

- Worldbuilding: May the Characters be With You
- About me
- Young adult author of *The Arkwell Academy Series* from Tor Teen and *Avalon* series from Balzer+Bray.
- Arkwell: Contemporary fantasy about a half-human, half-nightmare girl who can predict the future through signs and symbols in her crush's dreams. A murder mystery set at a magical school.
- Avalon: Sci-fi thriller about Jeth Seagrave, a professional spaceship thief employed by a notorious crime lord. He's looking for a way out of the life before his little sister gets sucked in.
- You can find me on the web at [www.mindeearnett.com](http://www.mindeearnett.com)
- What is Worldbuilding?
- The process of constructing an imaginary (fictional) world.
- What does that mean though? What is a world?
  - Some answers:
    - “The earthy state of human existence.”
    - “The earth with its inhabitants and all things upon it.”
    - “a common name for the whole of human civilization, specifically human experience, history, or the human condition.”
  - In other words, it means *a lot*. It's big and daunting. What's a mere mortal writer to do?
- Worldbuilding Approaches
- There are two approaches to worldbuilding:
  - Top-down or outside-in: starting with the “big picture” or general construct of the world and then winnowing down from there to the story and characters.
    - The Tolkien approach, in other words.
  - Bottom up or inside-out: starting with a smaller subset of the world and only building what's necessary for the story.
    - The everybody else approach.
- In reality most writers will do a combination of both.
- If mapmaking and new languages is your thing then outside-in is for you.
- Pros and Cons of the Approaches
- Outside-in Pros
  - When done well, the world is fully realized and believable.
    - Tolkien with his Elvish Languages, histories, etc.
  - You can write faster when the world is already made
- Outside-in Cons
  - Daunting, unless that's your thing
  - Potential exists to never write the actual story
  - Risk of drowning your reader in uninteresting details
- Pros and Cons of the Approaches
- Inside-out Pros:
  - Easier to manage, less daunting
  - Allows the writer to start writing sooner
- Inside-out Cons:

- Easy to cut corners and produce a generic, clichéd world
- Can be a plot hole pit. Plot holes are almost always the result of not thinking things through.
- Can leave readers feeling disconnected from the story or cause them to be unable to suspend disbelief
- Worldbuilding Approach
- Solution to the pitfalls of inside-out worldbuilding?
  - Focus on your characters:
    - Who they are
    - Why they are
    - What they know about the world
    - And especially—their *motivations*
- Worldbuilding Approach
- Some thoughts
  - Every story, regardless of genre, requires worldbuilding.
  - The road to bad worldbuilding is paved with indecisions.
    - Stories where things just happen because they happen
    - A primary symptom of this is a villain with unclear or nonexistent motivations for his/her villainy. Bad guys who are bad because the story needs someone bad.
      - Example: Star Wars: The Phantom Menace
  - The Importance of Making Decisions

**Hannah Green:** Grady, you know how in class you're always telling us that writers make choices?

**Grady Tripp:** Yeah.

**Hannah Green:** And even though your book is really beautiful, it's, at times, very detailed...it sort of reads in places like you didn't make any choices. At all.

- The Importance of Making Decisions
- Maggie Stiefvater, bestselling author of *The Raven Cycle* series and the *Scorpio Races* has this to say on the matter:
  - “Idea to novel is a process of elimination. Every question I answer and every decision I make—the narrator's age, the story's location, the time of year—narrows down the possibilities. I figure out the story I want to tell by establishing the stories I don't want to tell.”
- I would add that figuring out all the possibilities in each story before eliminating them is what makes it go from generic to unique.
- Worldbuilding Approach
- First thesis: Decision-making done through a character's lens is the key to successful worldbuilding. It is an organic process where character/story development creates the world and the world creates the story/characters.
- Second thesis: With an inside-out approach (and everything else in writing) you can only learn by doing.
- Therefore: Let's build a world.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Key Points to Consider
  - Be selective—both God and the devil are in the details.

