Episode 66:
Deep History
ft. Marie Brennan and Alyc Helms

Transcribed by:

BananaLord

C: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

MB: I do it to get away from the real world?

A: I do it to justify all the podcasts I listen to.

MB: [laughs] That's a good one. Anyway, I'm Marie Brennan, I'm the author of *The Memoirs of Lady Trent* as well as other series, and one half of M. A. Carrick.

A: And I am Alyc Helms, the other half of M. A. Carrick.

C: I'm Cass Morris.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

M: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca, and this is Episode 66: Deep History.

[intro music plays]

R: Well, welcome back, listeners! And welcome back as well to Marie Brennan and Alyc Helms, M. A. Carrick when you put them together. It's great to have you both back. How has it been since the last time we chatted? You've got another book out!

A: [laughs] Yeah!

MB: The vagaries of publishing schedules means that *The Mask of Mirrors*, which is the first of our Rook & Rose books, and *The Liar's Knot* are coming out in the same calendar year eleven months apart. So that simultaneously feels really fast and also, oh my God, no, it came out three years ago, right?

C: I was sure we had talked to you all much longer ago than we actually had.

[laughter]

MB: I think we might have recorded in December of last year…

C: Yeah.

MB: So it's been nearly a year but… the time just seems so weird.

R: We've determined that time actually has no meaning anymore. It's made up, it's just a blob, and we exist somewhere in it.

A: Maybe.

MB: Every day is Blursday.

R: Blursday.

A: And especially with writing where you've got a book coming out, a book that's in the editorial process, and then a book that you're writing, and so you can never remember what it was that you were working on or talking about.

R: Yeah, people ask me, "Tell me about your latest book!" And I'm like, "I don't know what that means."

M: "Tell us about this book!" And you're like, "Oh man, that was two books ago in my brain, I don't even remember…"

A: Or you start talking about the wrong one and they're like, "Actually, we meant the one that we're gonna be reading." Oh right, you don't have that one yet!

R: That one only exists in my brain! Neat!

MB: Yeah, because we're finishing up the very tail end of book three and obviously book two is coming out, which we wrote last summer, so…

A: Yeah, that's…

R: Why don't you go ahead and tell us about not only *Liar's Knot* but *Mask of Mirrors* in case listeners did not hear the first episode you were in and are jumping in now, tell me about the series.

MB: I don't know if I can stick Alyc with doing the elevator pitch, I don't know if you've prepped it.

A: I didn't prep it but I can try. [clears throat] Yeah, I need to get back into the groove of this. So the Rook & Rose series is the story of Renata Viraudax, aka Arenza Lenskaya, aka Ren, who is a con artist who is trying to con her way into a noble family to basically get the cash money money. And ends up falling afoul of all of the noble politics, and the ballroom politics, and running into this masked vigilante whose whole purpose is to go up against the nobility, and so basically it's capers, and hijinks, and banter, and multiple identities, and everybody kind of lying to each other. Marie often does the list from *The Princess Bride* if you want to do that because you've got it better memorized.

MB: Yes, I'm prone to quoting *The Princess Bride* when I make the elevator pitch, and I say, "fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, giants, monsters, chases, escapes, true love, miracles… hopefully you'll stay awake."

[laughter]

A: But I think also because we both do have an anthropology and folklore background, we've also called it When Anthropologists Attack in terms of worldbuilding.

[R laughs]

A: Because we both have a strong interest in—

MB: Which for your audience might be a good sales pitch. Elsewhere I go, that's probably not the best way to sling it at people.

R: But hey, fair warning. You get what you get.

M: I mean, you've got vigilantes and police officers, you have con artists trying to scam their way into things, it's basically all things that are my jam all piled into one book. [laughs]

MB: There's a reason the first book of yours I picked up was *A Murder of Mages*. I'm like, hmmmmmmm… this is striking some familiar chords in my head.

M: You did get a blurb from me because I was so excited when I read it. And then I was like, "We need to get them on the show!"

R: [laughs] It is. I haven't picked up *Liar's Knot* yet but I so thoroughly enjoyed the first book in the series. It was just such a fun read, and so immersive, and fantastic, and I think talking about why it was so immersive and some of the ways that you make a world that you build feel immersive, and rich, and layered, and all of that jazz is why you're here today. Hurrah!

[5:08]

M: Does that also include the history of jazz within your world?

[laughter]

R: We've talked about this before, haven't we?

M: Because that is the sort of thing we want to talk about, is the idea of how all those factors can meld together and the thing that has just presented itself as this is just a normal thing happening here and now in the world is based on the threads of nine different things that you weave together in your backstory and your worldbuilding that you're not necessarily gonna bore your readers with, but you know it and that's what makes it such a more rich experience for the reader.

MB: Yeah, some of it's the iceberg metaphor I've seen used for writing of you only see 10% of what a writer has figured out about their world. And that's true, it usually comes up in the context

of the research that you've done on a specific topic, but I think it also applies to the worldbuilding. There are things Alyc and I know about our world that you don't need it in the story and we're probably never going to tell you about it, but we know it.

[laughter]

A: Yeah. And it's funny because you were saying the history of jazz and I was just thinking, you know, we haven't really done a lot of development of the musical styles and histories and the—

MB: Yeah, the music and the visual art and such, those are areas we've sorely neglected. You can't fit everything, even into a book as packed with worldbuilding as ours, there's stuff we've neglected. So you've always gotta make decisions.

A: And that also goes back to the iceberg. I was also thinking the petticoat metaphor of you only want to show them a flash of all the stuff you've done, because that's more alluring than just [makes explosion noise].

R: I love it! I love it!

C: I'm so stealing that metaphor! That's amazing.

MB: You just wanna show a little bit of ankle, don't flash them completely.

[laughter]

A: But you want your petticoats to be, like, red.

MB: Yeah, they've gotta be attention-getting.

R: Yes. Or sufficiently frothy.

A: Or sufficiently frothy.

