

Foundation is published three times a year by the Science Fiction Foundation (Registered Charity no. 1041052). It is typeset and printed by The Lavenham Press Ltd., 47 Water Street, Lavenham, Suffolk, CO10 9RD.

Foundation is a peer-reviewed journal
Subscription rates for 2019

Individuals (three numbers)	
United Kingdom	£23.00
Europe (inc. Eire)	£25.00
Rest of the world	£29.00 / \$44.00 (U.S.A.)
Student discount	£15.00 / \$23.00 (U.S.A.)
Institutions (three numbers)	
Anywhere	£47.00 / \$77.00 (U.S.A.)
Airmail surcharge	£8.00 / \$13.00 (U.S.A.)

Single issues of *Foundation* can also be bought for £8.00 / \$13.00 (U.S.A.).

All cheques should be made payable to **The Science Fiction Foundation**. All subscriptions are for one calendar year; please specify year of commencement.

Address for subscriptions/back copies:

The Science Fiction Foundation, c/o 75 Rosslyn Avenue, Harold Wood, Essex, RM3 0RG, UK.

Email: Roger Robinson at sff@beacon.org. All messages should include 'SFF' in the subject line.

Editorial address (for submissions, correspondence, advertising):

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Articles should be approx. 6000 words in length, double-spaced and written in accordance with the style sheet available at the SF Foundation website (www.sff-foundation.org).

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ISSN 0306-4964/258

Foundation

The International Review of Science Fiction

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A Practical Application of Critical World-Building

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Every work of fiction is set in a fictional world. While seemingly pointing out the obvious, this statement explains the most fundamental aspect of critical world-building. Some of those fictional worlds may differ just a little from the actual world in which we (authors, readers, critics) live, offering an illusion of identity between actual and fictional. In other worlds, the differences are more substantial with the introduction of amazing technology, mysterious intelligence agencies or magical beings. Fictional worlds have to be built, constructed by their creators and recreated in the minds of their audiences. And in order to critically analyze a fictional world, whether it is presented in a text, a film, a game, or any other medium or combination of media, scholars also need to assemble the world from its various elements. We have previously referred to this activity as 'critical world-building', and the aim of this article is to demonstrate how a work can be read critically by building, analyzing and interpreting its world.

In our article, 'Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building' (2016), we suggest that how worlds are built depends upon a person's purpose: that a producer of a fictional world builds it in a different way than the audience of that world, and that when readers relate critically to a world and the stories set therein, their world-building differs again. We suggest that one such difference is the constant relating of a world's details to its entirety and how the world is situated in relation to a wider generic and theoretical context (see also Taylor 2017). Another aspect of critical world-building is to use the *world-architecture* as a starting point, for example, by analyzing and relating the map of a fictional world to the text of the novel (Ekman 2018a; Ekman 2018b).

In this instance, our sample case, the alternate history 'Biographical Notes to "A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, with Airplanes"' by Benjamin Rosenbaum' by Benjamin Rosenbaum (2004), has been selected as much for the extensive world-building it encourages as for its short format and online availability. It is set in a world in which the east has colonized the west through an understanding of the 'Brahmanic field' and of causalities other than linear cause and effect. The first-person narrator is an author who works on a 'shadow history' (alternate history) about a world in which the only existing form of causality is linear. Finding himself involved in the assassination attempt of a colonial prince, he tries to employ only linear causality to understand the seemingly unrelated events that unfold. The narrator's pen name is Benjamin Rosenbaum, the same name he gives his fictitious counterpart in his shadow-history world. Thus, the reader seems to be caught between two worlds, each

containing the writer Benjamin Rosenbaum, each a fiction in the other.

Before demonstrating how the fictional world in Rosenbaum's story can be read through critical world-building, and what insights can be gained from that, we will clarify our critical terminology. After that, we will approach Rosenbaum's world from three directions. First, we will analyze the relationship between the worlds of the text, then we will build the world from a close-reading of the first sentence of the text, and finally we will interpret the world as it is built from elements connected to the two women in the story.

