Episode 1:
Playing God in Your Spare Time

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[00:00]

A: Welcome, you're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

M: Because we got tired of just talking on Twitter.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller.

A: I'm Alexandra Rowland.

M: And I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

A: This is episode 1, Playing God in Your Spare Time.

[intro music plays]

A: Cool, hi friends, wow, new podcast, this is so exciting! I'm so thrilled to be talking with you guys about one of my favorite hobbies of all time. I think since this is a new podcast we of course have to take a couple of minutes to sort of talk about ourselves, our hopes, our dreams, our dearest wishes of our hearts, and what sort of expertise we have in this subject: why are we here, why did we think that it was a good idea to start a podcast about worldbuilding. Rowenna, you start.

R: I have to start? Okay. I am a longtime writer and longtime nerd, and my biggest interest was writing and worldbuilding. I tend to start a lot of times with history and with biology and with nature and just kind of like all kinds of dorky stuff that, what would people notice? My current books that are out are *Torn* and *Fray*, with a third coming in the trilogy.

A: And they're *so* good.

R: And they focus on women's work and urban living and revolution and silk, so I mean what more could you possibly want?

A: All the best things, yeah. I, too, am a fantasy author. My debut novel came out last year, *A Conspiracy Of Truths*. I have another novel coming out this September, the sequel, *A Choir of Lies*. And both of those … I have some amusing anecdotes to tell you about the world that those are set in, and I think I'm going to hold that for a little bit later in the podcast. But worldbuilding is something that I occasionally do just for funsies when I don't have a reason to do it. Like, I'm bored, I'll just do some worldbuilding for no reason. And I have had some wonderful conversations on Twitter with our friend Marshall Ryan Maresca here about tidal patterns and the influence of two moons on a world and so forth. So I look forward to having a redux of those conversations at a later date.

M: So, I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca, I'm also a fantasy writer. That's why we're all here.

A: Sort of the theme here, yeah.

M: And I am the author of The Maradaine Saga, which is four different series intertwined, all set in the same city, that all form a larger whole as a greater saga. So my books are *The Thorn of Dentonhill*, *A Murder of Mages*, *The Alchemy of Chaos*, *An Import of Intrigue*, *The Holver Alley Crew*, *The Imposters of Aventil —*

A: Don't you have, like, twelve?

M: I'm sorry, I'm very prolific!

A: You are!

M: *The Imposters of Aventil, Lady Henterman's Wardrobe*, *The Way of the Shield*, *A Parliament of Bodies*, which just came out in March, and then *Shield of the People*, which comes out in October.

A: Look at you, fancy man, showing us up!

R: We're like little babies compared to him.

A: Compared to Marshall Ryan actual Maresca over here, with his twelve novels and fancy man vests and so forth, yeah. So let's jump into some conversations. I'm just going to sort of, like, take charge and ask some questions and so forth. Since it's the first episode, I think we wanted to talk a little bit about where you start with worldbuilding, because it can… I think for a lot of people it can be such a huge and daunting task. So, where do you start? What do you do?

M: Well, it is a huge and daunting task and for some reason, the thing I love to do is how do I make it more daunting?

A: Sure, yeah. I mean, yeah.

M: I want to start with as big and wide of a scope as possible. Like, even though what I'm writing is only taking place in a city, I still need to know the whole world. So, I usually start with a map, and use that as … how even I like, get the map can … I can get deeply, deeply wonky on how I make the map, like I've done it where I make a proto-continent, and then break it up, and then smash it back together so that then I know where the mountains are and things like that. But that's where I love to start just because I always get stuck if I don't know what's over the next hill. So I need to know the full scope of things just as a way to get started.

A: Yeah, yeah. And for me, I think it's … I like building a world where it feels like characters have elbow room. Right? You know, like, there's space to move and sort of flex their influence in the environment around them, but also that there is a world beyond the horizon. I really like feeling like it's expansive and rich, and that there are things that we don't know. I think I see a lot in fantasy that … a writer often, since they know everything about the world, the characters that they're writing often know everything about the world, and that's not really how it works in real life, you know?

M: Right.

