

Episode 24:
“Dress for the Quest You Want”
Featuring Melissa Caruso

Transcribed by
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[0:00]

R: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

MC: I need an escape after helping my kids with their distance learning all day. I'm Melissa Caruso.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

M: And I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca, and this is Episode 24: Dress for the Quest You Want.

[intro music plays]

R: Well, dear listeners, welcome back again, we are so excited today to welcome a very special guest to the program-

M: Woo!

R: Melissa Caruso is here joining us today! Melissa, would you be willing to tell us a little about yourself and a little about your books?

MC: Sure, thank you so much for having me! Well, my name's Melissa Caruso, I write fantasy with intrigue and explosions, my *Swords and Fire* trilogy which begins with *The Tethered Mage* is completely out now from Orbit Books, and I have a new book coming out on June 2nd, *The Obsidian Tower*, which is the start of a new trilogy in the same world, and that - I was supposed to have my notes open, ahhhh, skip this part! [laughs]

M: The magic of editing.

MC: There we go, I have it now! And *The Obsidian Tower* is the first book in the *Rooks and Ruin* trilogy, it's about a woman with broken magic who is the warden of an ancient castle with a sealed tower. Her family has passed down one warning through the generations, which is that nothing must unseal the door. One night while she's hosting delicate diplomatic negotiations, a

deadly incident leaves her with blood on her hands and unleashes a terrible threat, as well as her family's darkest secrets.

R: Dun dun dun!

M: *Dark secrets!*

MC: Very much! Dun dun dun!

R: I was lucky enough to get to read an ARC of this book and it was excellent.

MC: Oh, well, thank you!

R: It was a wonderful book, I enjoyed it so much, so listeners, if you're listening to this podcast, I'm guessing it's because you like worldbuilding, and Melissa does a great job of it, and it's really fun to see between the trilogy and then the new book in the new trilogy coming out, just the consistencies within the world and also how the world develops over time. So it's a fun one to read, readers, if you're into worldbuilding, dive into it.

MC: Thank you so much!

M: And you've got a book coming out soon too, don't you, Rowenna?

MC: [spooky voice] WoOoOo!

R: Speaking of books coming out, yes, I do. The final book in *The Unraveled Kingdom, Rule*, is out May 19th, so...

MC: So exciting!

R: ...if you're stuck at home with nothing to do, preorder from an independent bookshop near you! I guess, we can say.

MC: Excellent.

M: That way you can slam through an entire trilogy while you're locked up in your house.

[3:04]

R: Exactly.

MC: Really, no better way to spend the time.

R: This is true. So today, I'm really excited, because Melissa comes to us today to help us talk about- we've talked about textiles and a little bit about clothing, but we haven't really gotten into the nitty-gritty of how do you costume a character? How do you kit out a character in a way that is worldbuilding-consistent? So we're going to dive into that, kind of a deep dive, nitty-gritty craft details will percolate up through this episode, but one question I had to lead us off: can you think of any iconic costuming choices, or iconic quest kits, or things like that that pop to mind from fantasy worlds that you admire, or that you just think of as examples of 'everyone knows fill-in-the-blank'.

M: I think one of the things that definitely pops out is, to me, in all the Harry Potter books, the very iconic ways that school uniforms look, and then how each individual person looks within their school uniforms, to the point that as soon as the movie is made, when you see that, you're like, "Oh, yes, *that's it*, that's it exactly," because it is so well-defined in such an easily iconic way. And I think that's always the goal when you're designing the clothing or costume or quest kits for your characters, is you want it so that, God willing, when there is a movie or fanart or anything like that, who they are instantly pops out as like, "Oh yeah, that's the character, I see it perfectly."

MC: For me, in terms of defining costume, one of the things that always jumps to my mind, is in *A Darker Shade of Magic*, Kell's coat. It's right there on the first page. First of all, it's a super cool magic item where you turn it inside-out and you get a different coat every time, and it's also very character defining for me. I *love* it, I want it, also very easy to cosplay, and the sort of counterexample of the sort of... I can't help but think of character builders or gear in video games, which is sort of the counterexample of what you probably don't want to do in a book, where you look at the gear your character technically has on them in a video game, it's like, ah, naturally I have fifteen backup swords, 80 pounds of dragon meat, a ladder, and, uhhh, I just found this, I'm dragging along this entire antelope corpse that I'm gonna strip down later in my workshop, and it's just not really realistic at all? You can get away with it in a video game because it's a convention but I prooobably wouldn't try doing that in a book.

R: I feel like the only video game I can think of that avoids that is *Oregon Trail*.

MC: [laughs]

R: Do you remember old school *Oregon Trail* and if you shot too much meat you weren't allowed to carry it back? Like if you shot a buffalo, you only got, like, half of it. Do you guys remember that? [laughs]

MC: Oh yeah, just brutal. The realism in terms of what you could carry in that one was *brutal*.

MC, R: [laugh]

R: But Marshall, you're so right too that I think that since we're so used to having just a treasure trove, recently, of film and TV adaptations of fantasy works, seeing how that translates from descriptions on the page to something very visual, and very concrete too - I think often when we write costuming, it might be very evocative, but it could go many different ways, and there are many things that a reader might interpret from the words that we use, but then a costume designer picks very specific, concrete things to translate onto the screen and have a whole aesthetic behind it too, so it's kind of fun.

M: I know for me that's always been a challenge, I almost wish- back when I did theater and I had a costume designer, I could just be like, "These are my vague ideas, go and make that into something physical," and then they'd go, and find cloth, and come back, and do it, and it would be like, "You're amazing! That's brilliant!" and I don't have a costume designer when I'm writing! [laughs] I have to do the work of figuring out what's this and what's it called, and I know, we joke sometimes that the two big things you can always- when you get them wrong, you're gonna hear about it, are guns and horses, but...