Worlds and World-Building: Some Background

The central concept in any discussion about world-building is the idea of a world as a fictional creation.¹ Our understanding of what a fictional world is derives from Marie-Laure Ryan's description of such a world as a 'connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members' (Ryan 2001: 91). She goes on to explain that

the text is apprehended as a window on something that exists outside language and extends in time and space well beyond the window frame. To speak of a textual world means to draw a distinction between a realm of language, made of names, definite descriptions, sentences, and propositions, and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts, and states of affairs serving as referents to the linguistic expressions. (91)

The world in a text is something understood to extend beyond the 'window' afforded by that text. The window only allows certain elements to be viewed, but there is generally an assumption that there is more to the world than what is visible, just as in the actual world a window affords a glimpse into a wider world, with the assumption that there is more world than can be seen. This assumption is an illusion, but, as Thomas Pavel puts it, the worlds 'neatly hide their deep fractures, and our language, our texts, appear for a while to be transparent media unproblematically leading to worlds' (Pavel 1986: 73). Through any medium or collection of media, all we have access to is an 'always-incomplete image' (Ryan 2001: 91) of the fictional world. This 'always-incomplete image' is constituted by a number of parts or, our preferred term, *elements*, the building blocks of the world. The act of world-building is the combining of elements into a whole through deduction, inference, and interpretation. Such combining must be done with the recognition that worlds are built through webs of connections and interrelations between elements, but also that there will be blanks in the world where there is information missing.

In the process of building the world of Rosenbaum's story, we realized that the different kinds of worlds in the text, and the relationships between them, required us to make some distinctions between various kinds of worlds. We have already used the term 'actual world' for the world inhabited by the reader and writer (in keeping with Pavel 1986 and Dolžal 1998) – that is to say, our world. To simplify the discussion, two more terms will be necessary: 'primary world' and 'secondary world.' These terms have been used with slightly different meanings in fantasy scholarship over the years, but here we will only use them to refer to fictional worlds (cf. Ekman 2013: 9–11). The primary world is a fictional version of the actual world, with only minimal differences, a 'simulacrum' of the actual world (Stableford 2004: 6). A secondary world differs from the actual world on a macroscopic level: geography, history, even laws of nature may differ. Mark Wolf rejects the notion of a primary/secondary world opposition, arguing that a fictional world's 'secondariness is a matter of degree' (Wolf 2012: 27). Even though a binary distinction between worlds would be practical, fictional worlds end up somewhere between the poles of 'almost identical' and 'in no way similar' to the actual world. Indeed, as the building of Rosenbaum's fictional world demonstrates, a world's 'secondariness' can be more complex than just a matter of degree: it can be a nesting of worlds within worlds, relating to each other in various ways.

The differences and similarities between the fictional and actual worlds can exist on several levels and be of several kinds. A primary world 'imitates, on a general level if not in every detail, the actual world' (Ekman 2013: 10). In his description of how the fictional world of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865–9) departs from the actual world, Wolf explains that the characters and places are invented 'in a way that disrupts the continuity of [the actual world] as little as possible' (Wolf 2012: 27). His degrees of secondariness create a spectrum of worlds ranging from this minimal departure from the actual world to secondary worlds that are different from the actual world in a wide variety of ways. The more similar the fictional and actual world are, the easier it is to build the world by extending it from the narrator's observations or other descriptions of the world. Whereas Kendall Walton describes such extensions of a fictional world as 'clutter' fit to be ignored (Walton 1990: 148), Brian Attebery sees this property of extension as something useful to story-telling, explaining that 'if the story mentions London, we can assume Paris':

We can fill in Tower Bridge and the dome of St Paul's, whether or not they are invoked specifically. We can supply Henry VIII and Victoria, Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf. Even the least well-read can provide traffic and parks and shops and cinemas to fill in the background of what the narrator actually chooses to notice. Ultimately

the world of the story extends in an unbroken path to the reader's own doorstep. Thus the reader does a lot of the hard work of bringing a story to life. (Attebery 1992: 131)