R: Lots of ruffles. So we're talking about today the idea of deep history, and complex history, and nuanced history, and that it's not a timeline of things that occur but rather these complex elements that play into each other, and something from 50 years ago affects something now, and it's just all those fun bonkers complexities. And I was wondering if you two would like to brag on anything in your world that you developed like that.

[7:24]

MB: There's definitely things where I don't know how visible they are, but stuff like even just the way the city of Nadežra is laid out. We spent some time talking about, OK, it started with a settlement on the island in the middle of the river Dežera, and then as the settlement grew it expanded to the banks, and it's a very marshy delta area and so the reason it looks kind of Venetian is because they basically built stone foundations into the mud, and drained that a little bit by having the canals between them, and if you go out to the edges of Nadežra you'll see houses on stilts, which is kind of what those settlements looked like before they got built up into these stone foundations. So that kind of thing, we know that's how the city developed and that's

why it's laid out the way that it is. And I think we've mentioned the stilt houses briefly at the end of *The Mask of Mirrors* but it's hard to really show that most of the time because it's taking place in the city. And most of our characters are not people who will go, "Ah yes, 500 years ago…"

[M laughs]

A: And I think, because I was thinking one of my favorite little bits, a group of little local rebels, they're trying to take back their city, and these types of revolutionary groups, they're often very atomistic, there's schisms and they change over time and stuff like that, but there's usually a kind of — if you look at Ireland or something like that, there's a history of recurring rebellions — and so we have this as well, where we mention right now there's a particular situation but it's part of a much longer situation of different groups trying to take back the city, but the way that we induce this—

MB: I love this.

A: Is there's a little girl, and she's got dolls, she's a Brisenian[??] girl and she's playing with dolls on her stoop like kids do in a lot of different cultures and times, and she's having the doll, who has a little shock of red yarn hair, delivering an impassioned speech about how they're gonna take back their city. She's giving the [roars] of the crowds and everything. And that way we get to kind of give this background of this hero, this folk hero figure from 50 years before who, her rebellion failed but we get to kind of give this snapshot of these rebellions are not just happening now, they're over time, and they've changed, and they've had consequences that are felt today like economic ramifications and stuff.

MB: Yeah, because there's economic sanctions imposed because of that rebellion and so forth. But instead of lecturing you about it, we've got a little girl being like, "It's Elsabin[??] the Red! I idolize her and I'm gonna play with her as my doll."

[laughter]

R: And I love that both of those are like, these are things that exist in people's everyday lives. It's there, it's not something that you have to see a timeline tacked up on a schoolroom wall to realize that this stuff is affecting people, and how they live, and how the world around them functions, and what it looks like. So I think that's really cool.

M: It's also more interesting to have it just be woven into pop culture, into nursery rhymes or games or something like that, rather than it to be some sort of infodump like, "Here's a thing from 50 years ago, as you know, Bob," because I think that's a lot more fun way to do that sort of thing.

MB: This is something Sarah Monette does really well in the Doctrine of Labyrinths series. There's just all these passing pop culture, or superstition, or whatever references to things where you don't get the whole story about them and you don't need the whole story about them, it's just something that makes you believe that there's texture to these characters' worlds, and it's not the kind of fantasy world where that one cataclysmic event happened 3,000 years ago and nothing in history has occurred since then.

A: Yeah.

MB: It's the opposite of that.

M: Every once in a while my entire brain gets locked into ranting about that movie *Bright*, which is supposed to be—

MB: Oh God!

[laughter]

MB: I wanted to like it! It was terrible.

R: I really wanted to.

M: I wanted to love it so much.

A: Because I'm such a 90s elves and motorcycles kind of a fan but…

M: But you've got cops just standing around the station house ranting about that the orcs fought the dark lord in the war 2,000 years ago, like this would be a thing you just chat about as if it's a relevant thing today.

[R laughs]

A: It's also fun to toss a little trim of the petticoat where you don't quite know where it comes from, because I know in book one we had this guy who's constantly got a new gimmick, new thing he's working on, and in that particular one he had a cabinet of curiosities exhibit that he was doing. And Marie had one in particular, they were golden walnuts from the Tomb of the Shadow Lily.

MB: We've come up with, like, six different ideas for what is the deal with the golden walnuts from the Tomb of the Shadow Lily, but they were just a thing in his cabinet of curiosities. Who knows if we'll ever settle that.

A: Yeah, we may or may not ever actually explore it. But even just little details like that make it feel…

C: Please don't ever explain the golden walnuts, because that should be a Noodle Incident thing.

M: I was just gonna say!

C: What a fantastic title for a Noodle Incident. The golden walnuts.

MB: Yeah, I lean towards that we will never explain what those are, maybe even to ourselves.

[R laughs]

A: But I like it when authors, especially with in our language, we make a lot of literary references, pop culture references, and when you look at literature in the past they're making references to other things, contemporary and also previous to them. And I like it when you get that kind of layering of it feels like a deep history even if there's not, there are texts that are popular, there's folklore, or not even folklore but shared stories and shared pop culture, yeah, that kind of thing.

MB: Yeah, that's why, I think, Sarah Monette does it so well, because I believe her background is in Renaissance drama or Renaissance literature more broadly, I don't remember which. But that stuff is leaking out the seams with references to history, and to classical mythology, and so forth, and so she brought exactly that mentality to the way that her characters talked. And she's got the gift, this is sort of the hard part of it, the gift of mentioning those things in a way that you don't feel like it needs an explanation. That you get enough from the context and you can move on. At least that was my reaction to it. There probably are readers who are coming to a halt every third sentence going, "But wait! Tell me more about that! I don't understand, you haven't explained this!" But for me it works really well.

A: I wanna know more about that thing, but yes.

MB: I'm intrigued but I don't need more.

A: Yeah.

M: Right. Like when you're watching Shakespeare be performed and he throws in 20 of those references that most of us don't know those references anymore, but you get what they're talking about regardless. And yes, you know all the references, Cass.

