



# GROWING YOUR ICEBERG

---

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

*By N. K. Jemisin*



# SKIFFY STUFF AHEAD

---

❖ 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.



# FORMAT

---

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.

# #SECONDARYWORLDPROBLEMS

- ❖ “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. Tolkein)

“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 MWAAAHAHAHAHA – ahem.

❖ REEEEESEARCH

❖ 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...*



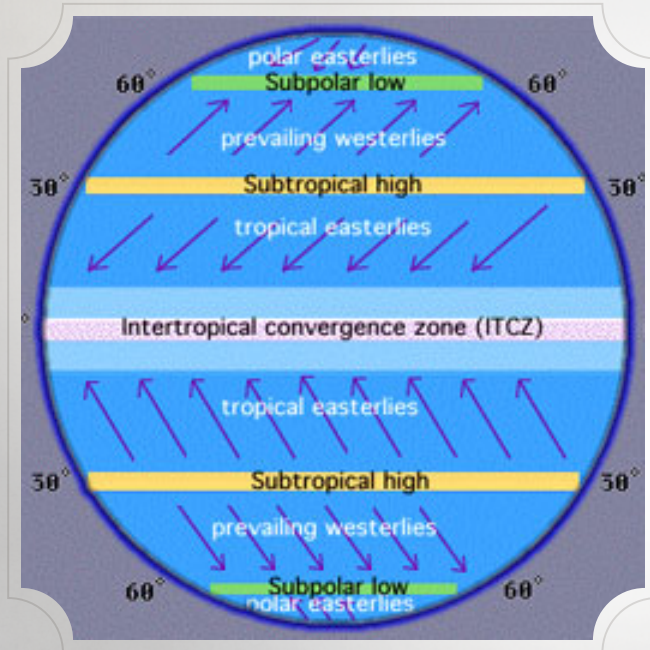
LET'S BUILD A WORLD



# 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](https://www.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

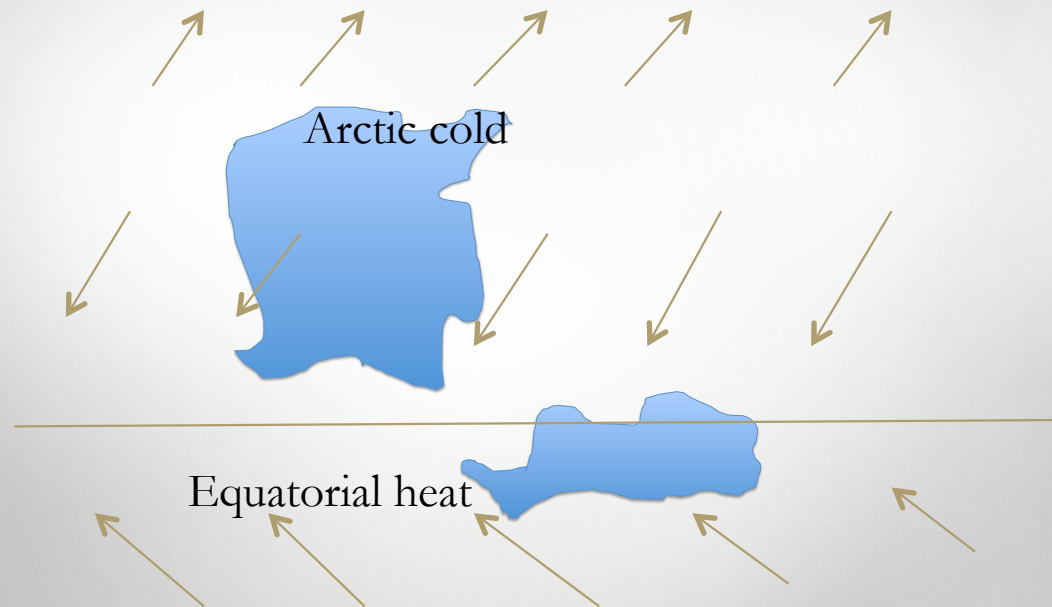
Think “puzzle pieces”. If you have more than one continent, they should fit together.



