

Creating Imaginary Worlds on the Page and in the Mind

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PhD by Published Works



To the best of my knowledge I confirm that the work in this thesis is my original work undertaken for the degree of PhD by Published Works in the Faculty of ADH, De Montfort University. I confirm that no material of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or qualification at any other university.

Abstract

This PhD by published works explores world-building in the light of the author's writing practice, which has been informed by his own neurodivergence in general and his aphantasia in particular. It has also been informed by Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological exploration of the reading process. The thesis interrogates the techniques and conceptual framework employed during the writing of three novels: *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* (2014), *The Queen of all Crows* (2018), and *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man* (2020). The author, being himself unable to form mental images, but wishing to stimulate that reaction in his readers, explores possible similarities between visual perception and visual imagination. Utilizing this exploration he devises and presents a framework for descriptive writing that may be useful to other practitioners and teachers of creative writing.

Practical Note on Scope and Layout

This PhD by published works comprises three novels and exegesis: *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*, *The Queen of all Crows*, and *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. The word limit has necessitated a narrow focus. Out of all the fields of investigation expressed in and through the novels, I have chosen world-building¹. And rather than address the experience and insights that have come to me from my neurodiversity as a whole, I here focus on one aspect – my aphantasia.² As a consequence, certain significant areas – detailed accounts of genre and terminology – appear in appendices. This is all in the interest of pursuing a single, fluent, line of argument.

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¹ My choice to hyphenate this word phrase is explained in Appendix 2. Some of its different uses and interpretations are laid out in chapter 4.

² I was identified as dyslexic in 1969 by Professor Tim Miles (founder of the British Dyslexia Association). Whilst I have not gone through the formal process for ADHD testing, I have been medically assessed as probably having the condition. There is no comparable process based in statute for the identification of aphantasia, since it is not classified as a disability. My self-identification as aphantasic is therefore based solely on the observation that I am unable to form mental images.

work. Some of the key elements of Iser's writing in relation to my own world-building practice.

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Acknowledgements

References

...no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes.³

- Wolfgang Iser

"I am a Book," said Vinculus, stopping in mid-caper. "I am the Book. It is the task of the Book to bear the words. Which I do. It is the task of the Reader to know what they say."⁴

- Susanna Clarke

Any world worth its salt is unbounded.⁵

- Alex McDowell

³ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.282

⁴ Clarke, S. (2005). *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. London: Bloomsbury. p.995

⁵ McDowell, A. (2020) 'Foreword', in Wolf M.J.P. (ed.) *World-Builders on World-Building*. New York. Routledge. p.x

Chapter 1. Introduction

The Writers' Paradox

All novelists live with a paradox. We labour to conceive of and describe worlds that do not exist. We inhabit those worlds in our minds and hope that readers might do the same. But the nature of the reader's experience can never be known to us.

Discussing the hidden world of other people's minds, the English language pushes us towards visual metaphors. We cannot escape the connection between *seeing* and *understanding* nor between *image* and *imagination*. Even when no optical element is implied, we may be said to *foresee*, *envision* and *picture*. But this linguistic hegemony does not reflect a universal experience. I am unable to form mental images and can only speculate on the inner worlds of those who can. Zeman et al. coined the word *aphantasia* to describe this inability to picture.⁶ *Aphantasia* is by definition the absence of an ability. But it has not been found to be generally pathological.⁷ Rather, it can be looked on as an intriguing variation in human experience.⁸ Its prevalence has been estimated at between 2% and 5% of the general population.⁹ Its significance to this study is as a difference that impacts the imaginative experience of a small percentage of readers and writers.

Whilst I have no 'mind's eye', my proprioceptive, kinaesthetic and spatial senses in imagination are strong. Rather than seeing imagined worlds in my mind's eye, I feel them

⁶ Zeman, A., Dewar, M. and Della Sala, S. (2015). 'Lives without imagery – Congenital *aphantasia*'. *Cortex*, 73, pp.378–380. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2015.05.019>.

⁷ Monzel, M., Vetterlein, A. and Reuter, M. (2022). 'No general pathological significance of *aphantasia*: An evaluation based on criteria for mental disorders'. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12887>.

⁸ Zeman, A., Milton, F., Della Sala, S., Dewar, M., Frayling, T., Gaddum, J., Hattersley, A., Heurman-Williamson, B., Jones, K., MacKisack, M. and Winlove, C. (2020). 'Phantasia—The psychological significance of lifelong visual imagery vividness extremes'. *Cortex*, 130, pp.426–440. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2020.04.003>.

⁹ Faw, B. (2009) 'Conflicting Intuitions may be based on differing abilities: Evidence from mental imaging research'. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 16 (4) pp.598-607

through an awareness of space, movement and texture for which the English language lacks a word. I call it ‘imagined touch over distance’. It is a sense vivid enough to produce a physical response in my body. For example, writing one of the chase scenes in *The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter*¹⁰, I mentally accompanied my protagonist across a treacherous roofscape, feeling the wet slates under her hands and feet. When she slipped, I felt my stomach tightening – my usual response to the presence of vertical space below. This was not empathy, since she did not share my fear of heights. Nor could I see the scene in my mind’s eye. Rather, I was gripped by the imagined movement – that downward lurch - as she slipped towards the gutter. The awful drop beyond felt viscerally present.

My experience contrasts starkly with the experience of many readers as reported in published reviews of my work.

“The sights... of the city leap from the page...”¹¹

“...I could enjoy the vivid imagery and worldbuilding that Duncan employs”¹²

“Those of us who imagine novels in pictures will enjoy this work...”¹³

Here the paradox is thrown into sharp relief. An aspect of my writing singled out for particular praise is its ability to facilitate an imagined sensory experience that I cannot share.

My creative writing practice began in 1991. One of the first things I produced was a novel, completed in 1993. When that failed to find a publisher, I wrote another and then another. Each time, I sought feedback from my writers’ group. I initially thought of these cycles of writing, feedback and editing as attempts to produce work of publishable quality. But

¹⁰ Duncan, R. (2014). *The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter*. Nottingham: Angry Robot. p.300

¹¹ Pass, E. (2014). ‘*The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter* (Fall of the Gas-Lit Empire, #1)’, *Goodreads*. [online] Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1029957134?book_show_action=true&page=1 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2022].

¹² Anonymous. (2018). ‘Review: *The Outlaw and the Upstart King*’, *The Speculative Shelf*. [online] Available at: <https://spikegelato.com/2018/11/20/review-the-outlaw-and-the-upstart-king/> [Accessed 26 Nov. 2022].

¹³ Anonymous. (2014). ‘Review: *The Bullet Catcher’s Daughter* by Rod Duncan’. *Koeur’s Book Reviews*. [online] Available at: <https://koeur.wordpress.com/2014/06/02/review-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 22 Jun. 2022].

my understanding was evolving. This was a writing practice, yes. But it was also practice research, something that has been called 'making as knowing'.¹⁴

Though the term 'aphantasia' had yet to be coined, I was well aware that my experience of imagined worlds was at odds with the experience of the people giving me feedback. They emphasised the importance of seeing in the mind's eye as a pleasurable aspect of immersion in a story. This I lacked. During this phase, I learned that partial character descriptions functioned well. But visually-minded readers found it jarring when I added to the description a few pages after the character had been first introduced. These readers were clearly filling in gaps in my description to form a more complete mental image and objected to any subsequent descriptive additions that conflicted with their initial experience.

Whilst looking at a person with red hair, I have a visual experience of that redness. But if I read about a character with red hair, I can only hold the colour as data. It has the same presence in my mind as an abstract concept – a fact to be remembered. This contrasted with accounts of reading that I was receiving from my writers' group. With this difference in mind, I began to experiment in my writing, searching for the attributes of the text most likely to facilitate this immersive visual experience in others. (My methods and framework for understanding visual description are laid out in Chapter 5.)

I achieved publication with my fifth novel, *Backlash*, in 2003. It went on to be shortlisted for the John Creasey Award of the Crime Writers' Association.¹⁵ With that success, I began to be invited to teach creative writing classes. And having deconstructed the writing and reading processes for my own work, I found myself able to do the same for my students. This was research-led teaching. But the process of teaching was also forcing me to clarify my ideas. Thus, teaching became another element in my writing/research practice. Initially I taught evening classes in an Adult Education college. This led to work in Higher Education, where a colleague introduced me to Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological exploration of reading. I was struck by Iser's assertion that the world of the story is a virtual thing, built through the joint enterprise of writer and reader. This so closely paralleled the findings of my own creative

¹⁴ Perril, S. (2021). 'On Metis: Or, What the Fox and Octopus taught me about Practice Research'. *Writing In practice*, 7, p.179.

¹⁵ Duncan, R. (2003). *Backlash*. London: Simon & Schuster.

practice that I began to incorporate his terminology and conceptual framework into my teaching/writing/research practice. (The relationship between Iser and my own conceptual framework is laid out in Chapter 3.)

The Novels

Backlash was the first of a trilogy of crime novels. This was followed by a crime novella. I then began to write an extended work of speculative fiction, spanning two trilogies:

The Fall of the Gas-Lit Empire trilogy:

- *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* ¹⁶
- *Unseemly Science* ¹⁷
- *The Custodian of Marvels* ¹⁸

The Map of Unknown Things trilogy:

- *The Queen of all Crows* ¹⁹
- *The Outlaw and the Upstart King* ²⁰
- *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man* ²¹

From those six novels, I have selected three to be the focus of this PhD by published works: *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*, *The Queen of all Crows*, and *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. I have selected these in order to span the series, first to last, and because they encompass three distinct approaches to narrative stance:

- First-person
- Third-person single viewpoint

¹⁶ Duncan, R. (2014). *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*. Nottingham: Angry Robot.

¹⁷ Duncan, R. (2015). *Unseemly Science*. Nottingham: Angry Robot.

¹⁸ Duncan, R. (2016). *The Custodian of Marvels*. Nottingham: Angry Robot.

¹⁹ Duncan, R. (2018). *The Queen of all Crows*. Nottingham: Angry Robot.

