

Episode 58:
L'Etat, C'est... Quoi?
ft. C.L. Polk

Transcribed by:
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R: You're listening to Worldbuilding for Masochists.

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

CL: Because they won't let us do pub quizzes anymore?

[M&R Laugh]

CL: I'm C.L. Polk.

R: I'm Rowenna Miller

M: I'm Marshall Ryan Maresca.

C: I'm Cass Morris. And this is Episode 58: L'Etat, C'est... Quoi?

[Intro Music]

R: Well listeners, welcome back to another episode of Worldbuilding for Masochists. This time with fabulous guest C.L. Polk, welcome.

CL: Hi.

R: We're so excited to have you here. Would you like to introduce yourself, and tell us a little about you and your work?

CL: Okay... well hi. I'm C.L. Polk. I write fantasy novels and I get mired in worldbuilding often. My first trilogy *The Kingston Cycle* has a lot of talk about politics and government in a nation where a select group of weather magicians exert a lot of political control in a nation with a parliamentary monarchy... and capitalism.

R: Excellent. And your most recent novel, is it, is *Midnight Bargain*? Is that correct, most recent?

CL: Technically the most recent novel is the last book of *The Kingston Cycle*.

R: Oh, okay.

CL: *Soulstar*. But I have a standalone novel called *The Midnight Bargain*. And it doesn't have a lot of stuff about politics and government in it. What it has is a lot of fashion, a lot of wealth accumulated through international trade.

R: Yes, it's a different kind of political undercurrent in that book. It's not overtly about the politics. But I love how you weave in that it's there. There's a governmental system there, and it's part of the influence. It's really well done.

CL: Thank you.

R: So we wanted to dive in today... we've talked about forms of government and types of government on the podcast in the past. But to get into a little bit more of... I guess you might say the philosophical bones of government and how the decisions that we make about what kinds of governments we're going to include and what their goals are, are going to affect the rest of the worldbuilding and all of that jazz. 🍷🍷 So [Laughs] I guess I wanted to start there maybe by asking what are the goals of writing politics in fantasy? Either for you, or more broadly, if you have broad overarching thoughts.

[C & M Laugh]

M: One of the things I constantly think about, and on our Discord server with our wonderful wonderful listeners we had a discussion about this not too long ago, the difference between what the government is designed to do and how that actually works in terms of how things actually happen and how they work. I think that's a great thing to dive into when you're designing the government of your cultures and of your world, is what did they mean to do when they designed it?

[C Laughs]

M: And what actually happened—

[R & M Laugh]

M: Despite what it was designed to do.

R: How it started.

M & R: How it's going.

[C, M, & R Laugh]

CL: Kind of was thinking about... when I write, and specifically I always think about state. It's super duper important to me. I find that my preference is to write about states that are flawed on the practical level. Because it's really fertile ground, per complaining revolutions and otherwise.

[M Laughs]

CL: I like to focus on a state's problems. But it's not that I want to say, "Oh this state is good." Or, "This state is bad." I actually want to examine it and ask this question first. Can a state's

problems be fixed or not? And the next question is... okay, so what do we do about it?

C: I mean, I think that's a great angle. Because clearly we as humans have not hit upon a perfect system of government, a perfect state. We don't yet know what that is. We have theories, we're always sort of trying to reach that more perfect union in a way. But every type of state is flawed in some fashion because humans are flawed and humans make mistakes, and humans don't always have great intentions. And I think you're right. There's just so much fun to explore there in the different tensions and different dynamics that you can get like that.

R: It does strike me as interesting that we as writers, unlike, I hope, state and nation builders in the real world, often want to create bad states. At least flawed states.

[M Laughs]

R: And one way or another we're setting out on purpose to write a state that has key flaws or is just overwhelmingly bad. There are insurmountable problems with it because that is a key function of story in one way or another. And I think that it is kind of interesting, what you were saying, that this is how we can examine questions of government, right? We set up the house of cards to pull it out and look at... okay, so what at the core makes a government "bad"? In quotes.

[M Laughs]

R: What flaw is corrupting, destroying, or otherwise causing the problem.

M: Right, which is why I like asking that "what is the original intention" question. Because you know that the founding people of whatever nation weren't like, "Guys, I've come up with this system... it's so bad. It's so bad."

[C, CL, and R Laugh]

M: "It's going to mess everything up. We've gotta do this."

[Everyone Laughs]

CL: We have a few, a very few examples, of somebody who's like, "I've come up with a plan that will make a state that is wonderful. Hooray. Let's do it." And we all know how those turn out.

[Everyone Laughs]

CL: But I really believe there's something to admire in somebody who has a big vision and wants to transform a society in order to make it fit their idea of what does our government need to do in order to make this a great place to live. Whereas the practical application of this is basically, "We want a revolution! No, this faction needs to be in charge, no, this faction needs to be in charge. Holy Shit! Lenin's got the ball! He's running to the endzone! It's communism, folks!"

[Everyone Laughs]

CL: Because sometimes it's just this weird accident.

