

WORLDBUILDING 101

With Moiya McTier

I. INTRODUCTION

About Moiya

Moiya McTier is an astrophysicist and folklorist who thinks she might actually be addicted to reading fantasy books. She combined her two passions by writing a science fiction book in college, and now she teaches workshops and hosts a live monthly show about worldbuilding.

Lesson Goal

Today we are going to learn about fictional worldbuilding, and we will have a chance to write stories in our own fictional worlds. We will learn some of the basic steps to worldbuilding—the questions you need to ask and answer in order to flesh out your world. We will practice together by imagining what life might be like on an alien planet, and then you will have the chance to build your own fictional world. Our goal here is to create a world with enough specific details to make it feel real and to see how a well-built world can enrich the stories it houses.

I. MIND PRIMER

What is your favorite fictional world? This can be from books, TV, movies, etc.

Write down three specific things that make that world different from our own.

1.

2.

3.

II. HOW TO WORLDBUILD

What is Speculative Fiction?

Speculative Fiction is a genre where stories include elements that don't exist in the real world. This can mean magic, advanced technology, or imagined creatures, or anything your mind can think up.

Examples of speculative fiction (or *spec fic*) include:

- *Star Wars*
- C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*
- *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
- Anything in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

What is Worldbuilding?

Worldbuilding is the process of constructing your own fictional world, or universe. Sometimes that world is exactly like our own except for one key difference (like, maybe humans never lost their tails), and sometimes the world looks nothing like our reality.

When worldbuilding is done well, it can create conflict, motivate character actions, and drive plot.

Worldbuilding is “the joy of getting to play God” according to Neil Gaiman.

Worldbuilding Example

My debut science fiction novel was set on a REAL exoplanet that I researched in college, and I wanted the world to be as scientifically realistic as possible given what my research revealed about the physical world.

The physical world: The planet was roughly Earth-sized and just slightly hotter than Earth, but it orbited a very small, cool, magnetically active star

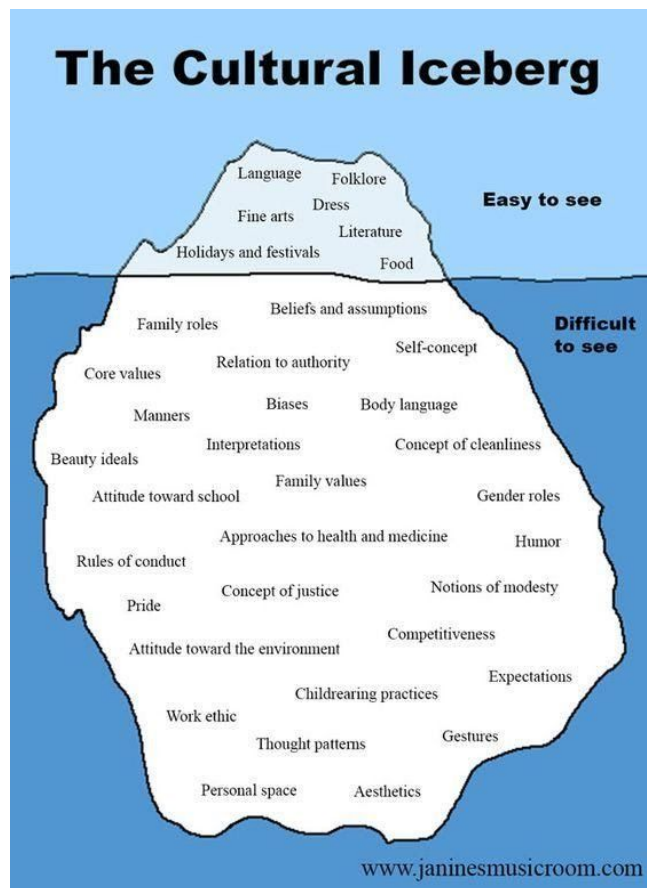
How did I flesh that out:

- Lifeforms called Mowleean evolved underwater to stay protected from star's magnetic activity
- Mowleean now live underground
- Mowleean biology inspired by fish
 - scales, webbed fingers, external eggs, etc.
- Mowleean scientists helped the species survive by using knowledge to protect them from the star
 - class structure that values intelligence above all else

Worldbuilding Steps

Questions to ask when you're building your world:

1. How is your world different from our reality?
2. How did your world get like that? / Why is it different from ours?
 - a. This question doesn't always apply
3. What is the history of your world? Its geography? Climate?
4. What do the lifeforms in your world look like?
5. What is the culture of your world?
 - a. Note that there can be many cultures in one world, just as there are many cultures on Earth.



