World-Building

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Part 2: Belief Systems

Getting Started

Welcome, World-Builders!

Here we are! Part 2 of my six-week world-building series! In this issue, we'll be looking at all aspects of **Belief Systems.** This one was more difficult for me to write than others because belief is so personal and yet it ties into almost every other facet of a world.

I've organized this document into various sections: **Organized Religion**, which will look at building a religion; **Fate and Destiny**, which will look deeper into the inner beliefs of your character(s); **Worship and Rituals**, which would look at the outward displays of belief, especially as required by organized religion; and finally, **Morals, Ethics, and Philosophy**, which was the most difficult to write!

Inner beliefs help you shape a real character. They help to take your readers deeper into what it means to be alive and helps them to connect with your character. Beliefs profoundly shape the way we look at the world, interact with others, and think about ourselves and our shortcomings.

I hope this guide is helpful for you in your world-building process. As always, I encourage you to reach out to me on the blog or on social media with your own tips, tricks, and questions.

I'm so excited to adventure with you!
Michelle

Elements of Belief Systems

Organized Religion

Start, as we did with government, by examining world religions. Take note of monotheistic (one deity) versus polytheistic (many deities). Note what each religion's core belief is. Religion does not have to be a focal point in your story, it does not even have to mention it. However, religion can and does influence not only the morals of peoples but also the inner dialogues. Take Christianity for example. The actions that some believers take to convert others are directly based on their accepted religious texts. Their lives are supposed to revolve around being like the Christ. Consider also the absence of religion or Atheism. Though Atheists do not conscribe to a higher power, most do still carry some sort of moral system with them. This guides their actions and their thinking.

Below I have listed some common religions and quick snippets of their beliefs.

Atheism: The belief that religions are man-made constructs. No belief in a higher power.

Agnosticism: The belief that knowing if a higher power is real is unknowable.

Buddhism: Those who practice Buddhism ascribe to the four truths: existence is suffering, there is a reason for that suffering which comes from attachment, there can be an end to suffering, and an end can be found through following the 8-fold path.

Christianity: The belief that Jesus Christ paid the blood price for the sins of the world as demanded by a holy God.

Hinduism: This religion encompasses many branches of belief. Notable beliefs include reincarnation, karma, and the desire to become more like Brahman.

Islam: Belief in the words of the prophet Muhammad as the prophet of God.

Judaism: Belief in the God of the Old Testament of the Bible and the original Jewish covenant with him.

Scientology: A religion based on self-knowledge and spiritual fulfillment through study. Holds that the human soul is infinite.

Taoism: A religion centering around piety and humility. This belief focuses on the harmonious relation of the self to the natural world.

Do any of these belief systems work within the framework of your novel? How can you use elements of each of these to round out your world? Beliefs play an important role in the everyday lives of people, whether it is belief in an organized religion or not. Science can even, to some, be seen as a belief system. Figure out what works best for your world and develop it to fit your world's needs. Create your own religion by taking bits and pieces of others.

I love this website for information on religions: https://uri.org/kids/world-religions

Organized Religion

Questions

1. Is there an organized religion? What is it called?

2. How many deities are worshiped?

3. Is there a worship location? A specific time for worship?

4. Are there sacred texts or oral traditions?

5. What is the religion built on? What started it?

6. How does this belief system interact with the government?

7. How are those who ascribe to this belief system treated by non-believers? How are non-believers treated by believers?

8. Are there competing religions in your society? In your world?

9. Have wars been fought over beliefs?

10. Does this belief system align with the laws already in place?

11. Do people worship out of fear of divine judgement or out of devotion?

12. What does your character believe? What do they believe about death?

13. How well-known are scriptures or prophecies?

14. Are there any significant religious figures today or in history?

15. Are there any prophecies?

16. Is there an educational institution devoted to studying these beliefs?

17. What do believers gain from belief?

Fate and Destiny

While often used interchangeably, fate and destiny are technically different.

Fate is described as events beyond ones control determined by a supernatural power.

Destiny is described as events that will happen to a person in the future.

Both deal with the concept of predetermination. As the "god" of your book, you have predetermined how the story will end. However, authors should be sure to look at their characters' beliefs about fate and destiny. While these are sometimes tied to an organized religion, this is not always the case.