²⁰ Duncan, R. (2019). *The Outlaw and the Upstart King*. Nottingham: Angry Robot.

²¹ Duncan, R. (2020). *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. London: Angry Robot.

- Third-person multiple viewpoint

The novels are situated within a world that has been described as a ‘hard alternate history’.²² This is a speculative genre that defines a specific deviation point from real historical events and plausibly explores its repercussions. The deviation point for this work is a Luddite-inspired revolutionary war in 1816 and the partition of Britain with the establishment of an Anglo-Scottish republic. A domino-fall of geopolitical changes follows. An alliance of new republics becomes the nucleus for a global confederacy of nations and the establishment of institutions charged with reining-in ‘the wild horses of science and technology’. This leads to a prolonged period of social and political stasis. The novels begin towards the end of that era. Blinded by hubris, apologists of this ‘Long Quiet’ imagine it to represent the culmination of history. Some readers have described this setting as dystopian. But the negative effects of unaccountable and centralised control were carefully balanced in its design against the positives - the absence of war and progress in medical science. In the end, the protagonist would need to choose between working to protect this global order or helping to bring it down. I did not want that choice to be easy.

The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter, which was shortlisted for the 2014 Philip K. Dick Award, explores a world in which overbearing control has yielded peace at the expense of stagnation. *The Queen of all Crows* and *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man* venture beyond the borders of that global order, to wild lands where power has devolved into the hands of those most able and willing to use violence. There, warlords are developing new military technology that will make the Long Quiet unsustainable. I planned to explore the rupture that would inevitably follow in a final trilogy, which is as yet unwritten.

²² Anonymous. (2014). ‘Hard and Soft Alternate Histories: *The Time Roads* by Beth Bernobich, *The Shadow Master* by Craig Cormick and Rod Duncan’s *The Bullet Catcher’s Daughter*’. *The Skiffy and Fantasy Show*. [online] Available at: <https://skiffyandfantasy.com/blogposts/hard-and-soft-alternate-histories-the-time-roads-by-beth-bernobich-the-shadow-master-by-craig-cormick-and-rod-duncans-the-bullet-catchers-daughter/> [Accessed 23 Jun. 2022].

Research Questions

In this thesis, I will use those three novels to interrogate the following research question:

- Given that I have no visual experience of the worlds about which I write, what are the methods and conceptual framework that enable me to facilitate a visual experience in the minds of readers?

This necessitates the following supporting questions:

- What insights does this offer to an understanding of the process of world-building more generally?
- What are the similarities and differences between Wolfgang Iser's theories and the conceptual framework I developed whilst writing the three novels in question?
- Might this framework be of practical use to other writers?

Chapter 2. Reception and Feedback Loops

Stages of Feedback and Response

My working practice has evolved to include discrete stages of feedback and response. My first stage is the critiquing of work in progress, chapter by chapter, at the weekly meetings of Leicester Writers' Club.²³ I rely heavily on this during the opening phase of a writing project. But writing the second act of a novel (after about 30,000 words) I tend to keep the work to myself, since these feedback cycles slow down my creative process. During that silent phase, I continue to learn about differences in the way that imagined worlds are perceived through participation in the critiquing of other people's writing.

Once the first draft has been written, I move to the next feedback stage, sharing it with a small group of Beta readers. Working with the complete novel, they are able to comment on large-scale structural elements. These are people who have helped me with many previous writing projects. Thus, I am able to understand something of their individual reading process, and can extract more useful information than would otherwise be possible.

The third stage is the process of refinement offered by literary agents and publishers, including structural editing and copyediting. Significantly, this stage has a greater focus on the likely responses of the specific genre audience. (The genres of the books are explored in Appendix 1.)

The final stage of feedback comes after publication. Reviewers encounter the story as it has been packaged by the publisher. Their reading is primed by cover design, back-cover copy and the physicality of the medium through which it is being accessed – be that physical book, eBook or audio-book. Their responses may change my plans for future books, or confirm me in my approach.

²³ Leicester Writers' Club was established in the 1960s for the development and support of writers in the East Midlands. Its membership has included award winning and bestselling authors such as Chris d'Lacey, Jacob Ross and Mahsuda Snaith.

Reviews of *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*

After the publication of *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*, I collected all online reviews for a period of six months, accumulating over 19,500 words of analysis. Nine years later, new reviews are still being posted, but at a slower rate - approximately one a month. There are presently 483 reviews on Goodreads and 180 on Amazon. (Some online reviews appear on both platforms, some on neither.) There are more than 4000 star ratings of the book on the two platforms.

Most of the early reviews came from people exhibiting a professional level of engagement with the reviewing process. They often had a social media presence built around reviewing and the genre community. Some had received advance review copies from the publisher directly, or through NetGalley. These reviews usually make a distinction between objective analysis and their own response, employing the language of meta-analysis, with terms such as world-building, narrative voice, characterization, and genre. By contrast, reviews coming longer after publication tend to be shorter and make less attempt at objectivity. Through time there is a shift from "The story is A, B and C" to "I felt X, Y and Z".

I made particular note of the following issues because of the frequency of occurrence in the 19,500-word sample, and/or because of their significance.

- World-building
- Genre and literary comparisons
- Observations that relate to the narrative stance/voice
- Political divisions in the books and in the real world
- Reflections on gender representation
- The status of Edwin, the protagonist's brother
- Tinker – one of the secondary characters
- Misunderstandings – unambiguously false statements about things in the story

Unambiguous misunderstandings were thankfully rare – there being only two in the sample. And since these two referred to different issues, they did not suggest a systematic problem. However, references to the character Tinker did change my plans. An orphan boy who forms an attachment to Elizabeth, the protagonist; he was intended as a walk-on-walk-off character. I was surprised to find reviews mentioning him in terms such as these:

...just adorable...²⁴

...melted my heart...²⁵

I really hope he is in the next book.²⁶

This unanticipated response caused me to find a place for Tinker in each of the five following novels. Conversely, references to Elizabeth's brother, Edwin, confirmed me in my approach. All reviewers seemed to understand that Elizabeth calls herself by that name when presenting as a man. When presenting herself as female, she refers to Edwin as her brother. Most reviewers stated that the brother does not exist, referring to him as fictional, non-existent, imaginary and mythical. One seemed to believe that Elizabeth is impersonating an existing brother. Two others explored their uncertainty on the matter:

²⁴ Anonymous. (2014). '*The Bullet Catcher's Daughter* by Rod Duncan (Review)', *Sleepless Musings Of A Well Groomed Moustached Man*. [online] Available at:

<https://sleeplessmusingsofawellgroomedmoustachedman.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan-review/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

²⁵ Anonymous. (2014). 'Adventures & Airships: *THE BULLET-CATCHER'S DAUGHTER* by Rod Duncan', *Books Bones and Buffy*. [online] Available at:

<https://booksbonesandbuffy.com/2014/08/25/adventure-airships-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

²⁶ Anonymous. (2014). '*The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* (Fall of the Gas-Lit Empire, #1)', *Goodreads*. [online] Available at:

https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1022585472?book_show_action=true&page=1 [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

I am still questioning if there was ever a brother? I have no idea. ²⁷

One of the ongoing and unexplained mysteries... is whether or not Elizabeth's twin brother actually exists... by the end of the book, I *still* wasn't sure! ²⁸

I had planned the ambiguity surrounding Edwin to be strung out over several novels. I intended to wait until book 5 to reveal that he does exist but that a childhood trauma has caused Elizabeth to repress his memory. My goal was to have readers resolve the mystery just before it was revealed. That way they would get the satisfaction of having solved the puzzle, but not the boredom of solving it too early. In order to have most readers solve the mystery in the optimal place, I had to accept that some would see the answer sooner and some would not get it until it was explicitly stated. The scatter of perceptive responses expressed in these reviews led me to believe I had the balance about right. Therefore I continued with the same approach as I wrote the subsequent novels.

Reviewers' Awareness of World-building

World-building was the most commonly referenced issue in my sample, being addressed in 57% of the reviews. It was the aspect of the writing most frequently singled out for praise:

The world building in *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* is spectacular. ²⁹

²⁷ Davison, A. (2014). 'The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter by Rod Duncan', *Fantasy Faction*. [online] Available at: <http://fantasy-faction.com/2014/the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

²⁸ Anonymous. (2014). 'Adventures & Airships: THE BULLET-CATCHER'S DAUGHTER by Rod Duncan', *Books Bones and Buffy*. [online] Available at: <https://booksbonesbuffy.com/2014/08/25/adventure-airships-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

²⁹ Anonymous. (2014). 'Simone's review of *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* (Fall of the Gas-Lit Empire, #1)', *Goodreads*. [online] Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/974535784?book_show_action=true&page=1. [Accessed 28 Jul. 2023].

The worldbuilding was one of my favourite things about this novel – it was incredibly well done.³⁰

Whilst encouraging, these comments gave little insight into the precise nature of readers' encounters with the imagined world. But some of the language did give clues. For example:

...it... extrudes the sights and smells of the Empire and its careworn streets.³¹

...we're shown enough to paint a vivid picture of the world...³²

Taken from an individual comment, the phrase 'paint a vivid picture' might be a metaphor that tells us more about the visual hegemony of the language of the mind than it does about the inner experience of that reviewer. But laid alongside numerous other reviews and detailed discussions during workshopping, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of readers are producing some degree of visual impression. Whilst I could not share in this visual encounter, I was meticulous in my approach to facilitating it. (I will discuss my methods in chapter 5).

My previous novels had been classified as contemporary crime. In writing them, I had been unconcerned by questions of world-building. The setting was real, I reasoned. It did not need building. But reviews revealed a sharp distinction between those who had that familiarity with the landscape and those who did not. One British resident wrote of *Backlash* "...the city landscape was particularly vivid."³³ But according to an American reviewer: "The landscape

³⁰ Pass, E. (2014). '*The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* (Fall of the Gas-Lit Empire, #1)', *Goodreads*. [online] Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1029957134?book_show_action=true&page=1 [Accessed 1 Aug. 2022].