MC: Heh heh heh...

M: But I think clothing is another big one too, that the people who are into that, when you get it wrong, are gonna be like, "You got this very wrong," especially if you're writing something that's strictly historical, but when you're writing something secondary world and you play mix and match with things historically, people are probably gonna get mad at you anyway, even though it's technically not wrong, but they're gonna be like, "You have that kind of stocking with that kind of corset? What are you even doing?"

MC: [laughs]

R: Jumping back to adaptations for a second, I think that that really came out a lot with the *Outlander* series. It's a historical fantasy, so it's fantasy, but it is set in historical time periods, and I think that the costume designer had a really difficult job to evoke the fantasy elements, to evoke the fact that it's a time traveling person with different ideas about how clothes work, and what she's going to think is pretty, and what she's going to take back in terms of how she wants to wear her clothes, and then put it in a historical setting, and I don't think there's any way to do that without irking some authenticity-minded people, but it was a really interesting exploration of how do you combine historical clothing with a fantasy concept.

MC: Yeah, and I feel like the amount of leeway you have to play fast and loose with what's historically correct really correlates to how historical you're trying to make your fantasy world. If it's straight-up historical fantasy, it takes place in the real world, then you better pay attention. If it's a made-up world, the more loosely it's based on ours, I feel like, if you wanna be like, "OK, in my world they invented steel boning 100 years earlier compared to what the rest of costuming is doing at this point," you can maybe get away with it as long as those resources are there, I don't know if maybe Rowenna's gonna disagree with me but-

R: No! I agree with you fully, and actually one of the few historical anachronisms that I was like, “I am going to make this work no matter what” is that I didn’t want whaling in the world that I created *in my book*-

MC: Yes!

R: -but that means no whalebone, so what am I going to have the corsets made out of? What are the stays made out of? And so I did, I just kind of imagined that they came up with how to make steel boning earlier than they actually did. And I was like, “I’m just gonna roll with this because this is important to me, we’re not gonna be slaughtering whales, I just am not into it [laughs] and we can’t have plastic, and reed just breaks, so we’re just gonna have to go with something else.”

MC: I had almost the same thought process, actually, where I was like, “Oh, boning, ooh, I have to have corsets but I don’t want whaling, whaling is just, no.” Same thing with oil lamps, I was like, “Alright, we’re just gonna use mystery oil in these lamps, who knows what’s in there, we’re not gonna think about it too hard.”

M: It’s made with oil... you know, it’s the oil. That you get. For the lamps.

R: Exactly, lamp oil!

M: That oil.

MC: Lamp oil. From lamp oil trees.

R: Exactly. But I think it raises good questions of, whatever your character is wearing, using, carrying with them - it sounds stupid to say it out loud - it has to exist in your world. Which means that it’s part of this larger network of questions about material culture, and trade, and how does this stuff all fit together.

MC: Yeah. I feel like you have two basic options. You can either be ‘OK, I have a big, diverse world with robust trade networks and I’m not gonna worry too much, because you have access to everything from every climate.’ If you don’t wanna go into that kind of depth but if you’re saying, “No, no, I have a relatively isolated island” or something or a monoculture, then you better pay attention to whether cotton *would* grow there in that climate, or, you know, whether you have the right kind of processing techniques to... Otherwise people are gonna notice who are more knowledgeable than I am, frankly, I go with the robust trade empire option.

R: Which honestly is pretty darn realistic for almost any historical analogue that you can come up with. Trade exists pretty far back and pretty far reaching, so you can get away with that and feel pretty comfortable with it.

[pause]

M: [chuckles awkwardly]

R: [laughs]

MC: Good.

M: Though I find it fascinating that sometimes, even with secondary world fantasy, you'll get people who will be all like, "But that's not how it's supposed to go!" I remember way back in the day when I was still sharing my never-to-be-published book that is never gonna be published to the beta readers and all that, and somebody complained about the cannons on the ship, like, "They would not have developed cannons at their level." I'm like, "What are you *talking about* 'they would never-'" Yeah, she was mad, like, "Historically the cannons wouldn't have been developed because of this," I'm like, "But... who's 'they?'"

MC: Yeah, right.

M: It's a made-up world!

MC: It's a made-up world, yes. You have leeway.

M: You have to roll with the 'it's a made-up world' sometimes. But I do like to delve into the 'OK, it is a made-up world, but when did they develop the gunpowder?' or things like that. That's, I think, a fun thing to do, because that's the weird way I think about things, but at the same time, it's a made-up world. You're allowed.

MC: I think one thing that is important, though, is to make sure that once you do introduce that they have something, to remember that, OK, now that they have it, they're gonna use it.

M: Yeah.

MC: And that goes back to the question of what they're wearing, and what they're carrying, and how they're using it, and things like that. If they have a material, how is that gonna affect- what else are they gonna use it for practically, if you just throw it in there as a random fancy cool thing that you made up, "Oh, they have this color-changing material, isn't that fun," OK, well, the military is gonna be using that for camouflage cloaks because why wouldn't you, right, or if you have whatever else you have, you just have to think about how people are practically and pragmatically going to use that. And also how they're going to use it for fun. I feel like high fashion would so incorporate - well, as Rowenna knows better than anybody - would so incorporate magic if you had access to it, if you could do twinkling lights in your gown, or make it smell really good, whatever, people are gonna use whatever they have access to in fun and frivolous ways as well as practical ones.

R: I think it is so important to remember that often we are thinking of the ways in which the magic or the technology is serving our plot, but our character wouldn't think that way. They would think, like, "How can I use this to make my life easier? How can I use this to have fun? Can I get drunk off of it?"

M, MC: [laugh]

R: This is how humans behave. Humans are not entirely pragmatic, and they are also very pragmatic, so you have to roll with, any outcome that a character could come up with the use of something, they probably have.

