

Stefanie Giebert

## Boxes within boxes and a useless map Spatial (and temporal) phenomena in the *Kingkiller Chronicles*

### 1. Introduction

At first glance, *The Name of the Wind* and *The Wise Man's Fear*, volumes I and II of Patrick Rothfuss' as yet incomplete trilogy *Kingkiller Chronicles*, appear to fulfill many conventions of heroic fantasy. The books are set in a world called the Four Corners (of civilization), consisting mostly of feudal states, a mostly rural and agrarian landscape. This world has a distinct but slightly vague 'old-timey' atmosphere – there is little technology, transport is mainly by horse-power, there seem to be no fire-arms and no media. However, a form of postal service exists, science and medicine are taught at university and women have access to university education, so it is hard to place this fictional universe within a 'real-life' historical epoch. The narrative centres around Kvothe, the many-talented hero. It features a quest (Kvothe is looking for the mysterious Chandrian who killed his parents when he was a child), a love-story, encounters with demons and fairies, sword-fights and the traditional map which invites readers to trace the hero's travels through nearly the whole fictional universe of the Four Corners. However, as becomes clear again and again, the books play with fantasy conventions and tend to disappoint expectations. As a number of readers have complained in reviews, Kvothe's quest doesn't really seem to go anywhere, as he gets 'stuck' at a university (or *the* University, as there seems to be only one) for years and seems to forget about his quest for periods of time altogether: "This [vol. II] is a great big book indeed, but not much happens"<sup>1</sup>, one reviewer claims. A second reviewer goes as far as to claim that the novel (vol. I) "doesn't have a plot"<sup>2</sup>, while another appreciates just that: "There is no action; there is, rather, description of inaction, of, in fact, silence. And the silence takes place in a quiet, under-populated inn. It's all nuance".<sup>3</sup> However, for readers hoping for action-packed adventures the long descriptions of the inn, the school narrative that takes up so much space and other relatively low-action episodes that describe the hero's travels (the Maer's courtship, Felurian, studying in Ademre, etc.) in detail, must appear disappointing or irrelevant, just as the books' concern

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1 Kirkus Reviews. 2/1/2011, Vol. 79 Issue 3, p. 173–174.

2 <http://ronanwills.wordpress.com/2013/05/29/the-name-of-the-wind-review/>

3 Michelle West: "Musing on Books". In: *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Dec 2007, Vol. 113 Issue 6, p. 32.

with ‘meta’-elements such as its nestled layers and its preoccupation with stories and names, storytelling and ‘reality’ has been perceived as pretentious and stilted by a number of readers.<sup>4</sup> An in-depth discussion of all the attempts of the author to subvert fantasy conventions would exceed the scope of this article, so the focus will be on spatial (and to a lesser extent temporal) aspects and motifs and how the author uses those to subvert fantasy conventions, sometimes leaving his readers confused – and either frustrated or intrigued by the puzzles.

## 2. Boxes within boxes

In the books the motif of boxes within boxes is a dominant one and it is pursued on various levels. First of all, a number of actual boxes show up throughout the story. In the frame narrative the protagonist and narrator, Kvothe, owns something called by his apprentice a “thrice locked chest”<sup>5</sup>. Its owner regards it with “fierce longing and regret”<sup>6</sup> but it seems that he is unable to open it.

Secondly, when in volume II, the main narrative turns to tell the events taking place at the court of Maer Alveron the so-called Lackless box, which had several times been the subject of children’s verses and songs quoted throughout the whole narrative as early as page 77 of the first volume, finally makes its physical appearance. It is an heirloom of the Lackless family, three boxes nestled within each other. There is a key for two of them, but the third box is ‘lock-less’, and so of course there is no key. Yet, Kvothe has the impression that “(...) it wanted to be opened”<sup>7</sup> but nobody knows how to do this, nor does any of the living members of the Lackless family know what is inside: “(...) by the weight of it, perhaps something made of glass or stone.”<sup>8</sup>, Kvothe assumes. Throughout the books, at several points mysterious doors made of stone have been seen – could it be that there is a stone key for one of the doors of stone hidden in the Lackless box? In the first two books, no evidence for this can be found, but the third volume currently scheduled for publication in 2015 has been announced under the working title of *The Doors of Stone*<sup>9</sup>, so a certain significance of those doors is to be assumed, and their significance shall be discussed in more detail later.

Secondly, on a more abstract level, the narrative structure mirrors that of three nestled boxes with its three levels of narrative. The first and shortest is the outer frame narration (prologue / epilogue), titled in both

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4 <http://ronanwills.wordpress.com/2013/05/29/the-name-of-the-wind-review/>

5 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*. London: Gollancz 2007, p. 115.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

7 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man’s Fear*. New York: Daw Books 2011, p. 1018.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 1020.

9 [http://kkc.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Doors\\_of\\_Stone](http://kkc.wikia.com/wiki/The_Doors_of_Stone)

volumes “a silence of three parts”, thereby taking the idea of trichotomy to an extreme. This frame narration describes the kinds of silence which, according to the omniscient narrator, lie over the Waystone Inn, the location of the second, inner, frame narrative.