³¹ Jones, A. (2014). 'Book review of *The Bullet Catcher's Daughter* by Rod Duncan', *SF Book Reviews*. [online] Available at: <https://sfbook.com/the-bullet-catchers-daughter.htm> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2022].

³² Davison, A. (2014). '*The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* by Rod Duncan', *Fantasy Faction*. [online] Available at: <http://fantasy-faction.com/2014/the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

³³ Logan, S. (2003). 'Hot Nights in Leicester', *Amazon*. [online] Available at: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/customer->

and city were poorly portrayed in that I never got a true sense of locale.”³⁴ Looking back, I can see that world-building should have been just as concerning to me in contemporary crime as it would become in speculative fiction. In delivering a narrative through prose, there is little difference between the process of describing a real place and an imagined one. From the point of view of the writer, the relevant question is whether the audience is familiar with the setting. This is also true in non-fiction.

The shift from crime to speculative fiction brought the construction of the imagined world into my awareness. But my early attempts in *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* were clumsy. One Beta reader suggested I strip out most of the world-building exposition, which was overly obtrusive. I followed this advice during a complete rewrite. But when the resultant manuscript began its journey through the commercial editorial process, I was told that it needed more explanation of the parameters of the world. I rewrote again, putting the exposition back, but guided by a more nuanced approach. With a first-person stance, the identity of the narrator had been evident. The key to my rewrite was to fix in my mind the relationship between that narrator and an implied narratee. I imagined the story being told a few years after the events to someone who had a general understanding of that world, but who lacked knowledge of some specifics. Each time I was faced with a decision of whether to explain something or leave it unsaid, I considered the fixed relationship between narrator and implied narratee. This gave consistency to the world-building. One reviewer described this approach as follows:

Elizabeth and author Duncan don't spend time marvelling over little things that would be very natural to them...³⁵

reviews/R31WMZ2O9HREC2/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=074323121X [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

³⁴ Anonymous. (2003). 'Did not translate well to this American', *Amazon*. [online] Available at: https://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/customer-reviews/R25SFVNNIS95UW/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_viewpnt?ie=UTF8&ASIN=074323121X#R25SFVNNIS95UW.

³⁵ Anonymous. (2014). '*THE BULLET-CATCHER'S DAUGHTER* – Rod Duncan', *Looking for A Good Book*. [online] Available at: <https://lookingforagoodbook.com/2014/07/04/the-bullet-catchers-daughter-rod-duncan/>. (Accessed:28 June 2023).

But most reviews comment on the general effect of my approach rather than analysing the method.

One of the most accomplished aspects of Duncan's writing is his ability to impart a vast amount of world building and plot details to readers without overwhelming them with an information dump.³⁶

Implicit in many of the reviews is a belief that the world described in the novel had been authoritatively designed in its author's mind and that their role in reading was merely to assemble it. They might comment on the delivery of the information, but not on their own role as collaborator in the creative process. As one reviewer noted:

By reading about the significant events that shaped the empire, such as the war that divided England or the rise of the Patent Office, I was able to piece together the culture and mood of this alternate universe.³⁷

Reviewers' Reading of Gender

The same reliance on the creative imagination of readers underpinned my delivery of the protagonist's gender. Several reviewers interpreted Elizabeth as fully female.

...her voice was so clear and, frankly, *feminine*, that I kept having to remind myself that the author is *male*. I've run across several brilliantly written books with a male narrator written by a female author, but I think this might be the

³⁶ Anonymous. (2014). 'Review: *The Bullet Catcher's Daughter* by Rod Duncan', *Avid Reviews*. [online] Available at: <https://avidfantasyreviews.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/review-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2022].

³⁷ Anonymous. (2014). 'Review: *The Bullet Catcher's Daughter* by Rod Duncan', *Avid Reviews*. [online] Available at: <https://avidfantasyreviews.wordpress.com/2014/08/28/review-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 1 Aug. 2022].

best male author writing a female character that I've ever read.³⁸

If praise is due here, it should be directed as much towards what I left out of the text as to what I put in. I had consciously provided a framework that left gaps to be filled by the audience. In this way, readers could construct an understanding of Elizabeth's gender that felt true to their own selves. Thus, different people were able to form different conclusions. For example, one nonbinary reviewer described Elizabeth as:

...one of the first characters whose gender identity seemed to come close to mine
-- not really man or woman, but something fluid and in between.³⁹

I don't wish to imply that I lacked my own conception of Elizabeth's gender. I needed a backstory in which she had been identified as female at birth but trained to present as either boy or girl, as circumstances required. To understand changes of presentation from female to male, I studied video tutorials in voice training, makeup, tells of movement, and the role of clothing in modifying body shape.⁴⁰ Many of these videos were created by people identifying as transmasculine or nonbinary. But at the outset, I was concerned with the fine observation of individuals rather than their categorization.

It had been my intention to leave enough space for readers to define Elizabeth's gender

³⁸ Anonymous. (2014). 'Adventures & Airships: *THE BULLET-CATCHER'S DAUGHTER* by Rod Duncan', *Books Bones and Buffy*. [online] Available at: <https://booksbonesbuffy.com/2014/08/25/adventure-airships-the-bullet-catchers-daughter-by-rod-duncan/> [Accessed 23 Jul. 2022].

³⁹ Codair, S. (2017). 'Sara Codair's review of *The Queen of All Crows* (The Map of Unknown Things, #1)', *Goodreads*. [online] Available at: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2196641628> [Accessed 2 Dec. 2022].

⁴⁰ For example: Jassper-Jay, A. (2013). 'How to deepen your voice – ftm', *YouTube*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oegzhs410f8> [Accessed 5 Sep. 2023].
James, M. (2018). 'Mascara Beard Tutorial for Drag Kings, FTM, and Enbys', *YouTube*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dhPUJK2WDok> [Accessed 5 Sep. 2023].

for themselves. However, during the years of writing, the rhetoric of anti-trans movements became ever more relentless.⁴¹ In that environment, I concluded that my neutrality on the question of Elizabeth's gender was an unsustainable dissimulation. Thus, in the final novel, I explicitly identified her as nonbinary.⁴²

⁴¹ A review of these movements can be found in: Butler, J. (2021). 'Why Is the Idea of 'Gender' Provoking Backlash the World over?', *The Guardian*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>.

⁴² A sensitivity reader employed by the publisher advised me that a nonbinary character such as Elizabeth could choose to adopt she/her pronouns. Therefore, I continued with that pattern in the book and have also adopted it in this thesis.

Chapter 3. Reception Theory

Having learned that readers were generating a visual response to my writing – images I had not conceived and could not share - I came to regard them as co-creators of the story. My job was to provide a framework. Theirs was to fill in such details as I might leave unspecified. And since each reader was unique, so to some extent would be the imagined worlds that they created. Viewed in this way, the world-building in a novel was a collaborative act between the writer and each individual reader.

I first attempted to articulate this understanding of world-building in 2015 in a guest lecture for Creative Writing students at De Montfort University. During the Q and A that followed, Professor Simon Perril observed parallels between my ideas and a field of contemporary literary theory that investigates reading as a dynamic act. This is sometimes referred to as 'reader response theory', 'reader-oriented theory' or 'reception theory'. With this introduction, I began to investigate the subject, and found my work as a novelist being enriched.

The Landscape of Reception Theory

Many theorists are associated with reception theory, but most focus on the way that readers 'interpret' literary texts, often in teaching situations. The creation of 'meaning' is the thing under consideration. Even very lucid surveys of this complex field, such as Eagleton (1994)⁴³ or Selden, Widdowson and Brooker (2016)⁴⁴, tend to be divorced from the practice of creative writing and craft (and the practice research emphasis of this thesis). Eagleton frees us up to realize that 'the meanings of a text do not lie within them like wisdom teeth within a gum, waiting patiently to be extracted'⁴⁵. But the reader's interactivity is still figured in terms of the production of meaning. Likewise, Selden, Widdowson and Brooker account for the emergence of such varied thinking about the non-passivity of readers by summarizing, 'A

⁴³ Eagleton, T. (2011). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

⁴⁴ Selden, R., Widdowson, P. and Brooker, P. (2016). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Routledge.

⁴⁵ Eagleton, T. (2011). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. John Wiley & Sons. p.89

problem for theory centres on the question of whether or not the text itself triggers the reader's act of interpretation, or whether the reader's own interpretative strategies impose solutions upon the problems thrown up by the text'⁴⁶. This raises interesting questions about whether meaning is something imposed by the text or actively discovered by the reader – but we're still firmly within the province of interpretation, and still with notions of 'text' that have little interest in the actions of authors (like myself) who may be highly aware that they are consciously stimulating a collaborative experience for the reader. Louise Rosenblatt proposes a 'transactional' theory of literature that certainly shows awareness of the 'to-and-fro, spiralling, nonlinear, continuously reciprocal influence of reader and text', but she ultimately still addresses her attention to the process of this transaction in terms of 'the making of meaning', and overtly within the context of teaching literature.⁴⁷

The broad concept of the construction of meaning was a useful starting point for me in thinking about and refining my practice. But to understand the processes taking place in the imagination of readers, I needed a framework that subdivided it into specific categories (which are laid out later in the chapter.)

Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* is perhaps more relevant to my concerns, since it explores responses to reading that lie beyond intellectual analysis. Eschewing 'the indifference of (mere) knowledge', Barthes compares the act of writing to seduction, saying: 'The text you write must prove to me that it desires me'.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, he returns to notions of knowledge, and particularly its collaborative nature. His book *S/Z* stages an exhaustive interpretative encounter with the 'plurality' of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine*. In this work, Barthes identifies the importance of 'cultural codes', which he figures as a body of knowledge and experience shared by writer and reader, necessary for the interpretation of a text.⁴⁹ His essay 'The Death of the Author' is focussed on resisting the need to anchor the study of literature in

⁴⁶ Selden, R., Widdowson, P. and Brooker, P. (2016). *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Routledge. p.49

⁴⁷ Rosenblatt, L.M. (1995). *Literature as exploration*. New York: Modern Language Association of America. p.xvi

⁴⁸ Barthes, R. (1975) *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by R. Miller. New York: Hill and Wang.

