[00:00]

A: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

R: Look, as far as hobbies go, it's eco-friendly, basically free, and pretty unlikely to end in injury! I'm Rowenna Miller.

A: I'm Alex Rowland.

M: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

A: And this is Episode 8: A Trip Over the Tongue.

[intro music]

R: OK, so by the time this airs this will be old news, dollface, but today is kind of a big day for Alexandra Rowland…

A: Eeee! [laughs]

R: Because… Today *Choir of Lies* is out in the world. How's it going?

A: It's been a lot, people have been very kind and generous on twitter, there's been a lot of yelling, 90% of the yelling has been me, 90% of my yelling has been mostly terror, kinda par for the course for book launch day, I'm sure you both know how that goes.

M: Yes indeed.

R: Absolutely. But I think terror is undeserved because, having read *Choir of Lies*, it is really wonderful, people should be running to their nearest bookseller, running people over, crashing through windows to get ahold of it because it is a lovely book.

A: Thank you! I'm just gonna do some shameless self-promotion then and say that if you have not heard about this book yet, it is the followup to *A Conspiracy of Truths*, you do not need to have read *Conspiracy of Truths* to appreciate and enjoy this book. They are both books about

the power of stories; the new one, *A Choir of Lies*, is about fantasy tulip mania and grief and recovery from trauma and sort of about how stories can heal us and community and hopepunk and… it's really queer. It's really, really very queer. So yes, please go buy it or at least shout about it on the internet.

M: Yay!

A: Yay! Do we have any other news or hype announcements?

M: By the time this airs - I believe this comes out the beginning of October - so just after this airs I will be appearing at New York Comic Con the following weekend.

A and R: Ooh! Fancy!

M: So that's gonna be some fancy fun stuff. So if you are attending New York Comic Con you can come and say hello to me and I think there will be an opportunity to get a free copy of *Way of the Shield* which came out last year and have it signed by me and look at my smiling face when I do it.

A: Nice!

R: [laughs] Excellent!

M: The sequel to that book, *Shield of the People*, will be coming out at the end of October, so you're gonna hear me screaming about that more and more in the near future. So that's what I've got going on.

R: Fantastic! So this is kind of exciting. We have an opportunity for you to consider, which is the *Writing the Other* worldbuilding class. The worldbuilding perspective of fiction can be pretty daunting and even more so if you want to create inclusive cultures that aren't, you know, accidentally replicating nasty colonial structures; viewpoints with diverse characters that actually aren't that diverse because they're just stereotypes and caricatures. So this class is really focused on that and it's kind of a deep dive into key aspects of worldbuilding and building inclusive worlds within that. So creating cultures, ideology, religion, cosmologies, sociobiology, research, and the coolest part I think is that it's eight outstanding worldbuilders, and I'm gonna list them for you! Max Gladstone, Kate Elliott, Nisi Shawl, Andrea Hairston, Tananarive Due, Jaymee Goh, Lauren Jankowski, and Steven Barnes. And a pretty cool thing is that because we know that you're already giant worldbuilding dorks, you get a $50 discount with the code worldbuildcast2019. So you can find details around that class schedule, time commitment, accessibility, financial aid at writingtheother.com. So I'm sure we'll be shouting about that some more. Very cool.

A: I feel so fancy?

R: [laughs]

A: Like, here we are giving people a discount code on our extremely legit podcast.

R: I know! We're so legit!

A: We're so legit! We're so fancy! Wow! Cool! Yes, great, good! [laughs]

M: [laughs] We've made it now, finally.

R: We are. We're official.

A: We have arrived.

R: But no, that sounds really cool and if I had more time on my hands right now I would be diving in along with everybody.

A: Honestly, yes.

M: I know several people that have taken this class and have highly benefited from it and loved it, so I strongly recommend if you have the means and the time and the wherewithal, this should be a thing you should do.

A: That's fantastic. I am so excited about it and I hope that our dear listeners get a great benefit from it. Other things that benefit them: an episode. [laughs]

R: [laughs] Exactly!

A: Shall we move along?

R: So, it was funny because we were talking about our world and how we were coming along with it and we kind of realized we need to name some things? And of course, being the worldbuilding masochists that we are, as soon as we brought up the possibility that we had to name some stuff, we realized that we had to talk about language and naming conventions and all kinds of stuff, so here is an episode…

A: ...about that.

M: All about that, because too often in fantasy you see things where people clearly named things just out of slamming syllables together that sounded neat without any thought of how they might actually work together or be part of the same language or culture. And I think it's important

to do the work, or at least do enough work that it looks like you did a lot more to make things have a lot more common sense and verisimilitude.

R: Yeah, agreed.

A: Rowenna, I think that you have an interesting anecdote, right?

[6:17]

R: I do. So when *Torn* first came out I got a message from a reader, and I don't know if it was well-intentioned or if it was a trying to noink[??] me kind of message, but he asked me about expressions in the book that are anachronistic. So if you've read *Torn*, it's got kind of an 18th century vibe to it, and I definitely use expressions and language in the book that are later - it's not that the technology wasn't there for the expression to have been possible, so I don't use, like, "jet pack" or something in there-

A: Or, "he telegraphed a punch".

R: Exactly! But they were terms that did not exist, if you look up the etymology, until the 19th century or later. And in thinking about my answer to him, I came back with, "look, if you really want to be pedantic about language in a second world fantasy, the characters aren't actually speaking English anyway."

A: Yeah.

R: Like, this is kind of getting out there but we're really translating concept that they would be thinking about in a language we don't speak into a language that our readers read, which for me is English.

A: Exactly, exactly. And even if they were speaking English, they probably wouldn't be speaking our contemporary modern English. They might be speaking something closer to Early Modern English like the way that Shakespeare spoke or Middle English like how Chaucer spoke, and Chaucer is only barely intelligible.

