



*Rowenna Miller*

## 246: Writing Magic: Character-Centered World Building in a Fantasy Series

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes today are at [diymfa.com/246](http://diymfa.com/246) because it's Episode 246. Now, today, I have the pleasure of hosting Rowenna Miller on the show!

Rowenna Miller is midwestern born and raised writer; and it turns out, you actually can't take the Indiana out of a girl, apparently. Kind of like with me, you can take the girl out of Manhattan; you can't take Manhattan out of the girl. Rowenna has a Master's in English Film and Literature because she can't shut up about stories, which is like exactly my kind of people; and has taught and tutored writing in colleges and university settings.

She is also a historical reenactor and seamstress, and she specializes in the late 18th Century. She writes fantasy shamelessly inspired by her love of history, particularly the History of the French Revolution, which is what we're going to be talking about in this interview. So, her debut novel, *Torn*, which I'm reading right now, and I cannot put down, was released last year in March. It was released March, 2018; and it's the first in her *Unraveled Kingdom* series.

Her second book, *Fray*, will be coming up in June, 2019. So, our interview is landing right in between the two. Our discussion today is going to focus on this particular series and the worlds-building around it, and how you can draw from history to inform and inspire the world of your story. So, welcome, Rowenna. It is so great to have you here.

**Rowenna Miller:** Great to be here.

**GP:** So, I kind of feel like we were besties separated at birth as I was reading through your bio.

[laughter]

**GP:** And then as I was reading your book, I was kind of like, 'oh my gosh, I can't wait to talk to her', because I feel like I've known you forever, even though we've just met. So, since I haven't known you forever, can you tell us a little bit of your superhero writing backstory or rather the story behind the story for the series? What inspired you to write *Torn* and *Fray*, and why?

**RM:** So, this is probably the only thing I've written because there are definitely some strong and shelves novels back in my history. This is the only one that I have, like a moment of inspiration that I can actually say like, "Oh, that's when I knew I wanted to write this." I was actually-- This is dorky. I was researching late 18th century jacket styles for women, because there's this huge explosion in fashionable jackets for women in the 1780s and 1790s.



I was going through archives of French fashion plates online, looking at these and kind of had this moment of realization that the women who were crafting these garments, that are just beautiful and mind-blowingly creative, were doing so often in kind of the backdrop of one of the most dramatic political moments in the 18th century, which is the French Revolution.

And just kind of saw myself thinking, you know, if these women could influence what was going on around them, would they, how would they react? What would they want to even do in this situation? So, that was kind of where that question sparked writing the first draft of Torn.

**GP:** I love that. I mean, I'm not as anyone who could even be considered remotely a seamstress, but I'm definitely a Craftsy person. And so, that tactile element, it just so resonates with me. Have you found that like the sort of crafting element has wound its way into the story?

**RM:** It definitely has in terms of, particularly, the main character is a seamstress; it's her livelihood. She's also considers herself really as an artist as well in terms of, you know, draping and crafting with fabric. So, she really views the world that way. She notices people's clothes before she talks about them, because that's how she understands that language of, 'what is someone wearing? What does that say about them?'

She, you know, even kind of speaks in metaphors a lot of about things being woven or stitched because that's where her mind goes. So, in that way, it definitely does come out in terms of how I understand crafting and seamstressing and textile ends up being reflected in how she navigates her world in some ways.

**GP:** I love it. So, one of the things that I noticed as I was reading Torn, and I'm about halfway through, so no spoilers, please, because I'm like completely enthralled. But one of the things that really drew me in is like, at first, I wasn't quite sure like what period we were in history, but it definitely had a historical feeling to it. And like, as I kept reading, I started seeing the French Revolution elements in there, but this is also clearly a very--

Like, it's an imagined world. It's a fantasy world. It is not France during the revolution. So, can you talk a little bit about the construction of this world? How did you originally lay it out in terms of the geography in your mind and the time period itself?