[Ongoing Giggles]

C: I was thinking that too. Like, Marshall says what was the original intent? But I think the question before that is: *Was* there an original intent? Or did this state come about by complete accident? Did we all sit down, and write a constitution, and vote on it, and ratify it—

[CL Laughs]

C: In this semi-orderly process involving lots of speeches and yelling at each other. Or did our state come together in bits and globs over time? And our law is sort of all common law, and is it even written down, and is the government system even written down? And I think that's an interesting place to start too. How did this state even form to begin with? And then how close is it still to whatever its origins were?

M: Let alone the, "Oh, things are bad so let's have a revolution. Okay we've had the revolution, we've won, what's step two?"

C: Oh no, things are still bad.

[Everyone Laughs]

C: The revolution did not, in fact—

R: Can we just get on the pendulum swing of France—

C: Mhmm.

R: For the better part of a century. Like..."Let's revolt! And... whoa, what happened, whoops. We're back over here again."

[C, CL, & M Laugh]

R: "Let's revolt! Vive le commune! What happened?" God, so I think the question is how long has your idealistic revolution even resulted in change? How long has this epoch in your state even been is a valid question.

CL: I think there's something to the idea that if you're talking about a state, that it pretty much has kind of a time where whatever was originally intended... by the time you get to about 250 years of running the experiment you're either in a completely different place than where you began or you're going to be there very soon.

M: What a strangely specific number.

[Everyone Laughs]

C: As the three Americans look at each other going, hmm...

[Everyone Laugh-Groans]

CL: Why do I hear the *Jeopardy* music?

R: And one question I think of too, depending on what kind of story you're writing, how much does the state and its philosophical bones even show up? Because there are certain kinds of stories that aren't going to show it very much, but it strikes me as interesting that almost any story is gonna get some of it in there. Right? Like you're writing military sci-fi. Well, why are they fighting? You're writing, you know, a comedy of manners kind of story. Well, what kind of social mores are tied to political realities? There are these little threads that are gonna run through almost any story that you can come up with that's gonna come back to that question of, well, what is your state? What's their bag?

[9:57]

CL: I love building states, I really, really do, and I always tend to start the same way. I have some questions that I always ask myself about where I am. I ask myself who's in power, and then I ask myself how do they structure their government in order to use that power? And then I ask what are they using that power to do? And then finally, how do they make sure that nobody else can take that power from them? OK, maybe that's cynical—

[laughter]

CL: But I ask those four questions and the brain gears are turning at this point. I need those four questions in order to write a novel. And everything that comes after those four questions is just me going into detail about them.

M: Those are four really solid questions though.

C: Yeah.

M: In terms of understanding what your government is gonna be and how it works.

C: Take note, listeners, take note.

[laughter]

C: Because it does, it tells you— It will inform other things. How much is your government in bed with your military, or with your religion, or with your mercantile system? Answering those questions will lead you to the other things that we think about when we think about worldbuilding.

R: And there are so many questions in terms of, how a state functions is tied to other parts of the world, whether those parts are, you know— What technological level are you at is going to inform certain functions of government. And the size of your nation, what kind of neighbors do they have, what does the geography look like? These are going to inform elements of state too, it's fun how it can all tie together. But you're right that asking the questions about the human element — like how does power work? Who is there? Who is doing things? — is super important for the bones of not just good state building but good story and worldbuilding.

M: I think that neighbor question is such a critical thing. Because who you are gonna be is so defined by who your neighbors are. The US could not and would not be what it is if it did not

have the gigantic, unguarded border to the north, didn't have pretty much friendly people of relatively similar values... [laughs]

CL: I guess, yeah, you have an entire nation of Canadians. You have to deal with us all the time. And, you know, sometimes I'm sorry, sometimes I'm not sorry at all.

R: I like our neighbors personally, just gonna put that out there.

C: Same.

M: I do too! I don't think it's quite this way anymore but back in the 80s and 90s, it was just the most casual border ever. [laughs]

CL: Oh yeah! Oh God! Yeah, because I used to live close to the border and I would literally cross the border because I wanted a specific American candy. And then I would turn around and go home.

M: I was in Niagara Falls once and, you know, cross the bridge to the border, and it's some guy who's just like, "Hey! Where were you born? US? Alright, have a good time!" That was the full measure of border security there at that point in time. But it works because there are two neighbors that have pretty solid relations between each other and nobody's particularly worried about espionage across the US-Canadian border, let alone invasion.

CL: It's like, what are we gonna do, make you all wear tuques?

[R laughs]

M: There's worse fates. [laughs]

R: Honestly, I mean... I'm from the Great Lakes region, I volunteer to wear a tuque, it's cool.

[laughter]

M: But yeah, if you are bordered with nasty invaders who want to take all your stuff, you're gonna have a more militarized country that's gonna have to guard that border just because if you don't, they're gonna come, and that's...

R: Or you solve the problem in other ways, like lots of espionage, or bribery, or other kinds of intrigue, or your country just changes size a lot.

