

World Building

Do you feel overwhelmed when you sit down to write about your fantasy or science fiction world? I did!

So, I found some entry points into world building. The strongest entry point for me is my characters. If you can take your characters and put them in our own world and they function fine, then maybe your characters don't belong in the world you think they do. But if they would be a fish out of water, then they belong where you put them – in your fantasy world.

I interview my characters to learn about my fantasy world. And if my main character can't tell me what I need to know, I choose a secondary character. In fact, I interview all my characters, even the minor ones, to learn about my world. Sometimes, I'll even invent an "off screen" character to learn about something my characters don't know, that I think impacts my story. That's sometimes how characters get "on screen"!

Not all the pieces of your world will you know, and not all pieces of your world will end up in your book. I start with the facts and lore that just flows from my subconscious, and research the rest. For example, my heroine, Henrietta, was trained to be a blacksmith and sword smith. Why? Because I'm interested in those things. So I researched by visiting a black smith and read about medieval sword construction and use. That was fun!

Note: If the research isn't fun, STOP. The first person you get to please is yourself, so research only the things that are FUN. What is truly joy-producing for you is also a clue that you're on the right path. While I may love researching 1850s Paris and asking question about how Paris was built to be the marvel it is today, it was tortuous trying to write a novel set in that period. Now, if I think of time travel story that uses that period, then, wow, I'm on fire.

One more thing about the process of world building: I'm sure this process is a personal one, so each of you will discover or has discovered your own method of developing a world. Personally, I start with character, her GMC, and her backstory and history, then start developing the world with that material. From there, other characters and their stories start fleshing out the world. Then I look at plot, and as I develop that, I come up with more questions and answers about the world. Then, as I write and edit my book, I answer more questions still. And when my critique group partners ask me questions, then I answer those too. I don't sit down with the list below and fill in the blanks. Well, I tried that once, and it didn't work for me. But it may work for you. So, the moral of this moment is to try one way, and if that doesn't work, try another. You'll eventually find the way that works for you.

Fantasy vs. Science Fiction & Making Stuff Up

Though we can blur the lines between the two, I want to draw a distinction on how we make up stuff for each genre. From what I understand, and have read, you can make up



everything when you write fantasy. You can do this as long as everything holds together in some kind of logical way. It must have meaning for your characters. If the world you're building feels totally random and that's NOT your intent, then you need to spend time figuring out the WHY and HOW of things. If you want to make up words for things, that's cool, as long as you and your reader don't get bogged down. Most of us aren't linguists like Tolkien and probably won't go inventing a language (Elfin) and then making up a world to go with it. (I heard that was the genesis of THE LORD OF THE RINGS tales.) For science fiction, the world is usually based in some scientific possibility. We aren't traveling the stars yet, but one day we could be. We don't time travel (yet!), but according to physics there isn't any reason why one day we couldn't.

How to Organize Your World Building Information

This is how I do it: I use a word document and my beloved document map tool to organize all of my character sketches, story outline, earlier versions of the story, and all the lore I'm creating. Document map is a Word feature, located under View in my MS Word version 2000. Use the header numbers to create a hierarchical list of chapters, and for each of the topics below, as relevant to your story. I also use document map to list each of my characters, their hair/eye color, their GMC, and special titles or words I made up for the story.

Questions to Ask while World Building

Here are some of the things I ask my characters about.

:Language -- does your world have different languages? How did they evolve?

:Origin Tales -- how the world came to be.

:Folklore -- Maybe your characters have a strong oral story telling culture, like mine do. So I use lore as epigraphs (the poetry before each chapter), and also weave the lore into the story to form a subtle resonance on the theme.

:Family tree -- Knowing this roots your character in her/his background, and can be good fodder for inner and outer conflict.

:Jobs/professions -- what kind do people have? Do men and women divide work, share it? What kind of training do your characters receive, if any? How are they trained and by whom?

:Gender roles -- see above; also explore people's attitudes about gender roles

:Clothing/Costumes -- how do people dress? What do your characters wear and why? This category can also include body marking, piercings, hairstyle, standards of physical beauty, jewelry... Where does fabric come from? Who makes it?



:Weather -- does your place have four seasons? Some of my kingdoms do, some don't. That depends on their geography.