R: Yeah, I definitely agree with that. I think that I start thinking about the character first, and what are they encountering, what do they have for breakfast, what do they see when they go out of their door in the morning, and there might be things that the character doesn't know about their world. I think, you know, like you, Marshall, I started the story in a city, and my character actually doesn't know very much about what's going on outside of that city; she's never been outside of it. So there's kind of a freedom there for her to be ignorant, and it was kind of weird for me at first to be like, okay, there are things that I might know, but I need to keep that shoved aside, because there's no reason for her to know what this other city would look like, or what the patterns of trade are between, you know, these two coastal towns. She's never been there, she has no idea.

M: But she might have, say, heard the name, and has her own preconceived notions of what it's supposed to be.

A: And I think that having a character with some degree of ignorance can also be a really useful tool for you as an author, because then you can — and I'm going to keep bringing this up because it's my favorite trick of all time to use — you can sort of build a negative space and invite your character to make assumptions about the world, and also invite the reader to make assumptions about the world. Because often times the reader will come up with some kind of

imagining that is way more rich and interesting and vibrant than anything that you could actually translate and put on the page.

R: Well, I mean, absolutely, because I think reading is a creative act. So, the reader is going to layer their experiences and their preconceptions and what they understand over whatever you say anyway, so it's kind of fun to play with that and to have that knowledge that it's gonna happen.

A: Yeah. We have a whole list of dot points to talk about, dear listeners, and one of the most interesting points that we came up with is this idea of choosing versus presuming. Do either of you want to talk about sort of what we meant by that?

M: How many things do we put into a fantasy world that are just these sort of base presumptions that we're not even necessarily making the choice — and, like, you see so many, let's say, Western European-styled fantasies, where the idea that there's royalty and nobility and a king and all that is just a given. And how often is that, like, are you really thinking, this is what I want it to be — like, do I want that a year is, you know, about 365 days, and there is just one moon in the sky, and the moon only goes around every 28 days. How much of that was a thing where you were like, yes, this is what I want it to be, and how much of that was, oh, I didn't think about what I wanted that to be, we just presume certain things. I mean, of course there are so many levels of base presumptions that you're going to make — the fact that, you know, you have humans.

R: Yeah, like bipedal — yeah.

A: Breathing oxygen, yeah.

M: At what level do you be like, no, I need to make a conscious choice about these things, rather than just presume that that's what it's like.

A: Yeah, I mean, and I really like to … I find myself choosing the … well, some of the defaults quite often, like saying there are four seasons in a year. Or there are 365 days in a year. Or there are 24 hours in a day, or there's only one night and day cycle, and they're roughly between eight and twelve hours long depending on the season and your position in the world. Just because those things are not the most important things to me, and, like, presuming something is not necessarily a bad thing to do when you're worldbuilding. Or at least, making the presuming choice. You know, I think that it is important as you say, to think about the choices and to make deliberate choices.

M: Yeah.

A: But if your deliberate choice is to construct a world with 365 days to a year and 24 hours to a day, that's not a bad thing. You don't have to do everything original and everything different all of

the time. Because for one thing, your reader is going to be totally lost, and it's going to be a really steep onboarding process to kind of get them up to date and up to speed with what you're doing with the book. Whereas if you just let them bring some of their own assumptions to the table, that saves you a lot of fucking work.

R: I think also, like some of the presumptions save a shortcut in terms of the cascade effect, that if you change something, like how long is a year, or what do seasons look like, what else does that affect? Not only kind of down the chain, if you have different kinds of seasons, what does agriculture look like then, and you kind of have to rework all of that stuff. So that can be fun, but that can also be, again, a lot of work. And also kind of back up the chain, that there could certainly be things that you play with that suddenly, oh this earth is not inhabitable any more because I made a year way too long, and it's actually, like, spinning out of control from its sun or whatever. So there's kind of goofy stuff there that you can dig yourself in a hole kind of easily. So presume with care, but at the same time some of them are there for ease as well.

A: Right, because at some point you have to stop doing the worldbuilding and start telling a story. Like, as much as we all love worldbuilding, it is possible to do too much and you do have to give your reader a chance to get invested in the world that you are building. And that means giving them a plot, giving them characters, giving them a person to be interested in.

R: As awesome as worldbuilding is, it's there at the service of something else, which is the story that you eventually want to blurf out there.

