Episode 15:
"Potpourri"

Transcribed by:
@banana_l0rd

[0:00]

R: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

A: [sounding exhausted] And we're *really* wondering why we do this to ourselves....

M: Because if we *didn't*, we wouldn't *have* this glorious podcast!

A: Ugh…

M: [laughs] I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

A: I'm Alex Rowland, and this is episode 15: Potpourri.

[intro music plays]

A: Hello, dear listeners, we are all tired, it's the holiday season, we're beat, I've been walking all day today, I am in New York City, and I think we're all sorta in the mood to have a fun times… not too much thinking sort of episode, yes, except we're going to end up thinking anyway, so this was a fool's errand!

R: Indeed, we will end up overthinking, we promise! We promise that with every episode, a full dose of overthinking.

M: Overthinking is… that's our brand.

R: But we're gonna have fun doing it.

M: Damn right we are.

A: Yes indeed. We're answering some listener questions today and we got three wonderful listener questions, but before we do that, may I make a brief announcement?

R: I think you need to make a brief announcement!

M: You *must* make a brief announcement since this announcement is the reason why you're so tired.

A: Well, yes, that is part of the reason why I'm so tired, both today in the short term and this whole month in the long term. I have a new book coming out next year! I just announced on twitter last week, for those of us living in real time which means now while we're recording the podcast, it will have been a couple weeks ago for those of you living in fake time which is the time when people actually listen to this episode… [laughs] It's called *Finding Faeries* and it is a nonfiction encyclopedia of where to find faeries in the modern world and specifically urban environments, and it's going to be a lot about environmentalism and climate change and sort of how technology has changed faerie life. I say nonfiction but I want you to hear the air quotes, like, it's fiction, obviously it's fiction, but it's also in a kind of nonfiction mode, and I'm really excited for people to read it but it is very exhausting to be writing it right now, I'm on a very tight deadline, so I'm just a feral swamp creature these days, dear listeners, that's where I'm at.

M: But I am so excited for this because it reminds me of this book that I read all the frickin' time when I was a kid, which was sort of the same thing but with gnomes, but it was sort of like sociological, anthropological of a gnome's life and everything about it and I read that so many times, it was delightful, it was bizarrely Nordic, and this project that you're doing sounds like it's of the same vein, so I'm super excited.

R: And this explains a little bit why Marshall Ryan Maresca is the way he is.

M: Yes [laughs]

A: [laughs]

R: Just a tiny bit. Clearly influenced. And Alexandra Rowland, you get to be that influence on a future-

A: On a future small child mind, yes-

R: -small one out there.

A: Wonderful. I mean, it's basically- it absolutely is entire my sort of shit, right, because it's basically just 100% worldbuilding all the time, always. But yeah, writing in that very academic, restrained nonfiction mode, that voice, is difficult and time consuming and sort of disheartening because I can only do, like, 300 words at a time, rather than my usual M.O. which is to sneeze and 20,000 words falls out in three days. But I have no characters, I have no plot, I have no dialogue, which are my real strengths with a book, so it's definitely something that has challenged me to stretch my capabilities and not rely so much on the things that I know I'm good at. So yes, that will be coming out next October, so keep your eyes out for that.

R: Very excited for this. Alright, so shall we launch into our first listener question?

A: Yes, let's do that thing.

R: Fantastic. So Alex - listener Alex, not currently recording with us Alex - asks: "in your books," - yOuR bOoKs - "how much worldbuilding was done before finding the story, or was the reverse done and worldbuilding elements created to tell the story you wanted?" So it's a chicken or the egg question, everyone!

A: So this is a really great question, because for me it was definitely the chicken. The worldbuilding came first. I started coming up with the world that *Conspiracy* and *Choir* and every fiction project that I have conceived for the foreseeable future is set in the same world, and I started coming up with the world because it was my very last semester of college, I was going through some really, really bad shit in my personal life, and the books that I was writing at the time, I wasn't interested in them, I didn't care about them, they were making me unhappy, and so I was like, "You know what? Worldbuilding is the most fun part. How about I just do some fun worldbuilding for no reason and not have it be for anything, it's just gonna be purely for funzies, and I won't have it be for a project, I won't do anything with it, I won't have it be for any project" and then I spent, like, three months just sort of noodling around and coming up with things because that was the fun part, and then eventually, inevitably, I looked at this heap of work that I'd done and I was like, "Hmm, I wonder if I could use this for a project?" I started wondering how could you write a book with the maximum amount of worldbuilding in it possible without overburdening the reader and making it so the worldbuilding was burdensome and taxing on them. And I was like, "Well, you'll need a storyteller to sort of talk about it, someone who has traveled the world and seen a lot of things" and that was how *Conspiracy* started taking shape, you guys.