In fantastic discourse, making assumptions about the world is more complicated, but the property of extension can still apply. If the fantastic elements are constructed as surprises, aberrations, revelations or other deviations from an otherwise primary world, readers are meant to extend the world all the way home unless explicitly told not to. They are invited to reconsider the world as a fantastic place, and still provide some of the 'hard work' of bringing the world to life. Attebery does not differentiate between 'story' and 'world' here, and for a fictional world constructed for, or along with, a story, this makes little difference. We prefer to shift the focus to bringing the *world* to life, as there are also worlds built mainly to provide *potential* for stories (such as a world for a role-playing game). It should also be noted that like Walton, Attebery's focus is on readerly world-building. However, critical world-building can also make use of the property of extension in the construction of the fictional world, for filling in blanks, adding background, and providing (assumed) details. Thus, the property of extension is akin to extrapolation: it allows for a certain amount of taking for granted and provides a sense of predictability. By determining how the fictional world is dissimilar to the actual world, and where differences can be expected, it is possible to build parts of the world from its similarities to the actual world. However, in critical world-building, a scholar must keep apart material provided in the description of the world from assumptions made by extending that material.

The term 'world-building' itself has come to acquire several related meanings over time, making it somewhat vague, slippery and in need of clarification. In his *Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1986), Gary Wolfe includes two predecessors to the term, 'world-making' and 'planet-building' (Wolfe 1986: 140; 90); the former describing the creation of fantasy worlds, the latter the techniques employed to create imaginary worlds of hard science fiction. Today, world-building is applied as a term across genres and media, including the worlds of literature, film, television and games (as exemplified by, for instance, Wolf 2012). It is also a term that has been used to describe the creation of a fictional world from a number of perspectives. Unfortunately, such broad application makes critical discourse on the subject confusing and imprecise. While the transmedial and transgeneric usage can provide interesting insights into the processes involved, precision in scholarship on world-building can be facilitated by a clearer use of terminology.

Fictional worlds are built in different ways for different purposes (Ekman and Taylor 2016). Examples include *authorial* world-building, which covers the

activity of creating the world from scratch, as it were, by assembling it from various elements in order to accommodate a particular narrative, suit a type of game play, or reflect a certain ideology, for instance. The plethora of books, articles, and online sources that offer advice on, or guidelines to, world-building almost exclusively adopt an authorial world-building perspective. *Readerly* world-building includes the cognitive and philosophical processes involved in taking the visual, textual, auditory, or other descriptions of a fictional world and turning them into a mental object with an ontological presence of its own. A largely readerly perspective on fiction, including world-building, is Walton's *Mimesis* as *Make-Believe* (1990). The concept of the *storyworld*, 'a jointly narratological and linguistic approach to stories construed as strategies for building mental models of the world' (Herman 2002: 2), is often used in world-building discussions that we would characterize as readerly in their approach. Related to readerly world-building is what we tentatively call *aggregate* world-building, the compiling and structuring of details about a fictional world often found in several works, narratives, and/or media. For aficionados of long book series or transmedial franchises, assembling masses of details into a fictional world can turn into a communal activity carried out in, for instance, online encyclopaedias ('wikis'). The aggregate world-building activities are prominent in much of Wolfe's discussions. Each of these examples assumes a particular perspective on the construction of the world, and each is a worthwhile object of study. Our own interests lie in what we call *critical world-building*, the examination, analysis, and interpretation of the interplay between a world's elements and its entirety, as well as between the world and its generic and other intertexts, and a critical and theoretical context (Ekman 2018a; Ekman and Taylor 2016; Taylor 2017: 21–8).

