

Speculative World-Building as a Refracting Prism: An Interview with Rebecca F. Kuang

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IA: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I have thoroughly enjoyed reading your novel, *The Poppy War*, and I was fascinated by your style and your characters. Your characters especially are so memorable, so relatable, and so real even when they seem to dwell in a bizarre phantasmagorical world. I'm wondering if you could speak to what made you write, why you write, and when you discovered that you want to write.

RK: I can't remember a time when I was sentient and not writing. When I was in elementary school, I was so enthralled with *Star Wars* that I stapled together pages of printer paper to create my own illustrated novel about the adventures of Luke Skywalker during his childhood on Tatooine (featuring myself, of course, as his author—insert girlfriend). In high school, I kept open a massive file where I jotted down scenes about teenagers zooming around on hover boards in a post-

apocalyptic world engaged in some nebulous resistance against some nebulous authoritarian state. The plot and world-building weren't important; this alternate universe was only a backdrop for me to play out my own fantasies and anxieties at fifteen. I wrote the girl I had a crush on as the love interest for the main character. I wrote the history teacher I liked into a mentor figure for the heroes. So writing, for me, has always been about sorting out what's fascinating or bothering me—making sense of the world by recreating the same issues I'm struggling with in a speculative world and watching the pieces interact.

I never considered writing professionally until I went to China between my sophomore and junior years. I had finally become fluent in Mandarin that year, and I was having conversations with grandparents who I hadn't spoken much to since I immigrated to the States as a toddler. I was struck by the stories they told me about their experiences during the vicissitudes of the past century. I was amazed by all they had survived. I wanted to record all of their words somehow, but as an undergraduate, I didn't have the training or abilities to do the research required to write a family autobiography. So I did what I've always done—tried to make sense of events by recreating them in a fictional setting.

That's still why I write. Historical events are so abstract when you read about them in a classroom environment. In the study of China's WWII, for example, it feels so antiseptic to talk about things like war crimes, occupation, collaboration, and sacrifice from a bird's eye view. It removes all the messiness, the nuance and complexity. Writing fiction lets me try to see the world from the perspectives of actors whose decisions I don't initially understand; it puts the humanity back in history.

IA: This is so interesting, that you grew up immersed in science fiction, and then going to China compelled you to want to write in the professional sense of the word. Have you ever considered your investment and talent in imagining new worlds as partly cultivated through the experiences of transnational immigration? I find this an interesting way to subvert the idea that SSF [science fiction and fantasy] is escapist; rather, it most closely captures the cultural frictions of transnational migration.

RK: Certainly, especially since consuming SFF pop culture was one of my entry points into understanding American culture. I immigrated to the U.S. before I had a proper grasp of English, and one of the ways my family learned it was by watching American films—notably, in my memory, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *Star Wars*. I remember jumping up and down on the bed with my siblings yelling “Chance! Chance!” though we didn't have any clue about the meaning of the word; we'd only heard it in the Dreamworks film *The Prince of Egypt*. I remember running around the living room shrieking “FATHER! FATHER” after seeing Darth Vader's big reveal in *The Empire Strikes Back*. I bring up *Star Wars* over and over again because it is so integral to my identity as a storyteller. I watched those films so many times that I was able to recite whole scenes from memory; when my mother banned me from watching too much TV, I took out the scripts in bound book form from the library and read them over and over again. I can still remember such specific lines from certain scene descriptions that it's no surprise the original *Star Wars* trilogy has imprinted itself on my storytelling bones.

I like how you put the escapism of SFF and the frictions of diaspora in conversation with each other. Just as there were hardly any other Chinese American students at my elementary school, there was also no space for Chinese Americans in the fantastic worlds of most of the children's books I consumed—the *Magic Treehouse*, the *Pendragon* series, the *Spiderwick Chronicles*, and even the *Star Wars* children's books seemed to have space only for white kids, even though they had space for magic, time travel, shape-shifting, and alien races. I still projected myself onto those protagonists, because when you're a child you need narratives to wrap yourself in. But for me, being white enough to be one of Bobby Pendragon's friends was as unrealistic as the dimension hopping magic of the *Pendragon* series itself. There was a part of me that recognized, even as I projected myself into a story, that I didn't really belong there. In a way, consuming SFF for me was a way of escaping into whiteness, though at the time I didn't realize it. It wasn't until a long time later that I realized if I couldn't find myself in those speculative worlds, I could at least create those worlds for others.