Remember that

- Consistency is key. Make rules for your world, and be sure to stick to them.
- Worldbuilding can be an endless process. You can always add more details. Just try not to get overwhelmed. If you do, limit yourself to aspects of the world that are relevant to your story.
- To build a believable fictional world, you must first understand your own reality.

Team Wordbuilding Practice

Now that you know what the steps are, we're going to try building a world together before you try it on your own.

The physical world: Gets hit by a lot of asteroids because the planet orbits near an asteroid belt

Answer the following worldbuilding questions one by one and then we can compare our answers

- *What is the history of your world? Its geography? Climate?*

- *What do the lifeforms in your world look like?*

- *What is the culture of your world?*

III. SOLO WORLDBUILDING EXERCISE

A. Choosing a world

Pick one of the following key differences as the basis of your world

1. The world has unpredictable oceans that sometimes cover all of the land with little warning
2. The world has very weak gravity
3. The world has thick clouds that block out light so that it's always dark
4. People and animals can communicate with each other

B. Brainstorming

Spend no more than 15 minutes brainstorming the answers to the questions below. Don't worry if you can't answer one of them. And don't worry if your answers aren't that detailed. True worldbuilding takes much longer than 15 minutes.

- *How did your world get like that? / Why is it different from ours?*

- *What is the history of your world? Its geography? Climate?*

- *What do the lifeforms in your world look like?*

- *What is the culture of your world?*

A. Reflecting

Write down *three things* that make your world different from our own, and explain why you decided to make them true about your world.

1.

2.

3.

IV. WRITING EXERCISE:

Rewrite the Cinderella story as if it were set *in your world*.

- Use the characters involved in the story (Cinderella, stepmother and stepsisters, fairy godmother, prince), but feel free to change the characters' race and gender
- Follow the plot of the story (Cinderella is unhappy, goes to the ball, prince falls in love, prince searches for Cinderella)

Share your work using #ExoLore

You can also join my slack channel for worldbuilders:

https://join.slack.com/t/worldbuilding-101/shared_invite/zt-dhkxypet-ObhhBKOfpGUq5_a2LzUA

V. FURTHER WORLDBUILDING EXERCISES

- Create a world that is just like ours, but with one small, historical change (the Library of Alexandria never burned down or MLK Jr. was never assassinated)
- Create an unrealistic fantasy world (with a coherent magic system and mythical creatures)
- Create a world that realistically explains a mythical concept (see *Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld, where vampirism is explained as a parasitic disease)

VI. RESOURCES

I didn't learn how to build worlds from a textbook; I learned how to worldbuild through lots of experience and reading (see appendix). But there are some helpful guides:

1. <http://www.artofworldbuilding.com/>
2. <https://blog.reedsy.com/worldbuilding-guide/>
3. <https://writingcooperative.com/world-building-guide-fantasy-novels-958e5859d892>
4. <https://thewritelife.com/worldbuilding/>
5. <https://www.amazon.com/Zs-Worldbuilding-Building-Fictional-Scratch/dp/0692850554>
6. <https://www.amazon.com/Kobold-Guide-Worldbuilding-Guides-Design-ebook/dp/BooB2DSY66>

VII. APPENDIX (examples of worldbuilding)

Games

1. Pokemon
2. Legend of Zelda

TV shows

3. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
4. *Star Trek*
5. *The Expanse*
6. *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

Books

7. *Peeps* by Scott Westerfeld
8. *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling
9. *Inheritance Trilogy* by N.K. Jemison
10. *Lord of the Rings & The Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien
11. All the books by Tamora Pierce
12. *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis

Movies

13. Avatar
14. Star Wars
15. Pirates of the Caribbean
16. Nightmare Before Christmas