These various kinds of world-building offer different approaches to how an imaginary world can be built, and the preceding list is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. There may be other kinds of world-building, and any single individual may engage in more than one kind of world-building activity. However, our four kinds of world-building allow us to separate, for instance, what an author does (or does not do) when they put together a world for their story, what a reader does when they (re)construct that world in their minds, and how fans structure a host of minute details into a world spanning several narratives and media. Not least, they allow us to discuss the aspect of world-building that most fascinates us: the world-building that scholars engage in when they put a world together in order to analyze it critically. Critical world-building is not intended as another way to approach the story in a work: it is an analysis and interpretation of the fictional world as artistic creation. World and story might be hard, even impossible, to disentangle in narrative media, while other media (role playing

games and visual representations, for instance), may contain no explicit stories, only the potential for them.

In the following three sections, we will use critical world-building to approach the world of Rosenbaum's short story from three different angles, examining the relation of worlds within his world, taking a close look at what the first sentence of the text can tell us, and interpreting the word we can build from elements related to the two women that feature in the story.

Relating One World to Another

That relationships between worlds are central to Rosenbaum's text is signalled already by the title. It is all too easy to see the text (only) as metafiction, and read the fictional world as a distorted and self-conscious mirror image of the world of the reader. In fact, the worlds in this text are structured rather as a set of Russian matryoshka dolls than as one world as the other's mirror. These dolls become clear when we read the title from the outside in. The actual world, in which the dolls stand and the text exists, is signified by the final 'by Benjamin Rosenbaum.' This is a reference to the historical author of the text, and to the world in which he and his readers lead their lives. Moving inside the outermost set of quotation marks, we have 'Biographical Notes [...] by Benjamin Rosenbaum.' This is the largest doll, the fictional world in which the story is set. It contains another Benjamin Rosenbaum, the protagonist of the fictional story (for all that his fictionality is called into question by the text being called 'biographical notes' rather than fiction). His world is a secondary world, different from the actual world in several major ways, including the nature of causality, technological development and advances, and social and political history. The fictional Benjamin Rosenbaum is also a writer, and his fictional creation is located within the innermost set of quotation marks: 'A Discourse on the Nature of Causality, with Airplanes.' This is not so much a story within a story as a world within a world, a smaller doll nesting within the larger one. It is deceptively similar to the actual world, but is a fictional world nonetheless: from what little we can determine, however, it may be a primary world. There is even a hint that the *mise en abyme* that is indicated by the possible mirroring of actual world and world-within-world may be repeated with two other worlds. Inside the fictional world within the fictional world is another world, an even smaller doll not detectable in the title but hinted at in the text: 'Perhaps he was writing my story, as I wrote his [...] In that case, we both of us lived in a world designed, a world of story, full of meaning' (Rosenbaum 2004: 325). The suggestion is that the fictional authors write each other, each creating the other's world, each placing it inside the other's creation. That suggestion is turned to speculation and wishful thinking by the pregnant 'perhaps': what remains is one fictional

world nested inside another.²

A first step in a critical world-building venture could be to determine how many fictional worlds are actually present, and how they relate to each other. In Rosenbaum's story, one fictional world is nested within another, possible to access only as a fictional object inside a fictional object. The narrator's attempt to think after the fashion of his invented world, to subject himself to its constraints, allows him to understand the events of his own world. But nested fictional worlds can have more direct bearing on the text. A nested fictional world can intensify the atmosphere of the world in which they are inserted, as is the case in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' graphic novel, *Watchmen* (1987). The sense of doom pervading the world of a nested graphic novel adds to the grim mood of the *Watchmen* world and story. Connections between fictional worlds and the fictional worlds nested within them are not uncommon in speculative fiction, with communication or even travelling between the nested worlds possible. In Michael Ende's *Die unendliche Geschichte* (*The Neverending Story*) (1979), the reader, Bastian, communicates with the nested fictional world of Fantastica and later finds himself in it. In Kelly Link's 'Magic for Beginners' (2005), a narrator tells the narratee about a television show in which the characters are fans of a fantasy television show of the same name. Communication seems to occur across the boundaries of these fictional worlds, and generic identity becomes fluid as the fictional worlds are not just juxtaposed but nested. These examples illustrate how nested worlds can be central elements in critical world-building, and that nested worlds are not all nested in the same way. Taking the world relations and their individual effects on the reading into account is central in interpreting the worlds.