⁴⁹ Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z*. Translated by R. Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, pp.205–206.

notions of authorial intention. This is summarised by the idea that 'it is language that speaks, not the author.'⁵⁰

The closest theorist to my ideas and the most useful for my research is Wolfgang Iser, whose stated goal was 'helping to devise a framework for mapping out and guiding empirical studies of reader reaction'.⁵¹ Iser acknowledges the writer's awareness of processes going on in the reader's imagination. He alludes to techniques used by writers. And his definition of 'meaning' is drawn wide enough to encompass my concerns:

Meaning is the referential totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text and which must be assembled in the course of reading.⁵²

Viewed in this way, 'meaning' encompasses all the forms of experience and understanding that I, as a writer, labour to facilitate in the reader's imagination.

The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter was written without any knowledge of reception theory. But writing *The Queen of All Crows* and the novels that came after it, my writing/research practice developed in dialogue with Iser's work.

Wolfgang Iser

The cornerstone of Iser's argument is his definition of the literary work as a virtual thing, born of the convergence of a text and the imagination of a reader.⁵³ It comes into being between those two progenitors, which he termed the artistic pole (the text) and the aesthetic pole (the reader). The literary work is dependent on both, since each contributes to its realization.⁵⁴ In other forms of social interaction, the didactic partners can ask each other questions to

⁵⁰ Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, Music, Text*. Translated by S. Heath. London: Fontana Press. pp.142-148

⁵¹ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.x

⁵² Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.194).

⁵³ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.275

⁵⁴ Iser, W. (1972). The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach. *New Literary History*, 3(2), p.279.

ascertain the extent to which they have 'bridged the gap of inexperienceability of one another's experiences'.⁵⁵ But not in the process of reading.

In Iser's view, it is the task of the writer to set out the story. But "no author worth his salt will ever attempt to lay the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes".⁵⁶ Writers deliberately leave gaps, in the sense that they withhold information.⁵⁷ That which the writer leaves undefined, the reader's imagination will create. And since each reader is different, so to some degree will be the meanings that they generate.

Iser acknowledges that this idea predates his theories. He cites Henry Fielding in this context.⁵⁸ We might also detect it in Hemingway's iceberg theory: "If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them."⁵⁹ (But in this explanation, Hemingway still seems to assert the primacy of authorial intent, whereas Iser makes writer and reader equal creators.)

Like Barthes, Iser is interested in the pleasure of reading. But he particularly specifies the pleasure of filling in gaps in the text. Viewed in this way, author and reader "share the game of the imagination".⁶⁰ If the gaps are too small, the act of reading will require little creativity, and will therefore be unsatisfying. If the gaps are too great, the construction of meaning will be difficult or impossible, leading to overstrain for the reader. Paul Fry illustrates Iser's idea with the image of the spark plug. The gap must be just right for a strong spark to be generated.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.166

⁵⁶ Iser, W. (1972). The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach. *New Literary History*, 3(2), p.287.

⁵⁷ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.282

⁵⁸ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.31

⁵⁹ Hemingway, E. (1932) *Death in the Afternoon*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York.

⁶⁰ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.108

⁶¹ Fry, P.H. (2012). *Theory of literature*. New Haven Yale University Press © De La Editorial. p.45

Whereas objects can usually be observed from outside, Iser describes literary works as being observed from within, through a 'wandering viewpoint':

The 'object' of the text can only be imagined by way of different consecutive phases of reading. We always stand outside the given object, whereas we are situated inside the literary text... instead of a subject-object relationship, there is a moving viewpoint which travels along inside that which it has to apprehend.⁶²

Passing through the literary work in this way, viewing it from within, the reader's ongoing gap-filling enterprise is directed to the construction of a complete understanding of the meaning of the story, for which Iser adopted the term 'gestalt'.⁶³ Reaching for a gestalt involves a synthesis of everything that has been learned to that point and an anticipation of what may come later in the text. As new information is provided by the text, the partial gestalt is modified. If, having finished the story, the reader were to go back to the beginning and read it again, foreknowledge would cause the gestalt formed during the reading to be different. Gestalt is not limited to plot. The reader also attempts to form a gestalt of significance.⁶⁴ This may include the grasping of truths that transcend their fictional setting and thus have implications for the reader's understanding of the real world.

The area of Iser's work that I find most problematic relates to visualisation. He does occasionally offer caveats, stating for example that his theory 'may perhaps be an oversimplification'.⁶⁵ He also acknowledges that mental images may have a degree of 'optical poverty'⁶⁶. But he nevertheless presents the formation of mental images as an automatic

⁶² Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.109

⁶³ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.40

⁶⁴ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.123

⁶⁵ Iser, W. (1974). *The Implied Reader*. John Hopkins University Press. Baltimore. p.283

⁶⁶ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.138

process and a 'basic feature of ideation'.⁶⁷ Despite being aphantasic, and therefore unable to generate mental images, I have no difficulty forming ideas. Indeed, I have come to regard my aphantasia as a gift, since it enables me to understand differently from the majority and facilitates insight into the diversity of the reading experience. From this, I have developed a framework for thinking about the reading experience, which subdivides the elements constructed by readers in their gap-filling, gestalt-forming game of the imagination.

The Construction of Meaning

As we have seen, Iser states that as readers move through a literary text, they try to construct its meaning and its significance. In this context, his definition of 'meaning' encompasses 'the totality which is implied by the aspects contained in the text'.⁶⁸ But as a novelist, I have found it useful to subdivide that widely defined term, since different kinds of meaning may be facilitated through different writing techniques. My categorization of the elements constructed by the reader is as follows:

- Sensory experience
- Logical meaning
- Ethical value
- Emotional response
- Wider significance

The first three of these categories can be regarded as elements of the imagined world. 'Sensory experience' encompasses all the readers' imagined sensory responses to being there. As Charlie Jane Anders wrote: "...if you don't make me feel the dirt under my fingernails, then you still haven't created a real place."⁶⁹ 'Logical meaning' refers to an understanding of the functioning of the imagined world and of relationships within it. And

⁶⁷ Iser (ibid., pp.135-151).

⁶⁸ Iser (ibid., p.194).

⁶⁹ Anders, C.J. (2013). '7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding', *Gizmodo*. [online] Available at: <https://gizmodo.com/7-deadly-sins-of-worldbuilding-998817537> [Accessed 8 Dec. 2022].

'Ethical value' is the reader's judgement of goodness or badness with respect to all that they have sensed and understood.

The last two categories – emotional response and wider significance – are encountered while the reader is inhabiting the story but may be carried with the reader after the book has been closed. In the words of Ursula Le Guin: "As you read a book word by word and page by page, you participate in its creation... the book of course participates in the creation of you, your thoughts and feelings, the size and temper of your soul."⁷⁰

Reception Theory and World-Building

Since the literary work is a virtual thing, generated by the coming together of text and reader, the same must also be true of the imagined world in which the literary work is set. Iser describes the text as passing through the reader's mind as "an ever-expanding network of connections" creating "the illusion of depth and breadth" and ultimately "the impression that we are actually present in a real world".⁷¹ Thus reception theory is inescapably linked to world-building, which is the subject of the next chapter.

⁷⁰ Le Guin, U.K. and Wood, S. (1979). *The language of the night: essays on fantasy and science fiction*. New York, Ny: Perigee.

⁷¹ Iser, W. (1980). *The Act of Reading: a theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. p.116

Chapter 4. World-building

The term 'world-building' can relate to a range of different areas of discourse and practice. It may be relevant to literary criticism, literary theory, media studies and linguistics.⁷² But it is also the concern of game designers, cinematographers, novelists and many other kinds of creative practitioner. A term that encompasses such a widely distributed subject, with so many different applications and interpretations, necessarily eludes simple definition. Ekman and Taylor (2016) describe the ambiguity that this can cause: '...we believe we know what someone is talking about when they talk about world-building. Often we don't.'⁷³ They introduce the noun phrase 'critical world-building' to describe an area of analysis dealing with imaginary worlds that have already been built. But my concern here is with the verb form of the term, the act of construction that we might call 'practical world-building'.

In his seminal essay *On Fairy Stories*⁷⁴, Tolkien explores the relationship between reality and the imagined worlds of fantasy, in the context of his Christian beliefs: "...we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."⁷⁵ He uses the term 'sub-creation' to distinguish human endeavours in practical world-building from Divine creation.

Mark Wolf takes up the term in a series of in-depth surveys, beginning with *Building Imaginary Worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*.⁷⁶ His analysis encompasses

⁷² Gavins and Lahey have edited an excellent review of world-building in linguistics. Gavins, J. and Lahey, E. (2018). *World building: discourse in the mind*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁷³ Ekman, S. and Taylor, I.T. (2016). 'Notes Towards a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building', *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research*, Vol.3 no.3 pp.7-18

⁷⁴ The essay was first delivered as a lecture in 1939 but was subsequently revised. The version referenced here is included in: Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *Tree and leaf: including the poem mythopoeia*. London: Harper Collins.

⁷⁵ Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *Tree and leaf: including the poem mythopoeia*. London: Harper Collins. p.56

⁷⁶ Wolf, M.J.P. (2013). *Building imaginary worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*. London: Routledge.

Wolf, M.J.P. (Ed.) (2017). *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*. New York: Routledge.

everything from single author novels to transmedia, multi-author works, such as Star Wars and the Marvel Universe, in which world-building necessarily seeks to define an objective set of mutually understood parameters, referred to as 'canon'. He identifies elements that may be included in this endeavour, such as languages, maps, timelines, genealogies, nature, mythology and philosophy. He explores degrees of separation from real to imagined worlds in terms of four categories: '...nominal, cultural, natural, and ontological.'⁷⁷

Wolf observes that the braiding of narrative and thematic threads within an imagined world can be used to compare and contrast the conditions of different places and characters.⁷⁸ (This is briefly explored in Appendix 1 in relation to my work.)

