

# **Holly Lisle's Create A Culture Clinic**

A Step-By-Step Course in  
Creating Peoples and Philosophies  
for Fiction

**THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE: BOOK II**



OneMoreWord

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Holly Lisle's Create a Culture Clinic (THE WORLDBUILDING COURSE: Book II)

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Dedication

For Matt

## **Acknowledgements**

Deepest thanks to both Heather Wardell and Christian M. Lyons for beta-testing and error-checking this manuscript, in record time, no less. You did wonderful jobs, and made terrific suggestions, and this book is much better for your comments.

The remaining errors, of course, are all mine.

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# **SECTION ONE**

## **Why and How**

## **Why Create Cultures?**

### **Or "I Write Mainstream, So I'm Off the Hook ... Right?"**

No writer is ever off the hook where culture is concerned, because every story ever written is, was, or eventually will be about cultures.

Really.

There was a science fiction story once in which a man was able to disguise the fact that he was alien by wearing a hat on his head to cover his antennae. All men wore hats almost all the time, so he didn't stand out. The writer assumed that hats were essential to men, and that men would always wear them. And then the culture changed, hats went away, and the story now seems broken.

Novels set in the time of the writer frequently assume culture, and hope the reader will share (or at least comprehend) the culture the writer is assuming. These novels are written for the day and the moment; they'll be unreadable in twenty years. If you want to write for the ages, your writing has to have complete, working subsets of all the cultures you wrote about IN the novel. Every single time. Cultures change. Dickens and Twain are still comprehensible today because they included right in their stories everything you needed to know about how their worlds worked. Their contemporaries are gone because *they* assumed that their readers would live in a world just like the one they lived in, and would simply understand all the things they left out.

Deeper novels draw out the cultures as richly as they draw out the characters. Novels set in the present *show* the present and those cultures working in it, and through the lives and actions of the characters demonstrate how their cultures work for and against them, and how the characters work for and against their cultures.

Novels set in the historical past *show* how cultures and life paths most of us have forgotten create unique problems and shape the people who inhabit those worlds to deal with those problems. Novels set in the future must extrapolate multiple cultures that contain features our world might someday have, while those novels set in worlds that never can be play with cultures that contain features no culture in our world can ever have.

From romance novels to Christian fiction to chick lit to Stephen King and Dean Koontz, to coming of age and coming of middle age and other literary novels, to *Harry Potter* and *American Psycho*, you as the reader are immersed in the details of lives lived within a set of cultural expectations, or lived outside of those same expectations.

When the writing works, we get magnificent fiction that tempts us to look twice at our own lives, to question our own assumptions, to get more out of our existence than we did before. And the writing works when writers understand the cultures about which they're writing, and are able to look at them and identify the cultural assumptions that exist, and then are able to *use* those assumptions to shape their characters and their storytelling.

When the writing doesn't work....well, you get one million 1970's Harlequin Romances in which a nineteen-year-old virgin fell in love with a thirtysomething power-addled jerk, and was thrilled to be talked down to, dragged around against her will, and taken by force, because she knew that *love would change him*.

You also get Westerns set in Too Much, Texas, and SF flowering in the belly of a generation ship and fantasy galloping through Elfhome and historical romances primping in Regency England, and suspense novels skulking through the dark heart of Paris...in which the cool settings are nothing more than painted paper backdrops, because the characters all came from yesterday's Wal-Mart, complete with vocabularies, attitudes, and expectations.

You get stories in which characters do incomprehensible things for no discernable reason.

You get novels in which people end up nearly wrecking their lives over a misunderstanding that two four-year-olds could have solved over the phone, because the writer couldn't see the possibilities for real conflict inherent in his world.

You get crap, in other words.

You don't need to get crap. You don't need to read it; far more importantly, you don't need to write it. Creating and comprehending the workings of living, breathing cultures, whether real or fictitious, will give you enough deep, powerful conflict for a lifetime of writing; will permit your characters to act in ways that are surprising and sometimes shocking, but that make sense for them; will give you more good, strong, compelling story ideas than you know what to do with; and will make your stories, no matter when and where they're set, feel *real*.