A: Exactly. Unless you're doing it for, you know, funsies and a side hobby, in which case, go fucking nuts, kid. Marshall Ryan Maresca, my dear friend, you have some dot points here called Marshall's Three Paths: top down, idea out, and bottom-up, do you want to tell us about those?

M: Yes! Okay, so, the way I see it: when you decide you're going to start worldbuilding, there is basically three ways you can go about it. The first would be top-down, that you build your world as you write, and just do a whole discovery, improvised worldbuild. Like, you just start writing and your characters suddenly go, "Well, if we do this, the Council won't approve." And you're like, "Oh, so I have a Council now. So that's gonna be a thing!" And you use your discovery writing process as a way to discover the world. This, to me, would be a nightmare, but some people love to do this.

A: It works for some people, yep.

M: And the next one would be idea out, like you have a big concept of, this is the story I want to write. And then use that big concept as, you know, say everybody lives in giant trees and uses gliders to get about and there's monsters on the ground, so that's my big idea, and so we're going to start from there and figure everything else about the worldbuilding based on that big idea.

A: An aesthetic thing, like, I really want to write a story with these aesthetics. With a steampunk aesthetic or a solarpunk aesthetic, or elves-living-in-trees-and-hang-gliders kind of aesthetic, like you said.

M: Yeah, like, I want this steampunk story of pirates in a giant blimp!

A: Yeah!

M: Everything else needs to be based around that idea — and so you worldbuild around that. And the third way is from the bottom up, where you just start the worldbuilding process from the very beginning, build everything, and then find your story from within your build process. Which, you can go really deep and in the weeds with that if you really want to. Sometimes I have to stop myself from going too far in the weeds, because you could be like, Okay, how far back do we go? Do we work out history from the beginning of civilization, from the cooling of the mantle in the first place? You can go that far back if you want to, but does that necessarily help you in terms of then writing a story at all? Or is it just you getting super wonky with your worldbuilding?

A: Right. If you want to get super wonky with your worldbuilding. I think you're using the word 'wonk' here as in 'policy wonk'?

M: Yes.

A: Okay, rather than 'wonky' as in, like, broken. I mean, I guess it could be both, really. I think that prehistory is a good place to do those presumings, where you can say, we can just presume that the crust of the earth cooled as it does by the default, and that evolution happened sort of as it does, maybe with some tweaks here and there so we can have dragons or giraffes with wings or what have you. So, yeah, that's a good place to do the presuming, I think, rather than examining every single piece of that and making a deliberate choice that, yes, you're going to have the earth's crust cooling however many billions of years ago and so forth. Because as you say in the dot points here, this way does lie madness, yes indeed. The other thing, the one thing that sort of always depresses — not always depresses me, it's not so much a depression as, like, sometimes I think about this ruefully while I am worldbuilding — and I think to myself, you know what, I could just make any old shit up and no one would even really notice or care.

R: But I think, too, it can keep you from writing yourself into a corner where you contradict yourself. If you know all these things, you didn't then suddenly write in a world where, you know, I was traversing the open plain and then we hit the mountains, and then we were on the river, and oh, crap, I just wrote a river that's running up a mountainside, and that's not going to work—

A: Yeah.

R: —or this coastal town that I suddenly have, like, really odd tornadoes running through, because that doesn't work either. And so, it can kind of keep you from screwing yourself over or

writing yourself into a corner that you can't get out of. You know, when you have that groundwork, even if no one ever really sees it, it's a cheat sheet for you.

M: Well, yeah. I mean, of course, when it comes to the writing, you don't want your worldbuilding to come through so much that your readers will feel like there's going to be a quiz at the end. The thing that I always am talking about is the iceberg rule. You know, above the surface is visible, is just a little bit. And there's all this other beautiful stuff that's never going to be in the text, that only you know. But the fact that you know it can bring a lot of richness to everything else in the text, in theory, so that it feels more complete.

A: And also, like, when you have … if your goal is to do kind of expansive, world-sized worldbuilding, then starting with at least sort of a sketchy map — you don't have to have it fully detailed, you don't have to know where all the mountain ranges are — but just sort of a vague idea of, like, sort of where the continents are, and maybe what latitude your particular country is lying at, just so that you know the basic weather patterns and environment, because that's something that's going to immediately affect the characters, right?