- Not all details of the world matter.
  - Details that always matter:
    - **Socio-economics (SE)**: how economic activity affects social processes and vice-versa. Who has the money, in other words?
      - More specifically, who has the power? In fantasy and sci-fi, the “magic” or “tech” usually equates to power.
    - **Self-concept (SC)** factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation
      - More specifically, how does your character relate to the world? How do they see themselves in relation to the world?
    - Character Motivation (CM): why do your characters behave the way they do.
      - Tip: if you can answer the question of why your character is behaving in a certain way or making a certain choice at any given time, your story is on target.
    - Worldbuilding Exercise
- Where to start?
  - Premise or set-up
  - Stories are like fire. Just as it takes two sticks to spark a fire it takes two ideas to spark a story
  - Example: Home Alone
  - Many fantasy and sci-fi premises start with magic/technology first
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- First stick:
  - A fantasy world where magic can be obtained by ingesting the leaves of a magical plant. Once consumed the person is able to heal any disease or injury for as long as the plant’s effects last.
    - Naturally, of course, consuming the plant and using the magic to heal will steal away some of your own life. Use it enough and you’ll die.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Right away the first stick raises questions that must be answered:
  - Who has access to the plant? – a socioeconomic (SE) question
  - Why would someone willingly consume the plant with that sort of risk? – a character motivation (CM) question
- Possible answers to question 1:
  - Maybe everyone has access to it. Maybe it’s easy to grow if you have the seeds.
  - Maybe only people in charge have access to it. (Again, magic or tech almost always equates to power.)
- Possible answer to question 2:
  - To gain money or power
  - To save someone else
  - Because they’ve been forced to take it
  - Worldbuilding Exercise
- Each answer will have a rippling effect that will influence the rest of the story. Choose wisely, but you must choose.
- Worldbuilding Exercise

- Decision to question 1: Only the rich and powerful have access to the magic.
  - But who?
    - A king or some other ruler?
    - A religious institution?
    - Farmers? Are they the new kingpins?
  - How do we chose???
  - Consider socio-economic factors involved. For example, how do the people in power keep it protected from outside threat? Military force? Structural strength? Are their real world examples to research?
    - Tip: real world parallels are the writer’s friend. They can give your story a framework/map to follow.
  - The second, better option, is to start making choices about character. Good news is we already have a character question to answer.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decision about question 2:
  - A character who needs to save someone else. Self-sacrifice is a well-known, easy to work with character motivation.
  - But it raises more questions:
    - Who is this character? Someone rich or someone poor (SE/SC)?
    - Male or female (SC)?
    - How old (SC)?
    - Who will they be saving? Why does the person need to be saved (CM)?
    - How will the person get access to the magic (SE)?
  - The choices you make to these questions will immediately start to shape the world.
  - But don’t forget, this is only stick 1. We haven’t found stick 2 yet, but we might—if we make choices.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decision to question 2: a young girl (17-18) from a poor family, who willing decides to be a magic consumer to get her family some much needed money.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Woman have some social mobility since they are allowed to be magic consumers (SC).
- The people with the power are either motivated to make more money (SE/CM), are sick and in need themselves, or they are benevolent and simply want to get people access to much-needed magic medicine and offer the money as incentive (SE/CM).
- What happens if we change the SC on our character? Maybe women aren’t allowed to be magic consumers and so she has to disguise her gender...
  - This changes our inferences about the world.
  - Women do not have social mobility (or not as much as first perceived). This is probably a patriarchal society. OR it could be a matriarchal society where women are too valuable to be allowed to sacrifice themselves. Again, we must make decisions.
    - Tip: Always pick the option that is the most interesting to you as the writer and the most unique to you as the reader.
- Worldbuilding Exercise

- Decision: this is a matriarchal society. Women can't be magic-consumers because they are too important. Only men have ever consumed the magic.
- First stick refined: A teenage girl decides to disguise herself as a boy so she can become a magic-consumer and earn money to save her starving family.
  - More questions immediately arise:
    - How much money will she get (SE)?
    - Is it enough to make her sacrifice worth it (SE/SC/CM)
  - Worldbuilding Exercise
    - Answer: Volunteers receive a lump sum upfront and then a stipend for every month they survive as a magic-consumer.
  - By making this decision about the world we immediately create character motivation. Our main character isn't just a martyr. She hopes that she will live long enough to make it worth it.
    - What can we infer about our character?
      - She's a dreamer, idealist, naïve, etc.
      - She's also brave. There have to be consequences if she's discovered.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Stick 2
  - Once our Main Character (MC) successfully becomes a magic-consumer she discovers the magic doesn't make her ill.
  - What are some possible reasons why?
    - Our MC is special, the "chosen one."
    - Women have always been able to safely consume the magic plant, but the people with power have covered up the truth.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- What happens to the story/world if we select option 1?
  - We must answer the question of why our MC is special.
    - Does she have a role to fulfill?
    - Is there a prophecy?
      - If so, then we must account for this belief in our society.
- What happens if we select option 2?
  - We get possible answers to the character motivation of our antagonist.
    - Why did they cover up this info?
    - Is there some dark secret in the past to be uncovered?
      - If yes, can uncovering this secret be our MC's motivation in the story?
      - How is history recorded in this world? How much does our character know?
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decision: Women are able to consume the magic plant without harm.
- Questions to answer now:
  - Why was the secret hidden?
    - Maybe women can do more than just heal when they consume the plant. Maybe they can become powerful.