R: Very cool. So I have a question for you, Alex, actually, before moving on, because that was such a unique way of coming to a story, and I think it's something we've kind of talked about before, but what percentage of that chunk of work that you did do you think ended up in *Choir of Lies* and *Conspiracy of Truths*?

A: Um, it's hard to say because it's sort of an ongoing process, right, like I definitely have not built the whole world yet. There are still huge, huge swathes and chunks of the world that I have not filled in. I have most of the countries named, maybe I have for 75% of them I have a rough kind of visual idea of the aesthetic that I would have for that country, but I haven't done any deep worldbuilding for most of them. Or if I have, it's just one or two offhanded remarks that someone made about them in passing, and that's kind of a great way to do worldbuilding, because I think the downfall that I think a lot of inexperienced writers fall prey to is that they spend all this time coming up with all these great ideas and then they want to put all of them in the book, and you don't need all of them in the book. You can elide most of them, and leave

some of them out, and use negative space, because negative space is your friend and will do the majority of the work for you if you can utilize it correctly.

So a lot of it was just- it's like the iceberg theory, right? Like, 90% of the iceberg is underneath the water and you never see it. And I think that's kind of what this was? Like, there's things which I have come up with in this world which have not yet been mentioned but I have them in the back of my head, and I think that's one of the reasons people so often remark about my books that the worldbuilding feels so deep and tangible, like you can get your hands on it, because I have done the work to support the foundations of it, before I just started coming up with little noodly ideas and there.

R: Very cool. Marshall Ryan Maresca, what about you?

M: Well, for the Maradaine books I definitely did the worldbuilding work before I ever actually started writing any of them, so for me it was not quite the same place as Alex's is from, but it was the same sort of, like, I was- at the point I was far more focused on roleplaying games than actual writing, so I was like, "I need to make myself a more concrete setting for roleplaying games" was the initial impulse where I first drew the map and came up with the rough sketch of what each part of the world was gonna be like and build it from there, and it was one of those things I kept fiddling and fiddling and fiddling with, and then this friend of a friend reached out to me where he was planning on starting a roleplaying game company, and at the time I was completely ignorant of so many things, and he's like, "I've got 100 ISBNs that I need to use so I'll be publishing stuff with that" and I'm like, "OK, that sounds neat, whatever, whatever that means" [laughs] not having any clue what that actually meant.

So in publishing roleplaying books he wanted something to be the core setting for the system he was creating, so he was like, "From what I've heard from our mutual friend, you've got something that's kind of neat, so let's have it be that, but you need to do a lot more work" so I really buckled down and did a ton of worldbuilding work to that end. And then having all that, he was like, "But we also should have the equivalent of stories or whatever that are set in the world to set tone and all that" so I started working on some things that I had envisioned as longer pieces but never quite came together and doing the history work and stuff like that and things based on that, it was all a mess of little false start stuff and things like that, and once I really had that worldbuilding work fully done, I was like, "OK, now I really need to start being serious about the writing thing and write a book."

So I planned out and started to write the first of a series that was totally a travelogue series of 'I've done all the worldbuilding so I'm gonna write a book where the point is to go from one part of the world to another.'

R: [laughs]

A: Yeahhh buddy!

R: Yep, ya did, ya did it.

M: I only wrote one book of that. It is *deeply* in the trunk, where it belongs.

R: [laughs]

M: But part of when I was then trying to workshop that book and figure out, OK, what's the problem, I'm like, "The problem with it is it has no plot because the plot is I want to go from point A to point B to point C and nothing else." So that's when I want to drill down, instead of showing the whole world, let's focus on one part of it and find the stories within that, and that's how I then centered on just the capital city of Maradaine and then… worked out this enormous thing in my head of what the whole story of the city could be, and then broke it into separate parts, and then the separate parts became separate series, and here we are in the midst of my madness as it currently exists.

A: Yeah. [laughs]

R: And they definitely have plots now.

M: They definitely have plots, yeah.

A: They do.

R: I can endorse that. They definitely have very, very exciting, good plots.

A: So when you say travelogue, tell me a little bit about that, because one of the first sort of tactics I tried to do with *Conspiracy* was also a travel diary - or a travel guide, rather, like someone had gone around and was specifically giving advice to future readers who might want to do the same thing that he had - so was yours like that, or…? What were you doing?

M: So mine, my main character, he was a linguist and a historian-

A: OK. A Chant.

