Follow Your Own Rules: Making Paranormal World Building Work

Blurb: One of the most important tenets of world building is to follow the rules. And one of the most exciting parts of writing paranormal is that you get to make up your own rules. However, once you make up a rule, you have to follow it. In this workshop, you'll learn the fundamentals of world building and how to apply them in a paranormal novel. Set up a world that works and works for you, avoid info dumping and put new twists on old supernatural beings, and use your world building to increase tension and drive the story forward. Principles taught in this workshop are applicable to other genres, so whether you write paranormal or not, you'll walk away with tools you can use.

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Introduction

I'm Crystal Jordan and I’m a librarian, which means I’m an obsessive-compulsive researcher. Which sounds bad, but works out really well for both my library and my writing careers! Anyway, I write futuristic, paranormal and erotic romance. My current publishers are Kensington Aphrodisia, Harlequin Spice Briefs, Samhain Publishing, and Ellora’s Cave.

I’ve been writing for about 5 years now, and I have no idea where the time went! I sold my first ebook about a year after I started writing and sold to New York about a year after that with a novella that had been previously e-published. So anyone who tells you that no one sells with a novella or by wading through the slush pile is wrong. Of course, after I sold I had to scramble to find an agent to represent me in contract negotiations, and I can only say that a good agent is worth her weight in gold. My current agent, who I just moved to earlier this year, is Roberta Brown, and she’s fabulous.

Okay, that’s all I can think of to say about myself.

So let’s talk about what we’re doing today. This workshop is not going to give you everything you need to know about worldbuilding—there are entire books devoted to the topic—and some of you have been writing for a long time, so this is just going to talk about some of the basics of worldbuilding, specifically paranormal worldbuilding, and maybe get you thinking about your own process. It might get you to try something different, or give you a new idea for how to make your process work better for you.

So, first I want to talk to you about some definitions. What is paranormal romance and what is worldbuilding? Then we’ll talk about different methods of worldbuilding, discuss paranormal stereotypes, and go over how to twist a story, idea, or supernatural creature to make it your own. We’ll do a couple of group activities, and then we’ll wrap up by discussing how much worldbuilding is too much.

What is paranormal romance?

The first thing I want to talk about is a definition of paranormal romance. I know this seems pretty basic, but it's actually something that can have some debate to it, especially with the advent of urban fantasy.

So, a combined definition of the RWA RITA contest guidelines, Wikipedia, and Text in Transit: A Guide to Genre in Popular Literature, paranormal romances are romance “novels in which the future, a fantasy world or paranormal happenings are an integral part of the plot” (RWA). The “fantastic elements may be woven into an alternate version of our own world in an urban fantasy involving vampires, demons, and/or werewolves, or they may be more ‘normal’ manifestations of the paranormal—humans with psychic abilities, witches, or ghosts. Time-travel, futuristic, and extraterrestrial romances also fall beneath the paranormal umbrella.” (Wikipedia/Text in Transit) Aside from time-travel, paranormal romance can also take place in historical settings, can range in heat level from sweet to erotic, and can be everywhere from light and comedic to dark and
almost bordering on horror. In other words, paranormal can cover a lot of ground. Let’s not even get into romance with paranormal elements.

However, I want you to note the mention of urban fantasy settings in the definition of paranormal romance. In a lot of ways, urban fantasy (when it’s got a strong heroine and some romantic elements to it) and paranormal romance cross over into each other's territory and there are some very vocal proponents that insist they’re on one side of the divide or another. For me, I don't care so much. I've had my book categorized as erotic urban fantasy and paranormal erotic romance. In the end, I worry about telling a good story.

In urban fantasy, there doesn't have to be a romance, but if it's there, then it's typically a subplot. The focus of the story is on the external plot—typically a fight with a villain to save the world from catastrophe. In paranormal romance, the focus is the internal plot of a developing romantic relationship between the protagonists, and along the way they may save the world. The degrees of romance versus world-saving can vary, which is where the confusion comes in.