IA: You hint at constellations of environments that captivated your own storytelling imagination: the environment of *Star Wars*, of your classrooms and schooling, and immersing yourself in recollected stories of real-life experiences. It's such a rich and complex mix of artistic influence and inspiration, seamlessly blending and blurring the borders of science fiction, fantasy, reality, and memory. It is not surprising then that in *The Poppy War*, you based a fantastical story of an orphan woman, Rin, on historical events of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Why did you yoke history and fantasy in such a way? What do you think is the work that fantasy does in articulating history and the work that history does in elucidating fantasy? There is something incredibly generative about this combination.

RK: Why speculative fiction in particular, though? Fantasy is cool because you can use speculative world-building as a refracting prism to exaggerate, re-interpret, and interrogate particular elements you want to hone in on. I like SFF where the magic is quite obviously a metaphor for something else; it's like injecting an ink tracer to better allow you to see the effects of things that often lay under the surface. N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* does this particularly well with the magical abilities of orogenes. In *The Poppy War* I wanted to examine the outsized role that poppies and opium hold in Chinese national imagination—it's so strongly linked to the Century of Humiliation—hence the magic system based on psychoactive substances.

IA: I want to go a little bit into the story of Rin, the hero of *The Poppy War*. But, first, I want to be clear that my questions about your character are understood purely as dealing with your art and your craft. There's the tendency, when it comes to racialized, non-white writers, to treat our work sociologically. Our fiction is often read as containing materials that provide anthropological insights into the societies that we write about, instead of as works of fiction. So, my question about Rin is based on my interest in the imagination and craft that went into her creation. What's this character to you? Who is Rin? Do you see her as someone history has overlooked, who had the power to

change everything had she not been overlooked? Or a figure that can only be imagined now, in retrospect?

RK: Rin is an original figment of my imagination created to grapple with historical issues. She's not based on any one particular figure, but she's inspired by the questions that several figures raise—Qiu Jin for the power of the cultural image that a woman revolutionary creates, Ding Ling for the failed promises of liberation the Chinese Communist Party made to women, and, obviously, Hua Mulan for the struggles that women face in male-dominated environments.

Most obviously, however, she's inspired by Mao Zedong. You cannot think about modern Chinese history without thinking about Mao. When I was an undergraduate, I spent so much time wondering about what kind of man he was. And modern Chinese society is so conflicted on Mao! He was responsible for terrible things, and no one—not even the PRC under Xi Jinping—denies that. And yet there is so much nostalgia for the Maoist era. Mao kitsch is so popular. Mao's *Little Red Book* still flies off shelves. Who was Mao, and what explains this complicated relationship to his legacy?

IA: In *The Poppy War* you created a fantasy world about such a monumental history through the experiences of an orphaned woman who has to confront impossible odds (of gender, class, identity, etc.). Rin embodies several qualities of dispossession and marginalization. Yet in the story she comes around to insist on being heard and she gains enormous “spiritual” powers that she turns against the oppressors of her people. What were you trying to do with the agency that Rin embodies?

RK: The trope of fate—of being destined for greatness, of being born into greatness—is so prevalent in fantasy. We love princes and princesses; we love court intrigue and plot twists about secret sons and daughters. *Star Wars* has taught us that heroes are heroes because of their bloodline; the Skywalkers are the main characters because they are Skywalkers. (*The Last Jedi* suggested that perhaps a “nobody” was just as capable of saving the galaxy as someone with special parentage, but *The Rise of Skywalker* quickly reversed this course.) Daenerys Targaryen in *Game of Thrones* goes on a seven-season long rampage to claim the throne for no better reason than that she is a Targaryen and therefore thinks she has a rightful claim to it.

But that's not how revolutions work, is it? I'm so fascinated by how someone from the outside claws their way into the ranks of power. Rin is determined to rewrite her place in history. She's told from the beginning of *The Poppy War* that harmony is achieved when everything fulfils its proper role—that orphan child brides should be content with being orphan child brides. But she wants more than that. She wants her life to matter. She seeks every opportunity to propel herself into greater historical importance. I'm interested in those jumping off points—how do people from the outside seize the right moments to work their way into the machineries of power? How do they go from nobodies to leaders of armies and rulers of nations? Is it cunning? Charisma? Ruthlessness? Chance? Fate?