R: Of course he was.

A: [laughs]

M: -who basically got forced to go on this mission that he did not want to do of being the translator on a ship where the ship was just- its mission was to circumnavigate the globe and visit all the different countries, and over the course of that he would get into various troubles and end up solving certain problems, and given that I started this in the early 2000s, this would

probably not have been a viable project then; it's probably a more viable project now than it would have been in 2002 when I started writing it, but… because, like, there if you had a hero who would never pick up a sword, nobody would want to publish that book in 2002, but I think now it would be a far more viable thing - but still, it has no plot.

R: [laughs]

M: But that was the idea, that it would be basically *Star Trek* but in fantasy where their mission is just to go to each country and open up some degree of diplomatic talk with every nation as they go from place to place.

A: Cool. Rowenna, how about you?

R: So, a little different I think because both the concept of the story and the world kind of blarfed out together when I kind of came up with the idea, because I- the first germ of an idea I had for writing the Unraveled Kingdom series was just this question of I was researching - of course I was - 18th century clothing and particularly these particular kinds of jackets, these caraco jackets, there were all different kinds of them and variations on the style, and I realized there's this explosion of style in caraco jackets right around the time the French Revolution is really brewing up, and I just kind of thought, how strange that these two things exist side by side, you have major political upheaval and gorgeous fashion happening side by side, and what if the people creating this fashion could have some kind of influence on what was happening on a larger political sphere.

So that was kind of the little germ of an idea that I had, so the world and the story were kind of entangled together from the get go. And I also had pretty firmly the roots of the world in the 18th century, 18th century France and late 18th century Britain, with actually some ancient Rome thrown in there, it's not really visible from the surface but a lot of the magic stuff actually comes from ancient Roman beliefs and concepts, so I had a lot of historical stuff kind of pastiched together to begin with that was kind of the framework, so a lot of that kind of just happened for me with having this idea for a story, and so then the big picture was there, but then there was a lot of sliding in important but within the storyline detail worldbuilding elements… like exactly how the nobility titling system worked was something that I did not have ready made when I started writing the story, that was something that I had to figure out along the way; like exactly how did succession work, and things like that. Neighboring countries I kind of had to play with a little bit more as I developed the story because that wasn't something that was part of the initial little germ of a concept I started with.

But a lot of it happened in tandem because I would kind of have this little branch into a worldbuilding thing I needed to get into, and then I'd be like, "Oh, well that could also lead into this plot things that needs to happen" and so it really wasn't create one and fill in the other, it was really in tandem, feeding off of each other like some kind of amorphous garbage beast that just kind of came out of my brain.

A: Cool, cool. So Marshall, I have sort of a question tangent from this: since you and I both have this thing of making a whole world and then playing in it like a sandbox, do you notice yourself building - like, once you have the foundations of your world - do you ever do more worldbuilding, then, based on a plot that you have that you want to do, does it ever in smaller, less global scale things go the other way that you have a plot and then you do the worldbuilding to support it?

M: To a degree. There's definitely things where because I want things to go a certain way, I then am like, "OK, I need to take this worldbuilding aspect and open it up to figure out more about it." One example is in *Import of Intrigue*, which is the book in Maradaine which is an excuse to show some of the larger world worldbuilding without having to go into the larger world, because it's mostly set in the part of the city that is these little foreign enclaves of people from other parts of the world, so I got to use that as an opportunity to not only highlight those other cultures from other parts of the world, but also delve into those points of interaction and contention between the cultures and how that plays out. So that was an instance where the plot that I wanted to do gave me the reason to delve in deeper with certain things that I hadn't delved in yet.

A: Yeah, and I think that one particular thing that you said is super important and a great way to hack it and expand your worldbuilding without overburdening the reader, which is to just show people who come from different places, right, like, I've read so many fantasy books where it is so homogenous - not just in terms of race, obviously, because fantasy is so white, fantasy is so, so white, and we're starting to see some improvement of it now, but there's still a really long way to go - but also just showing people coming from different places and people whose parents or grandparents immigrated from different places, and now they live here and they're from here and they've always been from here, but they're going to have a slightly different perspective on the situation than someone whose family has lived here for generations and generations, you know, just showing a more diverse spectrum of thought as well as humanity does so much to make your world feel bigger and richer and wider. So, yeah, having a foreign quarter in the city where all- like, a Little China, or- or- my brain is difficult, it's bad, take the podcast away from me, interrupt me, say something!