The only time I think this divide actually matters is in terms of reader expectation. The best example I can think of is Yasmine Galenorn's Sister of the Moon series, *Witchling*, *Changeling*, and *Darkling*, which were marketed as paranormal romance. I read the first one and liked it, but kept waiting for the romance. Where’s the hero, I asked myself. The book ended with an HFN with (I think) three different men. Confused, I went to the author’s website only to find a disclaimer that the paranormal romance label was a decision of the publisher’s marketing department, but the book was actually urban fantasy. With that in mind, I was able to really invest in the rest of the series, because my expectations were met with the adjusted label. I was no longer expecting an HEA ending for any of the sisters.

***Three Methods of Worldbuilding***

So, now let’s talk about the definition of worldbuilding. Worldbuilding is the process of constructing a fictional world. This world can span any time period or genre, and it doesn't have to involve a futuristic or paranormal setting. Even in contemporary stories, you have to build the world your character lives in for your audience. Even in the most stereotypical of families or small towns, you still have to establish a sense of place for your protagonists.

As Holly Lisle says on her website--and I've provided the link to her worldbuilding article on the handout--"You're worldbuilding when you sketch out a floorplan of the house that your character lives in so that you don't accidentally have her bedroom on the first floor in chapter one and on the second in chapter three. You're worldbuilding when you draw out a little map of the town in which your characters live and name the streets and decide that the corner drugstore is on the corner of Maple and Vine. You are worldbuilding when you decide that the town has two churches, one Presbyterian and one Methodist, and that the Methodists think (as a whole) that the Presbyterians are a bunch of godless heathens and the Presbyterians think the Methodists are a bunch of fanatics.

You're worldbuilding, in other words, when you create some guidelines about the place in which your story takes place or about the people who inhabit the place in order to maintain consistency.
within the story and add a feeling of verisimilitude to your work. So worldbuilding is essential to anyone who writes."

There are three major methods for worldbuilding in fiction, top-down, bottom-up, and a combination of the two, top-down-bottom-up. There are benefits and drawbacks to each of these, and we’ll discuss those. This is sort of plotting versus pantsing, worldbuilding style.

Top-down: This is the plotter version of worldbuilding. It’s a macro-to-micro approach where you start with the major aspects of the world: history, technology, mythology, economy, etc. After you finish the overview, you then focus in tighter and tighter on smaller details, such as individual groups and characters.

   Pros: These worlds are well-integrated and fit together seamlessly.
   Cons: This method takes a lot of time to get down to the detail needed to write a story.

Bottom-up: This is the pantser version of worldbuilding. It’s the micro-to-macro approach where you start with a group, character, or other individual elements of the world and build them up in great detail. The world peripheral to these details are built as needed, but not usually planned in advance.

   Pros: Immediately useful for storytelling as only needed details are decided upon.
   Cons: The world is designed haphazardly and may develop inconsistencies as it grows.

Top-down-bottom-up: This is a combination of the first two methods, or macro-and-micro approach where you start with a loose overview of the world, but without the level of intense detail of the top-down method. Then you switch to the bottom-up method and set characters and groups in that world, and develop those details needed to fill in the world and story.

   Pros/Cons: This method has some of the pros and cons of the other two methods. It’s immediately useable for storytelling while maintaining some overall world consistency. However, it does take more work to get the macro and micro aspects to the world you’re building to play well CONSISTENTLY together.

Questions to Ask

So, how do you even start using these techniques to build the world? For me, it starts with asking myself some basic questions about the paranormal and how it works in the world I’m building. My favorite list of questions comes from author Patricia C. Wrede, and I’ve given a very pared down list of my top 15 favorites on the handout, plus a link to her hugely extensive list.

The basic gist of these is the who, what, when, where, why, and how of supernatural abilities. Who can do magic? What can magic/supernatural creatures do or not do? Where did these abilities come from? Something I do with one of my critique partners, Dayna Hart/Rowan Larke, is keep asking why, or play the what-if game. What if vampires don’t drink blood? Why? They produced a synthetic instead. Why? To keep from being noticed by/exposed to humans. Why?
Because they have an underground culture. What if they were exposed to humans? So on and so forth. Playing what-if can help build the story, the world, and the characters.