If your character believes in fate, they may be constantly mindful of the deity that is guiding their path. However, if your character believes in destiny, they could just be allowing life to happen to them knowing that everything will work out the way it should in the end. Both of these beliefs can round out the development of your character and help drive certain decisions or reactions throughout your book.

This is important in the grand scheme of your world because it helps shape how the peoples of your society act, react, and think.

Golden Rule #4: Twist the narrative. I believe wholeheartedly in one of last week's golden rules: fantasy has to be real. But I believe equally strongly about this rule. You must twist the narrative. Your story and your world has to be unique to appeal to readers. One of the reasons Children of Blood and Bone became so popular so fast is because the fantasy world is one based, not in Europe like so many before, but in Africa, with African roots and story elements. Find a way to twist the narrative on your story. As another example, think of the character Ove from "A Man Called Ove." Everyone can relate to the grumpy old man that lives next-door. You've probably met one of these in your life. But Fredrick Backman does a great job flipping the scrip on this traditional character by letting us see his inner conflicts, his support of the LGBTQ+ community, and his thoughts of suicide. It makes you think of your grumpy old neighbor in a completely different light. Flip the narrative on elements of your story to make it unique.

Fate and Destiny

Questions

1. How does your main character wrestle with fate? Does he/she believe they're a victim of circumstance?

2. Does a deity determine each person's life?

3. What does your main character believe they have control over? What do they believe they do not have control over?

4. Does magic have any part in foreseeing fate/destiny? Does magic have any part in influencing it?

5. In your main character's opinion, what is the difference between fate and destiny?

6. Does your main character believe in a higher calling?

7. Are there any suspicions in your society?

8. Are there any re-occurring thoughts your character has when faced with the future?

9. What does your character believe about their own future?

10. Is there prophecy in your story? How does this play into your character's beliefs about fate and destiny?

11. How do your character's personal beliefs affect their daily life? What about their life when faced with adversity or challenges?

12. How does your society think of fate and destiny?

13. Are there any objects that can assist in seeing or predicting the future?

Worship and Rituals

Building in aspects of worship or rituals into your narrative can help to drive a plot or explain your character's reaction to certain things. If they're used to seeing women sacrificed on an altar, they shouldn't bat an eye when they see a woman murdered in a city raid. If cleansing is a sacred ritual, you should be intertwining the fact that your character washes their hands regularly, bathes in pools, or repeats prayers while they clean the blood from their hands.

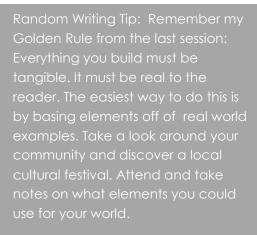Worship and rituals can help to round out a society, no matter how insignificant these are. Think about festivals or ceremonies you could incorporate to reveal that playful side of your main character. Or think about caravans and traveling bards that come to town seasonally bringing news of far away. Certain ceremonies can help to guide a storyline as much as they can help build your world.

Random Writing Tip: Remember my Golden Rule from the last session: Everything you build must be tangible. It must be real to the reader. The easiest way to do this is by basing elements off of real world examples. Take a look around your community and discover a local cultural festival. Attend and take notes on what elements you could use for your world.

Think about how the rituals and worship in your society might impact your character. Did they always feel on the outside looking in during these festivities? Or were they a centerpiece, perhaps a high-ranking official in the worship circle?

Worship does not have to be spiritual either. Some societies worship the land. Some have rituals when killing an animal for food. Some have festivals for meteor showers. Some have marriage rituals.

Golden Rule #5: React.

This seems basic, but one thing I see in young writers is their characters do not react to things, whether other people, events, or situations. The characters move through scenes mechanically as if not really experiencing the world. Make sure that they react to, for example, seeing a hungry child or having their money stolen. Too often I see writers write that their character saw a dead dog but follow it up with just the next sequence of events. Characters need to react to things, however minimally, just as we as humans do.

Worship and Rituals

Questions

1. Describe a traditional way of worship for someone ascribing to your world's main religion.

2. Are sacrifices required? What kind? Blood? Animal? Money? Food? Time?

3. Is there any clothing that sets believers apart? Any appearance?

4. What local festivals or celebrations honor this religion?

5. Describe the place of worship. Why this place?

6. Are there any sacred relics?

7. Are festivals or celebrations annual? What are they based around (e.g. springtime, astrological events, exact calendar dates)?