**RM:** So, I was inspired by, you know, those moments of French revolution, but also, Britain at the same time; and of course America at the same time are also very interesting kind of places. So, there are probably elements of all of those that kind of pepper their way into the story as well as stuff that's just totally made up. So, occasionally, you know, someone will ask, "Well, where is this historically?"

And I'm like, "No, I made that up. That just fits in because it's fantasy, and you're allowed to do that in fantasy." But I really kind of started with the protagonist, and how, you know, where is she situated; and then built out from there. So, she is a resident of the capital city and she's lived there, you know, her life; and that is kind of how she sees her world.

And, historically, people didn't always travel very much and didn't always have a very large scope for how they understood the world around them; just in terms of like geography, you might be born-- I think average people would be born, live, and die within about the same 50 miles. So, part of that, was kind of steeped into my understanding of, you know, she's a common person; she's not a world traveler.

You know, if there's a version of the Grand Tour in Galitha, she didn't go on it. So, for her, you know, I started in that very close, 'this is my city, this is my neighborhood, these are the places I go all the



time'; and then kind of built out. And, actually in Book Two, we kind of get outside of Galitha City and outside of even the country a bit, and kind of her surprise in encountering things that are different.

**GP:** It sounds like, you know, it's sort of; you built the world out sort of the opposite of how most people think Fantasy world-building happens. Like, I've talked to particularly writers who are starting out a fantasy series, they think about like the whole middle earth kind of scope, right?

They might even make maps, and they might have this whole sort of like, you know, landscape that they're working in; and then eventually, they might like zero-in on a city or the Shire or whatever. But it sounds like you kind of did the opposite, where like you started very much with the character at the heart, and then built out from there.

**RM:** Yeah, that's definitely accurate. I think that-- Both ways, I think are totally legitimate ways of going about building a world. I think that you either have to, you know, splash it big and go huge and then kind of figure out, you know, what's important and how do the people who are actually seeing this world see it? That when they're walking around, you know, your city; is this familiar to them or is this foreign, and how do they recognize the places that they see and how do they then relay them back to the audience who's reading?

So, for me, when I start kind of very small in subsequent drafts; I kind have had to go back and layer in things that maybe weren't at the forefront of my protagonist's mind, but that a reader needs to know and find ways to layer those in in ways that aren't obtrusive to the narration either because it's a first-person point of view.

And obviously, people don't necessarily think about their world in terms of, 'let me lay out a textbook for you in how this political system works, or what the map of my city is'. So, subsequent drafts, I kind of had to think about, 'okay, what's missing? What do people need to know? And, how would this character interact with those things, or engage with them, or talk about them in a way that makes sense?'

**GP:** You know, it's funny at DIY MFA, we often talk about how world-building-- We talk about sort of character-centric world-building. This concept is built out of a theory actually of human development called the Ecological Perspectives Theory, which is basically the person is at the middle of their experience in the middle of their world, and that things kind of ripple out from there; kind of like how you've been talking.

One of the things that I think is really important is what you were saying about how, especially if we're in a character's like a first-person or a close third-person point of view, the character isn't going to question what their landscape is about.

They're not going to like, like you said, 'give a textbook view' because they know it already. Like, why do they need to tell the reader, because they don't know they're in a story? So, how did you identify those places where you knew that the reader would have questions, and then kind of layer them in as you described because that's tricky to do?

**RM:** It definitely is. I think that one thing that did help with it was to consider it not separate from character development or separate from plot. And so there are moments where something that's important to know is also probably something that's driving a character development moment or it's driving something about the plot. And, particularly in those plot-driven moments, for example, how the political system works or how the social stratification works; there were moments where characters were going to come into conflict with one another and have these discussions.



So, that was one way that, you know, I had to be kind of careful in making sure that the dialogue was still natural or that the internal monologue still kind of made sense and followed how someone would think about it, but they are really natural places to sort of introduce; what do you, as a reader, need to know in a way that follows along with, 'okay, and how does this actually impact what's going on in the story?'

**GP:** Absolutely. I mean, I'm thinking, for instance, of, so the main character Sophie and her brother-- How do you say it; is it Kristos or Kristos?