Rosenbaum's text constructs a particular relationship between its fictional worlds but, through the way it engages with the alternate history form, it also draws on a particular relationship between the actual and fictional worlds. A 'true' alternate history is, according to Edgar Chapman, 'a story, or perhaps a scenario, where the actual history of our earth is accepted and assumed to be true, until a particular event has occurred which produces a different result from the history we know' (Chapman 2003: 5). In terms of world-building, this means that up to that branching point, the world of the text can be assumed to be – indeed, is meant to be – identical to the actual world. Natural laws, geographical space, past events, historical individuals are assumed to be the same for our world and the fictive one, up until the branching. Depending on the nature and timing of the 'particular event', some or all of these may change after that event, and the fictive ('alternate') world then departs from its actual original. Both the common past before the branching and the developments following upon it are dominant parts of how the fictive world is built. The various

differences, parallels and similarities offer means to make inferences about the fictional world, but they also emphasize its central features. Such emphasis is common in Rosenbaum's world, with the first sentence (examined in the next section) drawing attention not only to the alternative view on science fiction and feminism but to a world with differences in political power and its own gender issues.

The World is in the Details

An important part of critical world-building is close reading of world elements and the construction of a world from what can be inferred and deduced from the details revealed by such readings. Many world elements are possible to analyze in terms of how they relate to, or are coded references to, elements in the actual world. The first sentence of Rosenbaum's text demonstrates how details provide information about the world:

On my return from PlausFab-Wisconsin (a delightful festival of art and inquiry, which styles itself 'the World's Only Gynarchist Plausible-Fable Assembly') aboard the *P.R.G.B. Sri George Bernard Shaw*, I happened to share a compartment with Prem Ramasson, Raja of Outermost Thule, and his consort, a dour but beautiful woman whose name I did not know. (Rosenbaum 2004: 299)

'PlausFab-Wisconsin' is a parallel to our world's WisCon, a feminist ('gynarchist') science fiction ('plausible-fable') convention in Wisconsin. Even though the reference is coded, it demonstrates how close the two worlds – the actual and the fictive – are: not only do both possess a similar genre of fiction (science fiction/plausible fabulation) and have a meeting for its readers and writers, they have also developed an ideology centred around the power-relationship between men and women, although the construction of the word 'gynarchist', by forming it with the Greek roots *gynē* (woman) and *archē* (rule), foregrounds power more strongly than does the Latin-derived 'feminism'. The need for gynarchism also suggests a patriarchal social structure. Through the name of the vessel, *P.R.G.B. Sri George Bernard Shaw*, the Irish playwright's importance can be inferred (in some unspecified way),³ while the Sanskrit honorific *Śri* shows how the dominant culture is not European but of the Indian subcontinent. This dominance is further emphasized by other words of Sanskrit origin: the title Raja (king) and the names Prem and Rama (in Ramasson). These names also bring to the fore cultural intermingling, first visible in *Śri Shaw*: India may be dominant but Shaw – a European but also a former colonial subject – is influential enough to have a vessel named after him. The Raja of Outermost Thule – presumably areas around Iceland, Greenland, perhaps Scandinavia

– has a patronymic surname created in the traditional fashion of Scandinavian languages, still the norm on actual-world Iceland today (the father's name in the genitive followed by 'son'). The colonial attitude that is presented is juxtaposed with cultural intermingling, by imposing honorifics on a subjugated culture but also by adopting their naming norms.

As these first lines of the short story demonstrate, the relationship between the fictional and actual world is key in critical world-building. Already the details given in the first sentence begin to define the world culturally. Its patriarchal, colonial society suggests an inversion of actual-world colonialism: India has established European colonies and mixed Indian and European culture, even to the point of naming conventions. Differences between the actual and fictional world are foregrounded but similarities are also included. Words and names make clear that although there are differences, this is a world which contains men and women, art and Rajas, feminism and science fiction, Wisconsin and George Bernard Shaw.