[laughter]

CL: You can also have a situation where your next nearest border is kind of like your big cousin who has a lot of clout to throw around, and they're just like, "Don't you talk to me, you're my little buddy, ever again." And so you have this good relationship but at the same time, you have to make sure that you maintain this good relationship, which means that you don't have free reign to just change the system however you want, because you need to keep your big buddy happy with you. It's not like when you have this tiny little country and all of a sudden you're like, "You know what, this monarchy thing sucks, we're gonna run this government, and it's gonna be a

democracy, and what we're gonna do is everybody who's eligible gets their names thrown into a pot, and if their name gets drawn, they're on parliamentary duty for the next two years. And that's how we're gonna do it." And it's like, hold on!

M: Let alone the complexities of alliances, and connections, and if you have a system of nobility or such then you have intermarriages and all that, so then it's like, "We've killed all of our kings and we're starting a democracy," and the nation next door is like, "Um, yeah, see, your queen that you just killed was our king's daughter, so now we're mad."

[M & R laugh]

CL: Yeah.

M: "And we're gonna come in here and have a few things to say about your new government."

R: And a lot of the questions that we're exploring too, there's the question of how centralized is the government even to begin with? Do you even have a centralized state to take these concerns to or to be the one worrying about the border, or are you dealing with something that's more like tiny feudal city-states that are perhaps allying with each other sometimes and other times are all doing their own thing?

And it's interesting, I think, because we tend to presume centralized versus decentralized fit particular niches of sci-fi and fantasy writing. And in some ways that makes sense, because it's hard to envision a very technologically advanced world where we don't have a more centralized government, but you could poke that bear and see what happens when you have, say, a bunch of feudal city-states instead of centralized government in spaces that we usually think of as having centralized government. You know, can you do an Age of Sail novel with no huge nations? Can you do a gunpowder fantasy with feudal city-states? Play with it, see what you come up with.

[17:09]

CL: Yeah, I mean, the thing about a lot of centralized governments in fantasies, I think, is due to literal centuries of successful marketing of the ideas of kings.

[M & R laugh]

R: They have a great publicity team!

CL: [laughs] They really, really do! It's like, when you have this one person who was literally born to run a whole country, they were raised and educated in the stuff that their previous generations believed that they needed to know in order to be the monarch, and oh, also, they get to do whatever the heck they want. [laughs] There's just something really, really seductive about that. Even though kings are wrong.

C: Wrong but dramatic.

R: True.

CL: Yes!

C: I think that's part of why we're so attracted to monarchy in these fantasy stories, is that there's so much drama behind it, and you can get into the court intrigue is... I don't know, it has a different aesthetic, a different flavor when you're dealing with a monarchy as opposed to court intrigue of a representative government, as opposed to the house of representatives snarking at each other. Both can be fun, but it's a different flavor of fun.

R: And I think we can poke around at that question too, of kings are wrong. On what metric? I think we probably, in this call, all would say that we have a preference for democratic forms of government and that we would classify those on our value system as good, as opposed to an absolute monarchy. But I think it's interesting to, OK, so which values are we relying on to make those judgments? And how do we translate that into the writing itself? In some ways an absolute monarchy, if your value is efficiency, it's fairly efficient in a lot of ways. Democratic forms of government, we can be extremely inefficient. You wanna build a bridge? We're gonna argue about it for, like, a year before the county decide where the bridge will go, and who is going to be tasked with doing it, and then we're gonna fall apart a year later, whereas a king's just like, "Yes, make it so." And the bridge theoretically happens.

CL: Yeah, because you have to live up to that king's expectations. It's like, "I said I want a bridge, where's my stinking bridge?"

R: Right. And off with your head because you didn't do it. But the bridge happens! Whereas I think we can show in plenty of examples of representative government, we are not quite as... decisive or efficient. Now if you are worried about safeguarding liberty and all of that jazz, having the people's voice heard, efficiency is not a great metric. You kind of want to be inefficient in some ways, otherwise you bulldoze people who have things like rights that we believe in.

CL: Yeah, and because— So right now I'm doing a reread of a book called *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* by Jane Jacobs. It's been a really long time since I've read it. But one of the things that really struck me was that so many city planners in the middle of the 20th century were really— They were about their vision, they were about their ideal, and they were about their efficiency, and they didn't give a crap about the people actually on the ground. They had an idea of what a city was supposed to look like and if you lived in a neighborhood that didn't fit that description, you automatically lived in a slum. And it didn't matter how cool your neighborhood was, they wanted to fix it. And I think that kind of goes with my suspicion of kings as this one person who has this idea but the reality of the place they're trying to change isn't visible to them. And I think of a king as somebody who doesn't know, they have no idea what it's like to be a peasant, or a serf, or whatever, and they don't care!

R: Or even if they do care, they are extremely limited in their actual capacity to get it.

CL: Yes.

R: Even if you had the most ideal, compassionate human, it is one human, who is fallible and limited.

CL: Yes, and so even if you have a king who really wants to do their best, I think it's kind of inevitable that they're gonna have that ["It's one banana, how much could it cost, \\$10?"](#) moment.

M: I wonder if that's why in traditional fantasy there is that common trope of the king, because it's like, look, he had these humble origins, he knows what it's really like, and thus he becomes the quote-unquote "good" king that gets there in the end... And I think that's just part of why monarchies have that level of appeal within traditional fantasy, is because then with that singular ruler you can easily make that distinction of this one was a bad one, thus things are bad, here is a good king, now things are good, happy ending, we're done!