**RM:** Kristos.

**GP:** Kristos, and like kind of the best way to show what the political climate is, is to have the brother and sister arguing about politics, right? Because then they can be debating it between themselves at the taverns, and then the readers are also getting that information without it feeling like we're getting whacked over the head with like, 'let's take an aside and break the fourth wall in explaining to the reader what's happening'.

**RM:** [laughs] Right. I think that also kind of has this effect too of; who's talking becomes very important, what's being defended is going to depend quite a bit about, you know, who is doing the talking. So, obviously, when Kristos, the revolutionary brother, is talking about something; he's going to have a particular opinion, particular view on it.

And when theater, the noble, is talking about it; it's going to look completely different. So, I think in those moments too, you kind of have this intersection of plot and character and world that each person is only going to have a little sliver of what's going on, but you kind of pile them up together to get a view of the entire system as it's working.

**GP:** Absolutely. And the other thing that's also kind of fun because we're in Sophie's first-person point of view, is that we can then see her reactions to what other characters are saying about the situations and about their environment. So, like, we can kind of counter how she responds to Kristos with what she's actually thinking about what he's saying versus what he's really saying to her.

And so, like, we kind of get this triple layering of the political situation. So, one of the other things that I really loved was kind of like going back to that idea of the world-building, and sort of the pockets of world, and sort of how you started around the characters and then rippled out, is how we'd have these very developed, very crystal clear sort of micro worlds. Right?

I'm thinking of the moment, for instance, when she's standing in the, I think it's the first chapter, in the line to see the Lord of Coin. And we get a very clear picture of what that building is like, and what the street is like, and the people around her; and that also, kind of helps to fill out the world, but it's still a very contained space. So, how did you--

Can you talk a little bit about these different contained spaces, and how you used-- Almost like these little micro environments become almost like supporting characters, like how did you build out those micro moments?

**RM:** Setting does kind of become a character sometimes. I like that, that's a good way of putting it because it just influences, you know, how the reader is seeing the world. When you have, you know, you can have characters who are experiencing something a certain way, or you can have characters who encounter a setting; and that setting represents something about the world, if that makes sense.



So, in that scene, for example, Sophie doesn't meet the Lord of Coin in the scene. That's something that kind of happens off-screen, but just by seeing that space, I think you kind of, as a reader, understand a little bit about what that office and what that person are probably like, because have very little regard for the common people who are waiting in line; they're kind of shoved around like cattle.

You have kind of a cold drafty sort of feeling to it which is pretty accurate. You're talking about an old stone building anyway, but it kind of works in that spot. So, I think at that point, it is kind of standing in in some way; so even if you don't talk to this person, by seeing the space, you know what he kind of represents and what this office kind of represents in terms of its influence on the common people. I think that a good counterpoint to that might be Lady Viola's salon--

**GP:** I was just thinking that.

**RM:** -which is a very, you know, rich, layered-space, very upper-class, obviously, but also more welcoming and more interested in ideas. And in my mind, it's sort of like almost cluttered with all of the kind of things that this woman has collected to think about and to spark conversation; and just kind of colorful and light and lots of people moving around and talking.

And that's kind of representing another way of even thinking about interaction with a political system and interaction with common people that you have this Lord of Coin's office, which is cold and distant and closed off. And then you have this salon that is open and starting to kind of poke at different ideas and ask questions, and open its doors in ways that with the Lord of Coin's doors literally shut.

**GP:** You know what else jumped into my mind as you were talking about that too, is like with the Lord of Coin moment, we never see the characters. So, like, in our minds, that space becomes almost, like you said, representative of, 'what that interaction must be like and what that relationship must be like, what that person is like'. But what's interesting with Lady Viola is that we get a feeling for her personality when Sophie is first walking into the salon.

But then when we actually meet Lady Viola, she's a little bit different. There is like a slight, I wouldn't say disconnect, but like a nuance thing that happens when we meet the person versus the space. And that, to me, was also really interesting because it kind of lends a richness to the character that like, the space makes us think one thing; and then we meet the character and we're like, 'oh, she's got, there's a little more to her than that'. So, I thought that was really cool.