The interplay of elements is vital, explaining not only how the fictive world is constructed but also how it differs from the actual world, thus underscoring what is of importance to the story and the fictive world as whole. Each piece reflects back on the other, enabling more meaning for the piece as a whole, as well as its world. We have chosen to call this 'dynamic interplay' because of how elements change the interpretation of each other. Analyzing the dynamic interplay of a world requires the probing of world elements to see what they say about the world as a whole and, crucially, how each part impacts the other (Taylor 2017: 23). Our broader discussion below takes into account the individual elements of the story, but also how they combine with others, and what this says critically about the world as a whole.

Two Women in a World of Men

Thematic readings of texts are not new and it is possible to allow thematic contexts to guide what elements are included in critical world-building, and what theoretical lenses are employed in interpreting the world. As discussed elsewhere (Taylor 2017: 21–22), the combination of many different elements leads to fruitful critical world-building. The dynamic interplay between characters and their interactions, nature and technology, political systems and social structures, manners and customs can all be interpreted in a theoretical context to provide a deeper understanding of the world.

The way feminism/gynarchism is presented from the first sentence suggests that the role of women provides a critical way into interpreting Rosenbaum's fictional world. As mentioned above, the story opens with the introduction of 'the World's Only Gynarchist Plausible-Fable Assembly'. That the assembly is the

only one of its kind signals rarity or even a lack of respect, and the PlausFab genre itself is later described by the narrator as 'a half-despised art (bastard child of literature and philosophy)' (Rosenbaum 2004: 304). A possible, even likely, reading is that PlausFab Wisconsin is not the only PlausFab assembly, however, but that it is the only *gynarchist* one. The rarity and lack of respect thus has at least as much to do with its gynarchist nature as its generic focus. This indication suggests that building the world by using a feminist theme could yield valuable insight into the work. Few characters appear in the story, and the majority are men: the protagonist/narrator, the Raja and his bodyguards, and the pirates. Occasional women writers are mentioned but only two major characters are women. For most of the story, their roles and actions reinforce the impression suggested by the singular *gynarchist* PlausFab Assembly.

The dominant impression of women is as silent, unseen, passive, even submissive entities. When the protagonist/narrator enters the compartment where the story begins, he observes how the Raja's 'consort pulled a wisp of blue veil across her lips, and looked out the porthole' (299). She is not given a name, symbolically silenced and hidden from view. The lack of reaction on the part of the men in the room (one of whom is the narrator) indicates that her action is perfectly in keeping with expected, even polite, behaviour. This impression is emphasized by the consort being the one to hide her face: the male Raja does not have to silence or hide her; she obeys a social protocol that dictates her silence and obscurity. The second mention of her adds to this portrayal of the consort – and possibly of women in general – as socially marginalized: 'The prince laughed gleefully. His consort had nestled herself against the bulkhead and fallen asleep, the blue gauze of her veil obscuring her features. "I adore shadow history," he said' (301). His consort is still unnamed and is bracketed, in the text as well as in the description, by the central, powerful Raja. Her passivity and obscurity is repeated: she is asleep and her features remain obscured.

The consort's name captures the intermingling of cultures but also expresses her subjugation to the Raja. The Raja is a powerful member of one of the major colonial powers of the fictional world and his society is the one best described in the text. When, four pages into the story, the consort's name is provided, it is with a command: "Wake up, Sarasvati Sitasdottrir," the prince said to his consort, stroking her shoulder. "We are celebrating" (302). The gentleness and intimacy of stroking her shoulder suggests affection but not consideration: she is expected to celebrate something that she is unaware of, nor does it concern her. Why the Raja uses her full name at this point is unclear: it could be a belated introduction, a traditional form of address (in the fashion of cultures that use first name and patronymic/matronymic but leave out surnames at a particular level of familiarity), or some other reason. In combination with his