My favorite of Patricia C. Wrede’s questions are below, which I think emphasize that the paranormal has limits, it has rules you have to set. It should not be an easy fix to characters’ problems. It might even be a barrier to them reaching their internal or external goals. For example, one of the things that people tell me they don’t like about shifters is that authors use the predestined mate trope to make insta-relationships and true love. Some of my shifters have predestined mates, but not all. When I do, I often try to play the what-if game on how to make this the worst possible person they could imagine being their soul mate. The paranormal is not the easy way out, so don’t use it that way.

- What things can magic not do? What are the limits to magical power? How do magicians try to get around these limits?
- What is the price magicians must pay in order to be magicians — years of study, permanent celibacy, using up bits of their life or memory with each spell, etc.?
- Does practicing magic have any detrimental effect on the magician (such as becoming addictive, fomenting insanity, or shortening life-span)? If so, is there any way to prevent these effects?
- Where does magic power come from?
- How does a magician tap his/her magic power? Does becoming a magician require some rite of passage (investing one’s power in an object, being chosen by the gods, constructing or being given a permanent link to the source of power) or does it just happen naturally, as a gradual result of much study or as a part of growing up?
- How much is known about the laws of nature, physics, and magic?
- What general varieties of magic are practiced?
- Are certain kinds of magic practiced solely or chiefly by one sex or the other? By one race or another? Is this because of inborn ability, natural preferences, or legislation?
- Does a magician’s magical ability or power change over time?
- Can the ability to do magic be lost?
- Can the ability to work magic be taken away?
- Are there magical means of rapid communication? How commonly are they used? For what purposes?
- Are magical weapons available? Can magic be used in warfare?
- How has the presence of magic affected weapons technology? Can magic make weapons more effective? Do you have to do anything special to walls, armor, or weapons to make them better able to resist enemy spells?
- To what degree does the presence of magic, magical objects, and wizards replace technology? Duplicate technology? Supplement technology?

Paranormal Stereotypes and Archetypes

Now in Patricia’s *Enchanted Forest Chronicles*, she takes some of the most stereotyped creatures and archetypes in folklore and puts the most interesting spins on them I’ve ever seen. So, for this portion of the workshop, we’re going to do a group activity where we take some of the most used
(and abused) supernatural beings and identify their stereotypes. I’d like everyone to break into
groups of 3-5, and send one person from the group up to the front to get a card with your creature
on it. I’ll give you about 5-7 minutes to come up with some of the stereotypes and then we’ll
discuss them all together.

Demons
Vampires
Werewolves/Shape-shifters
Witches
Ghosts
Faeries
Mermaids
Zombies
Aliens
Dragons
Elves
Gargoyles

Now, what does knowing the stereotypes of a paranormal being do for your world building? On
the one hand it can help you avoid those stereotypes, and on the other it can allow you to play
with them and use them to your benefit.

An example I can think of for this is a young adult novel I wrote a few years ago that is still
languishing in my vault of old stories—though my agent just told me to drag it out and dust it off
because she thinks it might be marketable. Anyway, the stereotype I played with was for
superheroes. Now, we all know that archetypal character is buff and gorgeous, they're who we
want to be, the best part of humanity. They take care of the worst parts of human problems, even
if they have problems of their own. My spin on this was to have a plus-sized superhero. She was
sarcastic and mouthy and had an uber-girlie name she hated. She was teenaged me, with
superpowers.

So, let's talk about how to put spins on old or established ideas.

**No new ideas under the sun (just our twists on them)**

You guys have probably heard there are only a certain number of stories you can tell, an
established, finite number of basic plots. Some say 1, 3, 7, 20, or 36. The link to these are on the
handout. My favorites are the 3 and the 20 list, but it's a good idea to take a look at all of them
because they can make you start thinking about how you've planned out your story and world.

The three story list comes from William Foster-Harris's *The Basic Patterns of Plot*.

Type A: The happy ending.
Type B: The unhappy ending.
Type C (which is my favorite explanation of all time): The literary plot, in which, no matter whether we start from the happy or the unhappy fork, proceeding backwards we arrive inevitably at the question, where we stop to wail.

The twenty story list comes from Ronald Tobias's book 20 Master Plots: And How to Build Them.