Describing world-building as 'the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there', M John Harrison presents it as working against the creative act of reading. 'Worldbuilding numbs the reader's ability to fulfil their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do everything around here if anything is going to get done.'⁷⁹ In the face of this critique, Trent Hergenrader defends world-building by asserting: '...sometimes producing an encyclopaedia is exactly what writers need to be doing in order to lay the groundwork for stories that will come later'.⁸⁰ Chuck Wendig might seem to be arguing Hergenrader's case when he says: '...worldbuilding covers *everything and anything inside that world*. Money, clothing, territorial boundaries, tribal customs, building materials, imports and exports, transportation, sex, food, the various types of monkeys people possess, whether the world does or does not contain

Wolf, M.J.P. (Ed.) (2020). *World-Builders on World-Building*. New York: Routledge.

⁷⁷ Wolf, M.J.P. (Ed.) (2020). *World-Builders on World-Building*. New York: Routledge. p.133

⁷⁸ Wolf, M.J.P. (2013). *Building imaginary worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*. London: Routledge.pp.199-202

⁷⁹ Harrison, M.J. (2007). *Very Afraid*. [online] Uncle Zip's Window. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080203094611/http://uzwi.wordpress.com/2007/01/27/very-afraid/> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2024].

⁸⁰ Hergenrader, T. (2018). *Collaborative Worldbuilding for Writers and Gamers*. Bloomsbury Publishing.p.5

Satanic “twerking” rites.’⁸¹ But he offers a vital caveat: ‘Worldbuilding should be a slave to storytelling, not vice versa’.⁸²

A Reader-Centred Approach to World-Building

Significantly, Wolf also links world-building to reader-centred theories of literature, exploring the idea of a world gestalten ‘...in which a structure or configuration of details together implies the existence of an imaginary world, and causes the audience to automatically fill in the missing pieces of that world based on the details that are given.’⁸³ This is consistent with Harrison’s statement: ‘My feeling is that the reader performs most of the act of writing.’⁸⁴ Making this connection to gestalt theory, Wolf observes that the world thus constructed ‘differs from one audience member to the next’ and is therefore ‘not often considered as actual world-building’. Nevertheless, he concludes that it still needs to be ‘considered by the world’s originators and main world-builders, since how someone completes the gestalten depends on what they are given...’⁸⁵

Attempts to objectively define the imagined world may be essential in the creation of multi-author projects. Without such an agreed framework, different contributors risk inadvertently introducing contradictory elements. But solitary writers such as myself, building worlds independent of the work of others, can rely more heavily on the subjective experience of the reader. This harnessing of subjectivity has become pivotal to my writing process.

⁸¹ Wendig, C. (2013). *25 things you should know about worldbuilding*. [online] Terribleminds. Available at: <https://terribleminds.com/ramble/2013/09/17/25-things-you-should-know-about-worldbuilding/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2024].

⁸² Wendig, C. (2011). *Worldbuilding is a kind of masturbation*. [online] Terribleminds. Available at: <https://terribleminds.com/ramble/2011/02/22/worldbuilding-is-a-kind-of-masturbation/> [Accessed 2 Jun. 2024].

⁸³ Wolf (ibid., p.51).

⁸⁴ Harrison, M.J. (2007). *Worldbuilding: further notes*. [online] Uncle Zip’s Window. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080203094611/http://uzwi.wordpress.com/worldbuilding-further-notes/> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2024].

⁸⁵ Wolf, M.J.P. (Ed.) (2020). *World-Builders on World-Building*. New York: Routledge. pp.146-147

As discussed in Chapter 3, the imagined world, like the literary work as a whole, can be regarded as a virtual thing. It comes into being when the imagination of a reader is brought together with a literary text. Gaps that have been left by the writer will, through the reading process, be filled. Since each reader is different, so too (to some degree) will be the worlds thus constructed in imagination.

This variance in the way the imagined world is constructed from one reader to the next is intrinsic to the reading process. It is the subjectivity of that process that can elevate dry data about a world into something that feels like lived experience. Viewed in this way, writers and readers are co-creators and share in the gifts of 'making as a form of knowing'.

A Definition of Practical World-building

As a novelist and teacher, I am focussed on practical world-building, which long predates the subject of critical world-building. It is equally visible in *Gulliver's Travels* from the 18th Century and in the Epic of Gilgamesh from the second millennium BC. Indeed, the conjuring of imagined worlds must surely reach back long before stories were recorded in writing. In Tolkien's words: 'To ask what is the origin of stories... is to ask what is the origin of language and of the mind.'⁸⁶

Practical world-building is usually defined in terms such as these:

The act of designing parameters for an imaginary world for the purpose of an artistic endeavour, typically within the science fiction or fantasy genres.

As Wolf observed, reader response is not usually identified as an aspect of world-building. But as an aphantasic writer, with an experience of imagined worlds evidently at odds with many of my readers, I have no option but to entertain it as part of the process. A definition useful to practitioners such as myself must include the cunning subterfuge through which the imagined world is apparently delivered, a process that Lincoln Mitchel has called

⁸⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *Tree and leaf: including the poem mythopoeia*. London: Harper Collins. p.17

worldconjuring.⁸⁷ It might also define the elements constructed by the reader (outlined in Chapter 3). Thus, I propose the following expanded definition:

Practical world-building is the process of designing an imagined world for the purpose of an artistic endeavour, its delivery to an audience, its unique reception by each audience member, and their imaginative response, which is the creation of experience, meaning, value, emotion and significance.

When we regard the reader as an active participant in the creation of the world, it becomes clear that many of the same processes and techniques apply equally to the description and exposition of fictional worlds and real places. In Harrison's words: 'I see no technical distinction between the worldbuilding of the representational writer—the travel writer or memoirist—and the worldbuilding of the fantasist.'⁸⁸ The vital distinction is between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. The mere mention of a place name may be sufficient to conjure a subjective experience of a location in the mind of someone for whom it is already familiar – be it Tatooine or Trafalgar Square. But a place we have never seen, real or imagined, requires more work from writer and reader. Thus elements of a reader-centred approach to world-building may be equally relevant to the writing of non-fiction.

My experience as an aphantasic novelist required me to develop this reader-centred approach to the craft of world-building. It is in the conjuring of the visual field that I find myself relying on it most heavily, both as a writer and a teacher of creative writing. That is the subject of the next chapter.

⁸⁷ Mitchel, L. (2017). 'Against Worldbuilding', *Electric Literature*. [online] Available at: <https://electricliterature.com/against-worldbuilding/> [Accessed 8 Dec. 2022].

⁸⁸ Harrison, M.J. (2007). *Worldbuilding: further notes*. [online] Uncle Zip's Window. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20080203094611/http://uzwi.wordpress.com/worldbuilding-further-notes/> [Accessed 1 Jun. 2024].

Chapter 5. World-building and the Visual Field

Discourse on writing and the mind is infused with assumptions of visual thinking. Having stated that the mind is capable of forming images of things not present, Tolkien suggests that the word 'imagination' be reserved for 'the mental power of image making'.⁸⁹ In a well-regarded book on the novelist's craft, Nigel Watts lays out advice on rendering an imagined world in writing: 'Hopefully you are capable of visualising the scene so vividly that you can look around in your mind's eye and select any detail you want. Don't worry if you don't have this facility at the moment - this improves with practice.' Furthermore: 'Seeing imaginary scenes with your eyes closed... and then transcribing them onto paper is a large part of the writer's job...'. And when a writer resorts to telling: 'I sometimes feel that the author is struggling to picture the scene. This isn't a lack of talent showing, just a lack of visualisation.'⁹⁰ Comfortably aligned with the visually-minded hegemony, Watts understandably assumes his own experience and process to be universal. Stephen King seems to share this view. In a passage on visualization from his landmark craft book *On Writing*, he states: 'The key to good description begins with clear seeing and ends with clear writing...'⁹¹.

Against that background, it is not surprising that writers like myself, with little or no power to visualise, find ourselves with a problem to solve. Aphantasic novelist Alexandra Oliva has described the sense of dread she once felt approaching the description of a setting. "It felt like checking a box I didn't understand." Receiving feedback that she was describing too little, she began to describe too much. Eventually she found a character-based system that worked for her. "Instead of writing everything, I described the details that mattered to my character."⁹² My own approach to solving this puzzle is centred on the conscious emulation of

⁸⁹ Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *Tree and leaf: including the poem mythopoeia*. London: Harper Collins. pp.46-47

⁹⁰ Watts, N. (2006). *Writing a novel*. London: Teach Yourself. pp.101-102

⁹¹ King, S. (2003). *On writing: a memoir of the craft*. London: Hodder. p.209

⁹² Oliva, A. (2021). 'Being a Writer When You Literally Cannot Visualize Scenes', *Literary Hub*. [online] Available at: <https://lithub.com/being-a-writer-when-you-literally-cannot-visualize->

specific elements of visual perception.

Vision and Perception

Casually considered, the action of the eye appears to be similar to the action of a camera. With the click of a shutter, an image is captured. At a glance, a scene is taken in. This seeming objectivity and instant capture contrasts with the way a descriptive passage is written and read. Description is linear and temporal - in that it starts with its first word and progresses by sentences through to its last, and it is steeped in subjectivity. But a closer examination of the optics and movement of the eye, and how these relate to visual perception, reveals that this too is linear and subjective.

The maximum resolution of the eye is limited to a tiny circle of the retina opposite the lens. This area, known as the fovea, is closely crowded with light-detecting structures. It represents less than 1% of the eye's field of view. But it is served by more than 50% of the brain's visual cortex. Further out from the fovea, resolution decreases rapidly.⁹³ The optical function of the eye is the gathering, focussing and detection of light. By contrast the process of visual perception is located in the brain.⁹⁴ What the brain perceives is not the same as what the eye detects.

Looking into the night sky, the eyes of a fully sighted person are capable of resolving an image of the moon. But while focussed on that, everything further out from the centre of their field of view will be detected at lower resolution.⁹⁵ They will not usually be able to perceive this reduction in fidelity. Rather, it will seem that everything from horizon to horizon is

scenes/?fbclid=IwAR2dlzoloT5IKLSlj2ECFEasGbaekGS2JOKmqcDgwpxPn5N41D3FxFVlnQ8
[Accessed 26 Jul. 2023].