M: Yeah, I have a character in - *in my book* - I have one character who's a mage, and she's not a particularly strong or powerful mage, but she likes to dance, and thus she's like, "I can make myself light shows while I dance and use my magic that way-"

MC: Nice.

M: "-because it's really all my magic is good for. But I'm gonna use it to the best of my ability!"

MC: People would totally use it that way. I mean, just think about all the ways that you would [laughing] even prank people with your magic, or you could use it to make your hair look better in the morning when you get up and suddenly have to deal with something, you know, there's just- I don't know, I feel like there's a lot of blah blah blah blah, never mind, that sentence is done now. [laughs]

R: But I think that something, too, that you can think about in terms of availability in a world is also availability to the character. That, you know, are there socioeconomic limits on how much stuff costs, is this affordable? I remember the first time I was reading *Game of Thrones* and they get to the part that the Night's Watch wear black, and the first thing that went to my mind was black's a really expensive dye. Which is such an obnoxious nerd way to go, but there's a question of are the things that you are having as part of your 'this is how this signals this character' or 'this is what this character chooses to use,' have you built into the world things that make that less feasible for the character? And obviously in Westeros, apparently black dye is not that expensive, it's fine, it's not a problem, but if you're doing, like, 18th century France...

M: It's from a thing that grows in the North and it's really...

R: Exactly! It's fine, it's not a problem! But if you've created something where, well gosh, yes, silk comes from this place that's really far away, and we have to import it, and there's all these trade negotiations, you know, maybe your servants wearing silk as a marker or something shouldn't be something that you do, because you've just set up a whole world where accessing that is very difficult.

MC: Right. Absolutely. Or if you do really want your character that's not rich to have something that you've set up to be difficult to obtain, then OK, maybe they had to save up for five years and they have that silk cloak because it's something that they desperately wanted and worked for, or they stole, or was given to them in response for a favor, but yeah, don't just have them have it and be like, "Whatever, this is my random cloak that I pulled out of my closet."

M: Or you have the characters who somehow are poor and broke and have no money, but have, like, 25 knives for some reason?

MC: [cackles]

M: And you have to ask yourself, are they just buying a knife every time that they [fighting giggles] they get any money at all, it's like, "Ahh, I need a *knife*."

MC: Who needs food when you have 25 knives? Priorities.

R: I think you can do a lot of work actually by having your character have less, because then that one knife has to serve all of these purposes, and they picked that knife very specifically and very particularly, and I think that when you talk about what is a character using on a regular basis, you can do in a lot of ways more work by having them have fewer possessions.

MC: Yeah, not to mention there's the question of, OK, how much junk do you really wanna carry around? Like I've read fantasy books where there's the assassin who has 150 different tiny weapons secreted [pronounced 'secrete'] about their person- or, no, secreted [pronounced 'secret'] about their person, and that's just- that would be so horrible! Can you *imagine* having 100 tiny weapons? You just couldn't even move! You would be stabbing yourself, it would be heavy, if you sat down you would be jabbing yourself in the rear, it makes absolutely- why do you even need 100 tiny weapons?! You're not gonna stab somebody with 100 different weapons just for the heck of it! No.

M: Unless you make it a whole thing of, like, "I had this special coat made that has all the different hidden pockets and sheathes so I can have my 90 different weapons all in there," and that's what that coat is for.

R: You gotta create a reason for it.

M: But again, that's a thing! Right, you need to make it interesting, rather than just, like, "Oh, I just happen to have nine knives all up and down my leg, and they don't clink at all when I walk, no."

R: That's the thing too, they're an assassin, they're supposed to be subtle, and so if they're clanking when they walk down the street, or every time they sit down, "Ow!" "Yeah, that's an assassin. He just stabbed himself in the thigh."

MC: That's gonna be a problem.

R: It's not gonna end well for you.

MC: Oh, oh, this is one of my favorite little tropes, so, OK, you know how assassins always dress like assassins? I LARP and I was playing a game of Spot the Assassin with some friends once, and we determined that they all wear leather pants, it's just a rule, and I feel like this is very true in fantasy, particularly when people are actually dressing up in the costumes, but if you're actually an assassin, the last thing you wanna do is wear all close-fitting black, and assassin boots, and the assassin hood, and just look as suspicious as humanly possible, right? You wanna blend in, you should look like a carpenter or something, and then surprise people when you stab them.

M: "Who's the assassin? It's whoever's the sexiest-looking person here."

MC: Right. "Ohh, they're sexy and they're wearing all black? Mmm, nope."

R: Yes, avoid them. Well, not to mention, and perhaps I'm mistaken and there are ways to make leather pants more flexible than most historical methods allowed, but if you look at historical leather pants - I'm gonna take a tangent for a minute here - if you look at most historical leather pants, because leather breeches did exist in the 18th century and before, they had leather pants, there's always a lot of extra material in the butt because you have to have somewhere for your bendiness to go, so when you bend there's some extra fabric so that you don't just split your pants! And so I was watching the adaptation of *The Witcher*, and Geralt of Rivia comes on, he's wearing these incredibly tight-fitting leather pants, and my first thought was those are gonna split the first time he does a lunge, because there's no extra fabric there-

MC: Oh yes!

R: It's just- they're shredding, they're going everywhere. [laughs]

M: Apparently Henry Cavill went through, like, 40 pairs of pants.

R: I WAS RIGHT!

MC: I'm not surprised.

M: Because he's just that buff and leather that tight, and just, he wore through it all.

R: Inappropriately tight leather pants, yeah.

MC: I have a friend who was notorious for, in the middle of sword fights, busting his pants open in exactly this way when he would do some sort of dramatic lunge, because he was a nationally ranked fencer as well as a LARPer, and he would just do a lunge, and his seams would split, and, uh... It was super awkward.