stroking her shoulder, the use of both first name and matronymic comes across as surprisingly formal, hinting at different cultural protocols. The cultural context and mixture of cultures is well established at this point and her name fits into this context: Sarasvati and Sita are Hindu goddesses, and her last name is a matronymic ('Sita's daughter'). The combination of Indian and Icelandic naming traditions points at an intentional mixing of colonizing and colonized societies, but the surnames of the Raja and his consort also contribute to the role of women as passive and men as active: Ramasson and Sitasdottrir allude to the *Ramayana* epic and how Prince Rama rescues his wife Sita from the clutches of a demon king. At the same time, the fact that she uses a matronymic suggests that there may be some social capital to be gained from a female parent's name; or it may be a political (gynarchic) statement in and of itself. The text does not provide sufficient information on this point. It is worth pointing out, though, that this demonstrates that names are important in the world, by highlighting cultural intermingling, commenting on personalities, and emphasizing parallels between the fictional and actual world.

The other woman to play a significant part in the story seems at first to compete with the role presented through the Raja's consort, but is set up as inconsistent with social norms. The assassin appears to belie the role of women as submissive, passive and marginalized. She attacks the Raja to save his life through an intricate plan, is a skilled user of needlethrowers and gliders, and ultimately saves the Raja's life as he plummets towards his death. Her martial skills and the derring-do that mark her as a woman of action are undermined in a number of ways, however, revealing her to be a social anomaly. The first time the narrator genders the assassin, she is referred to as 'he' (305). The unquestioned assumption is that an armed killer is male. The Wisdom ant, a thinking, self-aware piece of technology, makes the same assumption (306). It is only once her mask is removed that the Wisdom ant observes that the assassin is female and Sarasvati Sitasdottrir's sister, Shakuntala. While not ruling out female assassins, the narrator admires her glider skills more than he cares to ponder her identity or purpose (308). Whether this is because women are rarely glider pilots or whether, to him, it is more interesting that he has found a solution to the shadow-history task he has been set is not clear, but the title certainly hints at airplanes being of more interest.

The assassin's purpose and motivation, once they are revealed, further emphasize that she is not representative of women in general in the society. Apart from her bravery, glider skills and arms training, the portrayal of the female assassin is in keeping with that of her sister: she is silent and hides her face. Her reasons may be different, but she conforms to the same role. Her motivation is at first only speculated on: is it 'political symbolism? personal revenge? dynastic

ambition? anarchic mania?' (308). While informative about the political situation of the world, none of these is correct. Shakuntala has joined 'the anarchogynarchist insurgents' (319), who clearly embrace a position that places them outside of, and in opposition to, society and even more marginalized than the gynarchist PlausFab writers. As a member of the insurgency, Shakuntala can be taken to offer a counter-image of women's social role, indeed, of what a gainful member of society should be. Furthermore, her ultimate motivation is revealed to be that she is in love with the Raja, who is secretly colluding with the insurgents. Love and political fervour – and we are not certain in which order – drive her to act as she does. And when Sarasvati realizes that the man she loves is threatened, her behaviour also changes. She becomes less demure and more like her assassin-sister when she begins to fight 'with uncommon ferocity' (322). Both sisters thus demonstrate how the socially accepted female behaviour can change, but that such change is a result of an extreme political position or of extreme feelings.

Conclusion

Critical world-building is about relating details to each other within the world but also to details outside of it. In one world, the 'yellow circle [in which] two round black dots stared like unblinking demonic eyes; beneath, a black semicircle leered with empty, ravenous bonhomie' (308) is the universal device of pirates, in another, it is a sign of good humour and jokes. We cannot interpret the meaning of the former without taking the latter into account. In critical world-building, details matter but only in a wider context. The dynamic interplay between elements reaches beyond worlds, and neither smiley nor skull-and-crossbones will remain unaffected.