R: Right, right. So it made me want to start off this episode saying how much do we think about this while we're writing, that we're doing this underhanded translation thing?

M: I think about it all the damn time. [laughs]

A: Yeah, me too. Me too, honestly.

R: [laughs] I'm glad I'm not alone. OK.

A: I'm constantly aware that I'm working in translation.

M: And I'm constantly thinking about, is this an appropriate word even in the sense of, I am translating to English but does this fit? Two words that I went down a complete rabbit hole with: one is 'parliament', because I was like, "well, wait a minute, if there's no France then there's no root word *parler* then there's no-"

A: Fuck. Goddammit.

R: [cackles]

A: Marshall Ryan Maresca, I am about to have this problem, I am going to pick your brain about the 'parliament' issue! Because I have been wondering what I'm gonna do.

M: But, like, is this then an appropriate word for a government body that is… With that one, I finally decided yes, that's OK, that one is OK.

A: Yeah…

M: But the other one that I really spent a lot of time dwelling on when I wrote *Imposters of Aventil* is 'marathon'. Because…

A: There's no Marathon, Greece.

R: And it's a very particular origin!

M: There's no Marathon, Greece and there's no particular origin of that word which would mean 'a long running race', so it was like, is that an appropriate word for a long running race? And I thought about it for a while and I eventually came up with, in the world that sporting event was just called an endurance, which worked, even though…

R: That works, I like that.

M: [laughs] But if I broke down the derivation of the word 'endurance' then it might fall apart then too! I don't know!

[A and R laugh]

R: Don't do that! [laughs]

A: I would probably have erred on the side of using 'marathon' just because it's easy, it's quick, my readers know what it means, and not everyone is aware of the origin of the word 'marathon', right?

R: Yeah. I think that that for me is where it would break down: is this something that would jar the reader out of the story because they have that connection or not, so I am probably in the middle with you guys, I would probably be asking some other opinions if I really had…

A: But you always stop and think about it! My best anecdote about this is while I was writing *Conspiracy of Truths* there was one line where I wanted to describe someone as a "loose cannon" and I realized that I have not yet given them gunpowder for military purposes yet. They have fireworks and they use the fireworks for signal flares and things like that, but they have not quite put two and two together and realized, "oh, we can aim this at people." So they don't have cannons. So I can't use the phrase 'loose cannon'. But in that case it actually really worked out because the phrase that I came up with to replace it was so much more interesting and vibrant - I think I did something about rats in a sinking ship or something like that, I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was so much more interesting than just a cliche like 'loose cannon'.

M: That is a thing I like to play with a lot, is when I want to use an idiom that is clearly not an appropriate idiom for the world and then take a little time to be like, "OK, what *would* be a world-appropriate idiom that could mean the same thing?" and that is a fun worldbuilding exercise you can do to then play with the language uses you're using in terms of idioms and saying that would fit your characters, and that gives your book a lot more flavor.

R: Absolutely. One of the ones in the latest book that I'm working on, the third in *The Unraveled Kingdom*, I wanted-

A: Wait, wait, wait, you didn't do the voice, Rowenna, you have to do the voice.

R: [with exaggerated American South accent] In *my* book…

A: [laughs] Thank you.

R: [laughs] I really wanted to use the phrase "a soup sandwich", which- have you guys even heard that one?

A: No!

M: I've heard it but I don't know what it…

R: My husband's in the navy and it rolls around in military parlance. It's someone who's very well-intentioned but they're so useless at their job.

A: Oh my God.

R: Like, they're a *soup sandwich*. Like, it just doesn't work.

A: I love that!

R: It ended up being this deep dive that each person shared from their culture their, like, "that's a cup with a hole in it," "that's a slotted spoon that can't hold soup," "that's a pie crust made of custard," kind of like, what their expression was, so that was fun showing their backgrounds as well as what expressions they use, and I love soup sandwich.

A: That's fucking delightful.

R: So we think about it all the time. How much do we make our readers think about it?

A: I think it goes back to, how much am I asking them to do? And also, how important is the word? So, for example, in Marshall Ryan Maresca's example about 'marathon', if it was a book about marathon running I might come up with a new fancy fantasy word for it, like, some bullshit fantasy word. But if it's just a one-off kind of like, like, "oh yeah, then they ran a marathon, whatever, next chapter" then I would probably just use the word 'marathon' because if it's something that's very important, I can ask my readers to think more about it and do a little more effort to understand exactly what I mean rather than using the word which is going to be an approximation.

R: I agree, and I think that there's a point at which it becomes laborious, and obviously I don't think any of us want our readers describing the voice of our book as laborious. Like, "it was very intelligent but it was really hard to get through because I had to keep *thinking* about the fact that this was a different world," like we've talked about before, the things like leaving negative space and letting our readers fill in some gaps for themselves is part of what makes worldbuilding fluid and makes it readable and I think that is kind of important, that translating element too, that we're making it fluid and not bogging it down with making it too much to think about.

A: I completely agree. My goal is always for the reader to have an effortless experience. If I am making them do work, I am making them do subconscious work, stuff that they're not going to think about, like the negative space thing that you mentioned. But asking them to learn a bunch of fantasy words is asking them to do a lot of work. And that's where it becomes effortful.

R: Right.

M: You don't want them to feel like they always have to go to the glossary to look something up every five minutes to figure out how to read the book you wrote because it's so filled with extra work and jargon and terms that if they don't become fluent in the language you're doing then they're gonna be lost.

R: Right. I don't want my readers to feel like they have to read a book to read my book. [laughs]

A: Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! I mean, yeah! [laughs]

R: So, our listeners may not be aware, Alex, what your academic degree background is in, so I thought that I might toss it over to you, to our linguist friend here, to give us some basic language awareness parameters to think about here.

