

SLF Portolan Project

Interview with Kate Elliott

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Mary Anne Mohanraj: Hi. This is Mary Anne Mohanraj for the Speculative Literature Foundation. We're here today doing a craft conversation with Kate Elliott. Elliott is the author of 27 books. Her most recent series include the *Court of Fives* series, *Black Wolves*, and *Cold Magic*. Today I've asked Kate to talk a little bit about maps. One of the things that we recently discussed in our conversation with George R. R. Martin was the importance of mapping to creating fantasy and science fictional worlds, which she's done a lot of. I was just reading the introduction to the new Ursula Le Guin 50th anniversary collection. She did a piece for the Earthsea reissue. And she talks about how she started with drawing the map of Earthsea and that became the seed for everything that came forward and it made me realize how I've got this big sprawling sci-fi universe I'm working on and I have done no maps. And maybe that's why I'm having so much trouble keeping track of everything. So I'm resolved after this convention to go home and start sketching things out. So if you can talk a little about how you approach mapmaking, and what you see as its importance or its utility in being a genre author?

Kate Elliott: Absolutely. I love to talk about maps. Because first of all, I'm a total map geek [laughter]. I have all these books about maps over the ages, and I love maps like the London Underground map, which is a fabulous piece of design. I mean, beyond anything else. I am actually stealing the concept of it for my novel coming out next year,

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Nice, which one is that?

Kate Elliott: That's *Genderbent Alexander the Great in Space*.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Awesome [laughter].

Kate Elliott: Right now it's called *Unconquerable Sun*, but I can't promise that will be the final title. It's coming out in July 2020. But anyway, when we think about maps, we think about external maps. We think about something we can look at. It is important in a number of ways to place yourself in space. And I mean that either in the three dimensional space or the two dimensional space of a map.

And there's a lot of reasons for that, which I'll come back to in a second. But the other thing that I have really come to understand over the years is that when people write, and I don't mean everyone, but when people write, a lot of times when they think about mapmaking, they're also not thinking about the internal map that they're bringing to what they're writing. I'm trying to think about examples I could give. So an external map might be a topographical map, where we can see where the mountains and the rivers are, and we can place the cities here and we can gauge how long it will take us to travel from this city to that battlefield or that village.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And especially keeping in mind things like are you on horseback and how long would that take. You have to feed the horses.

Kate Elliott: Exactly. And what the weather is going to be like. So now these things begin to develop together. But one of the other things that happens is people don't think about the internal map they're bringing. And the internal map they bring to their creation, to world creation, and I include myself, are all the assumptions, the expectations, the stereotypes, the things they don't know about. Did you see the cartoon version of *Mulan*?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I did.

Kate Elliott: At the very end, when Mulan has succeeded, and she's driven out the Huns, I guess they were, or the Mongols, I don't remember. She's allowed to meet the Emperor, which is like the highest honor you could have. And then because the writers were working from an internal map of what it would be like in the US, they have her hug the Emperor. That would never happen. Never. So when I talk to people about world building I say, first of all, interrogate your own internal map. What are you bringing to the world? Are you bringing assumptions to the world about how people interact? Or are you bringing assumptions to the world about what the setting looks like? For example, I'm going to write an analog Japan, right? So I'm going to have people wearing something like kimonos, and they're going to carry two swords, one shorter than the other. And they're going to eat a lot of rice. So these are external map things. But maybe I'm not thinking about what those things mean to the people who are using them. And how do those things relate to how they relate to their world and how they relate to themselves. Maybe can everyone carry two

swords? Maybe not everyone can. Maybe some people can only have one sword. Maybe many people can't have any weapons. And now suddenly we're beginning to see just from that one thing. Now we're beginning to see layers in a society.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: What you're talking about here is so interesting to me. I haven't thought of it in terms of maps before, but it is reminding me of one thing we talked about: the cultural iceberg. I don't know you've run across that concept. So with the cultural iceberg, at the very top are all these visible signs of culture that are sort of easy to latch on to be it women can't wear short skirts or whatever it might be. But underneath, there's all of this taken for granted stuff, this deep culture that you may not ever explicitly note in your story, but it's going to inform everything. And if you Google actually, you find there's a whole bunch of different variants of the cultural iceberg. People have approached in different ways and they think it's interesting seeing what they assigned is above the waterline, right below the waterline.

Kate Elliott: Right, right.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: So does that seem like a fair analogy?

Kate Elliott: I have a vague memory of having heard of that. I think that's also a great analogy because the key thing for me for world building, (and I need to add that people can world build however they want, if they want to write US suburban, 50's white people with fancy clothes because that's what floats their boat, they absolutely should), but I think when people think about world building they at least ought to be aware. I would like people to at least be aware and say hey, this is what I'm doing. Not everybody behaves like this. If you're going to have a queen in your fantasy world, and she's like, Leave it to Beaver, sitting, doing nothing and maybe sewing in the parlor while everything goes on around her, then you're not thinking about her position. The actual position of queens as chatelaines, queens who said, Hey, I hear that region over there has a famine, we need to send them some grain from our storage. This is stuff people did. Alexander the Great's mother would send wheat to places that had a wheat shortage. And that was part of her job.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right, to manage not just the household economy, but the national economy.

Kate Elliott: Yeah, yeah. And, and if you're thinking about this external map, because narratives that we talk about, narratives that we see in Hollywood for example, and these flattened narratives are also maps. They're narrative maps, and then they become focused on the external maps. So we get the narrative of women never did anything in the Middle Ages. And you know, people who say, Well, it's okay not to have many women and fantasy in epic fantasy because women never did anything in the Middle Ages. They were all pregnant, illiterate peasants who never walked more than five miles from their home, which of course is completely untrue. But if you have that map in your head, and you can't see that there's another map, you can't go there in your narrative.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Right. And I think it creates a thinness, I feel like. If you haven't mapped out your territory externally or internally, you end up with just sort of a sketch of a story and a sketch of a society and a culture, and it doesn't have the denseness and richness. George and I were talking about Tolkien and world building and how much depth there was to all of *Lord of the Rings* and all the background material that he thought through, much of which didn't make it into *The Hobbit* or into *The Lord of the Rings*, it was in appendices, etc.