**RM:** Yeah. I think that-- We curate our spaces and we curate our presentations, but often the way that we actually are, as people, are what our actual fears and motivations are, can be more complex. I think that it can be kind of fun to play with that line in fiction a little bit. And, in some ways probably accelerate how quickly you get to see those differences, right?

Because often, you know, we see the curated presentation of someone for a very long time before we actually get to see what they're actually like as a person; and fiction, I think each of them have to speed that up a little bit. I think that happens with Lady Viola quite a bit. She's got a reason to want to really break down that barrier.

**GP:** Yeah. It's fascinating to me also that like, because we kind of have this, it sort of plants a seed in our mind of like who she is before we meet her. And so, then as a reader, we have a shift in our expectations, but then Sophie also has a shift in her own expectations. So, it kind of like creates a double layer of nuance because we experience something different as readers, but then Sophie is also kind of grappling with that as well when she meets this woman for the first time.



**RM:** Right. Right. I think that also kind of playing with the ideas of social norms and what are the norms in the society look like, and she's engaging in a argue that is kind of outside her usual comfort zone, that; yeah, she works with wealthy clients, she works with some Nobles, but to be invited to this woman's house is a really a big deal.

So, that was another element for me of building out that world is, how does someone react to engaging with different people? Do you, you know, have the butterflies in the stomach about engaging with the guy who sells oysters on the corner? Probably not, but with this woman, this is a big deal. And so those expectations being a very important part of how she's walking into this and reading a lot of cues because she doesn't want to mess up.

**GP:** So, one of the really interesting things about this series is how it grapples with the role of women, right? And since we're talking about Lady Viola and Sophie, each of them-- I mean, they're both women and they have different roles; and they've had sort of carve out different positions for themselves in the society. So, can you talk a little bit about that, sort of how the gender sort of affects what they can and can't do in this society?

**RM:** Absolutely. And first off, I want to say, I think that it's great when fiction takes, especially fantasy, takes kind of traditional patriarchal societies, and says, "Scrap it. I want to try something completely out different. You know, I want to do something that's not necessarily a complete reflection of the historical places that we've had or reflection of historical places that we haven't explored as much."

But, in this case, I did kind of want to take a, you know, pretty patriarchal norm and say, "Okay, what were women doing? How do women carve out niches for themselves?" I think that that's what kind of draws Viola and Sophie together is that they're both women who are existing in pretty male-dominated spaces, but they've carved out niches for themselves; and they kind of recognize that in each other.

So, for Sophie, it's about creating a business that works, and maintaining that business, and having that kind of economic security that a lot of people in her community don't have. And for Viola, it's kind of crafting out this place of prestige where she is somebody who has influence in terms of the social networking that she's kind of built around herself.

**GP:** Yeah. What I've also thought was interesting with Lady Viola is like, I mean, with Sophie, we get the sense that she had-- It's very obvious from the get-go that she had to work really hard to get where she is. And, she's now achieved a certain level of almost pseudo kind of comfort and position.

But Lady Viola is definitely in sort of the upper-class, upper-echelon. And yet, we still get this feeling like from the moment we meet her, that her position may also be slightly precarious. And so like that kind of feeling-- And so, can you talk a little bit about that? Like, how these two women had to sort of navigate the patriarchal society that they're in.

**RM:** So yeah, I think that for Lady Viola, obviously, she's in a situation where she's resisting getting married. She doesn't want to go down that road because she recognizes that that means letting go of some of her autonomy. But it also means that she is the subject of a lot of gossip and a lot of kind of like malicious rumors, and things like that.

So, when she's kind of built her standing on being somebody who has this social group around her, and that then is her influence and her kind of agency to many of sense. That's kind of a threat on that when she's kind of grappling with rumors and gossip, and that actually comes up quite a bit in Fray. In Book Two, we focus a little bit more about the nature of gossip and rumors on social status, and what that means for someone like Viola.



For Sophie, I kind of made it even more obvious in terms of what the threat of a patriarchal society and marriage, in particular, is on her; and that in many 18th century and other time period cultures, you have laws of coverture, which means that if a woman gets married, her property transfers to her husband.