A: Sure. So I had a bachelor's degree in English, that was my major, and I minored in linguistics, so some interesting terms to know about: so I minored in linguistics because I was like "maybe one day I will need to invent a fantasy language and I think that that will be important. If it was good enough for Tolkien, it's good enough for me." And I haven't actually done that much language building specifically, like, I don't do conlangs, but I do have an awareness of orthography and I have an awareness of how language is used and I have an awareness of language interaction across cultures and language families and sort of a more broad spectrum of it.

R: So, vocab word: 'orthography'. Can you define that for us?

A: Ooh! 'Spelling'. Basically. I mean, that's really simplifying it, but the actual definition of it is "the conventional spelling system of a language, or the study of spelling and how letters combine to represent sounds and form words". So that means, like, how a language is represented - we all know what spelling is, I'm overexplaining this to you because it's interesting! - but the way that you represent a language on the page, this is something that I lean very hard on because when I am inventing fantasy words for a fantasy culture, a lot of times I will sort of vaguely model it on something that at least echoes or rhymes with something in real life - and I mean a very figurative sort of rhyming, not the words themselves rhyming but the concepts are rhyming with something in the real world - so, for example, I have just finished a manuscript that takes place in Fantasy Turkey. So I am using the Turkish orthography system to name things, places, people because that helps keep it consistent, it helps give me a framework so I don't have to build an entire language to know how it sounds, and it means that people can make conclusions about it based just on the familiarity of the language. So, for example, if I name something with a word that sounds Russian, because of the preconceptions that we have from the real world, people will be more likely to make conclusions and inferences based on just that word, just based on the spelling of it and how it sounds. Whereas if I just come up with some bullshit fantasy term, they don't have any context for that whatsoever and they can't make any inferences about it.

R: So creating, again, that space for readers to make the conclusions for themselves instead of having to think way too hard about it.

A: Right, right.

M: Although, that technique can create trouble for you that you might not want.

A: True, true.

M: Because you will craft at least a language base for the cultures you're doing that will spark a familiarity sometimes that maybe was not your intention and thus people will do that, they will fill the negative space with what they think your intention must be, then start to make decisions or judgments of what you did based on that presumption.

A: It's definitely something that, going back to choose versus presume, this is something that you want to do very carefully if you do it this way. You have to have an awareness of how language works, you have to have at least a sort of structural understanding of how that particular language works, and you preferably want to have a native speaker because when you make up a fantasy word in this vaguely real-world language, you kinda want to test it on them and make sure that you're not accidentally coming up with a word in a real language that means something.

M: [snickers]

R: Especially something like "Ass-tart" or something like that, you're like "aww man!"

A and R: [laugh]

A: Or also just an awareness that this is not a word that would ever occur, this doesn't taste right to a native speaker of this language. And it only takes, like, 10-15 minutes tops to just check with someone on twitter and say "hey, does this sound OK? Does this feel good in your mouth?" A lot of times they'll say "almost? Maybe change these two letters and that sounds and feels much more natural."

R: And I think that even if you aren't basing it on a real language, doing that yourself and actually saying out loud anything that you are creating in an invented language is pretty important as a check, because I have definitely written out things that looked really beautiful on the page and then when I said them out loud I was like, "oh, that sounds like 'asparagus', that wasn't what I intended at all, that's not gonna be right."

A: Yes, yes.

M: And I have done things where I've played with creating a language and then created sounds that worked together but then in an attempt to transliterate that to do the orthography for it, [it] then looked godawful in that process of it, even though on a sound level I could make it work and it sounded interesting, but it looked like hot garbage on the page.

A: Yeah, yeah. Speaking of orthography as long as we're on it, I have big feelings about the prejudice the current fantasy writers industry has against diacritic marks and apostrophes. And some of this is rightfully so, because the hatred that we have for this comes from a long

tradition, the last 20 or 30 years, of fantasy writers trying to be Tolkien and having no linguistic background whatsoever and not realizing what an apostrophe in the middle of a word does linguistically.

R: [laughs] It was apostrophe abuse.

M: Yeah.

R: We had some apostrophe abuse happening. We have to own that.

M: People would just throw in apostrophes because it looked neat.

R: Because it looked neat! Because it makes it a fantasy word!

M: Exactly.

A: Right. But I think it's time we reclaim the apostrophe in the middle of the word and I am going to be doing this later in the episode, actually. Same thing with diacritic marks. If you use them wisely and tastefully then they can add a real beauty to your fantasy language. A visual beauty and a sort of sound beauty as well, it gets you using different vowels, you can do some exciting things with consonants as well, there's some consonants that have diacritic marks, and I am very excited about them. By the way, jargon term. If you don't know what a diacritic mark is, that's the little marks above a letter, like the dots over a U, like an umlaut-

R: I love saying that word! It's such a fun word to say!

All three together, in varying silly voices: Umlaut!

A: Yes! Or like the *e grave* which is, in French it goes é, which is the E with the little 'boop!', the little dash, it's like an apostrophe but over the E, it's the E with the 'boop!', you know what I'm talking about. [laughs]

R: It's a boop! It's a boop, that's a technical term in linguistics, it's a letter boop!

[A and R both laugh]

M: It's a letter boop. These are technical terms, people!

A: Technical terms. *E boop.*

R: So earlier, Alex, you used a term that I want to come back to and define and get into a little bit more. You said "conlangs". Can you tell us what we mean by that and can we dive into that a little bit more?

A: Yes indeed. So a conlang is just a portmanteau - which is another thing I can define for you, a portmanteau is a word that is made up of two words squished together -

M: Like Brangelina!

A: Like Brangelina, exactly. So conlang is short for 'constructed language'. So this is, like, Klingon or Tolkien's Elvish languages or that very bad one that Christopher Paolini came up with in *Eragon*, that sort of stuff. It's what I got a degree for.