Kate Elliott: Exactly.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: But he knew it. And it informed the text and so it made it feel real and rich and I think that's a lot of what grabs the reader or the viewer.

Kate Elliott: I think there is a place for that. And I think there are readers who really want that thinner because they're more interested in the pacing, the course of events, where one thing happens and then the door opens and then someone shoots a gun. That's also a story. And I think that's also okay. But if people are really interested in world building for the sake of creating what I would call an immersive world, where you feel like you've really walked through those streets, then I think they have to start with themselves. They have to start looking through their own assumptions, which are barriers to creating more deeply.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I know that sometimes, for me, I run things by readers a lot. And one of the pieces I'm working on has Sri Lankans in

space. So I'd written it and I sent it, and I'm of the diaspora. So I left Sri Lanka when I was two; I sent it to some science fiction reader friends of mine in Sri Lanka, Yudhanjaya Wijeratne was one of the people who read it and he said the conversations didn't sound right to him because his experience of Sri Lankan culture, and I hope I'm not misquoting him, but essentially it was that people are living on top of each other. It's very close knit, very familial. And so my people were too polite and they were too nice. And I was thinking, Oh, right, I grew up in New England, I live in the Midwest. In New England you do not just dive into conversations in the grocery line with the person standing next to you or with the cashier.

Kate Elliott:

Although you do and you can in Hawaii. Interestingly.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

Well that's one of the things. In fact, like when I moved west to California, there was much more of that. And so that kind of a small interaction and the politeness of my characters, however they may be seething with fury underneath, but they were generally polite on the surface. That just rang false because it was not his experience of what Sri Lankans are like. And when I think about my relatives like, Oh, yeah, maybe they're not so likely to mask their emotions in that way. And then I have to think about, okay, well I've got Sri Lankans in space in a couple hundred years, do I want them, (and it's a choice), do I want them to be more like this kind of Sri Lankan are more like this or evolving in a completely different direction in a couple hundred years?

Kate Elliott:

Right? And then you think about well, what if they're all in the same spaceship or in the space station? And then there's a containment, so does that make you more polite? Because you need that distance? Or does that make you all living on top of each other and more just like we're all going to let it go.

Mary Anne Mohanraj:

That's right. And you know, what other external events might be impinging on that. Is there a threatening culture that makes you bond together as a group? Are you all on your own and how does that change things?

Kate Elliott:

See you now all of a sudden, to me that creates a richness that's greater than, as much as I love and as much as I myself draw these place maps, right? And of course, geology and geography

on a planet will have a lot to do with how a culture evolves and what they have access to. But now, you see the richness, right? How are people going to interact? And I would actually like to say something about doing research as in my case for the *Cold Magic* books, which I did a lot of research in Monday Malian cultures. Now, I'm an outsider to that culture. I don't know it. And I knew that for the purposes of an alternate history fantasy set in the equivalent of 1818. I knew what I wanted to do and I knew I wanted that as part of it because it's a Europe with with an extended Ice Age, so there's no Germanic tribes at all. So the cultures have developed differently. Europe has developed differently. But what I discovered was and had to think about was: let me find a couple of things that are different than how I would have grown up doing things. And one of them is greetings. So in West Africa, if two men are walking past each other on the road, and they're both on their way to work and they're both running a little late. It's more important for them to stop and do this. There's this whole extended greeting sequence. It's more important for them to do that than it is to be to work on time. No secondary world is built out of thin air. It's all rooted to what we know.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: I mean this is the thing. The assumptions are going to be there, so make them conscious?

Kate Elliott: Right. But also in terms of tricks- I don't want to say tricks- to use craft issues, craft things, if you can find a couple of things to make sure that are a little different, that you can flag to the reader. Then that gives you a sense that then people can begin to see that depth, or that sense of depth.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: And I think that's a lot of what people come to genre for too, because that gives you a sense of wonder and expanding our borders and our consciousness. So I have only a little bit of time with Kate Elliott today, because we're here at World Con. And she's going to rush off to something else.

Kate Elliott: I have to do a panel on invisible work, mothers and caretakers, which is like a whole other subject right?

Mary Anne Mohanraj: A whole other topic. So we'll get her back and make her talk about that again. So let me just ask you to end this at any last thoughts that you didn't get to that you particularly want to share? And also, if someone was going to start with your work- I fell in love with

Kate Elliott's work with the *Jaran* series, which is one of her earliest series and I still think that's a great starting point. But if there's one that you would recommend for people coming to you.

Kate Elliott: I have actually on my blog, (I'm not updating much, but anyway), I have a post pinned to the top of my blog called "Where do I start with your novels?" I write in different series, and they're all in different worlds. I have, I can't remember, like five or six or seven different series. But it's written as if you would talk about a boy band, which is your favorite singer in this band. But anyway, it lists them all because they're different in tone and setting and how I approach them.

Mary Anne Mohanraj: That's perfect. And your website is kateelliott.com or something else?

Kate Elliott: Yes you could find it on [kateelliott](http://kateelliott.com), two L's two T's, dot com or also my blog is called [imakeupworlds](http://imakeupworlds.com).

Mary Anne Mohanraj: Perfect. Oh, that's so apropos for today. Excellent. Thank you so much. This was great.

Kate Elliott: Thank you Mary Anne.