8. Are there any religious taboos?

9. How does one atone for breaking laws or forgetting rituals?

10. Are there any purification rituals needed?

11. Are there any physical markings given by believers or by a deity to show the guilty?

12. How does your main character petition their deity?

Guilt can destroy a character. Guilt can be heaped on a person personally for a shortcoming they believe they have (or do) or for a mistake. Others can also guilt your character. Belief and religion can often revolve around guilt and the pressure of perfection. How does your character deal with guilt? Who or what makes your character feel guilty?

Morals, Ethics, and Philosophy

Morals and ethics can often be confused or used interchangeably, when in fact, they are two different things.

Morals are what an individual believes is right and wrong. This can often be influenced by religion, society, or just an inner feeling.

Ethics are rules given by society. Ethics are most closely tied to religion, whereas morals are more personal. Many times ethics and morals are linked, but not always. Ethics are the system of moral principals.

We're getting real deep and personal here now! Each of these aspects will affect your character, especially if they differ from societal views of morals, ethics, and philosophy. These aspects not only help to build your world, but the characters within your world.

Take a look at the character studies to the right and think about what molds your own characters fit into. Do they ascribe to society? Or do their morals mesh to fit ethical norms?

Philosophy is the study of the fundamental nature of human existence. This is how society and your characters reason through right and wrong, contemplate the world around them, and make meaning of world events.

I recommend reading Plato, Aristotle and Socrates to start. Take a class at a local community college and learn how these great philosophers reasoned through the world in which they lived.

A character study:

Geelae, a soft-spoken maid for a local assassin, believes murder of any kind is wrong. However, the ethics of the society of Ula, are that some people deserve to die. Her morals are in conflict with the ethics of the society she lives in. How she thinks about this dilemma and the dilemma of working for an assassin whose job it is to kill is her philosophy. She could reason that if she didn't have the job, her little brother would starve, which would be murder. Ethically, she cannot do that since he does not deserve to die. Therefore, she will philosophize that by working for an assassin, she is saving a life.

Another character study:

Murstau, a scholar yearning to make a name for himself, plagiarizes ancient documents that are hardly ever read. He is revered as the "new mind" of the age. Murstau believes the proliferation of knowledge is of utmost importance and will see that it is carried out to whatever end. Ethically, plagiarism is wrong but morally, Murstau sees it as his duty since knowledge is freedom.

Morals, Ethics, and Philosophy

Questions

1. List traditional morals your main character has.

2. Why does your main character believe what they do?

3. What morals interfere with your character getting what they want?

4. How do the societal morals, ethics, and beliefs affect how laws and punishments of your society?

5. Do any morals conflict with established religion?

6. Are there institutions that study philosophy and/or religion?

7. Is the society progressive in their discussions about morals, philosophy, and ethics?

8. Do your characters participate in meditation or prayers?

9. How do characters believe their world came into being?

10. What system of logic do your characters use to reason?

11. How does your character reason through a situation that conflicts with their morals?

12. Do any of your character's morals conflict with the ethics of society?

13. Is your character introspective? Do they take time to philosophize about the world around them?

14. Are there any renowned thinkers or philosophizers in your society? How are people of philosophy treated by others?

15. What is "right"? What is "wrong"? What is the difference?

Connect with me!

About the Author: My journey began one day the summer before 5th grade. I had just finished reading J. R. R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and (in my young, naive mind) thought, if Tolkien can create such an amazing story, why can't I? I began what I continue to work on to this day, albeit with some major adjustments.

No. Strike that.

In truth, my journey began in elementary school in the days when schools had funding and therefore had print shops where you could submit your books to your teacher and she would "publish" them for you; spiral bound and laminated with your own design on the cover. I published over 25 books.

No. That's not right either.

My journey actually began one day during kindergarten when my teacher, Mrs. Johnson, brought in glossy scraps of paper that I thought looked perfect for writing books on (when in actuality, that paper was horrible and couldn't hold a pencil mark if its life depended on it). I wrote four books that year.

Well, whatever way it began, it endures. I'm a Michigander destined for adventure. Traveling is the only other pastime that stirs my soul (don't ask me my favorite destination - I don't know). When I'm not working my big girl job, I help run a comic book store with my family which means I'm always surrounded by fantastic art, good literature, mind-taxing board games, and love. A combination of cuddles from my cat (Aravis), a good cup of tea (or wine, or tequila - I'm flexible), and classical piano music is my recipe for a productive writing session. More often, I write to the sound of Office episodes and unending questions

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