Our goal with this essay has been to demonstrate how critical world-building can be applied to a text, by examining a fictional world in terms of its elements and how these interact with each other, and seeing what they say about the world as a whole. This required the recognition that, in fiction, worlds are not simple constructs that can be placed in binary categories, nor is 'world-building' an unambiguous term. We have applied critical world-building in three ways to Rosenbaum's text. A careful reading of how fictional worlds relate to each other and to the actual world offers nuanced constructions as alternatives to metafictional and alternative-history readings. Similarly, careful close readings of the first sentence, in which the world is introduced, reveal some central features of the world. One of these features, the status of the gynarchist PlausFab assembly, offers an angle for a broader thematic interpretation of the dynamic interplay between the various world elements related to the two female characters. Other themes are suggested by that same sentence, not

least opening the text up for post-colonial criticism. Reading these themes is beyond the scope of this essay, but we welcome future scholarship on them ... or on the significance of the smiley face and other cross-cultural devices. 😊

Endnotes

¹ The alternative term 'imaginary world' seems to us to be the broader concept: not all worlds that can be imagined are created as part of a fiction. We are aware that the opposite argument is also possible, however, and our settling for one term in favour of the other is, ultimately, simply a matter of taste and the need to avoid misunderstandings that might arise from the use of two synonymous terms.

² Note that our discussion concerns the extent to which the world(s), fictional and actual, depart from and relate to each other as worlds. For broader discussions about how the fictional relates to the actual, see Pavel 1986.

³ Although not made explicit in the story, we can make inferences to Shaw's ambiguous plays about the social position and construction of women within patriarchal and warlike societies, for example, Mrs Warren's Profession (1893), Major Barbara (1905) and Pygmalion (1913). And it is worth observing that in the actual world, Shaw is the offspring of another former colony of the British Empire.

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The Impact of the Eldritch City: Classical and Alien Urbanism in H.P. Lovecraft's Mythos

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An interest in the ancient past and its ruinous remains is a constant *topos* in literature. The western tradition of the description of ancient ruins can be traced back to the antiquarian interests of Herodotus, via the Roman period (Pliny, Pausanias), the Middle Ages (Gildas), the Islamic period (al-Bakri) and the Renaissance (Schwyzer 2007: 76–109; Wardropper 1969). It is during the Romantic era, however, that the ruin becomes a central theme and especially in Gothic literature. H.P. Lovecraft and his writings can be placed at the tail end of this tradition. Cities and ruins play an important part in his stories (whether from the Cthulhu Mythos or not), not just as a setting but in many cases within plot (Joshi 2008; Joshi and Schultz 2001: 50–5; Lowell 2004). Despite appearing otherworldly, they reflect ancient urbanism, in particular Graeco-Roman classical monuments and cities.

I want to take advantage of the presence of ruins and ancient cities (both human and non-human) in Lovecraft's works to focus on the point where this intersects with the impact of ancient cities in post-Roman urbanism. The final aim here is to analyze and assess the influence of both human (modern and ancient) urbanism and Cthulhu Mythos-ruins and towns in Lovecraft's oeuvre. In order to do this, I will put forward the two circumstances in which this influence can be seen: first, by looking at mythic cities (pre-human alien cities, pre-historic human cities, and human cities from the Dreamlands), and then at actual and fictional cities physically located in Lovecraft's New England.

Lovecraft, Mythos and the Urban

Although ancient monuments appear frequently in Lovecraft's stories, within his cosmic horror, some are *pre-human* eldritch sites. 'Cosmic horror' is characterized by taking nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nihilism and Gothic a step further: terror is caused by the characters' realization that there is *something* beyond human comprehension, and that it is inherently evil, reducing mankind to a small, insignificant role in the universe (Burleson 1991; Hanegraaff 2007). Lovecraft's protagonists find themselves facing alien ruins, understanding their context and realizing their eldritch implications. It is this realization that results in the characters' horror and insanity.

The urban settings go beyond, however, maddening alien cities and can be divided into four categories. In the first place we find those ancient cities from the Lovecraftian Mythos, which I will be label 'eldritch cities'. These are all the