The second frame narrative follows several characters, switching perspective between Chronieler, Bast and Kvothe, its main purpose apparently to explain ‘how the story of Kvothe came to be written down and what happened in between’. It describes first how Chronieler, the recorder of the stories of heroes and kings, arrives at the Waystone Inn and persuades Kvothe to tell him his story. It then interrupts the third narrative level (Kvothe’s life-story) now and again: either when Kvothe sees it fit to take a break in telling his story or when events from outside – villagers coming in for a drink or, more disturbingly, an apparently demon-possessed high-wayman killing a villager or other violent disturbances – disrupt the tale-telling. Sometimes these interludes follow Kvothe, Bast or Chronieler to their respective rooms at the Waystone or, rarely, outside of the inn, showing some ‘behind-the-scenes’ information such as Bast threatening Chronieler into staying at the inn or revealing that he arranged for a pair of soldiers to raid the Waystone in hopes that, in defense of his home, Kvothe would reveal his former, stronger self. Also, some background information about the village and the villagers is provided, as well as about the current political situation of the fictional world, which, however, stays fairly vague. The third narrative level, which takes up the biggest part of the books, is Kvothe’s life-story. It is told by himself from a first-person point of view and takes the reader on a tour throughout much of the book’s world. However, Kvothe seems to be a rather unreliable narrator and moreover leaves many questions unanswered, just as the Lackless box leaves its proprietors’ curiosity unsatisfied.

### 3. A useless map (with holes)

One aspect where reader expectations are repeatedly frustrated is topography. Although the books contain the world map typical of heroic fantasy (series), this turns out to be rather unhelpful and, as critic Jo Walton sums up: “The map in the books is problematical to say the least”<sup>10</sup>, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

First of all, we don’t really know where we are, or rather, where Kvothe is – that is, we don’t know where the frame narratives takes place. The Waystone Inn is located in the village of Newarre. However, Newarre is not on the map. Readers have puzzled over the meaning of the name of Newarre,

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10 Jo Walton: “Rothfuss Reread: Speculative Summary 1: “Inside edges. Holes.” Speculations on Imaginary Geography”. <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/08/rothfuss-reread-speculative-summary-part-1-qinside-edges-holesq-speculations-on-imaginary-geography> (4/4/2014).

suggesting for example ‘new war’ as an alternative reading<sup>11</sup>, but more obvious is the word-play on ‘no-where’. Chronicler observes how the road that leads into Newarre “didn’t seem to lead anywhere, as some roads do”<sup>12</sup> and it seems to be quite literally a dead end for Kvothe, who is repeatedly described as a ‘man who is waiting to die’ - which is the last phrase of both prologue and epilogue in both volumes.

Apart from it being a dead end, Newarre is quite explicitly referred to as ‘nowhere’, as Kvothe himself makes clear to Chronicler in the beginning: “you are, in fact, in the middle of Newarre”<sup>13</sup>, read: in the middle of nowhere. It is mentioned that Newarre is close to Treya, Baedn-Bryt, and Rannish – but as these places are not on the map either, these hints are not too helpful for the disoriented reader. Assiduous readers have had a field day trying to localise Newarre by deducing from clues given elsewhere in the books. On the one hand, judging from the currency used at the Waystone, the place is very likely in the kingdom of Vintas. On the other hand, it has been established that every region in this world has its own particular local superstition and people in Newarre are afraid of demons – which, in turn, suggests that it is located in the Aturan Empire. Thirdly, however, the soldiers who make an appearance at the end of volume II wear the colours of House Alveron, which is situated in Northern Vintas. Triangulating this information, a location in Northern Vintas, close to the Aturan border seems likely, concludes Walton, summarising the findings of an anonymous reader.<sup>14</sup>

Admittedly, Newarre is obviously a rather small village, as Kvothe’s comment to Chronicler continues: “(...) thriving metropolis. Home to dozens”<sup>15</sup>, so it would not be uncommon if it had been left out of a conventional map because of its small size – however, a number of cities share Newarre’s fate of not being on the map. Out of nine places of some relevance to the story in volume I and II, only three can be found on the map: Hallowfell, where Kvothe takes leave of his mentor Ben when he is 12 years old, Tarbean, the city Kvothe spends three years after his parents’ death and the University and its twin city of Imre where Kvothe eventually decides to go when he is 15. Trebon, the location of the Draccus episode, Severen (the Maer’s city), and Haert, the capital of Ademre, all places where significant parts of especially volume II take place are not on the

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11 Jo Walton: “Rothfuss Reread: The Name of the Wind, Part 1: The Cut-Flower Sound”. (comment by meteoroskopos) <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/04/rothfuss-reread-the-name-of-the-wind-part-1-the-cut-flower-sound> (4/4/2014).

12 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*. London: Gollancz 2007, p. 10.