R: But you know, when you look at some historical clothing and you think, "Wow, that's really unattractive," or, "Jeez, that's weird-looking," there's probably a practical reason for it. Sometimes it's yeah, they thought different things were attractive then, but the giant, baggy, saggy butts on breeches and the, ugh, the crotches are really awkward too- I'm gonna stop. I'm gonna stop talking about it now. [laughs] There's a reason, it's because otherwise your pants are gonna split in a million pieces and then you're not having a good day.

MC: That's not to say, of course, that you can't dress your assassins in sexy pants if you really want to. There's nothing wrong with assassins in sexy pants, you just have to kind of realize and accept that at that point you are being tropey, and departing from reality, and going into the same realm as female fighters wearing stuff that their boobs would fall out of the moment they swung a sword, realism is no longer your concern anymore.

R: And that is a balance, right, because I think as much as on this podcast we frequently talk about the practical questions, and the realism, and how does this work, and how does this fit together, there's also an element to fantasy that's aesthetic, right, does this feel, and does this look, and does this conjure an image that's conveying what I want it to? And sometimes the really practical answer item or maybe clothing that you really should pick is not really fitting in that aesthetic, and I think it's about balance, you've got the balance of both the practical and the aesthetic to consider.

MC: Right. If you have a super awesome-looking idea that isn't practical and wouldn't really work, but it looks really darn cool, then I feel like that's fine. As long as every other aspect of your world isn't hyperrealistic and this is gonna stand out. But if you're doing the crazy, over the top, anime-inspired world where people have shoulder guards that you could lay out a feast on because they're just that enormous, eh, whatever, fine, you're having fun with it, it fits your general aesthetic, you're going for over the top.

M: Swords three times the size of the person wielding it.

MC: Right! Right! Which is not even vaguely realistic, but if you're just- you know, whatever, you can just imagine that they have some kind of super light metal, and as long as you're not trying for realism with it, and you're consistent with that 'we're just making stuff up' feel, you can get away with that a little more.

[24:56]

R: And I think flair is realistic in and of itself. I mean, humans like to put on the ritz sometimes, and honestly, Melissa, I think your books, especially with the witch lords - that's part of the package, right, it becomes part of the world and part of the culture. She has these characters, listeners, who are rulers but they're also all mages, and they go full-on aesthetic, it's like a bust open the door and walk in with a giant cloak made of God knows what, like, pangolin scales and feathers just all over the place.

MC: [snorts with joy]

M: Right.

R: You know, it's awesome! But it feels very realistic even though it's over the top because it's built into the world in a way that says, "No, we're over the top and this is how we do, so you better show up if you're gonna show up."

MC: One of the things I was trying to do with that is when you think about in a society what people do to display power, right. In a lot of our historical societies wealth is power, so people who wanna display their power and their status are gonna cover themselves with jewels, and gems, and tons of embroidery that would have taken people a long, long time to do, and fancy fabrics that they had to import from far away to show "Look how powerful I am, I have all these people working to make this garment, I have all this wealth to get these rare materials," whereas in my world, in that particular country, magic is the highest symbol of status. That country doesn't care so much about wealth, so they're displaying their magic by being like, "Well, *my* dress is made of spiders! Can you do that?"

MC, M: [laugh]

R: Listeners, there actually is a dress made of spiders. I don't know if that's clear. There really is. Read the book. It's awesome.

MC: [laughs] Oh, thank you.

M: One thing though that is crucial in designing whatever, like, yeah, some people are gonna be extra and over the top, and I'm all about that so many times in the things that I'm writing, but people need to dress for the job they're doing, and a lot of times the things you need to put in need to indicate their job in a way that's clear, and there can be different rules that signal, hey, this is what my job is, and you can have a lot of fun playing with some of those cultural expectations.

MC: Absolutely, and I think that's another case where you're balancing pragmatism with symbolism, like, OK, a great example of totally impractical outfits that indicate what your role is is clerical garb. A lot of clerical garb tends to be purely ceremonial, you don't have to do

anything more complex than hold up symbols and things in it and give speeches, so that can be weird, weighty stuff that you can barely move around in potentially, if you have some ceremonial robe or something; whereas if you're a mercenary and you're gonna be fighting in this, you had *better* be able to move in it. Or if you're a carpenter and you need to be able to use your tools in it, or whatever you're gonna be doing, a farmer, you have to be able to practically execute the tasks you're expected to do while wearing the outfit.

M: And I think one of the challenges we face when we're doing any sort of secondary worldbuilding is finding that balance between the things that we and our readers would be like, "Oh, this signals that this person is, you know, a miner, or is a sailor," or something like that, and that in the culture you built - this is another choose versus presume sort of thing - is that necessarily the same signal they're gonna have, or are you just sort of taking it from the things that we would recognize, like, "Oh, that's what this means," even though it doesn't necessarily fit in your culture that you're building.

R: Like you have striped sweaters on your sailors like, "Well, we do that," like the old-school Popeye the Sailor Man kind of outfit, but that doesn't necessarily- yeah.

MC: Absolutely. Sometimes you have to examine your expectations for what is practical, even. Like I think we have a lot of images of what a typical adventurer wears, and they tend to be, you know, wearing a cloak, and they have maybe a bunch of gear on them, and they wear a lot of heavy armor, and things like that, but you see this in characters who are just walking around town or traveling, and if you've ever worn chainmail for long periods of time, if you're not actually expecting to be jumped, why would you do that to yourself?! It's really heavy! You don't walk around with your shield strapped to your arm if you're not expecting to be attacked. I have walked around all day with a shield strapped to my arm, it was a light shield that was not worthy of real combat, and even then, it just gets really old! You can't really use that arm, it's heavy, I mean, you can use it as an emergency umbrella when it's raining or use it as a lunch tray, but it's just really... you aren't gonna walk around looking ready for battle unless you're actively expecting to wind up in a battle.

