GROWING YOUR ICEBERG

Crafting a Secondary World That Feels Ancient in 60 Minutes (or less)

By N. K. Jemisin
This workshop assumes a certain basic familiarity with “speculative” fiction: science fiction, fantasy, horror, literary fiction that delves into the numinous or the weird, alternate histories. I will abbreviate this collectively as “SFF”, for “science fiction, fantasy, and other”.

If you aren’t familiar with SFF, there are several recommended starter titles herein. Check out the Nebula and World Fantasy Awards lists, too.
1. Introduction to secondary worldbuilding: hazards, concerns, things to consider
2. What’s awesome about secondary worldbuilding
3. Let’s build a world!
4. Q&A.
ICEBERG RIGHT AHEAD

❖ A common adage of speculative fiction writing is that worldbuilding should be like an iceberg: only 10% should be visible above the surface, with the rest hidden underneath.

❖ Two problems with this adage:
  1. It implies that there’s something scary or dangerous about that hidden 90%.
  2. As with all writing “rules”, it can be broken with care, skill, and under certain circumstances. E.g. The Silmarillion.
DON’T FEAR THE ICEBERG

- Fear of worldbuilding is why we see so many similar worlds done to death: Iron Age barbarians, Star Trek-ian space navies, medieval northern Europe ad infinitum. Easier to copy than create.

- Worldbuilding is what makes SFF unique; embrace it.

- Worldbuilding is like any other writing skill. Practice!
DON’T FEAR THE ICEBERG

Will crafting a really “different” world hurt my sales?

- Maybe. Then again, so would writing a cliched, overdone setting that bores readers to death.
- Books thrive or fail on their writing: plot, characterization, narrative style, etc. Worldbuilding is just part of that.
“Secondary world” definition: not the real world. The real world is the “primary” world.

- Can be a little different through extremely different, but learning curve increases with difference.
- Learning curves are OK! SFF readers like them! But…
- Too steep and the reader disengages!
- My recommendation: increase immersion as difference increases.
THE IMMERSION PYRAMID

High Immersion
- The Hunger Games (Suzanne Collins)
- If on a winter’s night a traveler (Italo Calvino)
- First Person
- Second Person
- Single PoV

Moderate Immersion
- The Night Angel Trilogy (Brent Weeks)
- The Coldfire Trilogy (C. S. Friedman)
- “Tight” Third Person
- Limited PoV

Low Immersion
- Gormenghast (Mervyn Peake)
- Lord of the Rings (J. R. R. Tolkien)
- “Distant” Third Person
- Multiple PoVs
- Omniscient Narrator
IMMERSING IN YOUR WORLD

- High Immersion: Explain little. The strangeness of the world is conveyed mostly through context, and rarely in the narrative. Glossaries and epigraphs can help.
- Moderate Immersion: Explain periodically. Sometimes interrupts the narrative for explanations of what’s going on.
- Low Immersion: Explain frequently. The narrator may directly address the reader. Prologues are common. **Danger: infodumping!**
WHAT’S AWESOME

- You get to explore anything you find cool, as much as you want, and no one can stop you MWAAAAHAAAAHAAAA – ahem.
- REEEESEEARCH
- Glossaries! Maps! Build your own Silmarillion!

Let your geek flag fly, my fellow writers.
RESEARCH IS YOUR FRIEND

- Books and experts are necessary. Offer coffee or dinner in exchange for the chance to pick a person’s brains.
- Travel may also be necessary. And fun!
- No one expects expertise – but they do expect you to have put forth at least a basic effort.
- Useful resources exist to help you generate maps, languages, and more.
- Beware research addiction! Set a time limit for the research phase.
ME AT CANYON DE CHELLY, 2005

- Paid for by a grant from the Speculative Literature Foundation
- Most recent trip to Hawaii to study volcanoes, 2013
- Add a research component to a family vacation and it can be a write-off! Talk to your accountant.
SCIENCE VS PLAUSIBILITY

- You can’t research everything.
- This is still a speculative world – not Earth, not real, maybe not possible by the laws of physics (e.g. if magic exists)
- This is still fiction – it must engage, not just educate, not just entertain
- Use enough science to make sense to the layperson, and no more
- Use your writing to sell the “whoppers”
- Don’t forget the social sciences!
Now...

LET’S BUILD A WORLD
PICK YOUR PLANET

- Habitable (to the people you’ll create) or inimical?
- Continents, archipelago, all ocean, no water at all?
- Climate: consider global weather patterns.
- Flora and fauna adapted to the above
- Your story’s people will have adapted to the above, too!
Not every planet is Earth, but this is the planet we know best. For plausibility’s sake, remember that it is the planet your audience knows best, too.