Better yet, creating cultures is an entirely doable process. It isn't always straightforward. Once in a while it will drive you batty. Occasionally it may require more of you than you really wanted to give. Mostly, though, it's incredibly fun, and fascinating, and more often than not you'll have to stop before you want to, simply because...well, you do have to write sometime.

And the end results for your fiction, no matter what sort of fiction you write, will be worth it.

## How To Use This Book

**SECTION ONE: How and Why** is devoted to general set-up—making sure you know how to use the book and have the supplies on hand when you sit down to work on your culture in order to make the experience as fun and stress-free as possible.

**SECTION TWO: Basic Culture Building** is further divided into the following categories: *Personal, Community, Religion,* and *Government*, and contains discussion, examples, and exercises designed to help you develop the heart of your culture while avoiding common mistakes.

**SECTION THREE: Advanced Techniques** For each question you answer, you can choose to explore deeper using the advanced techniques. These techniques include creating non-existent books, religious rituals, songs, artifacts, and other tangibles that exist in the world you're creating, adding necessary detail to your culture.

**SECTION FOUR: Worksheets** holds a stack of organizing tools to help you keep track of the work you've done, where you filed it, and what it contains. Most, though not all, of the worksheets are indexing tools.

### **ORDER OF WORK**

- Read all of Section One.
- Put together your starter Culture notebook, or add a Culture section to the back of your Language notebook for the same culture.
- Read or skim Sections Two and Three, using bookmarks or Post-it® notes to mark a few questions that interest you and/or directly relate to the story you want to tell.

- Go to the first Basic Culture-Building question you marked, and modify it, if necessary, to fit your world. (If you're working with aliens, different genders than male and female, sentient animals, or any other variants on the assumed basic human characters, change the terms to fit your needs.
- Answer the question in your word processor, or on your lined paper.
- Decide whether you want to move on to the next question (broad development) or want to continue to explore the same question using advanced techniques in Section Three (deep development).
- Continue working through your chosen questions in this manner, or answer your own questions that arise naturally from your previous questions, working in any order through the book, and always considering the options of broad development and deep development.
- When you know what you need to know to write the section of the story you're working on, **stop backgrounding and start writing.**
- Come back to the book when you get stuck or aren't sure how things in your story work. Pick a related section, answer a few questions, do another exercise or two, build some more tech or design some clothing or whatever you need at the moment, and then head back to your writing.

In most instances, you'll have much more fun with the process if you let your culture grow naturally and pick up spontaneous details as you write, rather than trying to anticipate all its details before you get into the story.

## What You'll Need

### Getting Organized

Organizing your created language information was easy. Languages lend themselves well to worksheets with columns, and with rules that relate back and forth between sections.

Cultures are much messier.

I could assume that you've already done *Holly Lisle's Create A Language Clinic*, and simply tell you to drag out your language notebook and add the next section of tabs and sheets behind the language section, with a big divider between sections that says CULTURE.

But on the fairly likely chance that you figured creating languages for fiction was about giving your characters a few funny-sounding things to say (it's not), instead of building and discovering the single most critical aspect of any culture and how that aspect (language) shapes everything else that comes after it (it is), I'll start from the beginning.

Remember—if you have already built your language or languages, set up each culture you're building behind its related language, and realize that you have a serious head start, both in organization and in culture development, on the folks who are starting from scratch with Book II.

You'll need:

- A sheaf of lined, hole-punched school-type paper for answering questions and working out your culture ideas. Or, if you think better while you're typing, a word processor and a hole punch and a sheaf of paper.
- One three-hole binder per culture (or group of cultures per writing universe). I highly recommend side-bound pressboard report covers. They will only take up as much room as you use,

unlike three-ring notebooks, and they are less likely to damage your pages than a three-ring notebook.