[C & M laugh]

M: I'm talking most people who haven't sat up reading *Titus* by candlelight in the middle of the night.

C: Gosh, one time, Marshall, jeez.

[everyone laughs]

C: But it is, it's how do you toss them enough to let them know this is the world's *Romeo and Juliet* story? I don't need to give you the full text of the story, I don't need to give you the full synopsis, just enough to let you know in a little appositive, this is what this is, it is a tragic romance, moving on.

MB: Though I would say that's different. I feel like there's two things at work here. One is, I'm going to toss in some references so you believe there is history to the world. And it's a different ballgame when there's history that the reader needs to know for the story and you do need to explain it, and then it's how do you get that across to them. I feel like that's a different challenge because you can't just do that with a throwaway line.

R: And I think one thing that's cool too, and that I saw you doing with the little girl and the doll, is that it's not just that historical events happened, but that people have perceptions of them.

[15:14]

MB: Exactly.

R: This folk hero is a hero to the little girl. Somewhere else, someone else is playing the trial and execution of the horrible villain. And you sense that, when you have things like folk songs, and folk stories, and the way people talk about the events of the past, it's not just that they happened but they have opinions about what happened, and how it's still affecting them, and what they would like to see that history resolve as in their own time.

MB: Yeah, we actually managed to get that into *The Mask of Mirrors*. So part of the history of the setting is that about 200 years ago, the place was conquered by a guy named Caius Sabinio, who was called The Tyrant. And then we needed the reader to know the story of how he died and the civil war that happened after that, and so we decided that there was a whole war that followed after it that ended with most of Rasan being retaken by the people who lived there but the city of Nadežra remained in foreign control. And so there's a ceremony that happens every year where the leaders of those two places come together for a really uncomfortable and politically tense ceremony.

And as part of that ceremony, there's a performance of basically the death of The Tyrant. And our character Ren, when she's watching it, has this moment where she thinks about how she's seen this performed in a bunch of different ways, everything from blood-splattered horror to sex farce, and then she watches the version of it that's performed at this ceremony and sees how they present it in this context. And so we get exactly that this means things to people and they may interpret it in different ways depending on who you're asking for their rendition of it.

A: And what the venue is, and having official versions and unofficial versions. Yeah, kind of like the Passion plays that they used to have, yeah.

MB: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's still a bit of an infodump because we have to be like, OK, this is the story of how The Tyrant died.

[A laughs]

MB: But we tried to embed it in a way that would mean we're giving you that information in a context where it's doing something else for the story, not just going, "OK reader, here's the plot."

A: Yeah, because it's also showing current politics, and tensions, and who's—

MB: Exactly.

M: And I do love the device of having your characters watching theater and the theater is giving historical information. It's always… it's one of my favorites.

A: We do that in *The Liar's Knot* too.

MB: Yeah, I just realized, we did pull a smaller scale version of this in *The Liar's Knot* as well. Slightly less load-bearing history. But it does lead to somebody commenting on how interestingly skewed the tale being told is, that's not the way—

A: Yeah, this person must be funding this because it's telling it in this particular perspective, trying to kiss up to them.

MB: Yeah, and there's even a comment about, "That's not the way I remember the history going," and somebody else says, "History is whatever our gentet says it is." That's the seat in their ruling council that handles cultural matters. And so it shows that censorship of how things get presented in a nicely cynical way. We don't have a performance, I think, in the third book, so it's probably good we didn't go back to that well yet again.

A: Well, now we gotta fit one in there!

R: Expectations, y'all!

M: I have a bit in one of my books where one character basically puts together a play just to do an acid test on the main character: where's he sitting politically? Is he swayable? So let's put together this play, and have him watch it, and see how he reacts.

MB: I was gonna say, we'll catch the conscience of the king.

M: I haven't done a play within a play within— A play within a play within the book, that… ooh, that's an *Inception* level that, OK, goals.

[laughter]

C: What I thought about all of this though is that it depends upon, the idea of deep history depends upon characters having a memory and there being a cultural memory that extends before their lifetimes. Which is not always a sense you get in some fantasy novels. It's like, oh no, we all woke up one day in this kingdom and we're living our lives now. But it depends also, like you said, on who controls the narrative. Is that cultural memory reliable? Has it been twisted? Do different people have different versions of the cultural memory? That can be so much fun to play with in getting character across too, I think. Which version of events does each character lean into or prize, can be a fun way to communicate lots of things simultaneously.

[19:41]

MB: Some of this can be when you're getting started on a story. If you know this is something where you're going to need to convey this kind of information, then some of it can be, OK, how do I craft my characters to be the kind of people who will know this thing, or be interested in learning it, or something that will let you get that in. Because there have been times where we've looked at things we're writing and gone, OK, of our point of view characters, which one makes sense to do this with, because some of them no, there's just no way, they don't care about that or they don't know about it. We gotta figure out who to go with.

A: Yeah. We have a lot of, who has the deepest emotional investment, not even necessarily in the relationships in this scene, but in the history or culture or whatever that is being explored in this scene, who cares about it?

MB: Or can we get Toniqus to ramble on about it?

A: Yeah, we do have a very useful infodump character.

R: You need one! You know?

M: It always is helpful to have that character.

MB: You could play a drinking game of, every time a character cuts Toniqus off mid-ramble so we don't infodump for too long, drink.

R: I think it's interesting too that there's political history, and the political and martial — not Marshall, you, but martial like war — there's all kinds of other histories that characters might be interested in. Someone might be interested in technology, or science, or medicine. Somebody else might be more tied into economics, or the history of trading with other countries, or whatever. So tying all those pieces together, I think, is where you get some really interesting stuff to play with in terms of just the complexity of things affecting other things, and all of those threads pulling together into hopefully a beautiful tapestry. I feel like sometimes I end up with terrible knots but, you know, you take what you can get.