[laughter]

M: And it's never that neat, but you can sand off all the edges to make it that neat within that context.

CL: Yeah, I think it would be really great to actually read a novel, a fantasy novel, about a regime change. I'm thinking of *The Goblin Emperor* as part of this, that's very definitely in the target of what it is I am talking about. The idea of starting a novel and what's going on in the big-picture background is the ruler and the governing body has changed, and they want to do all this stuff. I'm kind of into it. All the way to showing up to planning group meetings about how to revitalize a neighborhood or how to improve yields in agriculture, just these completely detail-oriented, wonky, just nerd-out meetings. I love this. Why won't they let me write a book about this?

R: [laughs] I think that they should. But I think it's interesting too because if you take that idea of what meeting do I want to write about, and you pull back and imagine that regime change, one of the fundamental questions they must be asking themselves is what's the government's job? What is the job of our state? And I think that a lot of times when we get into the more esoteric political arguments, that's fundamentally what's being debated, what is the function of a state? What's its job? And so I think that if you can pick at that, that can do some good stuff, right? Like is it the function of our governmental entity to be concerned with x, y, or z? And then how does that play out and how does that then reflect the values of those who are in power?

M: I only read the first one of the *Powder Mage* books, but it does kind of delve into that because it begins with, OK, we've killed the entire royal line, now the revolution is won, now what? But that also is like, "You idiots, the divine right of kings was literally divine, now the gods are mad!"

[M & R laugh]

C: Womp womp.

M: You fools! Why did you do that?! But it does have that level of, OK, now let's figure out what the government's gonna be. Now that we've done this.

C: Well, and thinking back to that need, that purpose, what is a state's job, I think we tend to see the slide towards authoritarianism, and monarchy, and more condensed forms of leadership

when the state's job is viewed by the populace as protection. As defense more than other purposes.

And so that's why in a lot of human history, when we've had higher proportions of warfare in your daily life, I guess, all the German city-states fighting each other and things like that, trends in that direction. I think it's why in the last few decades of American government, we've seen an attempt to make us think that we are in jeopardy in order to push away from the liberty and towards efficiency and security on that sliding scale. It's interesting to think about how that function of government is not necessarily what is actually true, but it's also what is perceived by the populace to be true. What do we need it for, what do we think we need it for?

M: And whose job is it to move the populace's perception?

CL: Oh, see, I have a thing that I think about sometimes. I had a shower thought and it was this: the state is always telling you a story. And the state needs you to believe that story. And every time someone believes in the story of the state, the state gains more freedom to do its work.

C: It's like "clap if you believe in fairies" but for government.

[everyone laughs]

CL: Because it's like, if the state gives you a story and you have a place in that story, you have a place in contributing to the greatness of the story of the state, then you know, you can get up and go to work in the morning and it means something. And so I'm thinking, when I am the creator of an imaginary state, I have the opportunity to design the story that this particular state is telling its people. And also I get to decide if it's a con job or if it's the ideal that they are constantly striving towards. And these are different stories. And it isn't necessarily that the story where they're telling the story of what it is that they idealize and what it is that they wanna achieve means that the state is necessarily good, you know, we keep coming back to it. But the other thing too is that you can have a thing where it's like, "these are our principles," and then you have tons of people within the state who have really, really different ideas about how to fulfill the promises that the state is telling its people.

M: I had such a delightful time writing all the propaganda bits of the occupying government in *Velocity of Revolution* for just that reason, like what's the story they're telling and how much do they themselves buy their own bullshit? And how do we express that within the media that we're seeing within the context of the world?

R: The best bullshit has at least a little grain of truth to it or something you can latch onto as a real ideal. And it's the corruption of the real ideal that produces the most odious bullshit.

[laughter]

CL: Yeah... [laughs]

M: I'm just remembering this Dustin Hoffman movie from the 90s called *Hero* that nobody but me saw. But there's one part where he's— He plays this complete lowlife guy who happens to be in the right place to do the right thing and does it, but other people get credit and it's a whole

complicated thing. But at one point he's explaining what's going on to his son and just goes, "Look. The whole world is bullshit, but it's layers of bullshit, and you just gotta find your layer that you're happy with and that's your bullshit."

[everyone laughs]

CL: I love that!

C: But to go back to that idea of the story that the state tells of itself and to go back to our earlier question about how centralized or decentralized is your country, I think the question of how is that story told and communicated within the world is also important. Do they have a press? Do they have mass media? Do they have broadsheets getting delivered? Or is it reliant upon something else? Is it reliant upon the monarch going on progress throughout the country and visiting different towns? Is it a small enough state that somebody speaking in the town square, eventually everybody in the town will have heard about it by midnight? How does that story get disseminated and what effect does that have on what is believed and bought into?

[30:01]

M: And who's controlling who else disseminates what they have to say?