Great man theories of history often assume heroes step into roles they were

born for, but they don't take into account all kinds of historical contingencies. There was nothing predestined about Mao's place in Chinese history, and there's nothing predestined about Rin's story in the Poppy War trilogy. She makes history.

IA: What you're saying about Mao here speaks to the attempt to reconsider established historical accounts and figures through the margins. I'm especially struck by the examples of failed "outsiders" you mention (from *Star Wars* and *Game of Thrones*). As an orphan, Rin is an outsider and also a queer figure, in the sense that she is severed from biological lineages and this in turn allows her to imagine other futures outside of reproductive patriarchy. Yet if history is something made, as against something predetermined, isn't it possible to argue that the very act of making history requires the exercise of power, the kind that "the wretched of the earth" (as Frantz Fanon would have it) do not possess?

RK: This is actually something I'm exploring in my fourth novel, which is set in 1830s Britain right before the first Opium War. I think a lot about historical inevitability, determinism, and path dependency. Was the British Empire destined to rise after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo? What things could have pushed it off its path to near global domination? Who would have been in a position to stop it? Historical power and oppression can feel so entrenched that it's difficult to imagine alternate ways things might have gone. We take factors like geography and technological superiority as the end-all be-all without examining how much hinges on personal choices and critical junctures. My protagonists, four students at a fictional institute for translation studies at Oxford, are trying to prevent the first Opium War, which I've isolated as one such critical historical turning point. What if Britain had not been able to reverse its silver deficit with China? What if it had never acquired Hong Kong, or kicked off what China refers to as its century of humiliation? This book is an exploration in resistance when the odds of defeat are near total, and my underlying argument is that history is more fluid and unfixed at every stage than we might think.

But how do four students stop the machinations of empire? Here I'm inspired by Fanon's theorizing on violence, which suggests that the colonized have more power than they think they might. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explains how the pressures of capitalism in fact, paradoxically, aid the forces of revolutionary violence. The colonized territory is the source of profitability; is the origin of labor and raw materials. The empire can't destroy its own golden goose. This is why Fanon writes that scorched earth policies are a thing of the past, and why revolutionary forces can overcome the power asymmetry. Violence is the one thing that might bring the colonizer to the negotiating table, because it is indeed so disruptive to the economic center.

IA: It is interesting that in Rin's process of making history, she has to become powerful. Rin reminds me of Onyesonwu, the hero of Nigerian-American African-futurist writer Nnedi Okorafor's novel, *Who Fears Death*. In it, Onyesonwu confronts similar odds as Rin and gains enormous powers that she turns against the oppressors of her people. Just like Okorafor's hero, Rin in

your novel uses her powers to unleash genocidal violence on the enemies of her people—her act of history. So, I'm wondering about the ethics of this use of power by formerly victimized and marginalized people. What's your artistic vision and commitment in granting Rin such power of destruction that she uses so devastatingly in the name of justice and the salvation of her own people?

RK: I'm still sorting out how I feel about retribution. *The Poppy War* came from a very raw place; I sometimes describe it as a 560-page long revenge fantasy, because that's where I was emotionally after learning about the Nanjing Massacre for the first time. These feelings persist for many Chinese people and members of the Chinese diaspora today; that instinctive, burning desire for vengeance is valid. Of course, we know such emotions are dangerous, and particularly so when they're yoked to nationalist agendas. Violence begets violence; there is no lasting peace founded on retribution. Rin's actions at the end of *The Poppy War* do not lead to healing, they don't fix anything, and they certainly don't end the war. I granted Rin those powers to show the awful impulse to vengeance that grief and rage can create, but I explored the devastating consequences of those powers in the sequels.

IA: Your novel makes it impossible not to think about the future, especially the future of humanity given the histories of absolute use of brute force and power and the rage for vengeance that you memorably chronicled. Could you speak to your thoughts about a future that proceeds from such past and present mass atrocities?

RK: I don't know what a future that successfully proceeds from past atrocities looks like. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on popular commemoration of the Nanjing Massacre, so I've thought a lot about collective trauma and memory, and the upshot is we still don't really have answers on what genuine healing looks like. We know more about what a failure of commemoration looks like. We see a lot more politicization and grand standing over past atrocities than any genuine acknowledgment of what was done to victims. Denying atrocities leads to harm. Sensationalizing atrocities for propagandist benefit leads to harm. Using atrocities to further nationalist agendas leads to harm. The Nanjing Massacre has become so wrapped up in modern Sino-Japanese relations that the victims have gotten lost in the conversation, and I think this is a pattern with many high-profile tragedies. The Chinese Communist Party is extremely good at mythmaking, and I tried to explore this with *The Burning God* especially—Rin constructs and disseminates her founding myth in the process of seizing control of the south.