- Tabbed page dividers to go in between sections of your culture. This is not a must-have, but those tabs can keep you sane when you're flipping rapidly between home life, community, religion, and government sections of your culture, and I recommend them with all my heart.
- Do-it-yourself culture-creating kit, which should include:
  - Black ball-point pens or other pens with quick-drying black ink for filling out forms (you don't want to smudge something critical because you wrote it in a smooth but slow-drying gel, and glitter inks, fluorescent ink and other colored inks will not reproduce well when you photocopy your notes)
  - Quadrille (1"=4 squares) paper if you can get it—I MUCH prefer quadrille paper over plain paper because those neat little squares become the most useful things in the world when you're figuring how much space people need to live in, or walk past each other in, or how many furs that coat you developed would need, or how many people could fit into the carriage you drew, and countless other essential things. If you can't find quadrille paper, then plain white printer paper. Either way, you may end up needing a lot. Purchase a minimum of fifty sheets—this should get you through a stack of cultures, but I've had a couple where I used that much for just one.
  - A set of fine-tipped drawing pens of variable width for designing houses and clothes and jars and carriages and weapons and everything else. I recommend Tech-Liner drawing pens because they're both good and relatively cheap, but any sort of technical drawing pens with black ink will do. You want widths from 0.1mm to 0.5 or 0.7mm. (In a pinch, you can use a ball-point pen or magic marker, or a brush and India ink, but carefully test

your ink to make sure it won't bleed through to the next page.)

- A metal straight edge or decent-quality ruler
- Scissors and glue. If the cultures you are writing about are in the present and you can find pictures of things you need for your world by cutting them out of magazines, it will save you drawing things. If you're scavenging artifacts, it can be useful for keeping them in one place.
- If you're working from the print edition of this book, you'll also need access to a copier, to copy off the worksheets.<sup>1</sup> Or you can e-mail me at [holly@hollylisle.com](mailto:holly@hollylisle.com) and ask me to send you the PDF worksheets so that you, too, can print them from your home computer.

## ***Your Notebook Layout***

Set up your notebook as follows:

- INDEX (tabbed divider)
  - HOME LIFE INDEX (cover sheet)
    - Cultural Basics Sheet
    - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
  - COMMUNITY INDEX (cover sheet)
    - Cultural Basics Sheet

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- Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- RELIGION INDEX (cover sheet)
  - Cultural Basics Sheet
  - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- GOVERNMENT INDEX (cover sheet)
  - Cultural Basics Sheet
  - Add Cultural Basics Sheet, Cultural Artifacts Sheet, Cultural Literature Sheet, Cultural Music Sheet, Buildings and Architecture Sheet, and/or Science and Magic Sheet if necessary
- HOME LIFE—Section A (tabbed divider)
- COMMUNITY—Section B (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here
- RELIGION—Section C (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here
- GOVERNMENT—Section D (tabbed divider)
  - Basic pages and advanced technique pages go here

## ***Organizing Your Information***

This is the page-numbering scheme I use, which will allow you to continue adding pages to your culture's notebook over the months and years while keeping track of all your information. If you just stick pages into the folder, you'll still be able to find your work eventually, and just by making sure that the pages are bound in, rather than stacked on shelves or tucked away someplace you're sure you'll remember, you'll stay ahead of the game.

But a (very) small extra investment in time on each bit of culture-building you do will permit you to maintain a clean table of contents that never needs to be thrown out and completely rewritten, and that will allow you to get your hands on each bit of information that you need.

To get this great gain, you have to do three things.

1. You have to number each page
2. You have to file each page with like-numbered pages
3. You have to write down the page name and number in your Index.

You can, of course, add additional levels of organization to each of your sections, and in sections where you're creating a lot of complex information, doing that might not be a bad idea. In sections where you only have a few pages, though, and you're pretty sure you've done all the work that you ever want to do (maybe Government, or Religion), use the following basic plan. This is the organization method I use for all my stuff, including areas with extensive backgrounding—I occasionally have to hunt a little for a bit of information that I need, but the hunt is never excessive.

Here's how to number your pages so you'll always be able to find your work:

- At the top of each page you create, include a title. For example, Party clothes of the wealthy New York socialite.
- In the top right-hand corner of every page of background you do, add a Category Letter. The categories are:
  - Home Life—A
  - Community—B
  - Religion—C
  - Government—D
- Next, add an Information Type Letter. The information types are:
  - Basic information—a
  - Art and Artifacts—b
  - Cultural Library—Books, Scrolls, and Oral Histories—c
  - Music and Dance—d
  - Housing and Architecture—e
  - Science and Magic—f
  - Other—g
- Finally, you add the page number.