R: We have a few examples. So you mentioned Klingon which I think everyone can go to immediately, does anyone have any examples of lesser known ones?

M: Dothraki got a lot of notice after *Game of Thrones*. They at least did some of the work in that. I don't know how much work they did, but they did a fair amount of work on that one.

A: As far as I know they did a great deal. Like, I'm pretty sure that Dothraki is a legitimately speakable language. For the TV show, I wanna say that they had a linguistics person come on and build it for them.

M: That's cool.

A: Same thing that they did for Klingon.

R: I definitely haven't rewatched all the Dothraki language parts but I felt like you could feel some consistency with it, that there was some consistency of structure and whatnot. You said, Alex, that you don't really play with conlangs in your books thus far, is it something you've played with otherwise?

A: I used to, there was one book that I wrote a long time ago that had a conlang and I spent a great deal of time on it and it was trash. Honestly, it was trash. I didn't know what I was doing. I was, like, seventeen. The most that I do now is a word or sometimes a phrase, I don't ever go to the length of entire sentences. Just because, like, why.

R: So, a why. I did not intend in many ways when I started writing this series I'm doing now to do the conlang thing-

A: Whose series is that?

R: [with exaggerated American South accent] In *my* book, my *series*…

A: [laughs]

R: But then I realized that the story necessitated the protagonist traveling to different places and so she was going to have to encounter languages outside her own to a greater degree so the own language that I'm kind of translating the experience from, there's not much within that, but then she's spending a lot of time other places so I realized I had to have her as this outsider hearing this language and have it kind of make it onto the page in some ways. And it's interesting because I have notes sketched out for a few pages for just a few lines that end up in the book because I wanted to make sure that my grammar was consistent, I do this weird suffix/prefix thing with the language to keep some consistency that you can see even just between a few sentences on the page, but yeah, it's interesting to play with the conlang thing without actually writing it in. But again, I wouldn't have done it if it didn't feel necessary to the storyline, and it kind of did.

A: Right. I mean, I don't discount the possibility that I might do more of this in the future, it's just that for the books that I have written now, it was not necessary or important.

R: Right. And why drag yourself through it - well, because we're masochists - but why drag your reader through it?

A: It's much more important to respect your readers than it is to respect yourself.

[All laugh]

A: Let's move on and talk about written versus spoken language. Rowenna, you put some interesting dot points here about the impact of written and spoken language on culture?

R: So, one thing I was thinking about especially in the interplay of our different cultures that we're talking about in our world and also when we talked about things like technology, whether your language is primarily spoken or whether it's primarily written, and I think that having an awareness of that is important. So kind of a random, very detailed aside, but if you think about the fact that English was really not standardized in terms of its spelling until roughly 1800, we started caring about that and you started getting, at least in America you got dictionaries coming out with standardized spelling to a degree that you could really work with. And you have 18th century dictionaries too, but then you compare them to the way people are spelling and it's all over the place, and it kind of indicates this interplay between how important is the spoken language versus how important is the written language and where are we on that transition between those and how standardized is a language, so it's something to consider. I don't know that you necessarily want to be spelling things differently all over your book, but having an understanding that if you have a culture that is not writing things down either because of technology or because of how their culture works, that language might function a little bit differently.

M: One thing that always drives me crazy is that if you do a conlang or at least fake your way through one enough that it has consistency, and this goes back to transliteration and

orthography, if you do one that has spelling rules like English in the sense of things that can be really weird and wacky, you'll just confuse your reader even more.

R: So if you're gonna make a conlang, don't base it on English because damn, we suck!

M: I sometimes walk this line of I want it to be realistic but if I do that it'll be far more impenetrable to the reader and I don't want to do that. So that is always a thing I juggle. English is terrible with that, English is the worst. Because we locked down spelling on things and pronunciation still drifted and so you would have things where the spelling fit the old pronunciation but we moved on from that and now we have weird rules like silent Ks at the beginning.

R: And we did things like stealing words from other languages and just kind of beating these words out of these languages and taking them for ourselves without really adopting them in intelligent ways all the time.

A: For example, in the modern day, a man in armor on horseback is called a knight. In Middle English, which Chaucer spoke, that was pronounced "k'neesht". So you pronounce the K and you pronounce every other letter.

R: But if you did a conlang which was like "sometimes the K is silent, sometimes that G is silent", people would be like "what is *wrong* with you?!"

[All laugh]

A: Why are you doing this to yourself? Who would ever do this to themselves?

M: Who would ever do this to themselves?

A: I have another cool linguistics anecdote for you about the impact of spoken language on a culture and so forth, and that is to educate you a little bit about the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Have either of your heard of this?

[30:56]

M: I've heard of it but I forget what it is. Tell us more, Alex.

A: So the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as linguistic relativity, is a theory of linguistics that says that the language you speak affects the ways in which you think. So, for example, a language that doesn't have a future tense, under the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, says that they don't think about the future. Which is not really… Which, by the way, this is a myth. The linguistics field does not accept this as a valid hypothesis anymore. This is not real. However, it's kinda cool to think about, especially in the context of fantasy worlds. Fantasy and science

fiction both. Especially if you are thinking about non-human languages. Because the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis totally isn't true for human languages, but that does not mean that it can't be true for alien languages! This was used to great effect in the movie *Arrival*; so in that movie, if you haven't seen it, these aliens arrive and [the humans] send a linguist to figure out how to talk to [the aliens] and as she learns the language, it changes the way that her brain is structured and she starts experiencing time in the same way that the aliens experience time, which is to say, all at once. So that is pretty nifty. Still a myth though. This is not how it works for human languages. [laughs]

R: Though I think the converse or the inverse, if you flip it around, is interesting, that a language often can express how a culture thinks about things or how an individual thinks about things within that culture. I had a French professor - my major in college was French - but he would always say prepositions are always the hardest thing in any language because they express how a culture thinks about space. So, like, why are we 'on' a bus? I don't know, that's just how we think about it!