:Flora & Fauna -- How important this is will depend on your story. Since I write adventure fantasy where there is a lot of wandering and traveling, I needed to root each locale. I did that by deciding that one location would look like Sonoma County where I grew up. Another would be tropical, still another would be volcanic. So each location has a deciding feature, like the oak trees of Sonoma County, and I use that to anchor the setting.

:Food -- how it's planted/harvested/hunted/gathered; what do people eat and when; how it's cooked. Who cooks? What's poisonous?

:Geography -- I love maps, and Orson Scott Card starts every story with a map. I don't but as the story develops I sketch many out. I daydream about the beautiful map to be drawn by a professional artist in my one-day published book!

:Annual Rituals -- what is important to your fantasy world and why? Include any rites of passage celebrations. How do your characters celebrate weddings, funerals, birthdays, puberty, other?

:Technology -- this is huge, so I recommend starting with the needs and capabilities of your main character and spinning out from there. Technology I think is one of those topics that you need to put parameters around. For example, in my fantasy world, I made the decision that the technology was pre-gunpowder, but fireworks existed, like our world up until a certain point. So that enabled me to be hand weapon focused (obsessed anyone?!)

If you're writing science fiction, then you need to think about energy source, how that energy is transformed and into what kind of cool things. Another example: I heard that research is going on for a space elevator. It would use the earth's gravity and enable inexpensive and energy efficient travel to the space station. I have a futuristic space station story brewing on the back burner. So knowing this technology and expanding on it, I could make my heroine, who's afraid of the weightlessness of space walks, enjoy the space elevator, because she loves controlled speed.

If you're writing time travel, then you need to figure how and why it works. If your story is fantasy based the rules can be different, based in magic. If you're writing science fiction, then your audience will expect you've figured out ways around the paradoxes that our modern readers will know (like in time travel), and explain them in your story world.

:Animals -- any special animals in your world? I use dragons and other fabulous creatures. I spend time develop their history and reason for being, and relationships with



my heroine and other people. You can also focus on the specialness of ordinary animals, or just have a special animal for your hero.

:Religion/Spirituality -- Again, start by interviewing your main characters. My heroine hates organized religion and wasn't brought up in it, so I just ignored religion in the first book. It had no impact on her or the story. But this second book has a religious group that will impact her, so I've spent a little time developing the priest and their beliefs and how they will create conflict and why.

:Magic -- this is a big one too, on par with technology. You need to determine the rules and boundaries around magic. Also know how it's acquired/learned/given/endowed and evolves. In GRACELING (Kristin Cashore) some people are born with Graces (the heroine can kill and is unbeatable; another maybe can cook really well). Cashore never explains why they have graces. They just do. As a reader, I accepted that her world was set up that way. So not everything in magic has to be explained to the reader, but as the author you probably want to know the whys and hows.

:Politics/power -- By knowing your characters you will have determined much of this. Even if it's in the background of your story, you'll want to know your characters' relationship to power. Chances are though it is a foreground issue, and it's good to know who's in power and why, how power is transferred to the next generation, and what people do or don't do to get close to powerful people.

:Culture -- as an almost anthropology major, I know how daunting this word can be. That is why I put it last. I usually don't ask my characters, "What's your culture?" It's a question most people can't answer. I can't. Not simply anyway. Culture is basically the collection of all the beliefs, customs, rituals, and behaviors that make up a self-identified group of people. Many of the topics in this list taken together make up culture. That said, I designed one of my kingdoms to be a cross between Venice and Hong Kong. This decision enabled me to pull different aspects of each culture's customs and ways of dress and words into my own group of people. If you can associate your world with parts of one you know that can help you anchor details and gives you an idea bank to cull from.

OK! Whew! I'm sure I've left some things off this list. I think it's enough to get you started.

Resources

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO WRITING FANTASY by Darin Park and Tom Dullemond, Dragon Moon Press, c. 2003, dragonmoonpress.com

The WRITER'S COMPLETE FANTASY REFERENCE: An Indispensable Compendium of Myth and Magic from the editors of Writer's Digest Books, c.1998

HOW TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY by Orson Scott Card, Writer's Digest Books, c.1990