⁹³ Krantz, J. H. (2012). *Experiencing Sensation and Perception*. London: Pearson Education. p.3.13 [online] Available at: <https://psych.hanover.edu/classes/sensation/chapters/Chapter%203.pdf> [Accessed 15 September 2023]

⁹⁴ Lieberman, L. (1984). 'Visual Perception versus Visual Function', *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 17(3), pp.182–185.

⁹⁵ 'Perception and Senses' (2005) *In Our Time*. BBC Radio 4. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p003k9h0> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2022].

resolved in full detail. At whichever star they gaze, they will find a clear image, since it is focussed on the fovea, the only part of the retina capable of such clarity.

Infrared eye trackers have revealed that what we might think to be the smooth transition of our gaze from one place to another, is in fact complicated by a series of ballistic jumps and momentary fixations. The information gathered in this way is more than the brain can process. Attention mechanisms must therefore extract the most relevant information for enhanced processing.⁹⁶ This filtering can have surprising results. Daniel J Simons devised a now famous demonstration of the effect of focussed attention. He created a film in which people move around a room, passing basketballs to each other. Test subjects were then shown the film and asked to count the number of passes between people dressed in white. With their attention thus directed, half did not notice someone in a gorilla costume walking to the middle of the shot, pausing to look at the camera and beat its chest, then walking out of shot once more.⁹⁷

The sighted perceive a complete visual field in high resolution. But their eyes are fully resolving less than 1% of that view. Even this produces too much information for the visual cortex to process. Thus the brain and the eye must conspire to hide their limitations from conscious awareness.

Visual Perception and Visual Imagination

My approach to descriptive writing is based on the assumption that the brain's ability to perceive more than the eye can see is also at work in visualization during reading. As a test and demonstration of this principle, I devised a guided visualization exercise for use in talks and workshops. I narrate a woodland walk to the audience, asking them to imagine the scene. The description concludes as follows:

⁹⁶ Wedel, M. and Pieters, R. (2013). 'Attention Research in Marketing: A Review of Eye Tracking Studies', *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2460289.

⁹⁷ Simons, D. (2010). 'Counter-Intuition', *TEDx Talks*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eb4TM19DYDY> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2022].

You arrive at last at a clearing. In the middle of the clearing you see an old building, long abandoned. Some of the slates are missing from the roof. Patches of paintwork on the window frames and door are peeling away. The stone doorstep has been worn down in the middle by the passage of countless feet over many years. Looking closely, you see that a crack runs across this stone. Moss is growing in the crack. It is soft and cool to the touch.

I then ask the following questions:

- Did you imagine the building having a chimney or not?
- What colour was the peeling paintwork?
- For those who did imagine a particular colour: do you know why it came to mind?

Having conducted this exercise many times, I have found a remarkable consistency in audience responses. Approximately 40% of each audience report seeing a chimney in their imagination. A similar percentage picture the building without one. The remaining 20% will not have formed a clear impression either way. A wide range of colours are reported for the paintwork. Approximately 5% of a typical audience will be able to identify a real place where they have seen peeling paint and are aware that the colour they imagined in this exercise was derived from that memory.

From a set of carefully chosen descriptive cues, and a knowledge of the kind of thing that is being described, including memories of similar things seen in real life, most of the audience automatically construct a mental image far more complete than the description that has been given. They are filling in gaps, just as Iser observed.

Emulating the Cues of Visual Perception

The movements of the eye are too rapid and sporadic for the pen of the writer to reproduce. But as we have seen, the brain is marvellously adept at constructing imagined visual landscapes from limited cues.

In my writing, I use three kinds of information to facilitate the illusion of the imagined world completely seen. The first is a statement, telling (rather than showing) readers what is

about to be described. Memories of similar scenes will provide the brain with parameters for the construction of the imagined world. The second is impressionistic visual description, such as might be captured by the eye in low resolution, away from the centre of its field of view. The third is detailed visual description of something small enough to be encompassed by the high-resolution fovea. This is approximately equivalent to the moon seen in the night sky or a thumbnail viewed at arm's length.

In advocating for a simple statement of what is being seen, I may appear to be contradicting Anton Chekhov's advice to 'Show, don't tell'. But in this, Chekhov has been misrepresented and often misquoted. In the passage cited in support of "Show, don't tell", he wrote:

In descriptions of Nature one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you'll have a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball.⁹⁸

His example includes all the elements I have identified: a statement of what is being described (the mill dam), an impressionistic element (a shadow that might have been cast by a dog or a wolf), and a precise detail, small enough for its image to fall within the fovea (the glint of light in a piece of broken glass).

A combination of these elements should be sufficient for most readers to construct a mental image. But feeling present in a story is more than merely seeing it projected onto the screen of the mind. Immersion requires that they pass through this metaphorical screen. To achieve this, I add a descriptive element relating to one of the non-visual senses. The choice of which sense to evoke is guided by the desired degree of intimacy. Sight and sound can operate over distance. But the embodied senses of smell, touch and taste will evoke closer proximity.

Chapter one of *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man* was centred on the viewpoint of a

⁹⁸ Chekhov, A.P. (1954). *The Unknown Chekhov, stories and other writings hitherto untranslated*. Translated by A. Yarmolinsky. New York: Noonday Press. p.14

familiar protagonist and built around feelings of romantic love and its loss. Therefore, it is crowded with the embodied senses of smell, touch and taste.

Standing in the washhouse cubicle, below a glassless window, Elizabeth could smell the air from the waterfall thundering outside.⁹⁹

But introducing a new point-of-view character in chapter two, I wanted to open with narration that was apparently objective. Therefore, vision initially dominates the description.

From a distance, the castle at Crown Point seemed to be an extension of the basalt cliffs on which it rested.¹⁰⁰

Assembling all these elements, I constructed the following formula to help me facilitate visual images in the minds of readers, and to teach descriptive writing to students:

1. One statement of the type of thing that is about to be described.
2. Two pieces of generalised visual description.
3. One element of non-visual description.
4. One physically small visual detail, precisely described.

My descriptions in the novels do not always rigorously hold to this pattern. They are typically mixed in with other kinds of writing, such as action, dialogue and introspection. And other parameters may shift the balance. For example, the visually-dominated section of *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man* quoted above continues for 500 words before the first non-visual sensation is evoked: “The stones felt cold in the shade.”¹⁰¹ Notwithstanding these reasons for variation, I keep my desired ratio of descriptive elements in mind, particularly during the editing process. The formula is most clearly seen in isolated passages, away from other complications. For example, in the guided visualization of an abandoned building, the elements are as follows:

⁹⁹ Duncan, R. (2020). *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. London: Angry Robot. p.1

¹⁰⁰ Duncan, R. (2020). *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. London: Angry Robot. p.12

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p.14

1. The statement of the presence of an abandoned building.
2. Missing slates. Peeling paintwork.
3. The soft coolness of the moss.
4. A crack running across the doorstep stone.

The same simple pattern is seen in the opening of *The Queen of All Crows*:

For passengers on the AS *American Frontier*, at a cruising altitude of eight thousand feet, the moment the world changed was preceded by a vision of beauty: the shadow of their airship fleeting over moon-lit cloud. Here and there the dark surface of the Atlantic was revealed in breaks between the white. From one such break came flashes like distant lightning. Passengers looked down in wonder through the cabin windows as bright streaks lanced up towards them. It was only when they heard the scream of bullets that panic set in. Impacts clattered against the engine and rear compartment. Then came the thuds of fatter, slower projectiles ripping into the canopy.¹⁰²

Here the elements of the formula are as follows:

1. The stated fact of an airship cruising at 8000 feet.
2. Dark patches of ocean. Flashes like distant lightning.
3. The scream and thud of bullets.
4. The shadow of the airship.

Just as feedback on my writing pushed me to create and refine this formula, so I test its results by interrogating reviews of the novels. As outlined in Chapter 2, there is ample evidence that the system is working.

¹⁰² Duncan, R. (2018). *The Queen of all Crows*. Nottingham: Angry Robot. p.9

A Framework for Teaching Descriptive Writing

I formalised my approach to visual description in order to teach it. And having formalised it, I gained understanding of the impact of aphantasia on my writing process, how visualization related to reception theory and how reception theory related to world-building. This framework for understanding fed back into my writing practice, allowing me to take conscious control of aspects that had previously been unconscious. My writing and my teaching about writing were co-evolving. I teach creative writing in university and through formal and informal mentoring arrangements. Incorporating this framework for descriptive writing into my teaching yielded positive results, in that many learners acquired greater control over their writing. Engaging in this kind of reader-centred discourse may in itself be enough to set writers on a different path. The guided visualization activity can help. Witnessing other people interpreting the abandoned building in different ways has been revelatory for some learners. Sharing the formula for descriptive writing yields good results with most students. They do not end up feeling bound to follow it precisely. Rather, they learn that a small number of carefully chosen elements can generate a vivid image in the reader's mind.

As I had hoped, writers with little capacity to visualize were empowered to use visual description where they had previously tended to avoid it. The following communication from one of my mentees is typical:

I used to think I saw things in my head, until others described the details and images they experienced... It turns out that I don't see much of anything... When writing prose, I was keenly aware that I wasn't describing anywhere near enough... Your method codified a series of phenomena that I'd been aware of, but not consciously understood, and allowed me to quickly approach a new scene without the fear that I would struggle to describe what I wanted.¹⁰³

The other learners reporting particular benefits were (unexpectedly for me) those with exceptional visualization. Until they have learned to harness this ability, these writers may over-crowd their writing with descriptive details, making it slow and hard to assimilate. This

¹⁰³ Anonymous. (2023). Email to R.Maude. 24th July

issue stems from a desire to convey the scene exactly as imagined, leaving no gaps for the reader to fill. One writer with this experience described the effect of my approach as follows:

I am a very visual writer. When I start to write, the scene comes into my head fully-formed, the characters are real from the moment they appear, the scenery is quite often fully-realised. What I find challenging is translating that to the page in a way that does not sometimes overwhelm the reader... But your formula provides a deceptively simple framework for creating compelling description with a lightness to it that is pleasurable both to write and to read.¹⁰⁴

Another of my mentees (who has compared imagination to watching movies) explained the choice of what to describe as having been an unconscious process: “I would pick up whichever elements I had seen most vividly.”¹⁰⁵ Since the vivid elements tended to be the fine details, description that contextualised the big picture was often missed, causing confusion for the readers. This is another of the issues commonly faced by highly visual writers. But through my framework, this writer states: “I have learnt to locate the reader in the scene by moving from a wide shot to the tiniest detail barely visible, locating the reader ever closer to the character...”