M: Or it's a weird symbolic sort of thing that's like, "We're not expecting a battle, but we need to look this way and carry these things because those are the symbols of whatever we represent," or something like that. But again, it's not a practical thing, it's a ceremonial thing almost.

MC: Although, if your job requires you to wear ceremonial chainmail, I say you need a new job.

All: [cackle]

R: Well, and it's interesting too that you have to ask the question of why in my world do I feel the need to signal this profession?

MC: Right.

M: Yeah.

R: You know, maybe you could have a world that actually yes, people who are professional soldiers or professional fighters in any sense need to signal to everyone else, just for whatever reason you have in your world's value system that that's something you have to share, and instead of carrying around your shield or wearing chainmail, maybe they have to wear an armband. Maybe there's a particular color. There are as many old wives' tales about things that prostitutes wear as you can- I mean, there's all over the board.

I had a friend doing 18th century stuff who was making a new gown out of yellow wool, and someone was like, "Oh no no, you can't wear yellow, only prostitutes wear yellow," and we both, like, ".....what?? Where are you *getting* this from?" It's some old apocryphal thing about prostitutes wear yellow that probably has some origin in some medieval code somewhere, because all these different localities in the Middle Ages did have rules about things prostitutes had to wear to signal themselves, and some of them were colors or certain kinds of clothing - I think in one place in the Netherlands it was a striped hood, you had to wear a striped hood if you were a prostitute - which in some ways this makes sense for this particular time in history, right, that the value system is going to be very anti-sex outside of marriage, this bad sex bad in this context, and there's a safety factor of, like, OK, venereal disease is a thing.

MC: Right.

R: But it's telling you something about the world if people have to signal themselves in some way in their clothing, that my profession, it's not just that I'm proud of it, but the rest of the world needs to know for some reason.

M: Which is a big reason why uniforms are used, so that people can be like, "Oh, that's a police officer, so either I go to them for help, or I stay out of their sight because then they'll arrest me," or something like that. But that's a critical thing in terms of how you signal people in official positions, like using the uniforms, or same thing with military, or, you know, special orders, or you can have the knights in your world, instead of them wearing the plate mail all the time, they can just have a fancy jacket and just wear the fancy jacket.

All: [laugh]

M: And it's a lot more convenient.

R: Well, it's like, there's this little mini piece of armor that survives into the 18th and 19th century military uniform, that officers would wear this little necklace, basically, called the gorget that is the very last remnant of armor, but it signifies this is an officer. Because once upon a time, someone of that status would have been wearing armor, but now that's not helpful, and

obviously having them wear full armor is *not helpful* for the reasons that Melissa has given us. [laughs] So they wear just this one little piece that says, this is my rank, this is my status.

MC: Absolutely. And of course there's also the question, even if it's not required by your profession, of what are your characters, just like we would, what are they trying to say to the world with what they're wearing too. Just because they're an adventurer doesn't mean they're not trying to make a statement. That statement might be, "I'm a badass, watch out for me," or it might be that they're trying to blend in, or it could be that they're making a fashion statement and they're flamboyant and everything, but just that it's a conscious choice of that character.

I always think it's a little weird when people dress - and I don't think you see this as much in professional stuff I hope - but sometimes you'll see characters who the writer had an idea of how the character looked that they thought was cool, but that didn't necessarily match the clothes that you would expect that character to pick for themselves, like someone who is not a fashion-conscious character picking this really cool suave tailored outfit, when they then go ahead to not seem to care about their appearance, that doesn't make any sense, or someone who dresses really super sexy but aren't self aware, just think about what your character would choose for themselves as well as how you want them to look.

R: And I think also the recognition that your character is probably choosing clothing in most circumstances. It's not like you enter a fantasy second world and you're assigned some kind of "here's your costume, welcome! It's a gray smock!"

MC: Right!

R: And that in most historical analogues, most times and places, there's some freedom to choose what you're wearing. You may be constrained by economics, you may be constrained by sumptuary rules, you may be constrained by some things, but most people are still choosing their clothing to some degree. They're picking what fabric, they're buying something second hand but they're picking what they're buying, they're retrofitting something after the fact, or they're picking their accessories, you know, so I think that there's a trap that you can fall into where we assume people would not be making active choices in their clothing and in their accessories and in the things they carry with them, and most of the time, yeah, it's an active choice. I'm wearing this pink dress because I like pink.

MC: Right.

R: It's a color I think I look pretty in, or it just makes me happy.

MC: I feel like that's especially important sometimes with secondary and background characters when, if you have a poor village, that doesn't mean everybody is wearing drab grays and browns that they rolled around in mud puddles in, even though we have this image that that's what poor peasants look like in our heads, it's not like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where

they're wearing burlap sacks and they're covered in mud. Like, somebody picked this outfit out, even if they don't have a lot of money, you know, maybe they've really patched it and tried to take good care of it, maybe it's their one good thing, or at least they're not gonna be literally taking sacks full of holes in them and just slapping them on without trying to do anything!

R: [laughs] Well, and it's kind of a funny where that came from, that has a lot to do with Hollywood, because in those big epics from the 30s, 40s, 50s when they were costuming these huge casts of extras, they would put all the extras in drab colors so the main actors and actresses stood out, but then we've internalized that as, like, well, that's what medieval times looked like.

M: That's what the extras looked like.

R: That's what everyone looked like! And then it's only the princess who has a color on, you know.