And though you have some exceptions to this, and there are even quite a few spaces where they would basically have Prenups that would say, “No, you get to keep your stuff”; the norm was still that you would transfer your property into her. That’s the worst situation possible. She built a business; she has this agency, you know, within her life because she has a business. And so to sign that over is something that she is just not willing to do, which is how she ends up being in her late 20s, not all interested in getting married.

**GP:** So, let’s shift gears a little bit and talk about the role of fantasy in this book, because it’s very subtle. Like, when I first, you know-- When I was looking at this book and the, ‘okay, we’re going to be talking about fantasy’; I kind of thought orcs and elves and that-- I wasn’t-- I was not, like not fully expecting that, but I was kind of like, ‘oh, okay, it’s going to be very obvious fantasy’; this is more subtle than that.

She, Sophie is a charm-caster and she weaves those charms into the clothes that she, I guess, sows and stitches, but it’s not like, you know, she’s not pulling out a wand, and going Expelliarmus, or whatever. So, the question here is, how does the magic work, how did you decide the rules of this magic in your particular world?

**RM:** So, I think that there’s kind of a line between the hard rules of, you know, how does this physically work; like if I were to break down the physics, how would it work, versus what is the perception of the magic by people? And, for me, the second was kind of more important in developing the story because I wanted to play with the idea of a magical system that was not the most powerful thing in the world that it occupied, that it’s kind of a kitchen trade.

It’s something that women pass on to their children. It’s something that has some influence, but isn’t necessarily the most powerful thing that you can employ. It’s a good luck charm that actually works. And, as Sophie kind of finds out too, it’s, you know, a bad luck charm that actually works.

So, it’s, you know, you can’t proof there’s something that appears or even really, you know, cast a spell that’s going to necessarily do exactly what you want it to do. It’s much more subtle than that. One of the reasons I wanted to play with that idea is that, you know, I can think about if you have magic, that is the most powerful thing that you can imagine. Well, that means that the ruling class is all over it.

I really wanted to play with the story of someone who was apart from that class, that area of influence, someone who was just kind of trying to make it on her own in her little storefront, just because I’m so interested in, you know, what are ordinary people doing in extraordinary circumstances?

So, I really kind of started with that, not necessarily academic grand rules, but how does Sophie understand how her magic works? How do people around her understand how her magic works? One of the important, kind of, points in the story is that not everyone even believes in it. It’s kind of a folk superstition that her ethnic group believes in. But a lot of the people that she interacts with on a daily basis don’t believe in it.

**GP:** I mean, even some of the people who buy her charmed things are sort of not 100% sold that they are charms.



**RM:** Right. It's kind of like; this is an interesting novelty item, maybe. [laughs]

**GP:** Exactly. So, that's really fascinating to me, this idea of like the role that magic can play in different types of fantasy. So, we talked about, sort of, the like almost physical scientific side of magic; and here you're talking sort of--

And, that would be like, you know, spells and charms and like, how that actually function versus what you've been talking about, which is sort of the role it plays in society. I think there-- What are some other ways that you think writers can play with magic if they're building a fantasy world? Like, what are some of the other options that writers have at their disposal?

**RM:** I mean, I think that, like you mentioned, thinking about, you know, what are the societal implications, what are the economic implications? What are the limits on this? Are those limits set naturally, or are they set artificially? This obviously wasn't something that I had to play with very much yet anyway, in this story arc, because the limits are very naturally set low.

But when you have magic that can do almost anything; well, how do you prevent that magic from doing anything; or does it just do anything and those are the people who are in charge of your society? And thinking about, how does magic and the people who utilize magic work into the ruling and governing systems of a society.

I think that they're often very much linked; and if they aren't linked why are they not linked; is I think really important to think about. I think also just in terms of, what have people historically believed about magic can be a really interesting place to poke around and kind of see, you know, what are some ideas one can get for how a magical system could work? I totally admit; I kind of shamelessly lifted the idea of curse and charm tablets from Ancient Roman religion.

