

Writing Fantasy #2—World Building

World building is at the core of writing fantasy. Your fantasy world shapes and defines every other aspect of your book: the characters, their strengths and limitations, and especially the plot. You make the rules, but that also means that you have to stick to them. That being said, world building is one of most fun parts of writing a fantasy novel. The ability to literally create a world, define the rules for a system of magic, build and populate cities, and then select and bring to life the people who will tell your story—your characters.

In some books, the world is a character in itself. I created a world for my Raine Benares adventures that was familiar, yet at the same time new and exotic. I felt that having the action of my story happen in a place readers could recognize would enable them to not only instantly visualize the setting, but put themselves into the story itself. Being a bit of a Renaissance history buff, I based my city of Mermeia on Venice. The architecture conveys the Renaissance feel that I was going for, and it has canals instead of streets, giving my characters a means of transportation *and* a way to dump a body or two. I mean, how cool is that? And since the real Venice consists of many islands, my imaginary Mermeia does, too. However, I also used islands as a way to separate the not-quite-friendly-with-each-other races and groups of people that populate my books.

Then there's what's become a staple of many traditional fantasy series—The Map. For some, their reading experience isn't complete without a map; others couldn't care less. Me? I have one. And whether you ever plan to put a fancy map in the front of your book, it's good to have a basic map while you're writing, just something you sketch out that you can use while you work. Why? So if your characters have to do any traveling (and in a fantasy, they always do), you know how long it's going to take them to get from Point A to Point B, what obstacles are in their way, which enables you to determine how those obstacles could influence your plot. A thorough map of your world (or just the city your book takes place in) can help you uncover subplots you might otherwise be unaware of.

Now we get to the really fun part of fantasy world building—magic. Who has it? How much do they have? What can they do with it? And the big question, “What if . . .?” The answers to questions like these can really shape your plot. Take the time to sit down with a notebook, ask yourself questions, let your imagination out to play, and see what happens.

For example, in my Raine Benares series, magic turned out to be the main plot element. Not the magic itself, but what people would be willing to do to get their hands on a lot of it and fast. My protagonist, Raine Benares, is an elf and a seeker, a finder of lost things and missing people. In terms of magical talent, Raine has enough that she's good at her job, makes a decent living, and that's perfectly fine with her. She's happy. Raine's problems start when through a series of misadventures she finds herself linked to a proverbial cursed stone of power that gives the one person it's linked to the power to basically take over the world. You know, kill thousands,

enslave millions, and literally move mountains—your standard god-like kind of stuff. And oh, by the way, the stone will drive you insane, a full-fledged cackling loony, and then you die, usually by throwing yourself off the mountain that you just carved in half. Needless to say, Raine's new goal in life is to find a way to get rid of the rock. The new goal of every magical mobster and sicko sorcerer in Mermeia and beyond is to get hold of Raine.

Voila, a world-building element gives you a cool and fun plot that you can sink your writing teeth into.

And how Raine, her friends, and less-than-law-abiding family fight off the aforementioned mobsters and sorcerers leads to one of the mainstays of fantasy world building—technology. If you borrow from an actual period of history for your fantasy world (as I did with the Renaissance), you've essentially established the parameters of your world's technology. I'm a fencer, and love rapiers and daggers, so the period and weapons was kind of a no-brainer for me. But you don't have to limit yourself to the traditional sword-wielding periods of history. In fact, feel free to mix and match. I'm a fan of *Firefly*, and I love how Joss Whedon created a sci-fi universe of starships meets the Wild West. And it worked. Wonderfully. A recent (and very hot) addition to the growing list of fantasy sub-genres is Steampunk, which is mainly based in the Victorian era.

That's why writing fantasy is so much fun. Not only do you get to create and interact with people who come to life in your imagination, but where and how they live is also up to you. Your fantasy world can be as limitless as your imagination.

And if you can make it believable, you can make it work.

Great world-building reference books:

How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy by Orson Scott Card

World Building by Stephen L. Gillet

The Writers Complete Fantasy Reference: An Indispensable Compendium of Myth and Magic with an introduction by Terry Brooks