A: Why aren't we *in* a bus?

R: Right. Exactly. Why aren't we…

M: With the bus. About the bus.

R: With the bus. About the bus.

A: I mean, in some contexts… I would say we are 'in' a bus if the bus was not moving.

[beat]

A: Like, if the bus was parked somewhere and we were not inside the bus for the purpose of being transported from one place to another, if we were just, like, hiding out in the bus, like if we'd bought some booze and we were just breaking into the parked bus to get drunk inside the bus, I would say we're 'in' a bus rather than we are 'on' a bus.
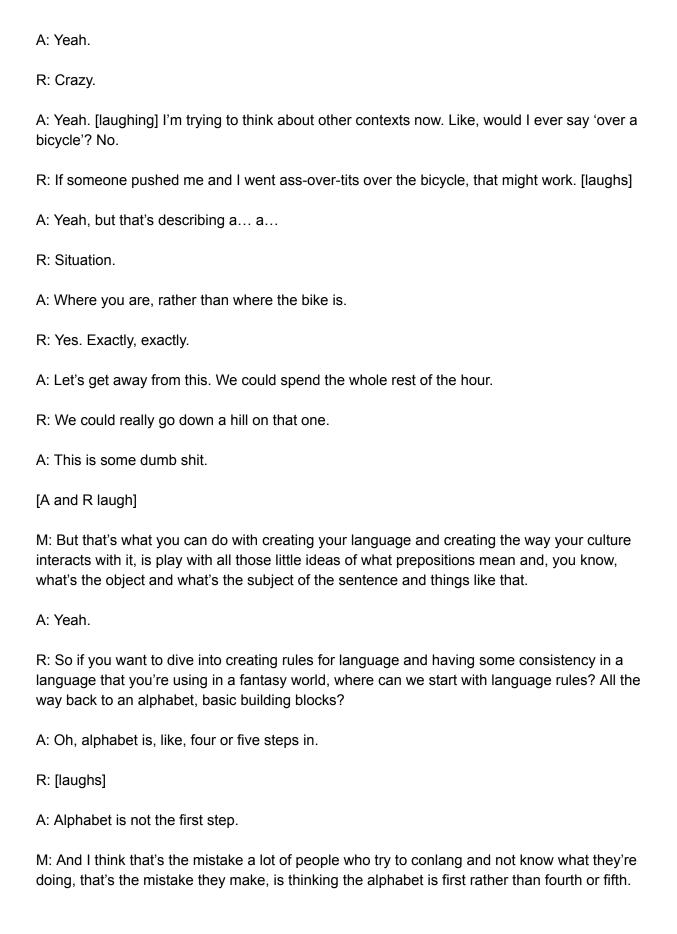
R: [laughing] Yet I'd have a very hard time breaking the habit of saying 'on the bus'.

M: Interesting. So the change of the bus from a location to a mode of transport…

A: Yes.

M: ...changed the preposition.

R: Exactly.

A: Yeah.

R: Crazy.

A: Yeah. [laughing] I'm trying to think about other contexts now. Like, would I ever say 'over a bicycle'? No.

R: If someone pushed me and I went ass-over-tits over the bicycle, that might work. [laughs]

A: Yeah, but that's describing a… a…

R: Situation.

A: Where you are, rather than where the bike is.

R: Yes. Exactly, exactly.

A: Let's get away from this. We could spend the whole rest of the hour.

R: We could really go down a hill on that one.

A: This is some dumb shit.

[A and R laugh]

M: But that's what you can do with creating your language and creating the way your culture interacts with it, is play with all those little ideas of what prepositions mean and, you know, what's the object and what's the subject of the sentence and things like that.

A: Yeah.

R: So if you want to dive into creating rules for language and having some consistency in a language that you're using in a fantasy world, where can we start with language rules? All the way back to an alphabet, basic building blocks?

A: Oh, alphabet is, like, four or five steps in.

R: [laughs]

A: Alphabet is not the first step.

M: And I think that's the mistake a lot of people who try to conlang and not know what they're doing, that's the mistake they make, is thinking the alphabet is first rather than fourth or fifth.

A: Right, right, right. So the very basic building blocks are phonemes and morphemes. Phonemes are the individual sounds, so, like, "sss" is a morpheme and "mmm" is a morpheme- or, sorry, phonemes. Those are phonemes. Because those are the very, very basic ones. Morphemes are more like little chunks of sound, and that is the smallest possible meaningful group of sounds in a language. So, for example, the word 'pre-' would be a morpheme. We know what that means, that is a prefix that means 'before'. So that's the basic building blocks. If you start from the very beginning, you come up with phonemes, then you put those together into morphemes, and then you can start sticking morphemes together to make *stuff*. So after you have phonemes and morphemes, the next step of the process is coming up with your core vocabulary. This is the most common nouns and verbs that occur in the language. So 'hand', 'eye', 'mouth', 'fire', 'sky', that sort of thing. It's going to be parts of the body, it's going to be the most common items around you, and it's going to be things from nature. And then your basic verbs. I mean, you can probably do alphabet before that if you want to because that's related to the phonemes and morphemes thing, but this is, like, if you're doing the really masochist version of this. Like, you can skip a couple of these steps.

R: I kinda feel like it's important to point out at this point that this is not necessary for having, like, a few names from a language in your book. We are going the deep dive here.

A: Right. Yeah. We will give you some resources at the end if you just need a fucking name.

