

Notes for Podcast: “The Edge of the World” by Michael Swanick

This story is mostly about world building and character development. If there is a plot, it is a sort of love triangle that never gets off the ground. Donna wants to be “noticed” by Russ, but Russ disappears before that happens.

The World Building Template asks

1. What is the geography of your world?

The world of the story has many place names that are familiar in our world. However, it has one feature that our world does not have, unless you are a flat earther: an edge. The void beyond the edge descends into nothingness as far as the eye can see. Gravity seems to continue. Birds can fly in the air beyond the edge. People have built steps that descend into the void beyond the edge and even built temples and other structures. People throw trash over the edge, and factories dump their chemical waste there. This story essentially asks the question, “What if the world had an edge?”

2. What kinds of beings inhabit this world?

The beings we meet and hear about are humans of different cultures and religions.

3. What kind of government do the inhabitants have?

Our main characters appear to be kids from American military families on a base in the Middle East. We hear of “Emirs” and other leaders, though it seems that one of the emirs was named “Kennedy.”

4. What is the history of this place?

That is pretty complicated. We hear of events that sound familiar, and others that don’t. We get a lot of the history from Russ, who seems to be more knowledgeable and better read than the others. We hear that Napoleon fired cannons into the void in order to somehow create a rainstorm to soak his enemies. We hear of monks who combined together to make a hated ruler disappear.

5. What kind of technology do these people have?

We see nothing that we do not have, except there seem to be some wishfulfilling magic at work. They appear to have bombers and atomic bombs. One wonders what happens when a bomber tries to fly beyond the edge. This question is not entertained by the story.

6. What religion or religions exist in this society?

Islam seems to exist. Also whatever religion the mysterious monks who kept the skulls of previous monks on their walls.

7. What kind of art do these beings have?

We don't really hear much about art, except perhaps for the decorative skulls. So the author seems to have gone to a lot of trouble to make a believable world that is like ours but also not like ours.

The Character Profile Sheet is also applicable here. This story is largely a character study of three characters, friends who appear to be teenagers, perhaps eighth or ninth graders. It asks for Background information such as species, gender, sexual orientation, friends and associates, enemies, strengths and weaknesses, favorite weapons or strategies, and philosophical beliefs. Our three characters are

Donna: Our viewpoint character. She wants Russ to notice her. She wants him to be more than a friend. She recognizes that he is troubled, but she doesn't know why.

Piggy: Donna thinks of Piggy as a "beta-male" jealous of and trying to compete with alpha-male Russ. With the name "Piggy" and the glasses, it is likely that the author expects us to think of the novel *Lord of the Flies*." Piggy desires Donna, but she rebuffs him.

Russ: Russ is the intellectual. He knows lots of history and stories and relates them to the others. He also makes remarks that indicate that he is troubled. Donna thinks he has a "crazy" look about him, and remembers that he once boasted of playing Russian roulette. When Russ tells the story of the monks causing King Althazar to disappear, Piggy asks, "You believe that crap?" and Russ answers, "No it's all bullshit like everything else."

After introducing the characters and describing a bit of the history of the edge, the story moves on to the descent of the staircase that the friends find at the edge of the world. The staircase is in poor shape and it gets worse as they descend. There is trash, and missing steps. They keep daring each other to go further. Russ especially wants to keep going. The dares, the insults and bantering, the sexual tension, and the dreamy philosophizing all seem typical of upper middle school kids. Finally they arrive at a monastery cut into the side of the cliff. The monks are long gone, but Russ has read about them. He tells their story:

Read 188-89

Russ tells how the monks made a king disappear.

Read 190-193

And later, Russ disappears. Piggy doesn't even remember him.

Read on 193

1. Donna wishes that she knew the "situation"? Is she talking about the situation between her and Russ? Later she says that she understands the situation, but she hopes she won't after she gets to the top. Is she talking about a bigger situation?

2. One of the themes of this story is human ability to adapt to circumstances, no matter how weird. I once read a story in which a pitcher in a baseball game threw a pitch that stopped right above home

plate and hung there, immobile and unmovable. People tried to move it, scientists were called in, for a while it was studied and measured and analyzed with machines. No one knew why it did that and no one found out. Games couldn't be played there anymore because the ball was in the way, so the stadium was closed down. Eventually people just forgot about it, though the ball was still there.

Here we have the edge of the world. Maybe it contains demons, maybe not. When people encounter something weird, they do crazy things. They fire cannons at it. They study it. They worship it. But eventually, they just adapt.

Imagine if an alien spacecraft got into the landing pattern at John Wayne airport and landed on runway 1A like all the other aircraft, and then just sat on the runway doing nothing. They would close down the airport. They would call the National Guard. They might surround it with tanks. Scientists would try to study it, communicate with it, try to open it. If it did nothing for a year, they might try to move it out of the way. If that didn't work, they would eventually reopen the airport without using that runway. Maybe they would build another runway. Fifty years later, it might still be sitting there, behind a chain link fence.

The North Korean border with South Korea is like that. There are over 1,000 artillery pieces on the North Korean side and lots of troops. Nothing has happened for 50 years, so the South Koreans build new condos right next to the border.

Taking this aspect of human nature into account, does the reaction of the characters to this very strange place that has existed forever seem natural? Would you go down those stairs?

3. Russ's disappearance from the world is perhaps the only evidence of the fantastic in this story. Does the author prepare us well for this event or does it just come out of the blue?