

When Kynsh Nashanak finds himself in Kaedoth, there's one thing on his mind. I needed money, fast, and playing a few hands of Towers would be a good way to start. Towers is a fictional card game in Christopher Buellman's *The Black Tongue Thief*. It happens to be one that Kynsh Nashanak is particularly good at. It's not the only way Kinch will make money over the course of the novel, but at the start, he explains some of its mechanics. I knew I'd find a game at the Bee and Kine, because a Bee and a Kine were two of the Cards of the Towers deck besides the Towers, the Kings and Queens, soldiers, shovels, archers, death, the traitor, and of course, thieves, signified in common decks by an illustration of a Grasping Hand. Kinch feels a certain affinity for this thief on the Tower's card.

What's interesting here is that Towers is a fully realized game, but it's also used as a way of extending the story world that Kinch introduces us to.

How that works is evident in this passage as Towers becomes a way of describing the rest of the scene not everyone in the tavern would be a cards player a few sheep herders and root farmers faithful to the gods of sour frowns held down edgeward tables talking low about rain and weevils there never washed woolens insulated with decades of hand wiped meat grease two younger bravos near the bar had short copper cups at their belts used in towers to collect coin.

Despite their swords, these fellas seemed leery of a trio of hard-looking older women clinking away at towers around a warm, bitten table. I was leery too, but I wanted a game." In this space in Kedoth, we encounter many types of people.

There are the farmers who have no interest in the title of the tavern and just want a quiet drink where they can lament the state of the crops.

There are a couple people at the bar who put on a front of toughness but aren't ready to start playing with the tough older women who are playing towers, the ones that Kinch will eventually join.

What's great about how this scene unfolds is it takes us from Kinch's interest and then spreads out from there. He goes to a tavern called the Bee and Coin.

He's looking for a game of towers which he has to explain to us. And in explaining that game, he paints the scene a little bit.

We're brought into the space. The background can fade away now as the narrative focuses on the game where he does in fact make some money which was the whole point here after all. And for those of you who've read the novel you know that Kinch loves his coins.

But I'm not here to continue talking about towers. What I want to talk about is the way moments like this in the novel use kind of multi-modal world building where towers or coins or as we'll see in the next example play act as other modes of media described within the pros that extend the story world that build that reality that draw us in by having the reader imagine these other forms of media, the card game, the coin, and, as we're about to hear, a mummer's play. First thing I did, having left my bow and pack, stashed in the inn's attic so I could move light on my feet, was make my way to the town square where the town mouth had cried the common of A group of mummers had come in a wagon all hung with bells and tattered banners and bits of stained or stolen silk. The side of

the wagon had folded down and rested on legs to make a small stage, a yard off the ground. Letters on the wagon spilled dams of laminar, and indeed there didn't seem to be a man in the company." Once again, Kinj needs to make money. Once again, he has arrived in the new town and in this example he goes to where the crowds are. He's going to apply his trade as a thief.

Several dozen lucky seas had gathered near but only about a third of them sat on the benches the player has offered. Most lingered at the margins keeping their options open should they grow bored and wish to leave. These would make the easiest prey.

And once again And as with the Towers example, we can see how Buellmann uses Kinch to navigate this story world and fill in details. There are only women in this group of mummers. The various wars fought in this story world have taken many of the men. This continent, these people, have even renamed themselves Kind, can't refer to themselves as mankind anymore.

They're these impacts that get registered in these small ways. But also we have the nice details of the tattered silks, the yard used for measurement. These are the kind of things that stand out about this scene.

Let's turn back to Kinch's description of the actual show that the Mummers are putting on. The troupe was performing a crowning play.

These were little farces, half an hour long, meant not only to make laughter but to teach the names of foreign kings and queens. Indeed, the subject of today's mummery was the mad princess, the aspantheon in Phantom Iraea, played by a cuddly lass in a red dress. She sported with the pet monkey Iraea had as a girl, the very one she later claimed spoke to her and told her the future. The audience learns about the kings and queens at the same time that readers do. The Mad Princess Marina seems to be happenstance at this point.

It's only later in the novel that we'll realize that we're being introduced to important information to make sense of the plot.

Once again, the backdrop becomes important for the plot, and the plot is an important way of moving the world building, of bringing the story together.

This intermodal inclusion of a play gives Beulman a chance to fill in the story world at the same time as developing these other lines.

And here is the crucial point. Multimodal storytelling can perform in the way that Beulman makes it, but it doesn't always sit so delicately as the storytelling does here.

These elements in the background matter.

Fuhlman makes them matter, but he doesn't tell us that they matter. He shows us that they matter.

And this distinction too is important, but I think really what's at stake here for me is that the Black Tongue thief is an example of this kind of world building outside of the contemporary frameworks of capitalistic media that we have talked about so much in this class.

Here, Buhlman does a kind of fantastic cognitive mapping, introducing the story world through kench, through detail, through character through idiosyncrasy in a way that leads Kench and his interests to matter. This isn't the worldbuilding of Amazon and the Rings of Power. This isn't the worldbuilding of Marvel or Star Wars under Disney.

This is a different kind of worldbuilding that is collaborative, even if it's only written by one person.

Collaborative because the reader cognitively produces the world along with Buhlman, just as Buhlman has built the world based on fantasy tropes, on fantasy world building, and on pushing back against how those things happen today.

The History matters. History matters in how games are played, and history matters in precisely the way this farce teaches us to read art and culture. There's a kernel of truth to these things, even if they appear to be for entertainment purposes only. Christopher Buehmann reads the Black Tongue Thief in the audio clips. The ambience is supplied by Cozy Tavern, by the Vault of Ambience, and Marketplace Ambience by Tabletop Ambience, both available via YouTube and here used in order to support the intellectual claims of this podcast. Thank you for listening.