It may seem paradoxical that a system developed by an aphantasic can be of particular help to writers with the opposite inner experience. But whether a writer has unusually vivid mental imagery, or is lacking it entirely, the formula suggests a balance of descriptive elements likely to work for the majority of readers - readers whose neurology is unlike their own.

¹⁰⁴ Brandon, M. (2023). Email to R, Maude. 24th July.

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous. (2023). Email to R. Maude. 27th July.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

We began with a paradox – that writers cannot access the very worlds they labour to create, since those worlds come to be realised only in the inaccessible realm of other readers' minds. It is a problem often ignored in discourse on the craft of writing, which, in keeping with the hegemony of the language of thought, assumes a dominantly visual inner experience. Indeed, by Tolkien's definition, imagination and visualization are inseparable.¹⁰⁶ Under that definition, I have no imagination (since I cannot visualize), yet my inner world is rich in texture, space and sound.

More than half a million words lie between the opening of *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* and the conclusion of *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*. My practice and understanding evolved during that writing process. Through an encounter with the theories of Wolfgang Iser, I discovered that I was not alone in my fascination with the mystery of other people's reading experience. But in coming to the question independently, as a neurodiverse writer rather than a literary theorist, my focus was different. Whilst he had written broadly about the construction of meaning, I was experimenting with readers' differing responses to world-building, specifically their construction of sensory experience, logical meaning, ethical value, emotional response and wider significance. This led to an understanding of practical world-building that differs from standard definitions by reaching beyond the stage of authorial design to include the delivery of the world, its reception and co-creation in the mind of the reader. While this may seem to shift the emphasis of world-building from author to audience, it is in my view a more writer-centred definition. It does not hurt a reader to wrongly assume a fictional world has been fully designed before they encounter it. But understanding the limitation of authorial reach can enhance the power of the writer to generate that very illusion.

Emulating the cues through which the visual cortex generates the impression of a visual field completely seen, I had learned to facilitate a visual response in the minds of many readers. This led to an approach to teaching creative writing that begins with learners' awareness of the subjectivity and individuality of the reading experience and is put into

¹⁰⁶ Tolkien, J.R.R. (2001). *Tree and leaf: including the poem mythopoeia*. London: Harper Collins. pp.46-47

practice through a simple formula for immersive description. Feedback from people who I have guided in this way suggests that my method can have a transformative effect, particularly for learners who lack the capacity to visualise and for those with unusually vivid visualization.

Discourse on world-building has tended to focus on the generally agreed and mutually understood parameters of fictional universes. This approach sits comfortably in academia, where notions of disciplinary rigor seem inseparable from objectivity. But the power and significance of fiction rests on something subjective - the individual and entirely hidden experience of readers. In this context, subjectivity is not an inconvenience for the writer to overcome, as if the creative imagination were a wilful horse to be brought under command by a strong hand. Rather, subjectivity is the great enabler. Through the reader's imagination, a few lines of prose can generate entire worlds. And since those worlds are viewed from within, as lived experience, their influence may go on to change, as Le Guin has said, the size and temper of the reader's soul.¹⁰⁷ The worlds we construct in imagination are not real, but through them the real world may be changed.

¹⁰⁷ Le Guin, U.K. and Wood, S. (1979). *The language of the night: essays on fantasy and science fiction*. New York, Ny: Perigee. p.25

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Genres and themes of the novels

Iris Murdoch told us that “Philosophy aims to clarify” whereas “literature is very often mystification.”¹⁰⁸ But for me, novel writing is driven precisely by the desire to understand. The novel does not seek the objectivity claimed by philosophy or science. Instead, it treats subjectivity as a virtue, inviting us to inhabit imagined worlds in which ideas can play out as lived experience. As Le Guin observed, science fiction writers don’t use scientific and other ideas merely as a basis for speculation and extrapolation: “...they get very involved with them. They take them personally, which is precisely what scientists must forbid themselves to do.”¹⁰⁹

Designing the parameters of this alternate history, I was consciously constructing a laboratory in which contending ideas about governance could be tested, particularly the paradoxical, push-pull relationship between nation states and supranational bodies.¹¹⁰ Through the juxtaposition of societies with opposite political philosophies, I was striving to understand the working of power structures. But also the role of marginalised people in processes of change. The main viewpoint character of these stories – and thus the centre of their subjectivity – is just such a person. Unable to comfortably perform her perceived gender, she ekes out a living working as a private investigator, switching gender presentation for the purpose of disguise. This is how we meet her in *The Bullet-Catcher’s Daughter*. But by the end of *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*, she has understood herself to be non-binary. Whereas the geopolitical themes of the novels were planned from the outset the theme of gender was a discovery of the writing process.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Philosophy and Literature’ (1978) *Men of Ideas*, episode 14. BBC 20 April

¹⁰⁹ Le Guin, U.K. and Wood, S. (1980). *The language of the night: essays on fantasy and science fiction*. New York, Ny: Perigee. p.25

¹¹⁰ An explanation for the use of ‘alternate’ rather than the more grammatically correct ‘alternative’ can be found in Appendix 2.

The Novels and their Genres

At the outset, I had planned for a shift of genre through the three trilogies. The first would be a private investigator narrative, the second a spy story and the final trilogy a geopolitical thriller. Through the eye of conflict narrative categorization, we can perceive a shift in emphasis across these genres from 'man vs man', to 'man vs society' and then to what we might call 'society vs society'. But, informed by the writing process, I found the first two trilogies settling into six distinct subgenres. There was no moment of conscious decision to cast them in this way. Rather, my writing evolved towards types of storytelling that allowed me to more deeply explore different facets of the main themes.

The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter is a hardboiled detective story. In this genre, a detective typically narrates a first-person account of an investigation, which is set against a background of systematic institutional corruption. Their role mandates interaction with people from every stratum of society, including privileged elites, the representatives of governmental agencies, and marginalised groups. Whilst their primary goal is identified as the resolution of a specific commission, wider issues are often exposed. *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter* follows all these tropes to develop the background of the imagined world. It leaves clues for the reader about the deviation point from actual history. And it explores the problems of overregulation inherent in centralized power structures.

Unseemly Science, veers into Gothic horror. Whereas the detective novel is defined by and rests on the logic of an investigative process, gothic horror is better understood in terms of atmosphere, emotion and the 'return of the repressed'. Gas-lights, thick fog, night journeys, illness, death, and claustrophobic enclosure are typical of the atmospheric settings. Such narratives explore those things that society might prefer to be left in the shadows. The emotional landscape reaches for the sublime through terror and erotic/romantic yearning. *Unseemly Science* follows all these tropes to investigate the counterfactual history of the Gas-Lit Empire from an emotional perspective. The protagonist's emotional response to the system is explored and her ill-fated attraction to a forbidden lover begins to be revealed.

The Custodian of Marvels was constructed around a heist narrative. This genre is

narrowly defined in terms of the goals of the protagonist and the structure of the story. The objective of the heist is first identified and the characters who will perform it are introduced. Typically each of them has a set of specialist skills. The plan is outlined and all necessary preparations are completed. But when the heist is initiated, something goes wrong. An *ad hoc* plan must then be conceived, through which victory can be snatched from the jaws of defeat. These are typically 'man against society' narratives, since the target of the heist is an institution that in some way represents the injustices of the system. Thus the criminals are cast as heroes, and the victim as oppressor.

The Custodian of Marvels follows all these tropes. For the protagonist to uncover the origin of the global order that she is fighting (and for readers to understand the imagined world's deviation point from real history) it is necessary for her to uncover secrets held by governmental institutions. It is knowledge rather than riches that the conspirators hope to steal.

Through the tropes of these three genres, readers are able to understand how the global order came into being, the functioning of its institutions, the strengths of the system and some of its inherent weaknesses. But to understand the flaws that must necessarily result in its catastrophic fall, they will also need to know what has been happening beyond its borders. That is the focus of the second trilogy.

The Queen of All Crows is a seafaring adventure. At the heart of this genre is the exploration of the unknown. The protagonist travels into a world in which their previous assumptions no longer hold good. Here may be monsters. But more terrifying and enticing, here may be different codes of morality. Stripped of the protections of the familiar, the protagonist will explore exotic lands, and thereby learn about their own selves. Setting out to write *The Queen of All Crows*, I was conscious of the relationship between such adventure stories and colonialism. From *The Tempest* to *The Heart of Darkness* and beyond, we find a problematic fetishization of the exotic. Foreign lands are cast as places less advanced rather than simply different. Thus they come to represent the primitive nature at the heart of the protagonist. My challenge was to harness the tropes of the genre without falling into those traps.

The story introduces a view of the protagonist's world from outside. From this standpoint it becomes clear that the global order will not survive in the long term. But just as

significantly for Elizabeth, in traveling to a society with profoundly different moral codes, she begins to question her assumptions about her own relationship to gender.

The Outlaw and the Upstart King is grimdark fantasy. This is a genre in which characters are driven by expediency to navigate a world dominated by violent conflict. It is thus set up in opposition to medievalist high fantasies in which destiny and honour send characters on glorious quests. The global order that has yielded the Long Quiet represents a world bound by stultifying regulations. The four previous novels contained a critique of that approach to governance. But in this novel we encounter a society in which the absence of regulation is considered virtuous. In place of general laws, individual oaths are worn as tattoos. I have taken the New Right's obsession with small government and made it flesh in a feudal society. I needed the grimdark genre to explore the brutality that might result from a lack of legal control. The narration of the first four novels was restricted to a single viewpoint. But in this novel we follow more than one viewpoint character, an approach typical to the genre.