M: We tend to do this thing, and I think it's a natural thing to fall into, where our primary characters, we will assign them a color palette, so again, when the inevitable fanart or movie or anything like that comes about, you're gonna get that, oh, that's this character because this color and this color, and boom, it's instantly recognizable. It's almost like what you do with superhero costumes, you make them as iconic and recognizable as possible so that once you see that you can instantly be like, "That's this character," and I think we like to do that a lot so we can then go back and introduce various characters in a quick, easy way because we have that color palette, boom, then you know who that is.

MC: I think that isn't even all that unrealistic, because I know that if you look in my closet, there are blue shirts, black shirts, and red shirts, and that's really about it.

M, R: [laugh]

MC: And I have a lot of friends who, you open it and it's just black, you know, or just blues and greens, so I think that's not even unrealistic. Maybe this is just me and my friends. [laughs]

R: No, no, I think there's a lot to be said for that.

M: No, I think that's very real.

R: I have definitely come home and been like, "I got this new sweater! ...oh. It's the same color as this other sweater I have. Oh well, at least I know I like it."

MC: Yeah.

R: You know, and I think one thing too, thinking about characters' personal choices and how they're choosing to present themselves, and one thing we've talked about on the podcast quite a bit is gender, and choosing versus presuming how people express their gender and how they fit into gender roles, but one thing that - I'm just gonna go out and say it - one thing that drives me *nuts* is when the only way that we shorthand or express a woman being different or being pragmatic or being tough is that she dresses as a man. That's the only way that we can do that, and it's irritating because it's tropey to me, and it's also irritating because it's just not the only practical solution, that just because someone's wearing skirts, they can do all the same things that men can do, for the most part, wearing pants. And the fact that men in a lot of cultures and a lot of historical spots wore skirts too, so there's a pragmatic question here of what can your character do in the clothing, and just because we have a modern conception of this equals this doesn't mean that's *actually* the only pragmatic way to go about it.

MC: Absolutely. There are certainly skirts that I would prefer to fight in over certain pants, like, you know, those tight leather pants are much worse to move around in than a nice, light, flowy skirt that's not too long, so, you know, I agree completely.

M: You're not gonna tear open the crotch in a skirt. That's just not gonna happen.

MC: It's not gonna happen. Impossible. Yeah, I completely agree. And it's also something that- we're building fantasy worlds, we have complete freedom to reimagine gender roles and clothing, like for example, one thing I loved about the movie *The Fifth Element* is that they had men also wearing fancy clothes with flowers and colors on them, and lace, and things like that, to fancy occasions, and they were sort of playing with the idea of, you know, in our current era men tend to wear very drab clothing, and it hasn't always been that way even historically, I mean there have been periods where men were far more likely to wear really flashy stuff than women, or at least equally likely, and now we have this era where men don't have the same- they don't tend to as often express a really flamboyant appearance, which is really unfortunate because there's been some fantastic historical men's fashions, I would love to see, like, the doublet come back, but alas. [laughs]

M: I was thinking about how in the pilot of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* they had the pantsuit uniform and they had the miniskirt uniform, and they had both men and women in the miniskirt uniform, and then they just dropped the miniskirt uniform altogether, but it was like, that was just a thing! Anybody could wear the miniskirt uniform, and that was kinda cool.

MC: That's fantastic, yeah.

R: I was just thinking that too, Marshall.

MC: [laughs]

M: Because we don't see enough of that sort of playing with the tropes, definitely on a visual level, because I think, again, even when we're doing secondary world fantasy, we have these ideas of how we signal what. The 'we're going to put the tough lady in the leather pants because tough lady equals leather pants' sort of thing even when that doesn't necessarily fit in with the world, and yeah, you can make it be anything, so why not, why not give everybody skirts and hoop dresses and things like that, because *why not?*

MC: Absolutely.

M: Of course, when you do that, then you always have the challenge of then are you giving your readers too steep of an on-ramp to get into what you're doing, and I think that's where the hard balance is with that sort of thing, what works and what doesn't in terms of- like, how far can you go that's too out there before people are like, "What the hell are you..." Hopefully, I would think putting all your characters in hoop dresses is not too much of a "what the hell are you doing."

MC: If it's a fancy party, why not? [laughs]

M: Yeah! Yeah!

[43:26]

R: And I think the internal consistency comes into play there. If the very first thing that you do, and the only thing you do, to signal some slight differences in gender expression is that suddenly everyone's in hoop skirts, yes, that's kind of a steep learning curve, but that's not necessarily great worldbuilding. That's not complete and cohesive. So I think that we can trust ourselves when we're writing to write cohesive worldbuilding so that the more comparatively surprising elements fit right in. It's like, well, of course that's how it would be, because why wouldn't it?

M: Right.

R: One thing that I have noticed as a gender disparity, and this is something that's come up in some pop history articles that aren't actually great, and I could digress for a long time on pockets - I won't, maybe I'll post something on twitter after this airs - but the idea that women didn't have pockets in their dresses in many historical periods so they couldn't carry things. What this misses is that women carried giant bags tied under their skirts that were just stuffed full of things, like, I can fit way more in my 18th century pockets than I can in my purse, those things are huge. So just the idea that historically people carried stuff, and in your fantasy world, they're gonna come up with ways to have the things that they need to have access to at all times on them. Especially in fantasy worlds where people are moving around a lot. You may not be in your home when you need an item.

MC: Right, absolutely. And particularly if you've got a character, as so many fantasy characters are, deliberately setting out on an adventure of some kind, whether it's that you're sneaking into the castle and you're gonna have all your lockpicks and things on you, or whether it's that you're out on a military campaign, or whether you're on an old-school quest where you're crossing all these miles and have all your stuff on you. I know that, again, my experience as a LARPer has been that, OK, we're facing a situation in a typical LARP that is not all that different than a lot of fantasy characters face, where you have to be ready for anything at all times. You never know when you're going to suddenly be jumped by monsters, or when you're going to have to pick a lock, or something like that, and the amount of time that LARPers give to how they carry their gear on them... it's just this huge consideration, you have to make sure that the things you need to be able to get out quickly you can access quickly. If you have a healing potion, that has to be something you can whip out incredibly quickly, you don't wanna be undoing buttons or going into your pack while your friend is dying.