R: [laughs] And one thing that I always find interesting to talk about too is the concept of grammar, because once you have actual words and start putting them together, we start to get into the concept of grammar, which is how words get put together in some kind of standardized way, and I think it's really important to think about that from elementary school on we often use grammar to mean academic correctness. "To use proper grammar." And really it's more about the conventions that a culture uses. So, like, African American Vernacular English, rural American grammar: those are grammars. They're not *academic* English grammar but they are correct in what they do, in that they're a standardized grammar that is using particular conventions to express ideas.

A: Yes. Yes. And I am just joyfully getting to rant about all my linguistics opinions this episode. Yeah, so these are all dialects, right, and a dialect is any subcategory of a language that has its own internal logic and structure. So African American Vernacular English is a completely legitimate dialect; it has consistent rules, it is almost a language in and of itself, right, except that it has overlap with other dialects in the language, it is mutually intelligible to other dialects that are spoken under the umbrella of English. Anyone who tells you that your dialect is wrong or bad or stupid is a prescriptivist asshole and you have my permission to punch them.

R: [laughs] One of my favorite things - I used to teach first year composition in college - and I loved telling my students, "Your grammar is not wrong. I don't care what grammar you're using, it's not wrong, you're using a grammar. I'm here to teach you academic English grammar that

you're expected to use in this particular box that you're setting and that's what we're gonna do here, but you're not wrong." So I think that's an important thing. And also, again to talk about dialect, the variation within a language, that comes out of all kinds of cultural and geographic impacts on how people are speaking.

A: And dialects are always growing and changing and fluid. I mean, *language* is always fluid. The way that we speak now is not the same as the way that we spoke ten years ago. And it's certainly not the same as the way that we spoke 50 years ago, which is wildly different from the way we spoke 400 years ago. So it is something that is always growing, and I think that's really cool. Did you know - another cool linguistics fun fact, I'm sorry, I'm taking up all our time with nonsense -

M: You're the expert!

A: The most linguistically creative demographic is young women. So if linguists want to study the bleeding edge of how language is evolving and changing, they study young women. And the most linguistically conservative demographic is old rural white men. So if we want to study the way that the language was spoken 10-15 years ago, or a little bit more than that, we speak to that demographic. Just because we have noticed that these are the people that hold onto language as long as possible, and these are people that are playing with language and sort of… making it their bitch.

[All three crack up]

M: Is that an academic term?

A and R: Yes!

R: I feel like that raises a really good point though: so you're creating a language, you've got basic building blocks to cobble together, you created grammar, but then you have the way people *actually* use it, and that can vary enormously depending on what people are doing with language, why it's being used, where it's being used, and I think that kind of gets to be where the richness of what we get to do in worldbuilding can come in, especially if you're not creating an entire conlang for your world or your universe but you've got a few key pieces that you really need to bring in for your story, whether it's naming or terminology, that usage part gets kind of fun.

A: Yes. For sure. So you talked about usage. Let's talk about usage on more of a meta level? Like, let's take a moment to just angst about how terrible it is that we as fantasy writers have to fuckin' name rivers and cities and mountain ranges and it's very bad, it's a bad situation, who thought this was a good idea.

R: [laughs] And it has to be kind of consistent within a world, right?

A: Ughhhhh!

R: Right? Like, if it's gonna feel good, there has to be some consistency in how stuff gets named.

A: I hate naming rivers. Nothing sounds right. Nothing sounds like a river name, you know? I can name people just fine. I can name countries pretty well. But naming a river? Noooo. No sir.

R: There's a major river that comes up in- [exaggerated American South accent] in *my* book [back to normal voice] and I totally just named it for a river near my house.

A: Oh, nice.

R: I was like "the Rock River. Sure. We're gonna go with that. And then this town is gonna be Rock's Ford because what do you name towns for on rivers? The stuff you do at the river, like the ford, or the ferry, or the bluff, or, you know, the rapids." Like, how many names, if you think about it, in English, are…

A: Just descriptive!

R: Exactly! Like, 'Grand Rapids'. That's because it's the Grand River and there are rapids.

M: One of the things I did [not in accent but with noticeable emphasis] in my book-

A: [laughs]

R: Very good, very good.

A: You can do a weirder voice than that, Marshall Res- [trips over tongue]

M: One of the things I did [in American South accent] in *my* book-

A: There we go. OK.

M: Is that better? Thank you. Because the nation of Druthal is then broken into archduchies and then the archduchies are broken into regions, I felt free to then play with the idea that rivers tended to have the same names as the region they're going through, so that was a way that felt consistent and…

A: Natural. Unpretentious.

M: And how the natural naming conventions of rivers should end up going. So that made life a lot easier along those lines. But also having beyond that- not doing the whole language work, but doing that basic 'define the phonemes, define your orthography' so that I knew how words were created in that part of the world and used that as the way to then figure out naming conventions for everything else.

A: Yeah. We have a dot point here about naming human people, and I think that this is an entirely different episode-

R: [laughs]

A: Because we're already starting to run long and I could rant for at least ten minutes about the different sorts of surnames that there are even just in Medieval English. Like, descriptive bynames versus locative bynames versus occupational bynames versus family surnames… yeah. It's a lot. Just Google it.

R: Yeah. I think you can put a pin in actually naming human people and just kind of leave it at that the things that people name themselves and name their children are very much related back to how the language works as a whole and how that language reflects cultural norms, so keeping that in mind can be helpful once you get there.

[44:52]

A: Yes, yes. So we have been talking about our fantasy world for a while and we keep calling it "our fantasy world", we keep talking about "Rowenna's archipelago" and "Alex's desert" and "Marshall's bit up there north" [laughs] Shall we name some stuff in our own world and talk about how we do that?

R: Now we're really playing God. We're naming things too.

A: [sarcastically] Naming stuff? Oh God. Finally. Who wants to start?