CL: Also, if you have a state and what they do is they have a system where they deliver the news, or decrees, or whatever by messenger... what's to stop the duke of this little corner of the realm from basically subverting that messenger so that they can tell their people in their isolated little pocket of the land that this is how it is, and make up whatever rules they want, and then how do you discover that misinformation? How do you break that misinformation?

R: Man, if we could solve that problem, that would be...

[laughter]

R: Aww... That would be super cool. [laughs]

C: I'm picturing this duke in the equivalent of the Orkney Isles with a printing press in his basement. And he copies the format of the king's decrees but is like, "No, this is totally legit," but he's just counterfeiting it to be whatever he wants. I think that'd be funny. I like... I like printing presses.

[laughter]

CL: Printing presses are so cool!

R: And then the question is, depending on if it is a "bad" quote-unquote king or a "good" quote-unquote king, is that duke a villain or hero? Why is he subverting the message, and what is the outcome, and, you know, the story that you write is very dependent upon how are we framing the government versus the tiny little revolution or coup happening in this duke's basement.

C: That's true. I was picturing, I was picturing a scheming duke who, maybe it's not that the

monarch's good but they're just rivals, but instead now I'm picturing this duke who's like, "Man, the world's a bummer. I don't wanna bum my people out. I'm gonna tell them happy stories instead."

[C & R laugh]

R: Or even just going back to what you were saying about the king can't possibly know what's best for everyone, this guy gets the message and he's like, "Well, we're not doing that, this is a terrible idea! No! I'm not gonna levy taxes of 5% per household to fortify our border, we're on a damn island, this is dumb."

C: "We're fine."

R: "We're not doing that. Save your potatoes."

M: "We're not growing oranges, it's winter!"

[R laughs]

CL: "This is silly as hell and I don't know what you're doing." [laughs] I know that social studies and history are kinda boring subjects in history, but oh God, I love this stuff!

C: No, they're the best, they're the best subjects!

R: I think this is a group of people who all enjoyed our social studies courses in school. [laughs]

CL: Oh yeah.

C: I wanted more civics! I was mad that they skipped half a year of ours for dumb testing reasons, they were like, "No, we have to do this instead for the standardized test," and I was like, "But... but... but..."

R: "Nooo!"

CL: "But... but... but I wanna know how to bug my city councilor to get a new park!"

C: Exactly!

[M & R laugh]

M: I mean, I had a whole procedural thing that I cut out of *Way of the Shield* because one of my beta readers was like, "Listen. I actually take notes for the state legislature, and I'm falling asleep at this."

[laughter]

M: "This is too wonky."

CL: I think this is where, when you are writing about the inner workings of government, I mean, I kind of expect the people that are reading my books are interested in what's going on politically

as it is, but what I'd really love to do is I'd really love to make the political struggles a reflection of inter-character struggles. Yes. So when somebody is arguing, is nitpicking, or a particular point of order in a section of a meeting, what they're actually doing is they're dragging the section of the meeting out so that their buddy outside of the office is performing some kind of political skullduggery to actually get them what they want. I'm glued to it, it's like, oh yeah, this is great!

M: I love those things also where they use the procedural stuff on a story level to screw things over, drag things out. I'm reminded of one of the early episodes of *Rome* where... [laughs] Cass just lights up when I mention *Rome*.

[C & R laugh]

M: Where, because at the senate meeting they were about to do a thing but then trouble happened, and so there was not the final hammer of yes, OK, we're done, that session never—

C: The session had not been closed, yeah.

M: The session had not been closed so it's like, "OK, technically we can still do this thing..." But then it gets screwed up anyway.

C: Because if we—

M: But the funny thing is there was this guy who was just a stickler of no, the session has not been closed, so therefore...

C: Because if session had been closed, then the debate was final and it was like, oh, we're at war now. If session's not closed, we might not be at war yet. Let's please reopen the session! Please? Please, maybe?

[CL laughs]

C: It also makes me think of the *West Wing* strategy that happened, I think it was in season six, when they hid all of the house members in an office so the opposing party would call the vote, thinking that they had, you know...

M: Thinking everybody was out of town.

C: Yeah, thinking everybody was out of town. And then that actually happened in, I think it was the UK parliament, I might be wrong about which country it was.

[R laughs]

C: But some real life parliament took inspiration from that episode and actually used that procedural trick of stashing everyone in a closet and then bringing them out once the vote had been called.

CL: Amazing!

M: But those are the delightful little wonky levels of power, who gets to call a vote? Who gets to decide, yes, we're actually voting on this and I'm not gonna call the vote because I know everybody's in town and I don't want them to vote for it? Or can you, as is happening in Texas right now, hide so that there's not a quorum and they can't vote?

[M & R laugh]

C: And if that goes on long enough, are they going to try to arrest you?

[laughter]

CL: The situation in Texas especially... it is high drama. When I heard that they all left the state, I was just like— My jaw was on the ground. "They did what?! Oh my God!" [laughs]

M: And kind of the fun of building a complicated system that has all these different rules, and levers, and all that, because then you can have these weird tricks like, "Well, they've got the votes, but we can just not show up and force them to be like..." Or like, "Well, they've got the votes, but I can just not call for the vote and so therefore..." Or I can decide the session is closed and so therefore we're at war. Too bad.