R: [laughs]

M: No, but-

R: Alex, you are absolutely right, and that was something I really dealt with a lot when I was developing the framework for *Torn,* was that my main character is an immigrant, and so to what degree do I show where she came from, to what degree does she identify as the majority culture, where's that in between there, and I think it was not an intended way for me to be like, "Oh, this is gonna be a worldbuilding trick" but it absolutely worked that way, to show a wider world than I would have if I had made her of the majority culture. And I think that's something we talk about a lot here on this podcast, is just keeping in mind the fact that humans are not static, and even if you don't have a super modern world, you still have trade and contact and

interaction, and it's a global world unless you've made a very deliberate and distinct choice to make it not a global world. I think that that's something that, when we get into that question of are you choosing it or presuming it, is accidentally presumed often that non super modern societies are not global-

A: Except they are!

R: -but most societies are global. I mean, we have such history as a global situation. And also that humans are a giant moving mass of… of… people! They move around, they move their cultures around, they add things to their cultures, they abandon things, and there's no point that I can think of except for really specific historical moments that humans are static.

A: Yes.

R: And so keeping that as part of it.

A: I can think of two amazing examples - historical examples - to support your point. One of which was in Byzantium, the Varangian guard for the Byzantine emperor - those were Vikings. Those were just *Vikings* who came from *the Viking lands* all the way to Istanbul not Constantinople. Sorry, sorry, sorry!

R: That's nobody's business but the Turks'! That's nobody's business but the Turks'! [laughs]

A: And the second example - actually, this one also involves Vikings - is that we have found, I believe, sapphires from Southeast Asia in Viking archeological digs. Which shows that there was a global trade network, even that far back. To get a sapphire from Southeast Asia aaaall the way to the other end of the continent, we don't know how long it took, but it shows that there was trade and people passing things along like a very, very long game of telephone.

R: [chuckles]

A: And it probably didn't come straight there from its origin. It probably took a long time, but the amazing thing that it came that far and ended up somewhere in the ground… is just really weird and strange to think about, but… yeah, keep that in mind for worldbuilding.

R: Yeah. I feel like this would be a really good place to segue into our next question.

A: Yes, I think so.

R: Because it kind of starts to deal with some of these themes. BananaLord asked us: "how do you feel about including real world prejudice - such as but not exclusive to racism, sexism, homophobia - in fantasy worlds? So, full escapism where none of that exists? Something grittier, more power fantasy-ish where all that exists and the characters have to overcome it?

Somewhere in between?" So I think we kind of joked before the episode started, we could kind of do an entire episode or more on this question-

A: Yes!

R: -but I think we can start to get some ideas flowing on the questions we would ask ourselves.

A: Yes. So how I feel about including real world prejudices: for one thing, I feel very cautious, especially about how I engage with the prejudices that do not affect me directly. I am white, I am female-presenting, I am a queer person, I am nonbinary, and so I am much more comfortable tackling queerphobia than I would be tackling racism. Especially fantasy racism for, like, "[posh accent] oh, no, we're prejudiced against *elves*" or whatever, which is…

R: [laughs] Oh, we have talked about this, the fantasy racist thing.

A: Yeah, yeah. So it's a really big complicated question. I don't think that I would be able to ever have a single sort of rule for myself, because every book is going to be different and every situation is going to be different, and it's the sort of thing which you have to handle very carefully, and sort of… take it on its own terms? Because there's nuance, right, nuance is everything, and you have to look at what you are doing for the thing that's right in front of you before you make conclusions about what is the right thing to do here. Right?

R: Yes. I think that question of how do you feel about it, do you write escapism or do you write something grittier, more of an overcoming story, I think it all depends on what kind of a story do you want to tell?

A: Yeah.

[26:32]

R: Both of those kinds of stories are valid and I think that both of them are important.

A: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

R: And I think that it is important to see representation of overcoming, and it is also important to see representation in which something is just accepted. So I think that's something to be very conscious of when you're making decisions about both the story that you're telling and the world that you're building to support whatever story that it is that you're telling, what kind of a story am I telling? Am I telling one to escape into and leave behind some of the nastier prejudices that this world dishes out? Or am I telling something that is an empowering story that is about overcoming something similar to or analogous to some of those prejudices. And I think both are totally valid.

A: As a queer person, I am mostly not interested in writing about queerphobia. All of my stories so far and all the worlds that I have built are just, yeah, it's fine, because I don't want to write about people being mean to people about something that is so personal to me. I want to live in a world where people like me can be accepted, and so I write stories where it's just normal, you know, and nobody gives a shit and it's not a factor, because - you're absolutely right and I 1,000% agree with you about both sorts of stories being important. I think that showing the fight and showing how people overcome it is so, so important, as you said, and is also… I'm just agreeing with you, I'm just restating exactly the thing that you said [laughs] I'm sorry, but-

R: [laughs] No, you are not, definitely adding another layer of nuance here.