MB: The economics thing, I will try not to put your readers to sleep in my summary of this here, but when I was writing the Onyx Court books, which are historical fantasy set in London, the second one, *In Ashes Lie*, takes place over the course of the English Civil War. So naturally I had to go do a bunch of research into the English Civil War, which that was a whole adventure of its own. But one of the books that I read, I'd have to get the title of it, it's something like *The Causes of the English Revolution from Some Year to Some Other Year*, exactly as exciting as that title sounds.

[M laughs]

MB: But one of the arguments it advances, because you look at the English Civil War and you're like, OK, so Charles I was an autocratic asshole and there were these personality conflicts with Parliament, and that's the kind of thing that's easy to convey in fiction. You can show the king being an autocratic asshole, you can show the guys in Parliament having their problems, but this book was like, OK, so the basics of Crown finances going back to the beginning of England as a kingdom, is that the Crown pays for the work of the government, including war, out of the revenues from its own lands. Taxes are a rare thing voted in for very limited times, and you gotta go to Parliament and ask for it, and the rest of the time the government pays its own way.

And the argument of this book was that was getting increasingly untenable because the government was getting more expensive, wars were getting more expensive, the revenue from land was dropping, and the Crown kept selling chunks of it off every time they needed more money, which meant they had less revenue, on and on and on. Henry VIII saved this all for a

while by dissolving all the monasteries, and claiming all their land and wealth, and so that was good for a while, but by the time you get to Charles, it doesn't work anymore. And this is one of the causes of the English Civil War. And I'm sitting there going, how am I supposed to put that in a novel?

[everyone laughs]

MB: I mean, yes, one of my main characters was a member of Parliament, but even then, having him sit and have a chat with somebody else about how, well you know, hundreds of years ago the way that this was set up is now causing these problems 600 years later… no.

[laughter]

MB: How do I put that into a novel?

R: And thinking too that how often are we aware of all of the causes of the things that are happening to us right now? Fifty years from now, somebody's going to write the history of this time period and have insights that we're sitting here going, "Uhhhhhhh blah blah, I don't know why, why is it like this?" But with that distance…

MB: …time right now. In the 17th century, people were not having entire careers engaged in analyzing current events in the way we've got now.

R: Yeah, and so maybe even play with that, maybe I can seed some things that the characters might not be talking about, but that my reader can know that there's more going on here than just the surface reasons and the surface rhetoric that people use for explaining why they want to do what they do.

A: I think we do something like that in describing our economics in the first book. At one point Ren is sitting down with somebody who does have some familiarity with the economic situation, and they're talking about how did they get into the current system that they're in, and he says something to the effect of, "Well, this is what you get when you have a bunch of people who've been at war for 75 years, they're tired of it and they cobbled something together out of what they— because they need to rebuild everything, and so this is what you get when you cobble something together when you rebuild, and then that's what you're stuck with."

MB: Yeah, you never get around to fixing it.

A: Yeah, you just keep latching things on and accreting things, yeah.

C: I think having characters complain about history is a great vehicle.

R: Yes.

C: You can have your tax guy going, "Man, I would like to go back in time and throttle the person who wrote this specific thing into the law that's dominated what we've been doing for the last 150 years."

MB: Complaining is an underrated tool of exposition.

[laughter]

A: Because that is something where you can kind of do an “as you know, Bob” because it’s like, “Ahhh! This thing, it’s driving me crazy!” “Yeah, that drives me crazy too.”

MB: There’s one thing in Dorothy Dunnett’s Lymond Chronicles where two characters sit and have a really sane and detailed conversation about the state of English, and Scottish, and French politics in the 16th century, and one of them sort of lays out a course of action that is not the one history followed that honestly might have worked out really well, and then there’s a pause, and then the other one says, “Well, there’s no use getting sensible about it.”

[laughs]

MB: And I love that moment because it gives you a bunch of political information and then pulls back a little bit by saying, remember, there’s actual human beings involved in this and that makes it messy. It’s never gonna work in that nice way that when you’re a college student on your third beer and you’ve figured out the solution to everything, those don’t work.

R: And I think it’s interesting how points of tension can be really good places to reveal what has happened to get to that point of tension. One of the things that I wanted to play with in my series was that different nations are at different points in terms of their economic development, like this country that had a lot of money 100 years ago is kind of on the downturn, and this country that has been kind of the backwater, oh, suddenly they’re investing in all kinds of stuff and they’re on the upswing, so how do people negotiate new relationships in terms of who has power, who has money? How does this make us feel? It probably makes us feel crappy when we’re the ones who had a lot of money and suddenly we don’t anymore, and who are these upstarts, and again, complaining is a fantastic vehicle for showing how people get to where they’re at.

[26:54]

M: Although Marie reminded me, another fantastic vehicle is that college student on their third beer.

[laughter]

MB: Yeah, when you get the street corner preacher who is ranting about the decline of morals ever since the glory days of whatever, you get the people drunken in taverns, Rowenna, you’ve got a whole lot of people sitting in taverns yelling about history.

[A laughs]

R: Drunk people in taverns…

MB: Because it’s very French Revolution, right?

R: Right.

MB: You’ve got all these people picking up their pamphlets.

A: I think it's also interesting, I can't remember who was talking about looking back 50 years and being able to have a view on what we can't see now, is this idea that there's continuities in the past where there might not have actually been as much continuity as we think. Looking back we kind of create a continuity because we can tell the story about it, but actually there's a lot more disruption, even within regimes and empires and things like that, we might talk about a particular empire that seems to be long-lasting but there's actually a lot of disruption going on in there.

R: And real life has so many red herrings. The stuff that feels extremely important right now, it's like, that actually was a blip, that actually didn't matter, that was…

[M laughs]

MB: Yeah, real life has no narrative continuity. That was the other thing with the English Civil War, I wrote my way through this, and I get to the end, and I'm like, so all the characters who were important at the start of this have just vanished along the way. And the things that they're arguing about at the end of the war are not even the things that they were arguing about at the beginning of the war. And the things that seemed so important back then, nobody gives a shit about now. I was like, who's writing this shit!

[laughter]

C: Editorial notes on history.

R: History needs an editor!