[R & CL laugh]

R: Well, and it's kind of funny too, right, because from a story writing, fun twist perspective, that stuff is so much fun. From a "How well are we upholding the ideals that our government was created for," it's kind of like, "Oh shit, we can use the government to do that?! That was not the plan, that was not, we wanted voice of the people and you're— You're tricking them into not being— But you're tricking them into not being—" So it's kind of interesting to see all the fun ways in which you can break the ideals, and for what purposes, right?

I think, again, most people go into doing what they're going to do in any setting, but especially in, you know, trying to assert politics one way or the other, because they think they're doing the right thing for whatever reasons. And I think you can really play with that in fiction writing in terms of, so we all agree that this is the ideal at the center but, as you were saying, we disagree about how to get there. Or in truth we don't really uphold that particular ideal because we no longer believe in it for whatever reason. But we keep it here because it's a nice part of the story, and it's a nice-sounding part of the narrative, and we kind of ignore it. What reasons have we broken away from the ideal and how do you reconcile that?

M: Or because we had this ideal, then we didn't actually write down a rule about how to do this sort of thing because we felt everybody who's going to be involved would stand up to this ideal. So why would we actually need to write down a rule? Oops.

C: No one would possibly do this. [Chuckles]

M: And then thirty years later it's like, "Well there's not a rule that says I can't." [Laughs]

CL: Or they write down a rule that's so incredibly specific to its time and place.

[M laughs]

CL: That trying to change it in order to reflect the reality of hundreds of years passing creates a crisis at the most basic level. Where people are like, "We can't do this. Or this sacred document that tells us what our state is about will be nullified and then we will be worth nothing. And then what will we do?" It's like... can we just—

[C&R Laugh]

CL: Maybe give women the vote?

[C, CL, & R Laugh]

M: This whole episode is just subtweeting the American government.

R: No, we really can't be trusted.

[Everyone Laughs]

R: Not just the American government [Laughs] I don't think at this point.

CL: Yeah, this happens a lot. In Canada we had to have a great big argument about whether women were persons and therefore could vote. I mean... this is something that we had to do. Because the original rules didn't actually, they specifically excluded certain people from being able to vote. And now we're like, "You know what? That idea was dumb."

[C Laughs]

R: I think even the question of who gets to vote is reflecting really basic concepts of the values of the government and what it believes its job is. When you go back to some of the earlier English voting laws that were all tied to land ownership. Clearly that's saying something pretty specific about what the function of government is, what you value about the government, and about the nation as a whole. If you're saying people who have land have a stake and therefore can vote. And then when you get into those debates about, okay, so universal suffrage then... because workers who do not have land also have stake and should be able to vote. And we're still ignoring women and swathes of the population that way because what stake do you have? I don't know.

CL: Yeah.

R: But it's interesting to see how that reflects, "Okay, well what are you saying when you're saying someone should be able to vote?"

CL: Who are you valuing? And it's a really good question. It goes back to who has the power, and what do they do to make sure that they get to keep the power?

R: And sometimes extending some freedoms or rights to people helps you stay in power in convoluted ways of thinking. But I think there's— I think it's interesting because the fact that every time we have expanded rights and expanded access, remembering that the reasons

people did that may not have been purely altruistic can translate to some good stuff in fiction writing too. Not everyone who wants to see measures passed wants to see those for reasons that don't involve holding onto their power.

C: And it makes me think too of the ways in which representative governments are harder to maintain than monarchies, generally. Because they require so much investment from the populace, and deciding what section of the populace gets to have that say, and what information do they need to have for them to have that say. For it to work well you sort of need a populace that is both interested and somewhat educated on the issues, and on their civic rights, and on all of those factors. And we think of ourselves as having universal suffrage today but accessibility isn't always equal. And it only kicks in at a certain age, which is an entirely arbitrary number. There's still—

[R Laughs]

C: All of these questions around who gets to participate, and how much do they get to participate, and what do we need to do as a society to prepare them to participate in the state?

R: Yeah, that whole "You can't draft us and not even let us vote." "Oh okay, so you can vote." "No, that's not the point, oh dammit. Well, okay, so we get to vote."

[Everyone Laughs]

M: But also then not only who gets to vote, but how do you vote? And how is that process handled. And who's in charge of that process in the first place? Because those are fun things to play with too. Or nightmares to live through, depending on [Laughs] depending on your point of view.

CL: See, I don't know if any of you, because we mentioned *The West Wing*, but I'm wondering if any of you actually watched *Scandal*.

M: Oh yeah.

CL: Because it is rotten with politics. It's wonderful [Laughs] that way. Because it's somebody who isn't actually involved in politics, except is heavily involved in politics. And just watching all the scheming, and the maneuvering, and the positioning of this and that, and how reputations can hang by a thread... it's really great. And it's also soapy as hell. So why not watch it?

[R Laughs]

M: Right, because there is so much in there about how basically this handful of people who nobody elected, nobody chose, nobody appointed; who just wield so much power in terms of public opinion and who actually has the levers of power of government. Because they can make or break somebody, save or destroy somebody, almost at their whim. And it's about which client pays them first.