M: I think Alex wants to start. [laughs]

A: OK, well, that's because I already put my name, like the name of my place, on the thing. So I have this desert culture in the southern hemisphere and as you may recall from the magic episode, they have just the magical ability to sense magic. That's it. And some other cool stuff. And I really like them! They have those water gourds in the ground. And I have decided to do my usual trick, which is to pick a real world orthography to base it off of, and so I am going to use Arabic orthography. I do not speak Arabic but I used Google Translate for one word, and that word is *al'ard*. Who wants to guess what *al'ard* means?

M: Is it 'the world'?

A: It's just 'the land' actually, it just means 'the land'. Because a lot of place names for nations are either named after a tribe that lives there, for example, England is named after the Angles, or it's just 'the land'. So yes, my place will be called Al'ard. And it does have an apostrophe in it.

R: Of course it does.

A: But I am defending this because it is not a useless fantasy apostrophe, this is an apostrophe that is doing some work, it stands for a glottal stop, which is a thing that you do in your throat and I don't have time to explain this, Google it.

M: Glottal stops are awesome.

A: Glottal stops *are* awesome. So yes, if you're gonna have an apostrophe in your word, totally fine to do, just it means something, it's not there as decoration.

M: Right.

R: And try saying it out loud before you really commit to it. And if you can't, ehh, reconsider.

A: Ehhhh.

M: I definitely have *in my book*, one of the foreign cultures, I do have apostrophes in there, but they are glottal stops and they are doing the work that they need to do.

R: Marshall Ryan Maresca, do you have some ideas you'd like to share with us?

M: Um… well, do I? I'm trying to decide what I want my Mediterranean-esque extroverts, like, what their culture is and what they want to be called and because I do not have the linguistic background that Alexandra Jane Rowland has… One of the tools I really like, and we will put a link to this in our show notes for y'all, is called Vulgar, the website is vulgarlang.com, it's a beautiful fun little tool that you do need to do a little bit of the work in terms of learning your international phonetic alphabet and thus learning all the different phonemes and figuring out stuff from there, but once you get the hang of how this program works you can make little choices and then press a button and boom, you get a language with its own phonology and spelling and grammar and how sentences are constructed and morphology of things and a small dictionary, and it's awesome. It's a lot of fun. You can cheat and be like "make the phonology the same as Spanish or as Swedish or as Hawaiian" if those are things you want to do, or you can go nuts and really do it from the beginning if that's what you want to do.

A: Yep. I've played around with it a couple times. It's a pretty neat tool.

M: It is a neat tool, especially if you want to have a bunch of language and thus have a few different places that have their own specific rules and each area then feels very realistic. And if you wanna do the big masochistic world build where you have twelve different continents and thus need twelve base languages to do naming conventions out of or even more, then that's a good place to start and you can then do things like name each place 'the land' in their language. [laughs]

A: Yup. Yup, it's legit.

M: Because why not?

A: Marshall Ryan Maresca, you're stalling.

M: I am *so* stalling!

R: [laughs]

M: And you knew that I was! Because I've been all this time just generating new languages until I got something that I liked the name of.

[All laugh]

M: This is what I was doing all this time while spinning along my semi-brilliance.

A: [pityingly] Do you need help?

M: The problem is - OK, so, the challenge, I'm not going to say problem, I'm gonna say the challenge - with this program is in creating stuff from random, is you either get stuff that seems really basic and you're like, "ugh, I don't like that" or you get stuff that's really bizarre and you're also like, "ugh, I don't like that". Like, the one I just got, and maybe I'll just take this just as, like, no, take the random thing and run with it, is 'Griastiar' which… is a mouthful.

R: It is.

A: How do you spell that?

M: G-R-I-A-S-T-I-A-R.

A: I don't really like it!

M: I don't like it either.

A: It looks like a bullshit fantasy word.

R: Here's the thing: I know that often when I am drafting early on I'll just go with something, and then search and replace is your friend.

A and M: That's true.

R: This is a lesson in worldbuilding, that sometimes you just have to throw something in there, try it out for a while…

M: And be like, "no, this sucks".

R: And, like, let it roll and something better comes along and you're like, "yes, that's what I wanted all along!"

A: And sometimes it grows on you!

R: Yes! Or it inspires something else.

M: Although a friend of mine, in her second book, she had just the 'this is a placeholder name because I don't have a real name yet' but then that ended up being published in the second book, and then in the third book she needed that character to be a more major character but was like, "I actually hate that name, but I'm stuck with it".

R: [laughs]

A: That's hilarious.

R: It happens.

A: So another thing that I do sometimes or that you can do, is you can take this word, like 'Griastiar', it's not quite right, so we can just tweak it ourselves, like I like it a little bit better if you take out the I and you take out the R: 'Griastan'?

M: Griastan!

R: Even just ending it in A I like better. Like, 'Griasta'.

M: Griasta. I like it!

A: [unsure] Griasta… I could go with Griasta. And then Griastan is the adjective form.

R: Yes, is the adjective form.

M: I like it.

A: Cool, let's go with that, Griasta, sure!

M: Yes. So that will be the name of-

A: Marshall's bit.

M: My Mediterranean extroverts who love everyone and want everyone to come on over and enjoy their beautiful land.

A: Rowenna, tell us about your archipelago.

R: So coming back to the concept of translating, if I was writing from the perspective of this archipelago, I would remember that their - and I don't want to use the term 'confederacy' because that has certain connotations for us -

A: A republic?

R: But it's a link-up of multiple different principalities that all are independent but that work together and are linked, so what I came up with for my English term was 'the concert of states'.

A: Oooh!

M: Oooh!

R: Because they're also really musical, music is a huge part of their culture, so, ehhhh, so I went dorky on that one, so the concert of states, and then I played with starting to think about their language and kind of made up how it would work in their language, I made *al'not*s the term for states and *lir* the term for concerts so *al'notlir* and then you add an "-i" on the end, *al'notliri*, for 'to have done it' so, like, 'concerted states', so that's where I went with that.