They would practice this goofy thing where they would, and it wasn't goofy to them. Obviously, they believed, used to believe this would work if they would inscribe a clay tablet with a curse or a charm; and then keep it or bury it or whatever. And it's kind of interesting; one of the most common things that they've seen to have done this for the archeologists to find is for horse races.

Like, you know, putting a curse on the green team that they're going to lose, and the horse it's next week. So, obviously, this is not something that took over the Roman Empire and their wielding, you know, powerful curse and charm magic. It was something that people were kind of doing in their backyards; and maybe they, you know, perceived some benefit from it. But certainly, didn't have a, you know, impact, I guess, that we know of.

**GP:** I'm just having visions right now of people like, you know, taking their little charmed tablets to Vegas or something like, it's just--

**RM:** Right. [laughs]

**GP:** -that could be like the modern application. You know, as you were talking, I was also thinking about, you know, what you said with when magic is sort of mainstream and it's dominated by the ruling class; it creates certain inherent problems, right?

Like, I'm thinking, for instance, of like Harry Potter world type of magic, where, clearly, there's like a magical government; and there's like a magical society, but then it starts to raise questions, right? If magic is so powerful, why is it that the Weasley family is super poor when they have all those wizards living under one roof?





**RM:** Right. [laughs]

**GP:** Like, can't they just, poof, make some gold appear; like, why? And so, I think that's also something that sometimes when people sort of make the magic; and obviously, like, we all-- I love Harry Potter.

I'm willing to suspend my disbelief on some of those things, but there's that part where as a writer, as we're crafting our magical worlds, the pitfalls, like, what do we need to be aware of and thinking about so that we don't write ourselves into a corner. So, do you have any advice about that? Like, what to sort of watch out for, as you're crafting the magic of a story?

**RM:** I think one thing is to always kind of ask the questions about what would happen if someone who was blank had control of this. So, I think we often craft systems thinking, 'well, you know, this is how it works if someone who's good has it'.

But then we think, 'okay, you know, well, what would happen to someone who was greedy, or someone who was very ambitious? What would happen to someone who was just really flighty or someone who you know, was very forgetful, had a hold of this kind of power? You know, what are the kinds of things that spiral out of that?'

I think that playing just a little bit of the What-If games can kind of reveal the pitfalls in whatever scenario you're kind of developing. That if you have magic working this way, well, if it doesn't have any kind of limit capped on it, either naturally or artificially, you know, someone who is very forgetful could put it on a shelf; and it would eventually blow up the world.

Okay, I can't do that. I need to figure out how to say that this is going to go down that road. And I think also thinking about, you know, if you have people who have magic versus people who do not have magic, how do they interact? Because I think that, you know, kind of the ugly truth about people is that when one group of people has something that gives them an advantage over other people, the results are often not great.

So, if you're not writing a story, that's the point that the people who have this advantage, you know, are subjugating the people who don't; why, what is preventing that from happening? And, thinking about balance, in that way, how do you keep a world that stays balanced or very deliberately build a world that is not balanced? And, you know, that can work too, but I think can be worth, that's what I'm doing.

**GP:** Yeah. As you were talking about that, I was thinking, for instance, it's not really magic, I guess, but like superheroes, like the X-Men, where the fact that they have these powers is actually a problem; so they have to hide them. And so then that creates a scenario where, yes, they're super powerful, but they're also sort of on lockdown.

And so that kind of creates a scenario where the people who don't have the power, actually the magic or whatever, have, are in power in control; and that's where the conflict comes in. And again, also, with, I think, Harry Potter style magic, where like they have to keep it hidden from the muggles and all of that, kind of keeps it so that it's in control; and it's not just, you know, gangbusters all over the place.

**RM:** Right. You know, one series I think that does this real well is Melissa Caruso's Tethered Mage, in which the people who are the ruling class, literally tether the people who have magic. They have control over those people's magic by kind of having a system that's, they call them Falcons and falconers.