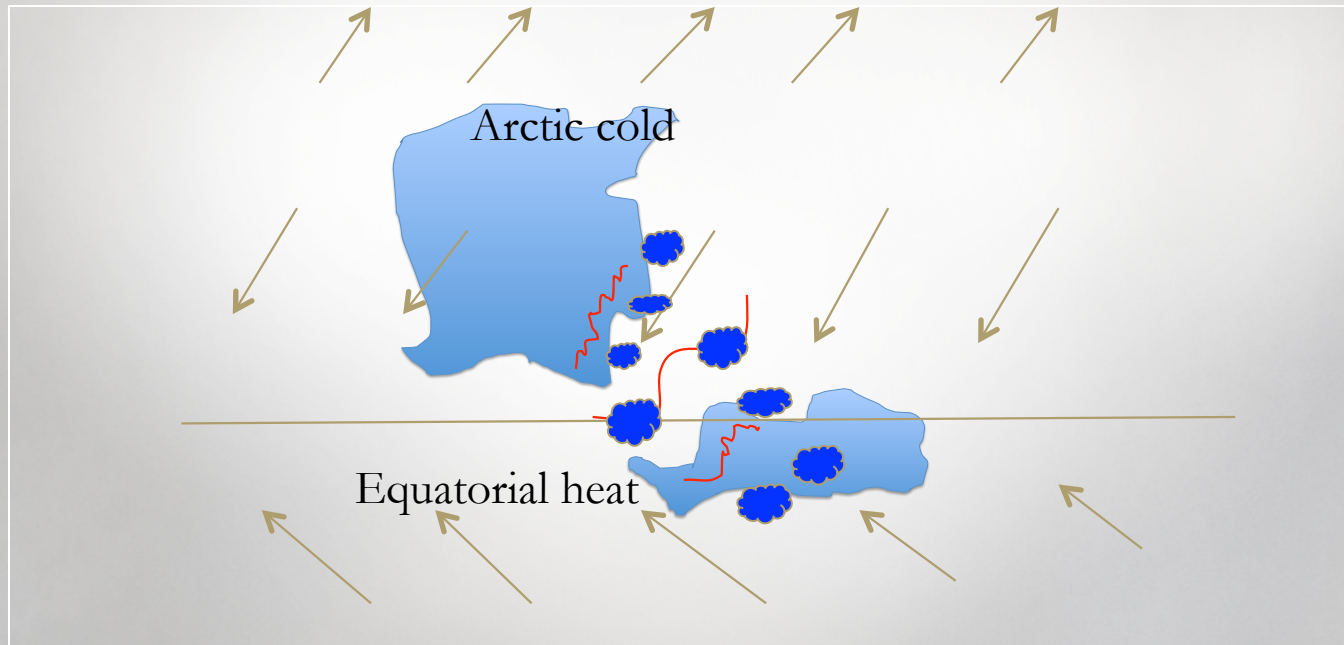
# TWO CONTINENTS



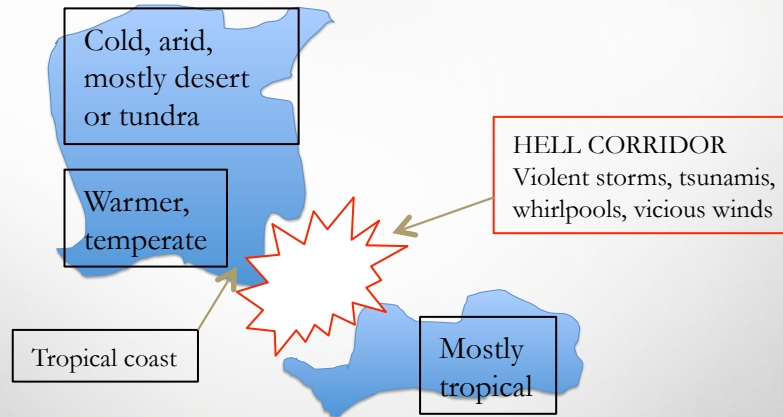
# TWO CONTINENTS



# TWO CONTINENTS



# TWO CONTINENTS



# 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

## ❖ Sex & sexuality

- Sex  $\neq$  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.

## ❖ Three genders recognized: male, female, **inter**.

❖ 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.
- ❖ Magical/pseudoscience elements: mithril, adamant, “element zero”, orichalcum, quantum.
- ❖ Don’t make something that will solve all problems! New elements should *create* new problems.

A decorative scrollwork border in white on a black background, framing the central text. The border features intricate floral and vine patterns, with a central crest-like element at the top and bottom.

# 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.

A decorative scrollwork border in white on a black background, framing the text. The border features intricate floral and vine patterns, with a central crest-like element at the top and bottom.

## 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)



# THIS IS YOUR WORLD

---

- ❖ 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!

# QUESTIONS