R: I think for me, too, I found myself needing kind of a little mini city map. Because this was like, I have someone who's walking the same paths every day and going the same places, and it was like, well, I didn't want to write myself some point where I'm just throwing street names out there, and I'm kind of not really sure orienting myself where my character actually is, so, you have like the big picture maps and also, like, the little mini sketches that you sometimes need to kind of orient your day-to-day as well as the global.

A: Right, because your books are set very much in cities, right? And I think Marshall Ryan Maresca, you also — and I am going to continue calling you by your full name, by the way —

M: I was really frustrated with a lot of sort of eighties- and nineties-era fantasy where we go to a city and the city is a bar and, like, one alley where there's, you know, thieves who steal things and one lord's castle, and that's the whole city, and I'm like, that's not how cities are!

R: Really cheap sets, I think, might have been part of that. But no, I hear what you're saying, because you want to think about all the things that a character will encounter. And, you know, they don't just have the *Cheers* bar and the alley of thieves who beat you up, and the castle that's, like, way over there that maybe they go to, maybe they don't depending on who they are. You have quarters, and you have outskirts, and you have a place where this city meets everything else, and is that a hard delineation or not? And when you're thinking about the bigger picture, you know, you have things like weather patterns or geography that … how is this actually playing out in the world? You have storms rising up from, like, where now? I'm not sure.

A: Right. And again, if you are wanting to write a book — for one thing, if world building does not sound fun to you, this is not the podcast for you! Like, I keep thinking to myself, well, you know, you can do that, but you don't have to do that. And then I'm thinking to myself, yes, but the

people who are listening to this podcast are the people who are going to want to do that, so. I shouldn't worry too much about it. But, yeah, again, this is all deliberate stuff and I think this is very much sort of … you should do this to the degree that you think is most fun. And whenever it stops being fun, you should stop doing that and do something else.

M: Yes.

A: And for me, the fun part is particularly … not so much environment building, because the environment building is fine, but I tend to just sort of sketch it out however and get that over and done with so I can get on to the really fun part, which is building cultures and civilizations and people, and talking about how people influence the environment around them and so forth.

R: Because people and environment are so intrinsically linked, it's like, that's where the fun comes in, I think. It's that interplay between people and where they live and who they are and what they do.

A: Have you heard of that theory — and I don't know if this is, like, a proven theory that's currently accepted in, like, the field of anthropology but it's the one that I was kind of taught when I was in early college — there's this idea that the environment shapes the kind of religion that a culture will develop. So if you have an environment with a very unpredictable and violent weather system — for example, Mesopotamia, which had terrible storms that would cause flash floods and kill a bunch of people unexpectedly — then your religion often develops unpredictable and capricious and violent gods who need to be placated somehow. Whereas on the other hand, if your weather system and your environment is very stable and regular — for example ancient Egypt, which had the annual floods that could be predicted down to the day — your gods tend to be much more — chill? And, like, less of assholes? Still kind of assholes, you know, they have their family drama just like anyone else, but, like, much less kind of Murder People than the Mesopotamian gods were by comparison. Are you guys familiar with this, have you heard this before?

M: I have heard that very specific thing before, yeah. I forget where I read it but yeah I do remember that. I've heard now that *Guns, Germs and Steel* is out of favour but I'm still a big fan of the idea of what is physically in the area you are is definitely going to be a strong indicator of what kind of culture you have, just because of what resources are available to you and what foods are domesticatible and what animals are domesticatible.

A: I think that animals, specifically, would affect culture because, for example, like, when you domesticate dogs or cats or cows, that opens up a whole new range of opportunities and options for you, and then whatever option you choose is a reflection of the values that you have as a society. Like when you domesticate goats, are you going to stick with being a nomad, for your goats and sheep? Are you going to have a semi-nomadic life and develop some agriculture on the side? And that has something to do with the environment as well as, like, values and what is available to you.

R: One of the things that I think, like, going along with that, that really affects values and how culture functions is just scarcity. What's common and what's scarce.

A: Yes.

R: That if you think about it, for example nomadic cultures often develop because of scarcity. That you have grazing fields that are not going to be sustainable year round, so you have to keep moving, you have water that's not sustainable year round, so you have to keep moving. So if you have something that's scarce, suddenly it becomes very precious. At the same time if you have something that's very abundant it can also be very important in a culture just because it's all around you so, you know, if you have trees all around you suddenly that becomes something that you build mythos and importance around as well. So it's kind of interesting like you were saying, what is in the environment has shaped what you value in a society.