A: So is it 'concert of states' or is it 'concerted states'?

R: 'Concert of states'. But then I played with the concept of the grammar being, like, this was an adjective form modifying the thing before it, it's been done to the thing before it.

A: This is a possessive- yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Yes, yeah.

A: I love that, I love both of those names. Just, like, 'concert of states', Marshall Ryan Maresca and I both went, "Oooh! Sexy! Nice!"

R: [laughs]

M: It's really good! It's almost like you're a professional writing person who has great ideas!

R: Yeah! I can do this or something!

A: But also then the name of it in the language just, like, tastes good and it looks good.

R: Thank you.

A: Love that. And also I love that we all three of us had such unique ways of approaching this, and they all sound distinct, they all look distinct, like I can very much believe that Griasta has a very different language family than Al'notliri - is it Al'notliri or… how do you say this, again?

R: Al'notliri, yeah.

A: OK, cool. Gotta get that glottal stop in there for that apostrophe.

M: It's gotta do the work, it can't just hang out.

A: Can't just hang out.

R: There for a reason.

A: Pay. Your. Rent.

[All laugh]

A: So we are running close to the end of the episode. Shall we take a minute or two to talk about, each of us probably has a favorite resource for coming up with names for things…? Do we?

M: Well, I've already talked - I spent my stalling time there -

R: You did, you spent your stalling time there!

M: Talking about Vulgar, which, again, I highly recommend, there'll be links in the episode description and stuff, and it's a really good resource. Again, you need to do a little bit of study in terms of some basic linguistics but once you get the hang of that it's a great tool to let you make languages from absolutely nothing without having to do the grind work.

A: Nice. My favorite naming resource - this is usually what I use for naming people but you can also use it for place names - it is the Medieval Names Archive, which is at

www.s-gabriel.org/names and is a resource that is used by people in the Society for Creative Anachronism, it is just a collection of usually articles but also just a bunch of lists showing names that were in use throughout the medieval period, so, like, the year 600 to the year 1600. And it's grouped by region, so you have names from the low countries, Occitan and Catalan names, Irish and Manx names, Pictish names, classical Roman names, all sorts of new stuff. I use it a lot because I like names that look like names but aren't going to be names that are super common in the modern period or that are currently in use. So we have a bunch of names that really fell out of popularity after the medieval period. But they still sound like names to our ear! And I think that this is a great resource for that. And also you can sort of guestimate the orthography of a language based on the names of people and find interesting bits of orthography that seem very foreign to an English-speaking ear, or an English-speaking tongue, I guess, ears don't speak. So for, like, a double U, not in terms of a W like at the beginning of the word 'water', but like UU at the beginning of a name, doesn't make any sense in English whatsoever, but there were several languages that were common in the medieval era that used things like that. So it helps push you out of your comfort zone.

R: I love it.

A: Rowenna, do you have a favorite?

R: So I have two very random places to pop to, and one is about more just kind of language use and not necessarily naming things, but one thing that I recently became aware of is the sheer number of historical dictionaries on Google Books, so if you just kinda wanna see how language was used at a certain point in the past in the last few hundred years you can just go on Google Books and look up 'dictionary' and start playing, so that can be fun and it can also be fun to see how usage of words has changed because some of those words are going to be different from how they were 200 years ago, 100 years ago, now, so that can be kind of a fun play. And in terms of naming people, I will totally cop to having used a baby naming resource, which is nameberry.com, because if you give it a name like "I kinda like this aesthetic but I'm not quite there yet" it'll spit out things in a similar aesthetic, so you can kind of play with browsing through an aesthetic rather than hitting a particular language or particular origin and it'll give you what the origins of the names are and lead you back to, like, "wow, I'm really hitting up a lot of Norwegian names" or "I'm hitting up a lot of Caribbean names" when I'm trying to find an aesthetic so it's kind of fun to play with.

A: Neat, neat. Any other final thoughts on language or anything like that?

R: I think just keeping in mind that we just did the deep dive and that this is not necessary for creating a livable and readable fantasy world. That if you're going to use a made-up language in your work you want to be aware of this stuff but clearly many people have written wondrously successful books that don't do this, so this is fun but don't feel like we've just given you impossible homework for your fantasy world.

A: I feel like we give people that disclaimer in every episode. Like, you don't have to be us. You really don't have to be us. But you could if you want to, because it's kinda fun. That's the moral of the whole podcast, really.

M: Our target audience is pretty much 'you kinda want to, though' .

A: You kinda want to, though, don't you.

R: You kinda want to.

[outro music plays]

A: Hi, you! Thanks for listening to this episode of Worldbuilding for Masochists and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. I only got to rant about half my linguistics thoughts and opinions but I think that we can save the rest for another time. As useful as my minor has been in my fantasy writing career, I sometimes wonder what sort of writer I would have turned into if I had minored instead in world history or anthropology, which would also be really useful background for a baby fantasy writer to develop. I guess we'll never know. Anyway, our next episode goes up on October 16th. We will be joined by another glamorous guest star, R J Theodore, author of the books *Flotsam* and *Salvage*. She'll be chatting with us about family structures. We really hope you liked this episode. If you did, please do take a moment to tell a friend, shout about us on the internet, or leave a review somewhere. 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 are on twitter and tumblr as @worldbuildcast and our email is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. We have also recently opened up our discord chat to the general public, there will be a link to that in the About the Show page of our website, so go check it out and come talk to us and other fantasy fans about how to build your neat worlds. Here's your cool fact of the day: English contains eleven basic color terms: black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, orange, pink, purple, and gray. Italian, Russian, and Hebrew have twelve; they distinguish light blue as a separate color from dark blue.

[outro music plays]