A: One of my favorite research books that I read for a different Venetian-based society that I was worldbuilding for was *City of Fortune*, which is about Venice, and it goes into a hilarious breakdown of the Fourth Crusade, which is my favorite crusade.

[laughter]

A: Because that is so bonkers!

[laughter]

MB: Two [???] were looted!

C: I know, I love the Fourth Crusade! Yes!

A: I mean, it's awful, it's terrible, but it's such a good crusade! They were so busy sacking Christian cities to pay back Venice that they never actually got to the Holy Lands.

C: They just forgot, forgot to get there. This is far enough.

A: We're just gonna keep on… They communicated, like, three times…

[laughter]

MB: Cass, I will say, I want Editorial Notes on History to be the title of something now.

C: It should be, it really should, just the margin notes. “No through line, plots abandoned, this makes no sense, why would someone act like that?”

R: [laughs] “Who is this? You haven’t mentioned this person before.”

C: “Too many names! Get rid of at least eight of these sons!”

[laughter]

MB: Yes, and that’s one of the things that we’re wrestling with in our book right now, is that we actually really want to make sure that the big historical things that happen in the present moment of the story aren’t just like, two people did a thing and that fixed everything. We want there to be lots of people sticking their oars in, and that’s hard enough when it’s the present moments of the story, it’s even harder when you’re like, OK, well yeah, 200 years ago this thing happened and actually there were 27 people involved. But you can even see that in how we tell the stories of real history, we try to simplify it. We will often narrow it down to a few people, and we tell their story, and everybody who actually knows it is sitting there going, “Well, actually there were 26 other people!”

C: Yeah. Who stabbed Julius Caesar? Who stabbed Julius Caesar? Everyone says Brutus, right? There were 30 dudes but we don’t remember most of their names.

R: And they were all real stabby.

C: We remember “Et tu, Brute?”

R: Well, if you even blow it out past the individual people involved, you have entire groups of people involved, entire populations who are moving as gelatinous masses of people in one direction or another and influencing things just by group participation.

MB: And not even moving like a gelatinous mass, it’s like the screensavers with the balls all ricocheting off one another.

[laughter]

MB: That’s what they are, it’s all these things that are sort of rubber banded together, and bouncing, and yanking back, just constantly in this chaotic fashion. And this is something that I know historians right now are really trying to push back against the “a few great men” model of teaching history, and they’re trying to talk more about these sorts of forces, like the basis of finances for the English Crown and how that influenced stuff, but it’s hard because we like stories about people, and we like stories about a few people that we can remember and get to know, and so there’s that force that keeps trying to simplify and pull us back to that. So here we are in fiction going, how do you do that thing we can barely do with the real history?

[A laughs]

R: And then you do have those fun moments of, if that person hadn’t said that thing or hadn’t done that thing, how would this have played out? It’s an interesting interplay between the forces

of things that happen and those individual moments when something does change things in some way or another.

MB: Yeah, there's an article in *Uncanny Magazine*, I think by Jo Walton and Ada Palmer, called "The Protagonist Problem", and it talks about the tendency, especially right now, for our fiction to want to tell the story where a few people who have protagonismos, the quality of being a protagonist, change things. But we do have fiction, and even in not that distant of the past, that shows a different model, and I can't remember the name of the example that they gave, but it's something where the story takes place in a hotel and people are getting murdered there or something, and it's the decision of the desk clerk to put people in a particular room rather than another one, you can look at that and go, this story would have played out so differently if that desk clerk had given them a different room. And so paying attention to the ways that that small action by that one person changed the whole course of things, not in a "they controlled the whole story" kind of way, but in that that butterfly flapped its wings and because of that, things are different. We have a plan for a butterfly to flap its wings at a particular point in book three.

A: Yeah.

MB: It's not one of our secondary characters, it's not even really a tertiary character, it is a minor spear carrier is gonna do a thing that's going to crack open some very important stuff.

M: I love that sort of "for the want of a nail the war was lost" sort of storytelling where you can show that because this one guy turned left instead of turning right, then oops, the plague took over the whole city because…

MB: Yeah. And I will say for ways to do this, because we brought up Dorothy Dunnett a moment ago, I am increasingly of the opinion, even though I have yet to actually attempt it myself, that epic fantasy or anything that's trying to do this big sweep of how did things end up here and what are all the factors going into it really needs to bring back use of omniscient perspective. Because Dorothy Dunnett is able to tell you so much about the politics and the forces that are at work in the incredibly complicated history she's trying to describe, and she's able to do it efficiently and vividly, because she's writing in omniscient. And that whole "for want of a nail" or "if he had just done this other thing", if you've got that omniscient voice that can step back for a moment and tell you that, I actually think this is a vastly underused tool. We almost never have omniscient anymore except as a brief, I'm gonna set the scene with some description before zooming in. We need to bring that back, because that would let us do so much more of this depth in a really efficient manner.

[34:20]

C: I am absolutely with you, I often feel hedged in by the constraints of the modern sensibilities for point of view. It's something that changes over time. But sometimes I look at Victor Hugo and go, you know, he got to have a character ramble for two pages about the history of an object in between picking it up and speaking.

[MB laughs]

C: I envy you, Victor Hugo.

[laughter]

MB: If you look at Neal Stephenson, he can rip for two pages at you and he's so goddamn entertaining while he does it, you're like, yes, please tell me more.

A: Describe the visceral body fluid sounds that are happening in this conference room, which is one of my favorite two page Neal Stephenson passages.

[laughter]

MB: It's so good! And it's all done to emphasize how quiet the conference room was. And it's just really well done.

C: Is this a horror story? Because to me this sounds like a horror story.

R: Yeah.

MB: It was in *Cryptonomicon*. And no, it was just talking about the various noises that our bodies naturally make, like describing the whole digestive—

R: [laughs] Cass and my misophonia is just acting up right now! Nope!