The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man has been described as court intrigue.¹¹¹ This subgenre of fantasy incorporates the structure and tropes of a political thriller, setting them within an imagined world. These stories typically chart a struggle for dominance within an established power structure. Violence here tends to be secretive. We are more likely to see poison or the forging of incriminating letters than a battle of swords in public view. Ideology is often at stake, since the contending characters have different approaches to governance beyond the confines of the palace. Thus the outcome of personal struggles will touch the lives of many.

Having reached this final novel in the series, readers should have a comprehensive overview of the Gas-Lit Empire and of the world beyond. They will understand that these two geopolitical entities represent opposite beliefs about governance. The world stands at a moment of balance between opposing forces. But it is a balance that cannot be sustained. The ideological divide was shown in the previous books. But in *The Fugitive and the*

¹¹¹ Anonymous. (2019) 'Review: *The Fugitive and the Vanishing Man*', *The Speculative Shelf*. [online] Available at: <https://spikegelato.com/2019/11/27/review-the-fugitive-and-the-vanishing-man/> [Accessed 24 Nov. 2022].

Vanishing Man, I wanted it to become explicit. Court Intrigue was the ideal genre for this, since it allowed for a series of conversations between characters with different beliefs. They discuss the relationship between nation states and supra-national bodies, and the violence of legal control versus the violence that may arise without it. They also explore the other major theme of these books – the nature of sex and gender.

Each of the six subgenres offered distinctive tools of investigation. In a work of such scale – more than half a million words - I had space to experiment with contending ideas as they played out in the lived experience of characters across a wide expanse of place and time. Through the juxtaposition of opposing philosophies about power and gender, I was able to come to a deeper understanding of my chosen themes.

Narrative and Thematic Braiding

In writing this alternate history, I was consciously developing narrative strands that contrasted in their settings (within and without the boundary of the Gas-Lit Empire) and in their point-of-view characters (Elizabeth and Edwin). My intention was to shed more light on my chosen themes through the juxtaposition of contrasting cases. In the conceptual framework laid out by Wolf, these juxtapositions can be seen as braided narratives and themes within the imagined world.¹¹² The concept of braiding also describes the way in which the settings and characters of my novels were constructed in opposition to the people and processes of factual history, as it is understood.

¹¹² Wolf, M.J.P. (2013). *Building imaginary worlds: the theory and history of subcreation*. London: Routledge.pp.199-202

Appendix 2 - Choice of Terms

World-building, Worldbuilding, World Building

The Google Books Ngram Viewer chart (Figure 1) displays the frequency of occurrence of the terms 'world building', 'worldbuilding' and 'world-building' in a corpus of books published between 1950 and 2019. 'World building' is seldom used. Whilst carrying the implication of a term recently coined, 'world-building' is roughly twice as commonly used as 'worldbuilding'. I found a similar ratio of occurrence in my sample of reviews of *The Bullet-Catcher's Daughter*. Thus, I have chosen to use the hyphenated form of the term in this thesis.

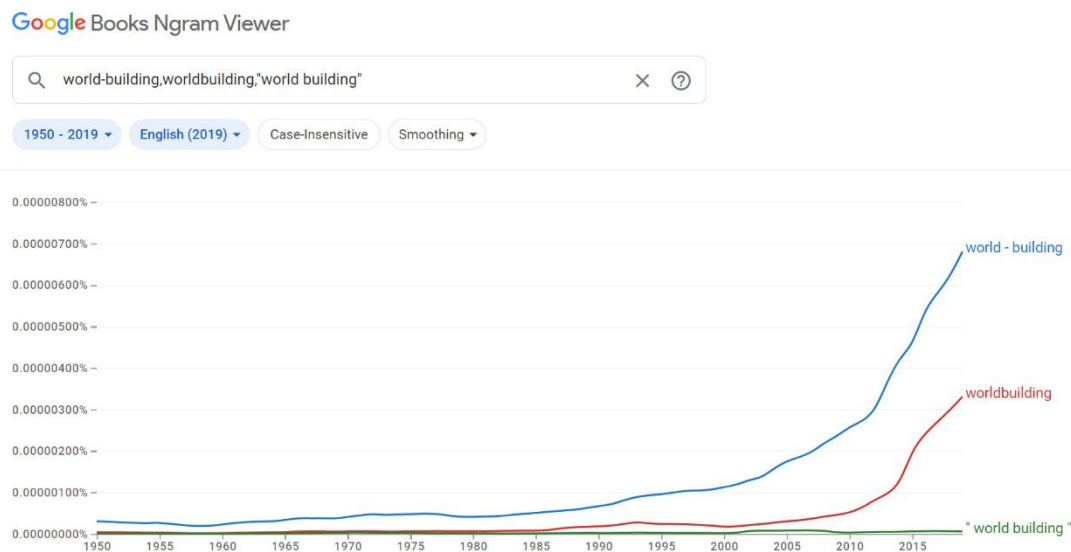


Figure 1

Alternate History, Alternative History, Counterfactual History

I decided against the term 'counterfactual history' because it implies a degree of historiographic rigour not reflected in my writing process. In adopting the term 'alternate history' to describe the genre of the novels, I was not choosing the most frequently used term, as revealed in the Google Book Ngram chart below (Figure 2). It is not clear that the use of those terms in the corpus of books sampled for the chart is identical to its use by readers of my novels. Further, the more grammatically correct 'alternative history' was used only 5 times in my sample of reviews, compared to 18 times for 'alternate history'. I therefore followed the term used by the majority of reviewers.

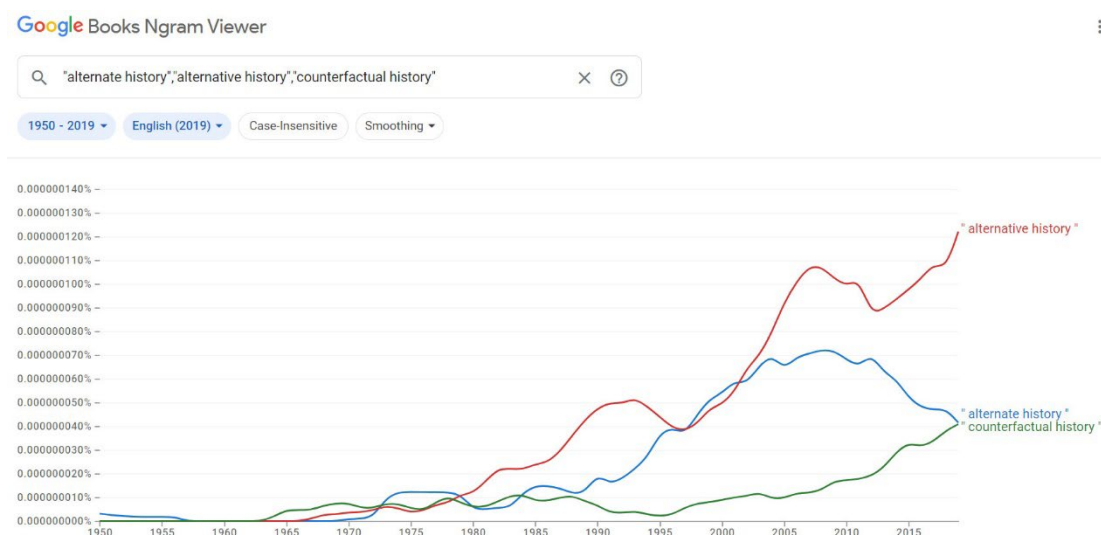


Figure 2

Gender Non-binary, Non-binary, Nonbinary

The term 'Gender non-binary' tends to be used by anti-trans activists and risks being read as a shibboleth of that group. The other available terms to describe Elizabeth and Edwin's gender are: non-binary and nonbinary. The Google books Ngram for these terms (figure 3) reveals very little difference in their prevalence now or in the past. I chose to adopt 'nonbinary' because the hyphenated version implies a term more recently coined. For comparison, 'Teenagers' has replaced 'Teen-agers' over a similar timescale to the growth in usage of 'Nonbinary' (with the notable exception of the New Yorker magazine).

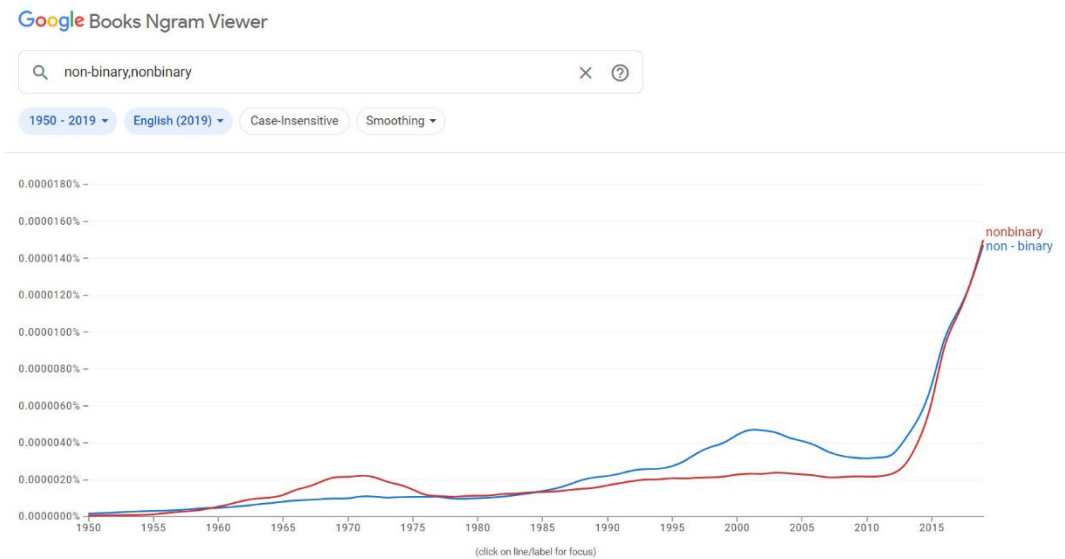


Figure 3

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