I think it's just such a great way of recognizing, you know, nobody wants to risk the person with magic controlling the weather and destroying all their crops, because they're angry; or the person who has fire magic burning down the city, because they got mad.

And also, you know, that side of, if you find advantage, you know, historically, we're not very nice to each other. A lot of times we wanted to find advantages, and have them for ourselves and use them to protect or advance whatever we want to do. And so thinking about that potential for exploitation, I think is important.

**GP:** Absolutely. So, we've talked about our sort of two prominent female characters. We've talked about how magic and the worlds-building works. We also have this backdrop of the impending revolution; and Sophie's brother Kristos, who's kind of heavily involved in that. Can you talk a little bit about how the political climate intertwines with the world-building and the magic of your world?

**RM:** I mean, politics is always going to be part of any world that you build. I think that if it's not a part that's at the forefront that means that either you're in a really lucky situation [laughs] in your fictional world, or the people that you're writing about are very lucky and they're benefiting from that system in ways that allow them to be able to ignore the system around them.

Kristos is in a situation where he cannot ignore the situation around it because it is very unfair to him; and to many, many, many people like him. So, I based it somewhat loosely on the system in France prior to the revolution, which was that you have Nobles who are kind of owning everything, and then you a very large working-class, and the concept of day laborers who don't have permanent employment and they're kind of you know, every day on the hook for, 'am I going to have a job?'

And, in the city that means, 'am I going to sign on to a crew building a building, or am I going to find work loading a ship down at the docks?' And, in more agrarian areas, you know, 'am I going to find a job threshing wheat or planting the winter rye or whatever?' But it's very uncertain and everything is kind of hinging on, 'what are Nobles going to do for me? What are people who have influence and how are going to do for me?'

And so you have this group of people who set up with that. They don't like not having any agency understandably, and Sophie is in kind of a weird position in that she has found a way out of this, very restrictive and lack of agency position. But even that is controlled by a lot of very, you know, restrictive laws that prevent common people from getting too much power, money, agency.

So, it's a really unfair and unjust kind of stratification that from the point of view of Kristos, it's not something that he can ignore. So, he's talking about it a lot; whereas to Sophie, she's in a position that she has a lot to lose. And, that was important for me to kind of remember that in almost any situation of major change or upheaval even when the end-result is something that seems very ideal, a lot of people have a lot that they might not be willing to risk losing.

One thing that kind of popped out, you know, in my head when I was kind of crafting Sophie in her position is that many academics will gauge that during the American revolution, you have about one-third the population loyalists, they don't want anything to change. One-third is patriots that want to further revolution.

And, one-third is pretty neutral or it keeps changing their alliance depending on who is in power and what is going to be the least risky position to take. I kind of wanted to think about those people and say, you know, what was it not necessarily that was preventing them? Like not that they're just coed



or they don't want to do anything, but what was so important in their lives that they didn't want to risk something.

I think that that kind of balance of, you know, you have political situations that are, you know, world-shattering in some ways and can affect the outcomes of nations, but then people also have personal situations that mean a lot to them; and balancing those kind of two things in terms of thinking about politics in a world.

**GP:** You know, as you were talking, particularly when you were talking about sort of like how politics is everywhere, even when it's not obviously in the story; it made me think of novels by Jane Austen, which there's a reason there's a militia in *Pride and Prejudice* in the town next to where, you know, Lizzie and her sisters are living because they're at war. It's just that we never actually see the war. We're not at the battlefield.

We're kind of seeing the militia as they're, I guess, in their rest time or whatever, but there's still like that undercurrent, that there's stuff going on in the greater world. So, like, I guess, as you were talking, it's-- You can weave the politics. Like, it's possible to weave the politics into a story without the story being inherently political and about the politics. I thought that was also really interesting because the politics can influence the story in ways that aren't obviously political.

**RM:** Yeah, absolutely. I think that, you know, something that we kind of, I think are talking about more in the publishing community and in the writing community is whether or not you choose to include politics in a story that you're writing that, you know, there's no such thing as a book that's completely apolitical.