M: Neal really does like his bodily functions, that's just part of what he writes. Although it does make me think about the styles of more literary fiction, like something like John Irving, where a character walks in and then he's like, "I'm just gonna go for five pages on the whole history of this character up until this point. OK, then we'll get back into the action." And you do not see that in speculative fiction much anymore. Unless it is someone who can pull off that sort of whimsical narrative voice. I'm thinking more like Neil Gaiman but…

A: I do remember one time reading Steven Brust's, I think it was his *Phoenix Guards*, so it was not his Vlad Taltos novels, it was the much more— where they're almost like a parody of those types of novels, but he does.

MB: Like *The Three Musketeers*, yeah.

A: Yeah, and he goes into a five page digression into the history of the saddle or something like that.

[R laughs]

A: And the entire time I was reading it, I was like, I can't believe he's making me read this, I can't believe I'm so engaged in reading this!

MB: Yeah, I think we've unfairly gotten into a mindset where we act as if that kind of "let me just tell you about this for an extended period" is a priori bad. And it's only bad when it's boring. But it's a little bit of a, are you good enough to pull it off, and because we have such a mindset of

this is bad, then readers react more negatively to it whether it's deserved or not, unless you are super good at it. And that's when you're, you know, Neal Stephenson.

R: So if we are not going to write an omniscient, or are telling a story that honestly would be better in point of view or multi point of view, what are other ways that we can convey this kind of complex, deep, nuanced history?

[37:28]

MB: I think the thing that point of view does give you is character voice, and perspective, and like I think Cass was saying earlier or maybe it was Rowenna, the interests that a particular character has and how they can frame everything from their— everything's fishing metaphors or something like that, I think that's a *Wheel of Time* thing.

A: Yeah.

[laughter]

MB: Yeah, and I think there are certainly things I could get away with in *The Memoirs of Lady Trent* because I had an intellectually curious main character. And there were things I could pull of there because, and I didn't even know this when I chose the point of view in those books but it was the best idea I made all series, but it was the idea to have them be memoirs. So she is writing her life story for an audience, and she is doing this when she is an old woman, so I could put things in there that would be like, "Now you young people won't know this because this was before your time, but let me tell you how things were when I was young," and it was part of the character, it was part of the voice.

I think that that particular form of first person narration has a lot of room to leverage that sort of thing, but a lot of the first person we get is a lot of the more immediate, it's riding along with them in the moment, rather than it being I am telling my story after the fact. And there's downsides to the after the fact thing, I have definitely seen reviews of the book saying, "Yeah, but there's no tension because I know that she survives to the end," and I'm sitting here going, how often does the main character die before the end of the book? Just asking? But OK.

M: Especially in a first person narration in the first place!

R: Yeah, it doesn't really matter if it's present, or past tense, or very far past tense, usually we let them live to the end.

M: Love to read a book that was bold enough to be in first person, like, two thirds of the way through, and then that person dies, and then it's third person the rest of the way. [laughs]

A: I feel like time has passed long enough that isn't that Mira Grant's *Feed*? Doesn't that happen in Mira Grant's *Feed*?

M: Umm…

MB: I have not read it, I don't know.

A: I know — spoilers everyone — I know the main character dies near the end of the book, and I'm pretty certain it's in first person.

MB: I have done it in third person with a trunked novel where the main character actually finishes out the book as a ghost.

A: But actually it's interesting because one of the things I'm more and more interested in is people being wrong about what they think about how the world works. A certainly iconoclastic point of view and I'm thinking of, there's this great very short book *The Cheese and the Worms* about this Renaissance, this medieval guy who was a cheesemaker who was part of basically this book club where he and a bunch of his friends were literate, it was the up and coming middle class bourgeois literacy, and so they were exchanging all these religious texts and also secular texts, and he came up with this whole cosmology about how angels were like the worms that came from the cheese as it developed, and he was tried by the Inquisition multiple times but he would not, would not give up on his cosmology of the angel cheese worms.

[laughter]

MB: Cass has questions.

C: I do, I have a lot of questions. [laughs] That's not the weirdest thing I've heard of in medieval theology.

M: The whole thing of having characters just be wrong about stuff, that's a thing you don't see too often in speculative fiction because I think there's another thing where the readers will reject that. I mean, you see this all the time in *Star Trek* fandom where any piece of information that a character has said is gospel. And you can't be like, well, that's just what somebody said about Vulcans, that doesn't mean that's what's actually necessarily the lived truth of Vulcans. And if you take that as some sort of thing where thus going against what this one person said once is some sort of continuity violation, then it all falls apart. And I wish as a genre we embraced the idea of people just being wrong about their history, about what their world is like.

R: You know, and I think part of it is that we as writers have to respect the fact that we are introducing an entirely new world to our readers.

A: Yes.

R: So if there is too much "Do I trust this person? Is this real? Oh God, I'm completely lost." There's an element to not overusing it because then the on-ramp becomes so steep as to become a spiral spinning them directly off into the abyss.

[laughter]

A: Nyooom!

R: Wheee! I'm so lost! But yeah, I think especially once you've earned the reader's trust and have the ability to fan out a few different viewpoints, and a few different ideas, and let the reader

look at them, and say, “And what do you think, reader, is legit here? Let’s play.” I think that that can be fun. But yeah, it takes skill and nuance to do it.

MB: I agree that you are increasing the cognitive burden when you do that, because essentially you’re giving the audience an unreliable narrator and the unreliable narrator is the author. That is a little bit hard.

[laughter]

M: You shouldn’t trust me! I’m just writing this.

R: What were you thinking?

MB: But I think one of the things you can do, and this works best when it’s something where there’s multiple point of view characters but you can also do it just through how characters talk, if you’re showing from early on that people have different perspectives on some particular thing, that one person spins it as, “And then this horrible oppressor was there,” and then somebody else is like, “Ah yes, that great king, the good old days of that,” something like that, you’re already showing that people will have different perspectives on stuff, and just because a character puts it one way doesn’t mean that’s the way that it really is.

