

WORLD-BUILDING 101: NOVELS

WHAT IS WORLD-BUILDING?

Worldbuilding is a skeleton. You may not see a thing's bones, but those bones determine the shape of the shape.

World-building can be described in lots of ways, but the main key is awareness of the bigger picture.

This applies to epic novels and adorable games. It applies to single pieces of art and long-form film. This applies to anything you create. Your audience sees what's inside the frame, here; but you, as the creator, must be aware of what's going on outside it.

Full world-building means an awareness of

- History
- Geography
- Ecology
- Economy
- Maps
- Cultures.

In fact, full world-building kind of looks like knowing how your own world works

This isn't scary. It's awesome.

World-building means that you have the sense of a bigger universe. There's a sense of *more*, maybe even of *epic*, that haunts the edges of your picture or your game or your movie. This goes way beyond clothing designs or the shapes of trees. This goes far beyond whether or not your characters use magic and what political systems are normal. World-building encompasses every assumption and belief your characters hold, spoken and unspoken – and that means it determines the decisions they make and the responses they choose.

Without world-building, your stories run the risk of feeling flat and unreal. With it, you have the chance to capture the imagination of your audience – and isn't that what we want?

We need world-building for several reasons:

1. It's the framework in which your characters live, creating the rules to which they respond.
2. It helps you tell a more full and vibrant story – whether it's fiction or not.
3. It leaves open the possibilities for sequels.

We'll each be speaking on world-building in our medium, and then we'll open the floor for questions. With that said: it's time to plunge into the world of books!

To build a world is a challenge in book-form because it's not a visual medium. There are two ways to do it, but both have to have the same goal.

Way one: from the outside in, building geology, politics, history, gender delineations and fashion; economic weirdness determined by things like whether or not the locusts were bad three years ago... the frame for what your characters do.

Way two: from the inside out, starting with the picayune details of your character's daily life and what that means for the way the world HAS to work.

In both cases, you need to know the *why*.

Understand history is written by the victor.

Why do your characters wear kimonos? Why does your alien species only have one language (and there really needs to be a reason for that)? You don't need to be a science major, but you need to have some idea why fire only burns green in that fantasy you're writing.

But these are all details you can work out on your own. You know that old phrase, give a man a fish, he's fed for one day; teach him to fish, he's fed the rest of your life?

Here's the author principle connected to that: everything you need to know about world-building falls into two categories: What your characters know and what your characters don't know.

That's because in a book, it's all about your characters. If these things don't affect your characters, your reader might not need to know. If a star blows up or evolves life or something and it has NO AFFECT on your characters, your reader won't care.

This includes what they don't understand, or misunderstand (incorrect information is a great way to move the plot along, because it means the world does NOT work the way your characters think it will).

This applies to all points of view in writing – 1st, 2nd, 3rd pov, as well as narrative.

The things your characters don't know, by the way, still affect the way the world runs, so it matters to your reader.

As an author, you need to know all the things. But conversely, as you build your world, you have to consider how this stuff does affect your characters. That's how you communicate it to your reader.

Characters matter.

Take hitchhiker's guide. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy presents us with that, when a bowl of petunias is suddenly yanked into existence by the infinite improbability drive miles above the planet Magrathea, and begins falling, having only time to think, "Oh no, not again," before crashing to the ground. (Agrajag)

Author-brain: do not assume it's clear to the reader just because it's clear to you and your characters.