If you address something, obviously, there are political implications, but if you accept all the status quos and all of the norms, that's a political statement too. I think that kind of recognizing that there's, you know, an inherent political nature to creating any kind of art. Not that that means that that's the only element of art or the only thing that's going on or that you have to do something, you know, overtly political in your work, but that it's there.

And kind of, you know, thinking again about, you know, the characters who are in this story, that they're each approaching politics from their own perspective; and each of them really thinks that they're right. And so the defenses that they make are very earnest, and very honest, and often very idealistic. And that it's kind of like this--

It was important to me that, you know, I was crafting characters who really believed in what they thought and were going to defend what they thought in ways that made sense to them. I think that kind of connecting that back to; they're always going to be political situations in any story.

And, you know, if your characters are thinking about them, that means that they have a stake in them. And if they're not thinking about them, that's also political; that they're not thinking about them, they have that privilege that they don't have to.

**GP:** That is such a great point. So, *Torn* is the first book in the series. *Fray* is come coming out soon. Can you tell us like, what's next? What can we look forward to with the series?

**RM:** So, there is a Book Three as well in the series, and that's what I am working on now. So, Book One really is focusing on this revolution and really focusing on the city itself. And, Book Two, I don't think it's any spoilers to say that it doesn't matter if a revolution fails or succeeds; that's not the end



of the story, that there's more to come after that, in terms of, 'where do you go from there? How do you-- You know, what happens now?'

You know, everyone wants to talk with the revolution. Nobody wants to, you know, sit around and draft all the new laws, whatever, or the opposite. Nobody wants to think about what happens in the face of the field revolution.

So, Book Two kind of starts to tackle those things, and how you move forward; and also moving out and starting to think about the politics and the social situations in one country are not contained in the effect the world around them; so, actually getting outside of Galitha a little bit. And in terms of world-building, kind of getting to introduce some new things through Sophie's eyes as she experiences new places and situations and people,

**GP:** You know, it's fascinating also what you said about how, like, nobody really talks about what happens after the revolution. It reminded me of an episode in one of the True Detective series, where there's like this massive shootout. And then there's this moment afterwards where the characters are all sort of looking at each other and going, "What have we done?"

And, to me, that was like one of the epic moments of the series, because it shows the fallout after; and like whether they had won or lost that mini battle, didn't really matter. It was sort of that recognition of just like; 'now we have to clean this up, oh no'. And so I thought that was really, that's really fascinating too, that like the story doesn't end with the revolution. And, I love that you're tackling the fallout afterwards, whether it wins or loses.

**RM:** Right. And also that, you know, thinking historically, you know, most revolutions are not one-and-done, we're in kind of an odd situation in America that I think that we look back at our own revolution and think like, 'yeah, we had this war'; but even that's not quite accurate because we left a lot of things unanswered that we came back about.

And, you think about France, which, you know, had a revolution; and then swung back the other way, and then had another revolution and swung back the other way. So, you know, that these situations are not closed chapters in a book; that it's all kind of part of the history that keeps evolving and changing. And, you're directing what's happening in the next scene, but that next scene is going to happen.

**GP:** Absolutely. So, I always like to end with the same question. What is your number one tip for writers?

**RM:** I would say that there is no wrong way of writing. And especially from my perspective, I'm a mom of two; one is six, and one is one. They're very, very busy; and they keep me very, very busy. So, a lot of advice will focus around, you know, like you need to write, have a schedule or write every day or you need to do these things. And, I think just kind of cutting yourself a little bit of slack in terms of, 'yes, it's important to manage your time; and yet, it's important to make writing a priority', but life intervenes a lot. [laughs]

**GP:** Yeah.

**RM:** It is okay as a writer that as long as you're still writing, you're still a writer, there's no wrong way to do it. That, and if you do have small children and can invest in getting a babysitter once in a while to just go write and not get interrupted; do that, because it's priceless

**GP:** As a fellow mom, I concur 100%. Oh my gosh, totally.



[laughter]

**GP:** Well, it's been such a blast chatting with you today, Rowenna, thank you so much for being on the show.

**RM:** Thank you so much for having me.

**GP:** All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