M, R: [laugh]

MC: If you have a weapon you need to be able to get out, like, again, those 42 throwing knives that your assassin has, if that's in a weird place where you've gotta unbutton your pants, "OK, hold on, wait a minute, this is down my tight leather pants!"

R: [laughs]

MC: How are you gonna- you're not gonna be doing that in the middle of a fight! I hope not, anyway, that would be awkward. And if you're gonna potentially be fighting in it, you have to make sure everything is very balanced. I know, for instance, I get dehydrated very easily when I'm fighting, and I would love to be able to carry water on me, this is very critical and something that a lot of your adventurers are going to run into, but water is very heavy, and trying to fight while you've got a big, sloshing water canteen is very difficult, and this is a challenge that I personally have not really found a good solution for yet. And just things like that. Or if you're gonna be crawling through the ventilation ducts in your sci fi novel, you're not gonna be wearing a backpack, or if you're gonna be climbing up the Cliffs of Insanity, you're not gonna have all this stuff hanging off of you, pulling yourself up hand over hand. You've just gotta kind of consider what's gonna be balanced on your person, how much it weighs, whether it's accessible, if it's gonna make any sense.

M: Yeah. I always am putting possibly too much thought into, with my characters, the various practicalities of what they're carrying and how they're carrying it. I have one character who, you know, he's a thief who does all these various heists, and he also builds all these gadgets, so he has this whole pre-heist ritual of laying out his gadgets and being like, "OK, which things do I actually want to take with me this time, and how am I gonna do that?" But the other thing I keep thinking of, I ended up having this weird recurring bit in each of the books with Veranix, because he has a bow, and because of the way the fights go, he keeps having to just drop the bow and then run-

R: [laughs]

MC: Oh no!

M: [laughs] And so I have this recurring bit of he just keeps losing bows, because the practical, like, "Oh, I gotta do this with my hands, I can't- I'm just gonna have to drop it and move," but it always was, like, what's he physically gonna do with his hands, and just the management of that just kept tripping me up all the time, and it was like, run with it, run with being tripped up.

MC: Yeah.

M: Run with him screwing up. Run with him like, "....I gotta buy another bow." [laughs]

MC: I think it's really realistic, though. The laying out of the gear is something that I *absolutely* have, again, done as a LARPer, saying, "Alright, I need this, I need to absolutely have writing materials on me," or, "I absolutely need to have some kind of light source," which what that's gonna be is gonna be very world-dependent, do they have magical light sources, are they gonna be carrying around candles and little tinder boxes, what are they doing, and also the bow - so my daughter took up archery, and granted, we're not hardened professionals, but stringing a bow is so not something you do while you're being attacked.

M: On the fly, yeah!

MC: Right! Nor do you carry around your bow strung, you know, not expecting a fight, so I feel like there's this awkwardness for fantasy archer characters everywhere where you go, OK, how am I gonna get this bow strung, right? I'm sure that there's some special way to do it, but for us, it's this process! You have to step on it, you have to stretch it out with both hands, it's very- if you mess up you're gonna be snapping your fingers really hard, so definitely not something you're doing on the fly from horseback if you weren't anticipating it.

R: Something I was thinking, too, is the length of time that whatever you're carrying with you has to last you for. So, you know, is your character suiting up for a heist that they expect is going to be over in the next four hours, or is this someone who is putting on a full campaign pack because they're gonna be on the march for months? And I think that that's- it's kind of nuts to think about how much people did carry who had to be on campaign for a long time. Like, I think the average pack for the 18th century British infantryman was, like, 30, 50 pounds or something, it's nuts, it's a lot when you add in the musket and all this other stuff that they're carrying. Though a friend of mine who I reenact with and who is also a veteran is like, "You know, actually, it's not that different from what a modern fully suiting up is for the military," so we do kind of get this idea of, oh, it was all so different back then, or, oh, my fantasy world must be oh-so-different, and it's like, well, actually people that are doing that job now have similar complaints. I imagine that a medieval carpenter probably has similar about, like, "Ugh, I gotta

carry this hammer but I also need this hammer,” and a carpenter now is like, “Man, I need both these hammers.”

M: “I need nine types of saws.”

R: Yes!

MC: Yeah, in terms of carrying around large packs, I actually- my husband’s uncle was contracted by the US military at one point to study whether it would be possible for soldiers to carry their gear on their head because-

R: [cracks up]

MC: For real!

R: I love that this is a study! I love it!

MC: Because he’s actually - my husband’s uncle, he was in a book about mad scientists - he’s actually an expert in gaits, as in G-A-I-T-S. He discovered in his research that there are places in Africa where traditionally people carry these burdens on their heads that are very heavy, and it didn’t actually have any additional energy expenditure. The study was, well, can we teach all of our soldiers to carry these massive packs on their heads? This would be fantastic! The study ultimately proved that it’s something you really have to have been doing since you were very small, train your whole life, you can’t just suddenly train your marines to carry 40 pound packs on their heads. So, we could’ve, you know, there’s this alternate timeline where that’s what the military does.

R: Yes! Oh! I think that this needs to be in a fantasy story now, that warriors who are raised from children to go on to become warriors also have to learn to carry all their stuff on their heads.

MC: Absolutely.

R: That’s just...

M: That’s just how they learn, yeah.

R: That’s just how they learn.

MC: And I don’t know, I have to say, this was anecdotally, verbally passed to me through the family so I can’t 100% vouch for its accuracy, but I believe it.

R: I believe it.