A: It is so valuable to show people what comes after the fight, and to show people the world that we could have if people were just not assholes to each other in this particular way. Because they're always going to find new ways to be assholes to each other, right, like if you take away a certain kind of prejudice there's always going to be other kinds of prejudice to tackle. I am much more interested in writing about class prejudice than I am about queerphobia sort of prejudice.

R: You know, and I think that there is- I like that this question says somewhere in between, because one of my favorite kinds of stories, both to read and write, are the not necessarily rising up in force and having a giant revolution of though but, like, how do I kind of engage my agency within a crap system. I think that those can be such exciting stories in a way, because a situation can kind of look like, well, nothing's going to change here, but those small acts of agency can really make a difference over time and over all and so I… *in my book* example, but I wrote two characters who are in a same sex relationship, and I had written a world where that just doesn't work, it's so based on primogeniture and you have to have heirs and the nobility cares about this crap, and so having these characters be able to quietly subvert that in their own way was a nice little way to write a noink in there, and the same with my protagonist, who's - it's a very gender-based society, women do one thing, men do another - but for her to take certain… how do I want to say that. Starting over. I guess for her to dive after agency in particular ways and they might not be really flashy or big ways, but to really exert what agency she does have, I think that, at least for me, there are often times that that's almost more exciting for me when I'm reading than someone who has a big overcoming moment, because we don't always feel like we have that in our real lives.

A: That's very true!

R: But all those moments of oh, I found my little way of fighting back and I'm going to do it.

A: That is very, very true. Marshall, you have any thoughts on this?

M: Oh, I have so many thoughts, which of course should be taken with an *enormous* grain of salt because on every single privilege vertex I am of the privileged class. I mean, literally every single one. But I know personally I'm more interested in writing worlds that are messy in terms

of how people are mean to each other without me being mean in the text itself, if that makes sense. I'm far more interested in writing those kinds of stories, but I'm very aware that plenty of readers are either both not interested in writing those kinds of stories, not interested in reading those kinds of stories, because many friends of mine have said, "I'm reading these books to escape, not to get punched in the face" and I understand and respect that, that is a very valid concern. But I definitely think also that those sorts of things can be very important to include, and the thing I'm writing right now, which is my dieselpunk thing, is loaded with issues that are based on class and based on race, and it's going to be… I've basically laid out a minefield for myself to dance through in terms of how this book could come out. I could mess up, I could mess up *deeply*.

A, R: [laugh]

M: And I'm doing the sensitivity reader work and the research and such to get it right, hopefully, but there is plenty of potential for me to screw this up, and I'm hoping not to, and I'm definitely aware of where a lot of the mines are, because I think it's an important kind of story to write, but I think on all levels it is important to write stories about people struggling with this, but it is also important to write the stories where the struggle has been won and what that nicer world can look like.

A: Yep.

R: And I think, too, one thing that drives me bats is when books are criticized for being unrealistic for including a lack of racism or a lack of sexism or a lack of homophobia or whatever in a fantasy world, and that all just comes down to, did you do the work worldbuilding? Because yes, there are things that are going to rub up against each other and not work very well. If you have a society that you've built a world in which men are elevated in some kind of way, they have all the power privilege and every kind of power role and money and land are all inherited through a male heir, and then you wanna write no gender disparity in other things, it gets a little weird. But good writers don't do that. And so I think it's all about creating a cohesive world that works, and you can absolutely do that.

M: I think it's one of those choose versus presume sorts of moments where people presume, like, "OK, I want to do a fantasy that's Renaissance Europe but without X, Y, and Z" without doing the dig-down work to make the without X, Y, and Z work. They just cross it out.

R: Because there are things that are just domino effects of change, and if you change this one little thing, well, what else in the society just fans out from that one change. I think digging into the history of a lot of our modern expressions of racism and sexism and ableism can be really helpful. There are some really excellent books, for example, on the history of racism in America and how in a lot of ways the slave trade and the institution of slavery developed our version of racism, like we didn't go the other way around, we didn't invent slavery because we were racist, we kind of invented racism because we wanted to have slavery, and so I think getting into the

'where did this crap come from in your world' is really important, and asking those hard questions of, OK, so do they just not like people for some random reason, ooor do they want something out of this? Does this benefit someone? Because so many of our systems of oppression, it benefits someone else, so who is that? And I think that that's where a lot of that kind of comes to a head in worldbuilding.