But I will say on the macro scale, the *Dragon Age* video games I think actually did a really fantastic job with this. They said from the outset that any piece of information you get in the game is a piece of information processed through the viewpoint of a character, it is not necessarily gospel from the writers of the game. And then basically in the last DLC, which is more like the final act of the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, they’re like, “Oh and by the way, we’re gonna take a whole chunk of stuff here and tell you here’s what was actually going on underneath that,” and it basically ripped my heart out and stomped it into the mud in some really impressive ways because of how I had been playing through the game, the narrative I had built up for the character I was playing. I was just like, ahhhhh!

[laughter]

MB: It worked really well but I will note, this is something they did after doing *Dragon Age: Origins*, and *Awakening* is the expansion for that, and *Dragon Age II*, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and all the bits of DLC, and there are novels, and there are comic books, and then they did *Trespasser*, and that’s when they pulled that on me. And it worked because there was a sense of the history you know is partial anyway. People don’t have complete records of the past. People tell myths about what things were like way back in the day.

A: And I think they were also very dedicated to not having one true mythology, not having an external validation of these are the gods and these are how they actually work.

M: There are definitely ways you can cue your reader to the idea that somewhere in the past when someone was given the choice of printing the truth and printing the legend, they printed the legend, but that the truth is still known. This was a thing I played with in *Way of the Shield* where I have a whole thing of the founding fathers of the country, but that’s the myth of these

ten people are the people that made the country what it is today, and having my main character who is a history buff walk into this painting of these ten people and be like, “They were never in the same room at the same time!”

[laughter]

MB: You need the pedantic nerds! Who are waving their wiki going, “But, but, but…”

C: “But actually…”

M: “Who commissioned this painting? I want to yell at them.”

R: I think that all these things from different perspectives and the acknowledging of what is just the legend, versus what are you building up around that, versus what maybe are your facts that actually happened, I think it helps us avoid the really overly simple, really flat history that I sometimes call the Just So stories. “Well, this is because this.” I feel like you see them a lot in memes and, I’m gonna call out Twitter, man, Twitter threads where people are like, “Fun historical fact!” and it’s usually like, no, that is so oversimplified, that’s not how any of this worked, yes there may be a tenuous connection between those two things but in fact there are 500 other elements affecting this connection that let it play out the way that it does. But I think we as people seem to gravitate towards the Just So stories.

MB: Yup.

R: So I think it’s a trap that we fall into in real life and it’s a trap that we fall into in writing fictional worlds too.

MB: Yeah, I actually literally have on my desk at the moment a book called *Captive of the Labyrinth*, which is about Sarah Winchester, the woman who built the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose. And basically 95% of everything you’ve ever been told about the Winchester Mystery House is bullshit.

A: Including what they tell you at the Winchester Mystery House. [laughs]

MB: Oh yes, absolutely. Because the house itself relies on the tourists coming in and it’s going to be so much more interesting if you’re telling the story of this crazy woman who believed she was haunted by the ghosts of the people killed by her husband’s rifle etc. And not a single piece of that is true. Even things like, oh, the house is so weird, there are staircases that go nowhere! That’s because the floor those stairs used to lead to collapsed in the 1906 earthquake and they didn’t bother rebuilding it.

A: That being said, the house is really cool.

[laughter]

MB: The house is very cool. But people wouldn’t come visit it if you were just like, come look at this sort of architecturally weird place.

R: I mean…

MB: So ghosts and… Yes, I would too.

C: Some would.

MB: But not enough people to pay for the maintenance on the house.

[laughter]

C: It's the old marketing thing, right? You don't sell the steak, you sell the sizzle.

A: Yeah. [laughs]

MB: Even if you have to make up the sizzle entirely and the steak is in fact a piece of shoe leather.

A: Like 80% of Welsh identity, sadly. Including the town that's, like, 50 letters long.

MB: But what Marshall was saying with the ten founding fathers and so on, you really see the processes at work with anything that involves nation building. Anything that is, here's the story that we tell about our country and ourselves as a people… Honestly, any time that I get that sort of story, that kind of narrative in a book, I'm immediately going, yeah, I don't believe it really went like that. I believe that is the story these people tell themselves, but I will be sorely disappointed if this becomes plot relevant and it turns out yes, they have it exactly right and it happened in precisely that way. I'll be like, really? Aww. Huh.

A: I don't believe that. Yeah. [laughs]

M: This is one of those subjects that we can just wind ourselves up and go.

R: Spend a long time.

C: We can talk us some history.

MB: A point that we haven't raised yet, though I think it's been implicit in some of the things that we've said, we see right now with our actual history the effects of what happens when we start listening to the versions of those events that are being told by, especially, marginalized groups. And I think that within your fiction, anything where you've got a diversity of characters along whatever axis, different genders may remember things differently or have different perspectives on what they meant, different ethnic groups, foreign nationalities, different religious groups, different economic classes, pick a category and you're probably going to get a different view of, ah yes, this was the golden age, and there are people going, "Umm, yeah, your golden age involved oppressing us and giving us no voice in anything whatsoever, not so golden for us."

And so the more that your cast is people from different corners of that setting, the more opportunity you're gonna have to bring it in, and that goes double if you're using those multiple points of view instead of being locked into a single one. I think frankly if you're locked into a single point of view, that's not the best vehicle for doing something that's gonna convey a lot of depth unless the character is focused on discovering and working with that depth.

[49:52]

R: It's definitely interesting when you compare something like "all of England's glorious wars" and then the anti-conscription songs that were clearly written by women. Ask them how they felt about this! We're not happy.

MB: Yeah. Or I'm just remembering at one point, I don't know why the War of 1812 came up, but I was talking to a British person, it came up, and they're like, "Yeah, you 'won' that war because we were busy elsewhere and barely even bothered fighting it."

R: "We were busy. You call it 1812, we're gonna go ahead and call it the Napoleonic Wars. By the way, you did the same thing with the French and Indian War, which by the way, that was our Seven Years War, you're a blip. You were a blip in what was going on."