A: So let's move on, we have some other questions to touch on. What are some of the reasons for doing, like, big expansive world building versus more small and limited, other than “I felt like it”?

R: When I first wrote the first book in my series it was all contained in one city, like they never leave that city, they don’t leave — there are things happening outside the city but it’s not something that actually affects the characters in a direct way — but then I kind of had to bust out the walls when I got a book deal that was three books instead of one and had to write two sequels. So I had to do some major renovations on my world and really blow it out and expand it. I mean, I had ideas of what the world looked like out there but I really had to get into more detail and actually take these characters out of a very insular place and shove them out there into the big wide world and so that gave, you know, kinda an opportunity where you had to have bigger worldbuilding if you have a bigger story that is more broad, over more area and more time too.

M: And I think part of it is to give it that extra layer of verisimilitude so that it doesn’t feel like the cheap sets. You want your story to feel like if your reader happened to just escape from the story and go around the corner, they’re not gonna find the back of the set and minor characters having a smoke break.

A, loudly: Or you *could*! And that could — I mean — [A, less loudly] Sorry, no, I’m kidding. I’m kidding.

M: But you want it to feel like there’s so much other stuff happening all at the same time that isn’t the story you’re telling. I think that comes from having that more expansive world-build. Now, there’s the pitfall that, “I did all this work, now I have to show it all to you.” The world that all my Maradaine books are set in, they’re all pretty much set in the city of Maradaine. But I had done the whole world, so I have the trunk novel that is the: Now We’re Going to Go to Each Part

of the World So You Can See It All. And it's trunked for a very good reason. That still helps inform where I'm coming from so that I'm aware of all the different, more cosmopolitan influences happening in the cities and I think that certainly helps me from just making it *be* another London-with-the-serial-numbers-filed-off kind of city.

R: Right, and I think, too, remembering that even in a very kind of a historical, or even ancient-inspired fantasy world, it's not insular, that there are trade routes and there is exchange of ideas and there's commerce. That was one thing that was very important for me in building the Unraveled Kingdom world, was that commerce is really huge and it's undercurrent in a lot of what's going on, and so you kinda have to be aware that things are coming in from places. You have to have something that you want to sell to places. So, what's happening there? What are trade routes? Why do people even keep in touch with you? Because they want something that you have.

A: I—

R: So, thinking about that undercurrent of richness there.

A: I think that's something that a lot of people sort of forget about in regards to the real world which was that we have had global trade, or nearly global trade, for a long-ass time! We have archeological records of jewels found in Viking settlements that were brought from Sri Lanka and South Asia. It might have taken a long time for one product to get to the other end of the world, but they were moving and people were in communication with each other and it might have been a very long relay race of, "I'm selling you this thing and then you sell that to another person," and so on and so forth, but it existed. It happened. We have had contact with each other and there wasn't nearly as much Here There Be Dragons kind of stuff back in the ancient times as we tend to assume that there was.

Have you guys ever had that acquaintance who is — this probably happened to you when you were a tiny, baby writer learning to world-build for the first time — did you ever have that friend who was like, "Oh, yes! I have a hundred and forty pages of world-building for this fantasy world which I have been working on for twelve years, and one day I will be finished with the world-building and I will go write a novel in it!" Do you guys know that person?

M: I think I was that person.

[A laughs]

R: Now I do, I know that person now.

A: I didn't wanna call you out specifically, Marshall Ryan Maresca, but I had a feeling that you were gonna be because it generally is, like, a white guy who tells me this sort of thing. I'm sorry!

[M laughs]

A: I was like, “I can see it in his eyes! He was that guy!”

M: Well, I was definitely — I was, for a long time, in that, “Someday I’m gonna be writing in this, someday I’m gonna …” and then eventually I was in this really, really terrible job and wanting to quit and figure out what the heck I’m doing with my life, and my wife was like, “You keep saying you’re gonna write books. Just buckle down and do it!”

A: Yeah.