M: And I think it's also important to be aware that humans are really, really good at "hey, those people on the other side of the hill are slightly different from us, therefore they are terrible and we hate them" and we can also be really good at overcoming that, but you need to do the work to show why people don't have the people over in Shelbyville just as much as you need to do the work of why… And, I mean, if you design your world in a way that these things just don't exist, that's fine. It's easy to do that, I think, relatively easy to build worlds where sexism or prejudice against sexuality doesn't exist if you're doing a good, deep-dive secondary world build, because you can say, "hey, if there's no Christianity then there's not gonna be certain things building up within the framework of society".

A: Yeah.

M: You have thoughts, Alex?

A: I do have a thought, and my thought is that, OK, so I want you to imagine a spectrum going from -10 to +10. If you have a prejudice in your society, say that that is set at -5, and you say, "I want to write a situation where this does not exist", taking it to 0 is not good enough. You have to take it to +5. There has to be something in its place to take up the space that a reader would notice, because the reader is coming into the work with a set of presumptions, and so if you just ignore it, they're going to assume that it's still there. They're going to *presume* that it's still there. So if you want to show that this thing does not exist, you have to build it in *positively*. So for example-

R: You have to say something, you can't just assume that they're going to guess at what you're going at.

A: Yes.

M: You can't just show there's no homophobia by having no gay people.

A: Exactly! Exactly! You can't just say, "oh, yeah, no one is homophobic in my book… it's… never mentioned, no one…" you can't just say homophobia doesn't exist in the world and then, exactly, not show any gay people, not show any casual queerness around in the way that the society is built, you have to take it to a +2, a +3, a +6, take it all the way to a +10! Show it and show that this does not exist in a concrete and real sort of way.

R: Exactly. I actually was just revising a project that I'm working on, and I had had a system in which in this particular culture within the world, there's kind of a martial marriage that two men can be married but they're also battle partners. And I realized that I never overtly said it, and I was reading through it again and I was like, oh my God, you could read over that and never realizing that I was saying they have a partnership but no, I really mean they basically have a marriage, and so I revised that section because I was like, that needs to be clearer because a reader coming in with presumptions is not going to necessarily read that.

A: Mm-hmm. It's sort of like how sometimes in a book, a character will be so subtly black, for example, that when they make a movie out of it, they change that character so they're not black anymore and then everybody's really upset about it, and some people are like, "oh, I didn't notice that they were". Like, OK, you can just come out, you can make it more clear, you can show your diversity and your representation so that nobody can miss it.

M: Or that the text does have it, and then when the movie adaptation comes out and the character is black, people losing their damn minds because *they* didn't read it that way.

A: Right.

R: Right. They didn't read that. Yeah.

A: Yeah. Exactly. It can go both ways. So it's not just about eliminating it, it's about building something new in its place.

R: Yes.

A: Did we have any other thoughts about that?

R: I feel like we have about 90 bajillion thoughts, but maybe we should put a pin in them and talk about this more later.

A: Yes, because BananaLord-

M: This legit could be a full episode just on this topic.

R: [laughs] Yeah. And it probably will be, actually, just you all wait.

A: I mean, we kind of touch on this fairly often, we bring this up in our two big rules of worldbuilding, our Choose Don't Presume and Don't Be a Fucking Racist. [laughs]

R: Yes, print them out, tack them up above your computer.

M: My short version is, it's important to do but do it smartly. Go sign up for one of the Writing the Other courses, get some knowledge in your brain and hopefully that will help you screw up less or at least prepare you for when you do screw up.

A: Or screw up better.

R: And you know, as someone who is - as Marshall said, you know, as people who are relatively privileged, yeah, be willing to screw up and admit that you screw up, that's kind of a thing that we have to accept and deal with.

A: Yeah. The learning process is ongoing and never ending and for those of us who are living with a lot of privilege it is something that is going to take our whole lives, this is not a project that we ever get to finish, this is something that is ongoing forever, for always, yay! Which, that sounds like I'm being sarcastic, except I'm actually not, what a cool thing to have a lifelong project in making the world better in this very small, tiny way of keeping your mind open and keeping your heart open to the opportunity to learn and grow as a person. So that's all my thoughts there.

R: [laughs] And on that note, shall we move on to our final listener question?

A: Yes. Which is also from BananaLord.

R: Yes.

A: Two wonderful questions from BananaLord, thank you.

R: They really are! "What's the most purely self-indulgent, 'I'm including this because fuck you, I want to' thing you've ever put into one of your books?"

