Andy Redsmith's Guide to Worldbuilding

Let's start with a question.

Which writers need to think about worldbuilding?

ALL writers do.

According to Wikipedia:

Worldbuilding is the process of constructing an imaginary world, sometimes associated with a whole fictional universe. The resulting world may be called a constructed world. Developing an imaginary setting with coherent qualities such as a history, geography, and ecology is a key task for many science fiction or fantasy writers.

True, but this is only one aspect.

Worldbuilding includes that, and more. When you're writing a story, you want to take the reader to the place you're writing about. You're aiming for them to have "willing suspension of disbelief."

Mr. Reader wants to imagine that he's in the location of your novel, and you have to construct the world for him to go to. If you're writing about Georgian England, or modern-day China, you've got to let us think we're there.

So we're all worldbuilding.

It's not only imaginary creatures and strange planets; that's just part of worldbuilding for Science Fiction and Fantasy. We all have to construct a viable world for our story to take place in, otherwise the reader's imagination won't go there.

But, you say, what if I'm writing about "ordinary" people in present day Britain? The world is already there. The society, the weather, everything. Do I still have to do worldbuilding?

Answer: yes you do. It's on a smaller, more intimate, scale than somebody who is creating a fantasy world, but it's still got to be done. You've got to create workplaces, the insides of houses, all the places for the characters to interact.

Now you may say that's not 'worldbuilding', that's 'setting.'

And I would reply: worldbuilding in the *Wikipedia* sense is a part of setting.

And everyone has to do setting.

Of course, the amount of worldbuilding varies from genre to genre and story to story.

In general, the most worldbuilding has to be done by those who are constructing completely new worlds, generally Science Fiction/Fantasy writers.

If you say: 'I'm writing about ordinary people in present-day New York,' then the reader will be able to paint most of the picture themselves. At least, they'll be able to paint the broad picture. You'll still have to do the small-scale stuff, as mentioned above.

If you say: 'I'm writing about 18th century Ireland', people go 'Oh yes. 18th century Ireland. That means we'll have farms, small towns, horse and cart for transport, etc.' In other words, whatever realistic and/or cliched images come to mind.

But if you say: 'I'm writing about a magic world', people have no frame of reference. You have to construct everything for them. You have to do more worldbuilding.

So yes, there are different levels, and it's something we all have to consider.

Now that we're all agreed (hopefully!), how do you build a world that's real for the reader?

In my humble opinion, creating a realistic world involves:
- Research, research, research
- Sensory engagement
- Imagination
- Trial and error
- And following the four rules below

Four rules? Yes, these are my four rules for worldbuilding.

Your world has to be:
1. Believable
2. Tangible
3. Logically consistent
4. Interesting

What does all that mean? I'm glad you asked.

1. **Believable**

    This is all about painting the picture. If you're writing historical fiction or a story set in a present-day foreign country, fill the scene with appropriate detail. Here's where the research comes in.

    For example, the 18th century Ireland story mentioned above. Or if you're in the African jungle, there will be big trees, wild animals, and strange noises at night.

    Wherever you are supposed to be, include things which help to set the story there and then. You want the reader to think they're in 18th century Ireland, or the African jungle, or wherever it may be, so everything you put in builds up and reinforces that idea. The story then takes place in that setting.

    You DON'T want them saying 'that couldn't happen' or 'they hadn't been invented yet' because you've put in something which isn't believable.

2. **Tangible**

   This is about interacting with the world. It has to be a place where things can be not just seen but also touched, smelled, felt, heard, and experienced. Things exist in this world. Characters do things in this world. If you pick up a rock, it has weight. If you bang your head, it hurts.

   It's taking the picture you paint in (1) above, and making it come to life. When you write the story, you're not going to paint the picture, then make it come to life as an afterthought. You're going to be doing both at the same time.

3. **Logically consistent.**

   This is about obeying the rules. Either the rules that actually exist if it's an actual place or time, (the laws of modern society, the boiling point of water, etc.) or the rules that you have created, (whatever they are). If you invent a fantasy or sci-fi world, it will still have rules.

   For example, suppose you invent a world where there is no gravity. You can't have your cop hero find the murder weapon lying around because it wouldn't be there: it would have floated away.

   Whereas (1) and (2) above are concerned with creating the world, and making all the things that the reader notices, this rule is concerned with the things that the reader doesn't see. You check everything is logically consistent before the reader gets hold of the book, and all of your background work should go completely unnoticed.

4. **Interesting**

   Not really a rule as such, more of a recommendation. If you create a world that is believable, tangible, logically consistent, but dull as hell, nobody is going to care what happens there. Conversely, if you make a world that is really interesting, but also doesn't obey the rules above, you're going to struggle to have a decent story take place in it. The world is going to overpower the narrative.

Other things to think about.

Remember, the world you've built is only a stage, and most of the work stays behind the scenes. A lot of the research and worldbuilding you've done will probably never be seen by the reader. The process of worldbuilding has created the best world that you can, but you don't need to show all your background work.

It doesn't matter that the reader doesn't see all of the worldbuilding you've done. Through the story they will only see part of the world; as much as is necessary for the story. If you've done a good job of building it, they can settle back and enjoy the tale.

It is important to let the reader think there is a whole world beyond the bit that they see. You can send a character off to another country, or mention things that are happening in the neighbouring town, or discuss a ceremony that one of the characters went through as a child, or – well, you get the idea. Things happening outside of the story.

The reader will be more engaged if they think the whole world exists. They don't need to know everything about it. BUT they need to be confident that you (the writer) do know everything about it.

And finally…

How much world building is too much or too little?

Answer:

It depends on: how much research you want to do, how much time you've got, how much you enjoy spending time creating worlds, and how much you think you need for your story.

You're probably better off doing too much rather than too little. It's better to have prepared stuff you never use, rather than need something you haven't thought of.

Finding the balance of how much worldbuilding to show is just like every other piece of descriptive writing in your story.

I hope all this is helpful and/or gives you something to think about.

Good luck with your writing!

Andy

Andy Redsmith is the author of two hilarious urban Fantasy novels, **Breaking the Lore** and the sequel, **Know Your Rites**. His novels take place in the the "real" world and a parallel magical realm. His books are not only well written and fun, but the worldbuilding is creative and immersive.

Follow this link for a **No Spoiler Book Review of Breaking the Lore.**

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