- If we chose this option, we might need to refine our world and make it patriarchal once more.
  - What will the antagonist do when our MC is discovered?
    - First must decide on an antagonist. Who is most threatened by our MC's discovery?
      - If matriarchal society, maybe the queen is most threatened. Perhaps the queen consumes the plant to make herself powerful and her family hid the secret years ago as a way to maintain control.
      - If patriarchal society, it might be the king who wants to keep women under control.
      - Or perhaps instead of a queen/king, a holy order is in power. (Or those kingpin farmers.)
    - Tip: Don't marry your ideas. In other words, be willing to change an initial perception about the world and characters as demanded by the story.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Premise update:
  - In order to save her starving family, a teenage girl disguises herself as a boy and volunteers to become a royal healer, the most well-paid and dangerous position in the kingdom. Healers must consume a magical plant that gives them the ability to cure any illness, but only at the cost of their own life. The girl goes in expecting to die only to discover that not only can she consume the plant without harm to herself, it also gives her additional powers.
    - We officially have a premise, or perhaps a "hook."
    - However, it's very generic.
    - Solution? Continue worldbuilding and making decisions.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decide the world's landscape
  - Based on our premise, what can we infer about the landscape already?
    - Plants must be able to be grown in some way. The land either has to be arable or the technology in the society must be advanced enough to grow the plant artificially such as in green houses.
    - Access to the plants must be easily controlled, otherwise the secret would've been discovered long before now.
  - Possible landscapes:
    - Plains, desert, tundra, wetland, scrubland, etc
      - Each one will have an impact on both character motivation and the story.
  - Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decide on a historical timeframe for the story
  - Vast majority of fantasies are set in medieval Europe
    - But even if you chose this historical timeframe, you must get specific. The middle ages lasted from 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and there are significant differences between them in terms of medicine, warfare, and other socio-economic factors.

- But a fantasy can have other historical timeframes and still be successful:
  - The Grisha Trilogy by Leigh Bardugo has a historical timeframe of Tsarist Russia in the early 1800s.
  - The Lotus War Trilogy by Jay Kristoff set in feudal Japan
  - The Girl of Fire and Thorns trilogy by Rae Carson has a Hispanic culture
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Decision: a hot desert climate. Water is scarce but the plant can be grown all year long.
  - Possible frameworks:
    - Ancient Egypt
    - Mexico (Aztecs)
    - Arabia
    - Parts of India
    - Parts of Africa
    - Ancient Rome or Greece might work as well, although it's a Mediterranean climate
- Decision: Arabia circa 650 AD (early middle ages)
  - Worldbuilding Exercise
- Importance of names:
  - Names of characters and places play a significant role in worldbuilding.
  - They create a specific tone and will often invoke images and feelings in the reader.
  - For example, in the Grisha Trilogy the fictional land is called Ravka and the main character is Alina Starkov.
- Worldbuilding Exercise
- Premise refined:

In order to save her starving family, seventeen-year-old Nadira Hawass disguises herself as a boy and volunteers to become an Akul Maut, an eater of death, the most well-paid and dangerous of all positions in the Irrian Kingdom. Akul Mauts work for the Sultan, consuming the leaves of the magical Solan plant, which grants the ability to cure any illness at the cost of their own life.

At first Nadira's only hope is to live long enough to make her sacrifice worth it, but she soon discovers the Solan plant affects her differently than the male Akul Mauts. Instead of stealing her life, she's gaining new and frightening powers—powers that soon make her a threat to the Sultan and the people who have long worked to keep the truth of the Solan plant a secret.

- Worldbuilding Exercise
- What next?
  - It's time to start writing.
  - However, the world is only a sketch right now.
  - Throughout each scene/chapter, I will employ the same worldbuilding approach as before, asking questions and making decisions.
  - Tip: Don't skip—even when the writing is coming easy and you know what happens next. Be sure you know *why* what's going to happen happens, and *how* it works within the framework of your world.

- Also, “because it’s cool” isn’t a legitimate answer.
- Happy writing!
- Recommended Reading
- *The Anatomy of Story* by John Truby
- *Hooked* by Les Edgerton
- *Writing Fiction*, by Janet Burroway
- *Save the Cat* by Blake Snyder
- *On Writing* by Stephen King
- *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamont
- *The Artist’s Way* by Julia Cameron