MC: And the other thing I think of when I think of everything people are carrying is I have friends who have done the Appalachian Trail, and that's where you have to carry eeeeverything you need for, like, a month with you, and the degree to which they will carefully plan out every single ounce, because you don't wanna carry anything further- I mean, if you're gonna be carrying it that far, you don't wanna carry it any more than you have to. They'll saw toothbrushes in half so they don't have to carry the other half of the toothbrush, that's how much they care about not having the extra weight. Much as our video game characters like to carry around their 42 pounds of orc meat or whatever.

M: It's the same thing in terms of space travel, every pound counts so you're gonna make sure you can maximize everything you're doing with everything you're taking up, you're not gonna take anything up wasted. Or if you have something where you have, like, balloonists, they need to know exactly how much they're gonna carry, so these are things that you can incorporate into the practical concerns of your characters, instead of just being like, eh, they got... stuff. Doesn't matter.

MC: Yeah.

M: Or you cheat and just have Hermione have her bag that has everything in it, because why not.

R: Never forget the magic, I mean, the magic can get you around a lot of these issues.

M: It really can.

MC: Oh yeah.

M: And that was the brilliant thing, is, like, "Yeah, I got a tent, I got these things, I got this portrait!"

R: It's bigger on the inside.

MC: I would love to have a purse like that.

R: So we are coming up toward the end of our hour, and before we move on to Melissa's piece of worldbuilding trivia to give us to our world, I wanted to give us each an opportunity for one more *in my book*, and so I wanted to know for each of you, for one of your main characters, what is one in-world item that they always have in their pocket?

M: Minox always has extra food, and this is a thing that- because in my book, magic burns calories, so people who are mages, if you're doing magic, you're gonna get hungry really quick, so it's good to just have extra, like, dried fruit or dried meat or something just on you so you

don't pass out after you do something magically, and my editor was like, "We've reached the point in this book where he should be at least prepared all the time,"

MC, R: [laughing]

M: "Because he's not *stupid*, we've had too many bits where it's like, oh, now he's just gonna pass out, so have it be that he just always has something in his pocket, and you can have it like, 'he ate that and he's out' but he should always be ready, just in case."

R: [laughs] I like it.

MC: Absolutely. I had kind of a similar progression in that, *in my book*, this is actually in my first trilogy *Swords and Fire*, my character Amalia has a satchel, and things kept getting added to the satchel after incidents in which she did not have them and needed them, so she has an elixir that she has to take to stay alive due to an unfortunate childhood poisoning incident, and she always carries that elixir with her, but then due to incidents in the books as the books go by, she's carrying more and more backup vials in different locations, just in case to make sure that doesn't happen again! And more and more stuff keeps getting added to the satchel too, she learns from her experiences that she needs to carry whatever.

R: This reminds me of how I have, like, purse Advil, and desk Advil, and car Advil, and other purse Advil, and overnight pack Advil... [laughs]

MC: Oh yeah. Absolutely.

R: So I think mine is that all of the female characters and some of the male characters too have pins in their pockets. They have a pinball or they have some form of pins, because so much of the clothing that my characters are wearing closes with pins. So if you lose a pin, then suddenly the front of your gown is gaping open or whatever, so you have to have spare pins so you can look put together at all times. It's like the equivalent of carrying an elastic on your wrist or having bobby pins in your bag, just in case.

MC: Nice.

R: Alright, Melissa, we would love to hear from you - we didn't actually talk about it much today, actually at all today, but we are kind of building a second world live on air bit by bit, and it is our custom that when we have a guest star join us, that they leave us with a little piece of trivia for our world. It can be related to this episode, completely unrelated, any little thing you'd like.

MC: OK. Well mine: not only do the skirts have pockets, but they can have pocket dimensions. Circle skirts with mystic runes along the hem are popular among the well-connected and wealthy, and with a little practice, twirl and kneel and you can create a magic circle that will open a portal to another world.

R: I love it!

M: I love it!

R: I love it!

M: Love it!

R: [laughs]

M: I love the TARDIS dress!

R: [laughs harder]

MC: Absolutely! [laughs]

R: Oh, that is fun. Melissa, it has been so much fun having you with us. I hope that you had as much fun as we did.

MC: I did, thank you so much.

R: This has been an absolute delight. Listeners, do check out Melissa's trilogy that is already out, and check out *Obsidian Tower* when it is out in June, and feel free to hit up Melissa on twitter with all of your questions about what it's like to fight in a dress, because...

MC: I have a lot of opinions on that.

R: She has a lot of opinions.

MC: [laughs] Thank you so much for having me, it's really been a pleasure.

[outro music plays]

M: Hi, you. Thanks for listening to this episode of Worldbuilding for Masochists, and letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. Our next episode goes up on May 27th, and we'll be talking about empires and rebellions with Andrea Stuart. We're going to build up some nations, let them get corrupt and decadent, and then tear them down with a plucky band of dissidents. It's a time-honored trope, and we're going to deep dive into it. We really hope you liked this episode. If you did, please take a minute to tell a friend, shout about us on the internet, 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 our email is

worldbuildcast@gmail.com. We also have a discord chatroom linked on the About the Show page of our website if you want to come and chat with us and other fans of the podcast.

Here's your cool fact of the day: in the Revolutionary War, many soldiers abandoned their heavy cast iron cooking kettles while marching. One soldier wrote, "[dramatic, gruff voice with vague ye olde accent] I told my messmates I could not carry our kettle any further. They said they would not carry it any further. What use was it? Nothing to cook, and did not want anything to cook with. I sat it down in the road, and one of the others gave it a shove with his foot, and it rolled down against the fence, and that was the last I ever saw of it. We got through the night march, we found out our mess was not the only one that got rid of their *iron bondage*." So remember that when your heroes stop to make a stew at the end of a long hike.

[outro music plays]