M: So I buckled down and did it, but I was doing the thing where I was just fiddling with the world-build, fiddling with the world-build… Now there was, actually, at least a semi-reason for that because there was a period of time where I was contacted by a guy who had a gaming company and was going to launch a new roleplaying game, and wanted a setting and so he was like — because we had a mutual friend who was aware of all the world-building I was doing — and he was like, “I think the setting you’re doing is in! Do more world-building!” So I was doing it for that, for a while. Then I was like, “Okay, now I have all this. Now I really have to settle down and go from having all this to actually writing something that’s set in it.”

A: So, I will tell you an amusing anecdote.

M: Oh! There’s an amusing anecdote!

A: Because I was sort of this, but backwards. Because when I was — this amusing anecdote is that when I was in college, in my finals week of my very, very last semester — I was an English major, as you might have guessed, so I only had one actual test that I had to go into class for — everything else was papers that I had already handed in. So I had a whole week to sit in my dorm room with loads of free time all to myself, and I had just had a terrible break-up with an asshole gentleman.

R: Uh, he was not a gentleman, then.

A: Not a gentleman, you’re correct. So I was like, “I need to do something fun that’s just for me, that’s not for any class or for any project because if I have it for a project, then I will put tons of weight and stress on it. I’m just gonna do a bunch of world-building and it will be specifically for no reason whatsoever. I will never write a book with this, this is just for me.” So I was doing those 30, 50 pages of intense world-building—

M: Right.

A: But I was going, “I’m never going to do anything with this.” Then three months later I was like, “I wonder if I could do something with this!”

R: Best laid plans…

A: It was really, genuinely only supposed to be, like, a procrastination project while I worked on this steampunk YA book that I was writing at the time. And then, like, three months into it I started planning *A Conspiracy of Truths*, and then I sort of tripped and got a book deal, and here I am with this expansive world. And right now all of the projects that I currently have planned, right now and in the future, are all set in this same world. And me from just-about-to-graduate-college kind of looks at me from right now and goes like, "You little bitch. This was not supposed to be for anything!" Kind of the backwards route from what people normally do from their expansive worldbuilding.

R: So, now, one thing I was kind of curious about was groundwork and foundations, and if you had kind of ever found yourself written into a situation where your worldbuilding dictated something about your story.

M: I think a good example of that is in *Lady Henterman's Wardrobe*, where — so, in that series, the main characters are in the poor west side of the city, and they're a bunch of thieves who pull heists, and they're a lovely, lovely group of characters. This thing that they're going to do is, they're basically trying to sneak and break their way into a rich manor house on the east side of the city. And so, I was like, okay, you know, I have all the neighborhoods in the city, where this is, and where *this* is, and I can't just have them, like, popping halfway across the city every day, so I'm going to have to have them set up some sort of separate base of operations a lot closer to where they're going to be. So, things like that, where I've set up forces I wasn't originally planning — so, now they have a whole separate safe house to work out of away from their neighborhood when so much of what the plot is is about them protecting their neighborhood — then I'm like, ooh, can I play with the fact that they're now halfway across town and can't run back and protect their friends if something bad happens, and stuff like that. So, things like that came up — where if I just had a vague, ill-defined city, I could just pretend—

R: You could just do whatever!

A: A lot of times, I think of it as kind of like a game of solitaire. And, like, when you're playing solitaire, you have this game. There's no one else in the room but you; you're playing solitaire by yourself, and you're playing rules that you have agreed upon with yourself. And you could, like, peek at the next cards and sort of — oh, here's an ace from twelve cards deep in the stack, I'll just take that and no one will know — but, no! You're setting up your own rules, and you're choosing not to cheat! But sometimes you really want to cheat, though. Right? And it can be pretty difficult to stick with your self-discipline, as it were, and not fuck up your own worldbuilding by being vague about where streets are, or saying, oh yeah, I could just have them be mysteriously there to rescue their friends!

M: I might not have explicitly defined Magic Can't Do That, even though I've, you know, said that in my head — but maybe I need magic to Do That right now, so my life is easier.

A: Probably no one will notice!

R: And magic totally adds in a whole other layer of craziness, doesn't it?

M: *Oh*, yes.

A (overlapping): Oh my *gosh*.

R: And it's like, you can define it in a way that can do anything — but if it can do anything, then you've just totally undermined everything sometimes.