So if you do a series of sketches of shoes and boots for your culture, you could have the following sorts of headers:

- Home clothing of the wealthy New York socialite A-b-1
- Party clothes of the wealthy New York socialite B-b-1
- Church clothes of the wealthy New York socialite C-b-1
- Politicking clothes of the wealthy New York socialite D-b-1

All your actual A pages will be filed in your Home Life section, while B pages will go in your Community section, and so on.

If you do any Advanced Techniques development in your culture, each section will be further subdivided into basic information and information from advanced techniques.

Any time you want to go back and add new pages, title them, number them, and update your table of contents in the front of the Culture section of your notebook.

With this numbering system, there is no trying to keep things in alphabetical order, no erasing and rearranging entries. Everything falls into usable and findable categories, and the titles at the tops of pages will help you thumb through the notebook to rediscover things you forgot you put in there—serendipitous finds that can give you new ideas for your story.

## ***Protect Your Work***

Make sure that every time you do a sheet, you promptly put it in the notebook. Be a little paranoid as the project grows and you become sure the culture is one you like and might want to use for more than one book. Photocopy your work and store it in a safe place.

Bank box? Maybe.

Parents' house? Only if they know its value to you.

Personal fireproof safe? If you can swing the price of one, sure.

But *someplace safe*.

The point is that once you've used your culture in a published work of fiction, you want to know that your background will be safe for the rest of your working career. If you lose it and you want to go back one year or ten years or twenty years later to work in that world, you have a mountain of work ahead of you before you can step back in and pick up where you left off.

And you might discover that you simply cannot get back a working version of the culture you need; that you've forgotten how your gods or clergy work, or why men live separately from women until the women have had at least one child, or whatever it was that you'd designed.

You don't want to end up there.

# **SECTION TWO**

## **Basic Culture Building**

## **Discovering Culture**

### **Why Everyone Has Culture, Even If They Don't Know It**

We'll start right in with our working definition of culture. By making sure you've covered all these areas in your story, you can be sure that your culture and your writing will be understandable to people who are reading your books long after you're dead. You will have included the necessary information to make your written world live and breathe.

#### ***All cultures share the following characteristics:***

They are comprised of people:

- who share **common ground**
- and are born of a **shared philosophy**
- who adhere to **specific goals**
- which require **the setting aside of differences**
- and demand of each member **personal sacrifices of time, effort, and resources**
- in order for **all members to work for the good of the group**
- and to **survive, propagate, and grow beyond the lifetimes of current members**

So you're looking at this, and you're going, "All cultures? Really?"

Really. If it's a culture, it will have these characteristics.

You can build cultures full of nice people, or cultures full of rotten people, or cultures full of passion-driven lunatics, but all of these cultures will meet all of the requirements listed above.

Let's create an overview of a current culture right now.

## **Writer culture**

The Writer Culture is comprised of:

1. People whose **common ground** is sitting down and pulling words out of thin air and committing them to some sort of storage medium, like paper, or pixels, or clay tablets.
2. Writers who **share the philosophy** that they have something to say, and they are by God going to say it, and with any freakin' luck at all, someone else will eventually read it. And maybe pay them to do so. (Though getting paid actually marks one of the shared goals of the much smaller Pro Writer subculture of writer culture.)
3. Writers who **adhere to specific goals** which include finishing individual pieces of writing, sending writing out to editors, achieving publication, doing more words per month than they did before, and so on. These goals vary depending on the specific tribe of the culture you're talking about, and there are tribes whose goals apparently include using every word in the OED before they die, but let's not mock them. They, too, live to write.
4. In Writers' meeting places, writers generally **set aside differences** by avoiding discussion topics like politics and religion and ecology and sticking to shared loves like word counts and revising their latest work and how badly their last three days have gone because their characters aren't speaking to them—because Writers know that being able to talk about writing is more important than chancing pissing off a fellow Writer by discussing whether there is any essential difference between Republicrats and Democans, or why anyone cares.