A: Ahhh! Ahhh! Babes! Babes, let me tell you about my most recent manuscript! Which I just finished a couple months ago which the unofficial title on twitter is *The Shamelessly Self-Indulgent Trope-tastic Book of My Heart* which has everything and the kitchen sink of everything I like best in a book. I decided that I wanted to write about my favorite trope of all time, which is a sort of romance arc between a feudal lord and one of his loyal retainers. And after that I just started stuffing more and more delightful tropes into it - some of them are very small, some of them are more overarching - and the great thing about writing something that gives you so much sheer, incandescent joy is that I don't know if this book is ever going to sell. If it doesn't, I'm OK with that, because I have already gotten so much enrichment and fulfillment just from the experience of writing it. And it has made me so, so happy, and I really recommend everyone do this because it's great. I don't want to talk about it too much because-

M: Because the book might get published!

A: Because I might give everything away right now because that's kind of the nature of the beast, like everything that I've just told you is stuff that I've already mentioned on twitter in the past two years so it's fine.

R: OK, I just- because I don't know the depth and breadth of this project, Alex, will you just give us a couple worldbuilding teasers about it beyond what you've already given us?

A: Sure.

R: Like, where does this take place?

A: It takes place in a setting which I have mentioned in *Conspiracy* and *Choir* already called Arasht, and it is the richest country in the world because they have this vast trading empire, it's sort of based on fantasy Turkey, specifically the fantasy Ottomans, and they have absolutely badass shipbuilding technology and one of the best economies in the world, as I said, and the fineness of their currency - the purity of the metal with which they make their coins - has not changed in generations because they have a certain sort of magic which, if they touch a metal, they know what it is. That's the extent of the magic system. Just if they touch the metal, they know what sort of metal it is. Which sounds very small scale, and I was like, I just want this to be a very, very tiny, tiny, tiny magic system, except once you actually-

R: Oh no no!

A: Oh no no no! No no no! Because even that tiny thing of touch a metal, know what sort of metal it is has *huge* rippling implications which sort of fucked it up. But you can adjust that by saying, oh, well, not everybody has this kind of sense and not everyone who has the sense is particularly good at it, like how some people have better eyesight than others. So, yeah, is that sufficient for you, Rowenna? Did you want-

R: Yes! No, that is a wonderful teaser, I appreciate that. Thank you.

A: There you go. So coin fineness and economics and shipbuilding technology and fantasy Ottomans.

M: Cool.

A: And it's real gay. It's *real* gay, friends.

M: In other words, it's an Alex Rowland joint.

A: It's an Alex Rowland book! [laughs] Economics and queer people! How about you guys?

M: OK, so, of what's purely the most self-indulgent 'I'm putting this in' that I've put in any of the books, on a worldbuilding level, would have to be in *Imposters of Aventil*. To give a rough idea, in *Imposters of Aventil*, the backdrop of that book is there is an intercollegiate Olympics going on, so there's all sorts of sporting events happening and the college is overwhelmed with athletes from every single school, and so there's also a lot of parties and a lot of other things going on while this event is happening, because that's what happens when you have a bunch of young, hyper-athletic people all in the same place. And at one point the main characters discover that there is going to be this illegal underground game of crownball played between some of the athletes of some of the different schools, because crownball is illegal because it's been banned because it's too dangerous of a game, but of course they have to go because they think if they go there they'll find out where the drug dealers are because *surely* if there's an underground illegal game of crownball going on, there's also going to be drug dealers there, because that just makes sense.

So the game of crownball is played in the pool in the bathhouses, where they throw a couple of balls into the water which float, and a couple of crowns, which are coins, into the water and then all the players jump in the water and swim down to the bottom and you have to find one of the coins on the bottom, come up for air, and announce that you have found a crown, and then grab a ball, and if you have both a crown and a ball in your hand then you score a point. But once you've announced that you have a crown, *anything* can happen to you, because they can just tackle you and drown you or whatever. This is an absurd game. The entire reason this game exists is because of one night where I and my cousins were all at this hotel in the middle of nowhere, Pennsylvania where we had a bunch of coins [laughs] and a pool, and we just broke into the pool at midnight-

R: [bursts out laughing]

A: I knew it was gonna go there! I knew it was gonna go there!

