

[18:01]

N: Mm hm.

S: And an important act, a brave act. Especially when other people are telling you not to or when there's this thread of cynicism running through culture, too. To say, this is beautiful, this is cool, this is wonderful, let's enjoy this. Let's treasure this moment. I think it's a powerful thing for a character to do. To be like, "I'm just gonna ride this merhorse." Or "I'm gonna open my coffeeshop" or whatever it is. To find joy in the moments that are yours. And that *you* get to define what that joy means. That's a powerful thing.

N: How do you think this connects back to fairy tales? Because that's something I always think about. It's like, fairy tales have this double-edge. You know that the [Grimm's Fairy Tales](#) were not as lovely as they are, but they *became* cozy. Do you think that, re-telling wise, like [The Little Mermaid](#)—it's far less horrible—

M: We Disney-fied them.

N: Yeah, but even before Disney we were Disney-fying them. Right?

M: Right.

N: I wonder if there's some kind of connection there, too, with those repeated stories of our childhoods that get softened, right? And that safety of your mom, or your uncle, or someone cool in your family telling you that story. And knowing that they're not gonna scare you.

S: I think fairy tales are such a fascinating tool. Because they're hollow. They're a sculpture, you know? You don't hear about the motivations of the princess, beyond a sort of base, single objective. They are not given these layered, complex characters intentionally. Which means that they are basically just story structures that can be interpreted however you like, and I think that's really cool. That you get to use them. I mean, all literature is in prior conversation with all other literature.

So. And one of the cool things about writing for adults and experienced readers is that they have all this wealth of knowledge of stories. You know, you can depend on them to know what

[Cinderella](#) is. They know what [Star Wars](#) is. They know how a story feels, so you get to choose whether you fulfill that or subvert that.

I think with fairy tales, they're just another tool. Just like tropes are.

N: Mm hm.

S: That you get to step on and use to say something new. If that makes sense. [laughs]

N: Oh, totally. So, when you're building. I'd love to hear from you, especially as someone who comes from the epic world, do you do things differently from a worldbuilding perspective, when you know you're going cozy? Or is it... and is it off page, or on page? And how do you decide what the amount is, right?

S: The worldbuilding is pretty much the same, honestly. It is the approach to the lives within that world that varies. I mean, the world I set up in [Spellshop](#), the very first chapter, the Emperor just gets thrown out the window and the Great Library of Alysium is burning. It starts with a revolution. With a very violent revolution. There are bodies in the canal. YET. It is cozy, due to our sentient spider plant who brings on stage. And we immediately get out of there and move to our lovely island. But the background? I could've built the exact same world, the exact same magic system, exact same political system, and written it as an epic.

N: Mm hm.

S: The difference is really... the vibes.

[Sarah and Natania chuckle]

S: The style, the voice of the story. That it is the pacing of it. The breadth of it. The journey the character goes on. I think structurally, probably the only sort of... rules that I'm sure someone will eventually break in cozy, is that you need to have a happily ever after. You need a happy ending. And you need nothing so horribly traumatic happening on screen to your characters that you're investing your heart into. Because then you're not feeling cozy. The key is you have to feel hugged throughout the whole thing.

But you can achieve that against a backdrop of just normal worldbuilding. And the more real the world feels, I think, the more magic you can get away with. [Laughs] And the more the light matters. If you have that darkness, then choosing light becomes more powerful. So I like having the darkness in the worldbuilding and then choosing raspberry jam and talking plants. [Laughs]

M: I mean, I've been hearing people talking about the idea of like cozy apocalypse.

S: Oh, yeah.

M: Where the world is falling apart and everything is terrible, but *this* character is still making a tea shop. And you might ride through on your death cycles and wearing your tires as armor or something. But here, you're gonna take off your shoes. You're gonna sit down, and you're gonna be polite... [Laughs]

S: You're gonna have yourself some nice baked goods. And then you're gonna go back to your rampaging. [Laughs]

M: Yes!

S: So I really think you can take any world and you know, hang out and [Dagobah](#) for a while, open a little, like, B&B on the swamp and have a charming cozy while the [Death Star](#) is being blown up.

M: So much of it is not so much the world itself, but where you aim and focus the lens.

S: Yes.

N: Mm hm.

M: And I mean, we had [an episode a few months ago](#) on what we called "Micro Worldbuilding" which is just getting more and more granular of, like, what level you're working at. Rather building whole nations, just building this city block. And I think part of what we're talking about is that same sort of process. Like, no matter what else is happening in the world, if I'm focused just on this little area right here, and then having a squash festival.

S: Right! I do love... I think I do the same worldbuilding that I do in any of my novels. I think I'm just as rigorous with cozy fantasy. I love to layer it with implications of a long history. I love to layer in mythology and folklore, and different cultures that get referenced. But you're right, the camera is focused in on this one little bit. With the knowledge that there's more beyond what the camera can see.

M: I mean, and that's always what you want.

S: Right?

M: You want that sense that there *is* so much more. And not only that there is so much more, but that if you moved the camera, you would get—there is this completely other story.

We've talked about this in the past on the show. I remember [Rowenna](#) was talking once about how there's a lot of books where it feels like this world is this very particular rat maze for your main character rat to run through that maze in that right order. And nothing else exists outside of that. And that's deeply boring. [Laughs] And I mean, I think a lot of what we're talking about is that sort of giving just so much life that these smaller... I don't want to necessarily say "simpler" stories... But lower-stakes stories have just as much validity as, like, the big epic fantasy story.

S: Yeah, it should feel that way. How do you two decide where to focus your lens?

[Natania laughs]

N: Well, Marshall has, ah... spreadsheets for that. [Laughs]

S: Amazing! Okay, I love spreadsheets.

[All laugh]

S: I do love a good spreadsheet.

[25:00]

N: Joking aside, it always for me comes back down to character. As much as I love to worldbuild, I do a lot of head-hopping. Not the sort of, old-school, in the same paragraph. But different chapters from different points of view. So I like to think of the world through their lens and their interactions. Like, how they're experiencing, how their prejudices, how their upbringing, how their privilege, how all of these things impact the world around them and how they see that. And that's usually, if I'm stuck, that's usually where I go. I love banter, I love wit, I love characters that have those very cozy moments, as well. And I love family drama. Those are two things that I... I mean I have a more epic side and a more cozy side. But those are the kinds of places that I like. Those interpersonal relationships.

S: Yeah.

N: I write Arthuriana. You can't avoid it.

[Natania and Marshall laugh]

N: Like, everyone's related to everyone, everyone has a beef with someone else.

[Sarah laughs]

[26:06]

[Pre-outro music begins]

M: Hi, you. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Worldbuilding for Masochists* and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. If you want to know more about your hosts and all the fantastical books we write, including the new editions of my [Maradaine](#) novels and [Velocity of Revolution](#), Natania's [Queen of None](#) and [Netherford Hall](#), and Cass' [Aven Cycle](#), links to all that information is on our website at worldbuildingformasochists.podbean.com. We also have an archive of all of our episodes and links to more information on the guests of this and every episode.

Also our anthology, [Traveling Light](#), is out. Filled with short stories set in the world we have been building on the show. We have stories from all of us, as well as Marie Brennan, Mike Chen, J.C. Pillard, Victor Manibo, Kate Elliott, Lindsey Carmichael, Valerie Valdes, and Mike Underwood. Links to purchase are on our website, and it's available on all the places you buy books in ebook and paperback. Also also, we now have a Patreon. Come check us out at patreon.com/worldbuildingformasochists, where we'll be giving you bonus content and surprises, and we would love any support you would have to give us.

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

[Outro music plays]

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