CL: Yeah and there's all kinds of ways to get leverage because you can know somebody's secret and be able to control them through that, but you can just buy a politician if you want to.

[Laughs] And it's just sort of like... it was always, when I was watching it, there was always something going on where I was like, "Oh... that would work in a book really, really, well." And so it was kind of like *The West Wing* on one side and *Scandal* on the other kind of showed me these two contrasting kinds of ideas and ideals. And so I wind up rewatching the first, say, 4-5 seasons of each of these shows over and over again.

R: Well, and I think that leads to looping back around on when we're deciding, is government good, is it bad? And that there's a difference between the ideal and the execution. And all of the ways in which the ideal can be undermined by things that have nothing to do with formalized structure of the government at all.

C: Yeah, I mean, how much does money play into it, how much does the media play into it? That's something that Kate Elliot did well in *Unconquerable Sun* I thought, in the way that the omnipresent media affects the governmental structure there and how critical it is to keep control through the presentation is really interesting. Is bribery a factor? It was illegal in the Roman republic. That did not stop anyone from doing it. [Laughs] It was expected—

[CL Laughs]

C: That if you wanted votes you were going to bribe people. You budgeted for that. All of these different... like I said before, sort of pressure points and tensions. And then when we're talking about speculative fiction we can add in magic. How does that change our equation? How does that tip the balance of power? If it's open, or if it's secret, does that affect how it affects the weight of power as well?

CL: Oh my God, I just thought of *The Manchurian Candidate* with wizards.

[M Laughs]

R: Yes. Yes.

[CL & R Laugh]

M: Like I think when you add magic into the mix the question of why aren't mages just in charge, or are they? And if so are they openly or secretly, is it a thing of just, "The mages don't run the government. But each of them has some government official that's just their puppet." Like literally. [Laughs] And it's just accepted that that's how it's going to be.

CL: Yeah, and you can just have an open mageocracy. And just have it so magicians have the power, and they've got the power.

[CL & R Laugh]

CL: And then what happens? And then all of a sudden your farmboy really can become a king, because now he's a wizard!

[R Laughs]

CL: So now he goes away to the big city and joins the government. And now you go, you have a

beloved trope and you're doing it differently.

C: Yeah, is it a path to power, is it an obstacle, is it the engine of power? There's a lot of different level there. I've had a lot of fun playing in The Aven Cycle that mages are specifically prohibited from holding high office. They can hold low offices but not high office because that would be too much power in one hand. And our protagonist, Sempronius, thinks it's unfair that that thing you're born with should prohibit you from taking power. And on the one hand, maybe he's right, and it is not fair that a whole section of society is prohibited these offices. But on the other hand, you can also see how opening that door might lead to places he doesn't intend. And might lead to a very different form of government than the one he thinks he's advocating for. And that too is once again playing out, that where did we start, what did we intend with the state? And where might it go? How does it spin out? [Laughs] Does it spin wildly off the side of the mountain?

R: I think too the question of magic, of how much is overtly out there, part of the system, and how much is running as an undercurrent. A lot of the things in our political system that give us what is the narrative of the state, or even just how does the state function, we don't see them very much. But they're there. Like how much the media is giving us elements of what our political world looks like, right? We don't see all the machinations there, but it's there. And it's affecting how we perceive and engage with politics.

C: I'm very distressed by the idea that lobbyists are our mages in that sense.

[C, M, & R Laugh]

C: Lobbyists are the ones behind the scenes.

CL: Oh.

C: And casting our spells, and making us all do their bidding.

R: Right, but in a lot of ways wouldn't that make a lot of sense?

CL: What a horrible idea.

C: It would though, right?

R: Like you have this influence, kind of undercurrent happening. It's affecting what the narrative is. It's affecting what the influence one way or the other is. And I kind of played with that in my book. [Laughs] That one of the other nations that they have contact with, one of their big secrets is that they can use magic just to influence how people think and feel about something. So you go into the chamber to vote and all of a sudden you're thinking, "Actually I think I should vote for this measure." And... and oh look, oops.

CL: Oh no.

R: And now you've influenced outcomes without anyone really knowing why.

M: Let alone the more blatant lobbying of like, "Oh, what would it take to get your vote? You want that? I can summon a demon that will get you that."

[CL & M Laugh]

CL: Oh goodness.

R: Again coming back to what is good, what is bad. What is inherently good or bad about a system is determined by, in a lot of ways, you the writer. And how it plays out, and how it's described and created as ideal versus pragmatic. So you could have magic working in very comfortable ways in your state if you're not us with minds that [Laughs] immediately go to all of the worst case scenarios.

M: You have your senate chamber or whatever with wards so that every spell that can control or influence people is shattered when you go onto the voting floor. So...

R: You could have truth magic.

M: Ooh, yeah.

C: Something really neat in H.G. Parry's recent books *A Declaration of the Rights of Magicians* and its sequel is the idea that the halls of Parliament are magically responsive to really good speeches. That they resonate and hum with music when the rhetoric is good. I was like, "I love it."

R: Yes.

C: Install that everywhere.