From PBS.org
LET’S BUILD A WORLD

For the sake of today’s exercise we will assume

- Habitable
- Earthlike: more water than land, one sun, one moon, nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere
- Similar ecosystem
- Human inhabitants… at least
TWO CONTINENTS

Think “puzzle pieces”. If you have more than one continent, they should fit together.
TWO CONTINENTS
TWO CONTINENTS

Arctic cold

Equatorial heat
TWO CONTINENTS

Arctic cold

Equatorial heat
TWO CONTINENTS

- Cold, arid, mostly desert or tundra
- Warmer, temperate
- Tropical coast
- Mostly tropical
- HELL CORRIDOR
  Violent storms, tsunamis, whirlpools, vicious winds
TWO CONTINENTS

We can call it “The Sea of Tears”
TWO CONTINENTS

Because it’s cool
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

- Our world gives us the basics: Agriculture difficult. Tsunamis, earthquakes, storms frequent. Life dependent on trade and the sea.
- Sociology gives us the rest. Many, many characteristics to explore. Overwhelming!

Wordle.net
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

- Even **one** sociological difference can have profound effects.
- Important to understand how societies grow and change.
- DO NOT rely on stereotypes or myths.
- Sociological recs:
  - **Guns, Germs, and Steel** (Jared Diamond)
  - **The Tipping Point** (Malcolm Gladwell)
  - **1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus** (Charles C. Mann)
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

- Pick three sociological characteristics to start. The rest, in conjunction with the world’s physical characteristics, will dictate the rest.

- Don’t forget the speculative element!
  - Magic
  - Weird science (e.g. Two moons, “element X”)
  - Another sentient species
  - No more! The world is weird enough already!
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

- Random selection of characteristics:
  - Art & architecture
  - Sex & sexuality
  - “Element X”
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

- Art & architecture
  - They build for tsunamis, storms, and earthquakes: elevated on stilts or pylons, “hanging frame”, wind corridors a la “shotgun homes”, avoid stone, prefer lighter materials
  - Lots of wind and ocean motifs
  - Veneration of resilience, appreciation of ephemerality

- If they have a religion, these elements would influence it. Regardless of religion, these will be cultural values.
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

*v• Sex & sexuality
  • Sex =/= gender. Sex = physical configurations; gender = how society interprets those and behavior
  • Resilience: Women have higher pain threshold. Fewer boys survive childbirth & childhood diseases. Ephemerality: Change with need is valued.
  • Influenced by ocean life. Tropical fish change sexes as needed.

*v• Three genders recognized: male, female, inter.

*v• Matrilineal. Women head families and captain ships, but men & inters expected to “become” women as needed.
“ELEMENT X”

- Some elements that are very rare in the primary world could be abundant in a secondary world, or vice versa. E.g. gold & platinum everywhere but not much iron.
- Don’t make something that will solve all problems! New elements should *create* new problems.
FURYWOOD

- Made from trees which grow only along the coast of the Sea of Tears.
- Super strong, super light, actually gets tougher after being struck by lightning or set on fire.
- Special harvesting methods, more like quarrying or smithing.
- Ships made of furywood are “fired” before commissioning. Those which have been tested by storms are most valuable.
- Powerful navies… so long as the secrets of furywood are kept local.
LET’S MAKE A PEOPLE

- Seafaring, woman-dominated, three-gendered, traders and raiders who are feared the world over for their blackened invincible ships!
- Society focused on trading for needed goods, and protecting furywood.
- Negative attitude toward medicine: “Get better on your own. Survive if you can.”
- Same people on both sides of the Sea of Tears? But after a few generations, they would differentiate. Possible conflict.
- Possible conflict with more agrarian societies, less naval societies, societies horrified by social structure.
LET’S BUILD A PEOPLE

The rest follows on from there!

- Well-developed climate science and astronomy (also mathematics)
- Possible animist religion centered on the sea
- Defensive technology around protecting furywood stands.
- Society structured around trading families; anti-individualistic.
- Without agriculture (arable land) and patrilineage, little need for permanent marriage. The rarity of inters would make them desirable and possibly venerable.
- Resilient men sought after for child-making; violent, risk-taking men who seem prone to die young less so.
YOU’VE HAD A GREAT START! NOW WORK HARDER.

- That was just the world. You still need to select characters and build a plot!
- Low immersion example: The sprawling epic tale of three families’ struggle for trading dominance, told from six PoVs, with maps and glossaries and explanations. Title: The War of Tears
- High immersion example: The romantic first-person saga of an orphaned boy who yearns to captain a furywood ship. As he grows up he must earn the favor of a trading family’s matriarch, romance a high-status inter, and (once he’s got it) fend off foreigners who want his beloved ship. Title: Tearbreaker (the name of the ship)
You are welcome to build a story in the world created by this workshop. Remember, ideas cannot be copyrighted. The uniqueness of a story lies in its execution.

If you want to credit me, go ahead, but you don’t have to!

I’m not planning to write anything in this world. I’ve got plenty of my own worlds to play in already.

Try running the exercise again, but making different choices!