M: You've got to play with, then, what that does to society. One of my favorite things for that comes from a Steven Brust — I want to say it's the Vlad Taltos …. I'm surely mangling, but — that series! Where the resurrection is just so ubiquitous that, then, like, assassinating someone is just a way of saying, hey, quit it. Because being killed is like, a minor inconvenience! He brought magic to that level of power and then how that affects society.

A: Yeah, same thing in Jen Lyons' *Ruin of Kings*, because they have this, like, death cult where you can just die. And just be brought back to life. And so it's really, really interesting to construct this world. And I have talked to Jen a little bit about — well, quite a lot about this, actually. No spoilers, obviously, but Jen has constructed this world where dying is not necessarily a permanent thing. And that has huge ripple effects. But I think we're going to have, like, five episodes about magic. I think that we will have to, because there's no way to fit it all in just one hour.

M: Oh, yeah.

R: But it's interesting when it's the foundational thing, right? Then it's kind of, like, if it's as foundational in somebody's world as the weather or the geography — and so it's kind of an interesting wrinkle that you throw in there, that there's this extra thing that can affect everything else, or write you into a corner, or be really fun — or make you bash your head against a wall, just depending.

A: So how much do you want to imply about the non-setting locations? Like, when you have a setting that's a little bit more limited, like a city, like how the two of you work — and, I mean, I have done it, too — what is important to ... we've talked a little bit about trade routes and so forth, but how important is it to talk about what's beyond the city?

R: I wouldn't say it's absolutely necessary, just because I think it's in many ways dictated by the story and the characters in terms of what you actually say. You might know plenty of

beyond-the-horizons, but I think that there are certainly characters who, just because of whatever circumstances they're in are limited in what they know about. So, you know, you can have characters who are really working class, illiterate, have no knowledge of what's out there except what they kind of overhear, and that's what you can pass on to the reader. Or you can have a character who is, you know, the king in the high castle who knows everything and is getting all the letters and the correspondence and has all the maps and has traveled, and that's what the reader gets then. And so I think a lot of what's passed on — at least if you're doing any kind of first person or close third — is going to be through the perceptions and the experiences of the character, and I think that in many ways that can lead to richer worldbuilding on the page than anything that we do behind the page, as kind of like — how is this experience, and how is this tactile, and how is it understood by an actual human person?

A: Oh, I completely agree, and I think that's one of the best ways to convey worldbuilding to the reader as well, without making it seem like an infodump. Because people have a much higher tolerance for infodumps when it is about characters and their opinions and their experiences of the world rather than cold, hard facts. For example, no one reads the prologue to *Lord of the Rings,* which is "Concerning Hobbits," which is like thirty pages of hobbits and pipe weed — like, we probably read it once, but that's not the part you go back to. Most of the time you just skip ahead to chapter one, right?

M: It is literally a thirty page, like, sociological report on the hobbits—

A: *Yeah*.

M: As a youthful person trying to read that book, I kept bouncing off it, because, like this is the first part. And I was like, uh…

R: Who's supposed to read this?

A: Whereas, if you skip right to chapter 1, then you get to hear about Bilbo and Frodo and their interactions with their neighbors, and that tells you a lot about hobbit society, but it tells you about it in a much more interesting and engaging way. So having a character who has strong opinions about the world around them is a really, really good way to sort of convey that information to your reader. Because then they can complain about things — readers love that — and they can enthuse about things — readers love that as well — it's just easier to read about emotions than it is to read about facts, would you agree?

M: Oh, absolutely. Like, rather than a treatise on what magic is and how it works and all that, if you have some guy just griping about mages and they probably set the fire, then (a) it's telling you already that magic exists, but it's also telling you a lot more about this society and how it reacts to magic and things like that.

A: Yes! Yes.

R: And what is normal and then what is surprising to a character can tell the reader a lot, too. You know, if they're going about their day and they stub their toe on a unicorn and they say nothing, you know this is not surprising, this is normal. But if they're going about their day and someone's selling apples in the marketplace and this is exciting and surprising and new, you're like, oh, okay, so why is this surprising and now you have my attention, and you can feed a little bit more in there as to why it's interesting or surprising for a character.