5. Members of the Writer Culture **make personal sacrifices** by investing the hours that other people blow watching television or sleeping to isolate themselves and put words on paper. Screen. Whatever. Members of the Writer Culture pour more blood and sweat and more tears than they will admit into nailing a scene, creating a story, conveying a world, and doing it right, because they realize that doing it right matters. If you are a Writer, you get this. (If you are a member of the Television Culture, on the other hand, you're thinking, *What do you mean, **Blow** watching television. Don't you understand that TELEVISION IS LIFE, you Neanderthal?*)
6. Members of the Writer Culture **work for the good of the group** by sharing info, time, skills, techniques, and suggestions with other writers, because being a member of the culture can be tough going, and it's hard to find others who belong. By offering what they have learned to newer writers, members of the Writer Culture ensure that they are not alone, and they validate the core philosophy of the group, that words matter, that stories matter.
7. And by supporting newer Writers, they work to ensure that the Writer Culture will **survive, propagate and grow** even when they are dead, and that the art of telling stories—and telling them well—will persist and thrive. The Writer Culture expands by volunteerism—that is, its membership is self-selected by interest, inclination, and desire to belong.

Along with **cultures**, there are:

**Subcultures**, which share all the basic tenets of their main culture, but which:

- Add additional goals, or forms of personal sacrifice, or requirements to the personal philosophy
- NARROW the common ground the group shares, making membership in a subculture more exclusive but also more restrictive than membership in a culture

- Frequently propagate by cherry-picking membership from the main culture

**Countercultures**, which are cultures that espouse values that contradict those of the culture we view as *main* in our context.

Countercultures, in order to be real cultures, must:

- Contain each characteristic of a culture in a fully-formed fashion.
- Provide a complete philosophy of their own, not simply state "We're against what Main Culture stands for."
- Provide creative, not destructive, goals for its members. This can be a little tricky to sort out, because creative goals are not necessarily positive. Back to Writer Culture and creating a Writer Counterculture—here is a negative but creative Writer Counterculture goal. "We will require that our members maintain their amateur status and write only with the goal of sharing their work privately." A destructive (or non-culture) goal would be, "We will ban anyone who is professionally successful." This might seem like two ways of saying the same thing, but a culture defines itself by what it is. A rabble never goes farther than defining itself by what it isn't. A lot of groups that think they're countercultural are, in fact, merely rabbles. A genuine culture always offers something concrete and tangible to its members.
- Propagate by recruiting membership from those dissatisfied with the main culture **who want to create something different and, in their eyes, better**. People who are dissatisfied but whose total vision of the future consists of wrecking the main culture are NOT members of a counterculture. Again, they're a rabble. All culture is about building something. It may be something worse or something better than that which currently exists, but the primary engine of countercultures, sub-cultures and cultures is **creation**. I cannot stress this enough. It is the heart of understanding cultures.

I'll use a final example to demonstrate what I mean by negative and positive goals. I'll use war and peace. It's a universal issue—every culture and every subculture has had to find a way to address it, and common ground is hard to find. I'm going to give some examples of answers here. There are many, many more that I have not included.

- Rabble statement: "We are anti-war." This is a meaningless statement. Under most circumstances, almost all cultures are anti-war. War sucks. But this does not tell us what sort of peace the rabble considers adequate.
- Too vague statement: "We are pro-peace." Everyone except lunatics is in favor of peace of some sort. However, peace comes with a lot of different conditions. What are the conditions that the culture imposes on peace? (There are always conditions.)
- Pure pacifist culture: "We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others or ourselves even if we are overrun and slaughtered or enslaved by our enemies."
- Partial pacifist culture: " We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Passive defensive culture: "We will not attack first in any situation and we will not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Active defensive culture: "We will not attack first in any situation, BUT we will defend others and we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Passive offensive culture: "We will attack first in a few limited situations wherein we judge that we (but not others) are about to be attacked, AND we may or may not defend others, BUT we

will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."

- Active offensive culture: " We will attack first in a few limited situations wherein we judge that we (or our allies) are about to be attacked, AND we will defend others and we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened."
- Aggressor culture: "We will attack to gain slaves, loot, and territory, and we actively advance our culture through rape, murder, and genocide, enslavement, forced conversion, and warfare, AND we may or may not defend others, BUT we will defend ourselves if our property, our way of life, our lives or our children's lives are threatened, or for any other reason that suits us."

## ***EXERCISE 1—Discover A Local Culture***