R: Oh yeah. [Laughs]

C: It's not like it's overtly influencing you, and it's value neutral. It's not responding to the substance of what you're saying, but it responds to the words and the power. Like... oh, that was really well-framed, that was nicely structured—

[R Laughs]

C: And the walls just start vibrating with excitement over it. [Laughs]

M: So you can go full *West Wing* and get scored while you give your resounding speech, and...

R: Well, it's funny that we all kind of react with this mild horror to the idea of magic influencing politics in some way that's not overt, that's under the surface. But it's like, not to sound like a freshman English teacher, but rhetoric is magic in some ways in that it influences how you think about things in non-overt ways under the surface. And we are all very comfortable [Laughs] not comfortable, but plugged into a world where that's just how it works.

CL: The other thing too is that we've had a lot of time to figure out how to tailor our communications to manipulate people's feelings. And that this is, this is what we use to get what we want; whether it's for you to buy a new Volvo or for you to vote for sugar subsidies. It doesn't matter. [Laughs] This is a tool. Everybody who has the will and skill to use it is using it right now.

R: And I feel like social media is such a part of our lives now that we kind of forget how bonkers confusing it was for people when it first came out in terms of, "How do we use this? How do we optimize our use of this form of media to do exactly that? How do we make it do what we want?" And I think we're really used to seeing it now. But for a while there it was sort of like experiments gone awry and people trying to use it for their purposes. And sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't.

CL: Yeah, and thinking about that I didn't get on Twitter until 2009 and by then people had figured it out. They hadn't elevated it to a higher manipulation, but people knew. They knew how to pack impact into 141 characters, or however many it was. Sometimes you could just have good, silly fun. And other times you could transmit a single sentence that would make somebody think about it all day long. And now it's like so many people are so good at condensing a message into a tweet. Or, if they do multiple tweets, into hooking people into reading the next tweet. That you have to be exceptional to get noticed anymore.

R: And just had the random thought train of Twitter communication being a form of currency and then realized, oh God... we forgot to even talk about currency during this episode. [Laughs]

CL: Oh no, oh my God.

R: And that's probably an entirely separate rabbit hole for another day that we're going to have to come back for. [Laughs]

CL: Yeah, get somebody who understands money because I... don't.

[M & R Laugh]

CL: Make Django [Wexler] do it.

R: So barring any final thoughts, or ideas, or burning questions for the group, we're coming up on our hour and it is our custom to ask our guest to give us a little piece of worldbuilding trivia to keep in our souvenir box. So, it can relate to our episode today or it can be something entirely random and off the cuff, but I'm sure it'll be entirely you, whatever it is.

CL: Okay, so thinking about the idea of the rule of the wizarding government. And I'm thinking that... about, how do you keep wizards from taking over a government entirely until you have full mageocracy and what they decide is what happens? And I think probably what you need to do is you need to create a system where if a magician walks into a government building their ability to do magic is nullified. And people think that this is a great idea. This is the perfect solution. We can have a wizard Prime Minister because, well, the wizard Prime Minister is doing their Prime Ministerial duties in the House Parliament, they can't actually call upon their magic to make people do funky things. Enter the wizard lobbyist.

C: I both love and hate it.

[Everybody Laughs]

CL: Yeah, me too, disgusting.

C: But it's a fantastic plot device, just waiting.

R: Yes.

C: Or blossoming.

R: It is a premise—

C: That's a premise.

R: That is just asking for a short story if not more. [Laughs]

M: Absolutely. I'm now visualizing these wizard lobbyists just on the outer steps of the building.

C: They know exactly where the line is.

M: Just gathered there. [Laughs]

R: It's like the sign that goes up that goes, "No campaign materials past this point."

M: Past this point.

R: Only it's "No magic past this point."

M: "No magic past this point," yeah.

R: "Government area."

M: But it's like, "Hey, we want you to vote this way. And I've got a few incubuses on speed dial. And yeah, we can get you what you need."

[Everybody laughs]

CL: Oh my gosh, miles of ink worth of an idea.

M: I love it.

R: Well C.L. Polk, thank you so much for coming and joining us this evening. It has been so much fun talking to you and digging into all of the ideals and less than ideals of the state.

[M Laughs]

CL: I— I just love the fact that we just jumped on the train to—

[Everybody Laughs]

C: We're all very optimistic people.

[C, CL, & R Laugh]

CL: It's like, "This is where I live, right here, in the worst case scenario."

[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 will go up on September 15th, where we'll be going back to the world we've been creating and talking about integrating many different wild ideas into a richer, more complex, more complete world. I'd also like to remind you that we are finalists for the Hugo Award for Best Fancast. If you are eligible to vote for the Hugos, we would love our consideration. If you want to learn how you can be eligible, visit discon3.org.

We really hope you liked this episode. If you did, please do take a minute to tell a friend, shout about us on the internet, or leave a review on iTunes. If you've got questions or just want to tell us how cute we are, there's a number of ways to contact us. We're on Twitter as [@Worldbuildcast](https://twitter.com/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 to chat with us and other fans of the podcast. We'd love for you to share the worlds you're making and help us all build until it hurts.

[outro music plays]