But all that just goes to show the power of narrative. If narrative can be used for state agendas, it can also be used for counter-histories. I'm not sure about what a future that proceeds from atrocities look like because I think we have so few examples of such success, but it probably includes local, community, and bottom-up stories and histories.

IA: You raise the issue of commemoration as a kind of response to atrocity history. Do you consider your work as a kind of commemorative gesture to the Second Sino-Japanese War; in other words, an attempt for you to

imaginatively memorialize that past? From your view, what is the connection of memory and imagination and history (since, as you suggested earlier, history is what is made and not what is) in the artistic process that went into the creation of *The Poppy War*?

RK: I see *The Poppy War* less as a formal entry into the public commemoration of the Nanjing Massacre (I don't know how I could ever accomplish that without feeling disingenuous; public mourning requires speaking for so many people in a way that I feel wholly unequipped for) and more as my very public attempt to understand, personally, this indescribable atrocity. I mentioned above that history feels so antiseptic when we learn about it in classrooms, decades later and oceans away. It feels like something that could never happen to us, carried out by actors upon victims that we could never relate to. The Second Sino-Japanese War in particular is such a violent breach, a traumatic lacuna that I just could not make sense of when I read about it for the first time. So *The Poppy War* was partially the result of my trying to understand a history and experience that feels too grotesque and unimaginable to ever be understood.

It's also how I tried making sense of the Chinese Civil War, Cultural Revolution, the Great Leap Forward. The tragedies of that era, to us, come off as the product of wildly irrational decision-making. What produces that kind of crazed violence? What produces such a massive failure of governance that millions of people starve? I can't just accept that this happens; I have to know how. I'm convinced that the space between you and I and the kind of person who would stone their teacher to death under the frenzy of radical peer pressure is quite small. Fortunately, there are now pretty decent compilations of primary sources, as well as interviews with people who lived through those eras. I sank myself into that literature and tried to inhabit those thought processes as I reinterpreted those historical events in my trilogy. I never let a character make a decision until I've convinced myself that under the right circumstances, I could too. That's how I connect memory and imagination.

IA: This idea of counter-histories or counter-narratives aligns well with the fights of other BIPOC in the U.S. who have also actively imagined other worlds for quite some time, including Black struggles for abolition and Indigenous struggles for sovereignty (both of which continue to this day). How do you see your work engaging in, if at all, the struggles of other BIPOC SFF writers?

RK: I'm actually still at the point right now where I'm trying to emphasize difference over the similarities. Asian American writers are still fighting to have their fiction recognized as worthy of inclusion in the broader Western SFF canon, as opposed to a niche, small literature that can all be grouped together and described with vague or misapplied terms like "Asian inspired" and "silkpunk." We are united in a joint struggle to have our voices heard, but the messages we're trying to send are so very diverse. For example, my work is very often classified with Ken Liu's *Dandelion Dynasty*, which explores the project of nation-building and national mythologizing and draws from sources like the *Aeneid*; and Fonda Lee's *Green Bone Saga*, which is about family and loyalty and draws from sources like *The Godfather*. Those are very, very different projects, and their thematic ambitions

are very far from what I'm trying to do. I'd argue that *The Poppy War* is more in conversation with *Ender's Game* than it is with either of those works. And I worry that if we continue to be lumped together, our work won't be read against, and won't be accepted as part of, the larger Anglophone tradition in which we're all working.

Publishing has a problem with tokenizing BIPOC writers, which is a symptom of white people in publishing seeing marginalized identities as a niche marketing category rather than an epistemological standpoint worth deferring to. Certain editors will argue that at acquisitions meetings since they already have an Asian fantasy writer, a Black fantasy writer or a Latinx fantasy writer, it would be redundant to sign on another one; they assume that readers, indeed, would not *want* to read multiple books by BIPOC writers. So my continued emphasis on the diversity within BIPOC storytelling is in part a reaction against this harmful assumption that all BIPOC work is engaged in the same struggle in exactly the same way. Our voices are so different, and crucially, our messages often disagree with each other. There's a lot of value in those disagreements. I'm focused right now on making sure readers and editors know that we're not a monolith.