A: And it also gets the reader asking questions. Which is kind of the ideal that you want to aim for, because if they're asking questions, then they're interested, and they are invested in hearing the answer. And then they won't mind if you do a little bit of an infodump to tell them that. What are some of the other characters who are — besides, like, emotional people — what are some of the other characters who are useful vehicles for carrying worldbuilding to the readers? Do you have any examples or opinions?

M: Characters whose job is education are always useful ones.

A: That's pretty good.

M: Because then you get something that's sort of infodump-y, but you present it as sort of an in-character thing of, here's a professor giving a lecture, or here's a professor yelling at your main character for having the wrong answer, and thus you can give them the right answer. Or — not to be all like, Well, in *my* book, but I love to say *well, in my book* —

A: I think we're all going to be doing that a little bit, so, like—

M: One thing I did to get a bit of, like, history infodump out in *Way of the Shield* was, rather than just be like, history infodump, (a) I made my main character be a history buff, so, like, that's his thing. And then I put a painting in front of him that represented bad history, so he just gets mad. So he's looking at this painting, like, "Those ten people were never in the same room! They did not actually work together! Who commissioned this painting and why is it here in a museum? This is terrible!" And so then you get some of what the real history is, but you also get this sort of sense of, if the legend is better than history, print the legend, and that's what the painting is.

A: Oh, yeah, and you know that is, like, one thousand percent my jam, too — is like, bad history, or the stories that we tell each other, because that tells you so much! Not only does it tell you the actual story that they're telling, it tells you about the person telling the story, it tells you a lot about the society that they live in that has the values that it does to come up with this particular story, it's doing usually, like, between three and five things at once, instead of just one thing, as Tolkien's "Concerning Hobbits" treatise does. Which is just, tell you about hobbits.

So, yes, we are coming up to the end of the podcast, we are running out of time here. Rowenna suggested that we talk about some things that we are excited about to get you, dear listeners,

excited about the rest of the podcast. Who wants to go first? Because I know that I have tons of interesting things.

M: As we do our deeper dive into things, I'm definitely going to be excited about talking more about things like infrastructure in the world, and governments, and how roads and waterways and trade routes and all that fun stuff — in terms of how the worlds actually work and function. So that's going to be a fun thing to talk about as we dive deeper into stuff.

A: I am very much into naming things and constructed languages — I actually minored in linguistics for the explicit purpose of maybe one day I will have to make up a fantasy language. Like, that was the actual reasoning that I had for minoring in linguistics. In hindsight, I think that I probably would have done a little bit better with, like, anthropology or history, just because, like, languages — the stuff that you learn in a linguistics course is not as accessible to the general public as the stuff that you learn in an anthropology course or a history course. And I think that those might have been a little bit more immediately useful for worldbuilding purposes. But I'm also really excited to talk about astronomy, because that's kind of the one science that I have any kind of brain for, and yeah. Bunches of other stuff.

R: I am excited to talk about — we touched on magical systems, and I think the integration of magical systems with a culture at large is something I'm excited to dive into a little bit more. I'm also really excited to talk about family structure, and what is family, and what is parenthood, and what does childhood mean, and kind of playing with that really kind of mundane, ordinary, but also possibly very varied and exciting part of life.

A: Fantastic.

[Outro music plays]

A: Hi, you! Thanks for listening to this episode of Worldbuilding For Masochists, and for letting us help you overcomplicate your writing life. I'm so excited to be doing this podcast with these two cool authors, and to be talking about some of my favorite parts of the writing process! We've got a huge list of amazing topics to talk about, and I think we'll be inviting some guest stars as well, sooner or later. Stay tuned, because we're only going to get deeper into it from here. Our next episode goes up July 10, and we'll be discussing geography, astronomy, and mapmaking. If you don't know anything about any of this stuff, that's totally okay — I think we'd probably better have a bit of a crash course in each of them, just for educational purposes. We really hope that you liked this first episode. If you did, please do take a minute to tell a friend, shout about us on the internet, or leave a review somewhere. If you've got questions, or you just want to tell us how cute we are, there are a number of ways to contact us: we are on Twitter and Tumblr as @worldbuildcast, and our email is worldbuildcast@gmail.com. Here's your cool fact of the day: the first documented use of natural gas as fuel was in China in the first century A.D.

[Outro music plays, fades out]