Quest
Adventure
Pursuit
Rescue
Escape
Revenge
The Riddle
Rivalry
Underdog
Temptation
Metamorphosis
Transformation
Maturation
Love
Forbidden Love
Sacrifice
Discovery
Wretched Excess
Ascension
Descension

The thing is, you can obviously put more that one of these in your story. And the ones you use, the order in which you use them, and the paranormal creatures and world you’re building are what make the story uniquely yours. There are some types of stories that are so done, so known, that they’re part of our cultural make up. Cinderella anyone? This one has been done in so many ways, in so many different time periods. One could easily argue that Pride & Prejudice is a Cinderella story.

If there are only so many stories you can tell, then it’s all about putting your own individual twists on ideas—I've always maintained that the important part isn't telling a story that's all your own, since there really is no such beast. It just how you tweak it that makes it yours.

Sitting down and considering how to twist an old idea works no matter what genre you’re dealing with. Every genre has its stereotypes, from historical to futuristic. One that strikes me for contemporary category romance is the Greek/sheik/tycoon secret baby daddy trope. So, if I wanted to twist this idea, I could maybe invert it and have a tycoon baby mama or a secret baby the heroine didn’t know about. It seems ridiculous, but I’ve seen an author do a great job with it—and I’ve searched and searched, but can’t find her name or the book’s title. I hate when that happens! But the basic plot is this: the maid’s niece hooked up with the rich man’s son, which
sounds completely stereotypical, right? But then the author tweaks it and had the heroine give the baby up for adoption as a teen, thinking no one knew about it, but the rich father found out and took the baby in and raised it as his with his new wife. Fast forward ten years later and the secret baby romance happens, with a twist.

Get back into your groups from the last activity, and we’re going to start twisting those oh-so-overdone-storylines and come up with some new twists. Send a member of your group up for another card, which has a particular fairy tale on it. With your group, you’re going to come up with a new twist or twists or a retelling or anything you want that uses your fairy tale. It can be paranormal or not, in any time period or setting…whatever your group wants to come up with. I’m going to give you another 5-7 minutes to do this.

Some of you will have the same fairy tale, and the point is to show you that you can give the same idea, even retreaded one, to different people and no one is going to have exactly the same interpretation. We all process things in different ways.

Little Red Riding Hood
Cinderella
Snow White
The Frog Prince
The Princess and the Pea
Sleeping Beauty
The Ugly Duckling

Now, let’s share the spins you all came up with, and we can talk about the how and why of where the twist came from, how you used the group to flesh out your own ideas.

**How much information is too much**

Okay, so we’ve talked about different definitions of what makes a book paranormal romance or not, what worldbuilding means and what methods we can use to build our worlds. We’ve gone over paranormal stereotypes, and how to twist old plots and stories to make them our own. But once you’ve got a great world, complete with rules and supernatural beings who have to follow them, you need to get all of that on the page so your readers know what you know, right?

Wrong.

Here’s my rule about how much of your worldbuilding to put on the page: don't give away more than you have to. You need to answer the most obvious and pressing *whys* but if you’re adding a rule or twist just because it’s cool, and not because it’s essential to your worldbuilding, you might want to reconsider. Let me tell you why, I’ve had authors talk about series they’ve written where they threw in one of those nifty worldbuildy bits in book one and had it bite them in the butt in book three when they go, “If I just hadn’t *said* that, even if I had it in my head, I could have changed it and no one would have ever known this wasn’t my original idea.” And then they have to completely revamp their plot or character because they threw a wrench in their own works by not allowing for further creativity or worldbuilding later on down the road.
Another bonus of not showing all the cards in your hand? You can avoid the dreaded info-dump. Your readers don’t want to wade through a five page explanation of the Fae versus Vampire war from three centuries ago just because you totally geeked out over it when you were creating the world’s history. In fact, worldbuilding is something that should happen throughout the story. There may need to be certain details you give right up front so readers can understand what’s going on, but you can weave worldbuilding in throughout the rest of the book as it’s needed so you gradually expand the world for your reader, draw them in and keep them engaged as you provide them with new information about the people and places they’re reading about. Remember, only give them as much as they need, and don’t overwhelm or bore them with TMI.

Questions?

Thanks everyone for coming and playing along with me today. I had a great time! Before we finish up, does anyone have any questions about the workshop or just any writing-related topic that you’d like me to answer?