MB: Yeah, I've seen arguments for the Napoleonic Wars actually being a World War 0. Because there were many conflicts in many places that were all part of the same messy things.

R: I've even heard that from the Seven Years War, in fact. That that was the original World War, because there was just stuff happening.

MB: Yep.

M: I had just seen, because sometimes I stumble into history TikTok, where somebody asked the question of, in England, how do they teach the Revolutionary War? And these British people were responding, "They really don't. I'm sorry. We really don't."

[M & R laugh]

A: Yeah. It maybe gets a line in the textbook.

R: I think there's even an argument to be made on that just from the perspective of, so how did the Americans win the American Revolution? You could also say, why did the British decide to just go ahead and cut our losses, we've got investments elsewhere, y'all are way too much trouble.

M: When did they just go, sunk costs! Sunk costs, we're done.

MB: We've gotten some interesting perspectives because we set up a Discord server recently for our readers, and we've actually got an interestingly international array of people so far. And so at one point one of our Polish members started talking about World War I and World War II from the perspective of a Pole, and American, you go, yeah, World War I was a crappy war. It was a war where nothing good happened, it accomplished nothing whatsoever, it was just awful, grimy misery that left people with PTSD and a second war later. Poland goes, that's the war where we got our country back. Because we had been partitioned, and at the end of it there was Poland again, and it was great. And World War II sucked because that was the war where basically none of our allies helped us and we got stomped on again. So the attitudes towards those two wars are diametrically different in Poland because their experience of them was radically different. And I thought, yeah, I never thought about it from that angle. Because how

much do US schools bother teaching you about Polish history? They don't. Same as British schools don't care about the American War of Independence. Or the civil war, rather.

R: It has been an absolute blast talking to both of you again and I'm so glad you could both come on. And as is our tradition, we would like to ask a parting gift of you of a little bit of worldbuilding trivia.

[52:49]

MB: Crap, I'm having that paralysis of I know I've been reading plenty of fascinating things lately but I remember none of them. OK, here's one. I found a very cool book, because I've wanted to learn more about astrology and such in different cultures, and I still haven't found that book, but there is a book called *People of the Sky* that goes into astronomy and some astrology cross culturally, and one of the things it brings up is that there's a number of places around the world where the layout of how a house gets built is linked to what's going on in the sky. And I'm like, that's the kind of detail I'm not sure I have ever seen in a novel, except with the limited thing of a passage or two of oh, the sun will line up in this spot. But domestic house architecture. How often does that come up of, yes, when we put the smoke hatch in the roof, we're going to put it where in a particular season you can see a certain constellation. I don't see that in stories, so there you go.

R: I love it.

A: I'm trying to think of something, anything. So I was talking to somebody about business recently. So I don't know, there's something about there's a particular dye that is created from a particular mollusk, and because they have to harvest a lot of these mollusks, this one not very inhabitable area otherwise got settled. And I'm trying to build something out from there. I like the idea of there's so much that happens because of a strange resource that suddenly becomes very popular because it creates this great purple dye or something. Tyrian purple.

MB: Yeah, why are people living in this inhospitable area? Well, it's because there's this one thing there that's worth the pain and effort of staying and extracting it.

R: I like that. Marshall, maybe Snail Lick Island is actually not that nice but people live there to harvest the snails.

A: Snails, yep.

M: Just to harvest the snails? Or they've made it nice over time but it was just a rock.

C: It didn't start that way.

M: It was just a stark rock.

C: A rock with a bunch of snails on it.

[laughter]

C: It was actually some sailors got shipwrecked there, and then when they got rescued, they were like, “Nah, we wanna stay here. We like this rock now. Because we’ve licked all the snails and it was a wild experience.”

MB: Inhospitable rock, that’s where I wanna be.

[laughter]

M: Send some food, because we can’t grow any here, but other than that… we’re good.

R: Oh yeah, and that’s the fun thing too when it’s a super inhospitable place and the weird trade networks of like, we have to have people bring in absolutely everything so who are we making friends with?

MB: I’ll also briefly, one of my favorite blogs, A Collection of Unmitigated Pedantry, which I recommend to anybody who likes this kind of stuff, talked about the line of, oh Afghanistan, the graveyard of empires. He’s like, OK first of all, no, there have been many successful empires in that area. And second, the reason it looks that way to the West is because it keeps being not worth the expense of maintaining your presence there, and having to ship in all your damn infrastructure, and try to get things out of there again. And so he called it “the midlife crisis purchase of empires”.

[A laughs]

MB: It’s the place you acquire when you don’t know what to do with your empire and it’s the first thing you regret later on and go, you know what, I never should have even picked this up.

[laughter]

C: Oh God, it’s so true! Oh!

MB: Yeah.

M: I really didn’t need my own personal plane…

C: But I kept getting ads for it, and everyone else seemed to have one, and I…

[laughter]

R: Well, thank you both so much for coming on and we look forward to seeing you hopefully in person, fingers crossed, in a couple of weeks at Worldcon.

MB: We are going to be there.

A: I was going to say, I think Rowenna, Cass, and Marie—

R: Yes, we’re all on the same panel.

C: We’re all on the same panel!

M: All four of you are on a panel together.

C: Mm-hmm!

M: And I can't even go see it because I'm counter-programmed at the same time.

A: Oh no!

C: Bummer. That's a bummer. Because it's gonna be wild. We're gonna be talking about textiles and politics, and I think it's gonna be just off the hook.

MB: We'll get back to snails real fast, I'm sure.

[chorus of "yeah"s, laughter]

MB: Well, thank you guys again.

A: Yeah, thank you.

MB: We obviously are birds of a similar feather to you.

R: Yes.

C: Very true.

[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. Coming up on January 5th, we will have a mini-episode about our Worldcon and Hugo experiences, and our next full episode will be on January 19th, where we'll be launching our exciting new worldbuilding adventures for 2022. If you want to know more about your hosts and the fantastical books we write, links to all that information is on our website at worldbuildingformasochists.podbean.com.

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

[outro music plays]