M: And so we just invented this game which was just basically an excuse to attempt to murder each other in the pool. [laughs]

A: [laughs]

M: With some, you know, trappings of sports rules. Because my three cousins are, unlike me, hyper-athletic and hyper-competitive. My cousin Eddie can make Scrabble into a contact sport. We invented this game that night in this pool in this cabin lodge in the middle of nowhere in Pennsylvania, and it has always stayed with us as a legend of this thing we did when we broke into the pool at midnight at this cabin lodge, because I remember at one point when we were about to go, my uncle had picked up the woman who actually was in charge of the pool but wasn't actually a lifeguard, and she's like, "I don't think that's a good idea" and my cousin was like, "OK, how many of us here are actually certified lifeguards? Five of us? OK, we're going."

A: That changes things.

R: [laughs]

M: That changes things. Everyone was a certified lifeguard but me. [laughs]

R: But you didn't die! There we go!

M: But I was like, how can I stick this into my fantasy world? And then like, ooh, but if I make it this illegal, we're not allowed to do this but we're gonna break into the pool, we're gonna do this sort of game, then yeah, it could be kinda fun. So yeah, that was a fun, utterly indulgent thing to write that I did just because I wanted to do.

A: That is adorable. Rowenna, how about you?

R: In some ways I kind of feel like the entire world is sort of self-indulgent, because all of my dorky research interests culminating into one thing I did, so I could just leave it at that, *but* there was this trend in the late 18th century for women to make riding habits, or have riding habits made to match their husbands' military uniforms, and they look *sharp*. Like, they're like- they've got the- they look sharp.

A: They do. They look so fucking sharp.

R: And they're British uniforms turned riding habits so they're scarlet red and they've got the facings-

A: Think of women in tuxedos.

R: Yes! Yes!

A: Women in tuxedos is how sharp this looks.

R: It's so sharp, and in fact - fun fact, I believe it is in the US state house in the diplomatic rooms, [Mrs. Francis Montresor by John Singleton Copley](#) is hanging and she's wearing one of these - look her up because it's gorgeous, it's so sharp, anyway - I was like, my main character has to have one of these, because I am not patient to sew all those buttonholes for myself, I've done it before for a man's coat and I'm not doing it for mine [laughs]

A: Butthonles are the devil.

R: They're, like, three inch long butthonles, they're godawful. In silk twist, it's- God, it's just bad.

A: They're the fucking devil, buttonholes. We hate buttonholes.

R: So I was like, my fantasy character can have one because I don't have to sew those buttonholes, but to get there I had to have a military uniform and it had to have contrasting cuffs and body, so I had to write all of that into the story in order to get to the point that she was going to have the matching the army riding habit that she ends up making for herself.

A: Well, well done. A legend.

R: And it ends up being a major plot point in the book, is getting the cloth to do this, so… so there you go. For a riding habit.

M: That's awesome.

A: So, dear listeners, these three questions that we had were absolutely amazing. If you have any other questions that you would like us to answer in the future, please feel free to send them to us at our email address, which is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. How about we just say we don't really know when we'll do the next one but we'll do it when we have enough questions to make a full episode out of.

M: Because we don't set ourselves to a set schedule, because doing things every ten episodes is a presumption. [laughs]

A: It is a presumption.

R: It is! [laughs]

M: Base ten is a presumption!

A: You're making fun of me because of my other podcast, I see. [laughs] I see, I see how it is. This is a personal attack against Alex. So yeah, if you enjoyed this episode, if you would like to hear more us talking about listener questions or if you have ideas for episodes you would like to hear about, please send them to us, we love your questions and comments! Thank you so much!

R: Yes, thank you so much for these questions and I definitely look forward to more like this in the future, and of course when we say 'as many questions as we need to fill up an episode' clearly one question will get us going for a really long time.

A: For 20 minutes. Yeah. [laughs]

R: I'm excited to see where we go with this.

M: We even cut ourselves off with the second question. We were like, OK, we're gonna stop and move on.

R: We need to shut up now. [laughs]

A: [laughs] Hey. Hey. Having a podcast means that you never need to shut up.

R: [laughs] True.

M: This is true.

R: So welcome to 2020, worldbuilders and masochists, and we will have lots of fun in the next year, I am sure.

A: Fingers crossed.

[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. Our next episode goes up on January 22nd. We are talking about politics and systems of governance. This is gonna be a thinky one, folks, so just uhhh be ready for that. 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 and tumblr as @worldbuildcast, and as previously mentioned, our email is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. We also have a discord chatroom linked on the About the Show page on our website if you want to come chat with us and other fans of the podcast. I don't really have a cool themed fact of the day for you because we gave you a bunch of them already, so how about I ask you a question, dear listeners? What sort of setting or time period are you dying to see someone writing about in science fiction or fantasy literature? Tell us on twitter or in the discord chat.

[outro music fades]