13 Ibid., p. 43.

14 Jo Walton: “Rothfuss Reread: Speculative Summary 10: The Road To Newarre”. <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2012/05/rothfuss-reread-speculative-summary-10-the-road-to-newarre/> (4/4/2014)

15 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*, p. 43.

map. In contrast to that Ralien, Junpui, Anilin, Tinuë can be found on the map but have so far not been of great importance to the plot.

To conclude, the map is inconsistent, which can be disconcerting to any reader who actually likes to trace the hero's journey on it. So a sense of disorientation might ensue which is strengthened by the fact that navigation in the Four Corners can be difficult. Two examples might illustrate this: Planning a journey to Trebon, Kvothe asks around how far it is but the answer is not satisfactory: he is repeatedly told the number of days it will probably take him to travel there and not the distance in miles, as he had hoped. Probing further, Kvothe eventually is told the distance in leagues, but, as "a league could be anything between two to three and a half miles"<sup>16</sup>, the answer's vagueness still frustrates him. Similarly difficult and frustrating seems the academic opposite of this, namely the science of navigating by trifoil compass. Asked a navigation question in one of his admissions exams at the university, Kvothe is left baffled:

Brandeur looked down at the papers before I'd even finished speaking. "Your compass reads gold at two hundred twenty points, platinum at one hundred twelve points, and cobalt at thirty two points. Where are you?" I was boggled by the question. Orienting by trifoil required detailed maps and painstaking triangulation. It was usually only practiced by sea captains and cartographers, and they used detailed charts to make their calculations. (...) I closed my eyes, brought up a map of the civilized world in my head, and took my best guess: "Tarbean?" I said. "Maybe somewhere in Yll?" I opened my eyes. 'Honestly, I have no idea.'<sup>17</sup>

Making things more complicated is the thin line between legend and 'reality', which suggests that there is more than one layer to the map. The second and third narrative levels are interspersed with poems, songs, tales and legends, so places from fiction also play a role and readers have attempted to locate for example the eight legendary cities that were destroyed throughout the so-called *Creation War*, speculating which of the contemporary cities might mark the locations of the older cities, thus adding a second layer to the map. Readers have further speculated that the ruins found in the cellars of the university may be the remains of one of the legendary cities and that the University was simply built on top of it<sup>18</sup>, so there might also physically be a vertical dimension to the map.

On the whole, the question of what is a story and what is 'real' within the world of the narrative is repeatedly brought up in the first frame story. On one end of the spectrum, the evolution of stories is discussed by Kvothe

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 486.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man's Fear*. New York: Daw Books 2011, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Jo Walton: "Rothfuss Reread: Speculative Summary 1: "Inside edges. Holes." Speculations on Imaginary Geography". <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2011/08/rothfuss-reread-speculative-summary-part-1-qinside-edges-holesq-speculations-on-imaginary-geography> (4/4/2014).

and Chronicler and seemingly fantastic occurrences are proved to be rooted in much more mundane reality. Some of Kvothe's legendary deeds are revealed to have been not so spectacular after all but simply small events hugely exaggerated. Similarly, the reader learns that in the Four Corners, dragons actually exist but that there is nothing legendary about them, as Chronicler sums up: "Honestly, I was a little disappointed. I went looking for a legend and found a lizard".<sup>19</sup>

On the other end of the real vs. story spectrum, disturbing and apparently supernatural creatures start to appear in Newarre and frighten the villagers who think that demons "belonged in stories. They belonged out there. (...) Your childhood friend didn't stomp one to death on the road to Baedn-Bryt. It was ridiculous."<sup>20</sup> Yet, the demons appear and one eventually kills a villager. Similarly, most inhabitants of the Four Corners think that the Lorelei-like creature called Felurian is only a legend but Kvothe, who theretofore thought "I do not believe in fairy tales"<sup>21</sup> encounters her face-to-face in volume II and becomes convinced of the opposite. In addition, Kvothe's companion Bast, who is present throughout the inner frame story, is obviously a member of the 'fair folk'. The villagers have not been disturbed by his existence so far because he apparently uses *glamour* (defined by Briggs as "a mesmerism or enchantment cast over the senses so that things were perceived or not perceived as the enchanter wished."<sup>22</sup>) to appear more human than he actually is, as is revealed after Chronicler's magic attack on Bast which seems to lift the *glamour* for a short time: "his soft leather boots had been replaced with graceful cloven hooves."<sup>23</sup>

So there are a number of intrusions of 'storybook creatures' into the world of the Four Corners, and to cap it all, the Otherworld in the form of the *Fae*, a fairy country, eventually becomes the setting of Kvothe's life story for several chapters in volume II. The *Fae* cannot be found on the map, although its absence seems not too surprising given the fact that many people in the Four Corners do not believe in the existence of a fairy world, even though it is, according to Kvothe, very real, if you can only find the "thousand half-cracked doors"<sup>24</sup> that lead to it. One of those doors he finds in the ancient forest of the Eld and about this area one of Kvothe's companions remarks:

Maps don't just have outside edges. They have inside edges. Holes. Folks like to pretend they know everything about the world. Rich folk especially. (...) You can't have blanks in your maps so the people who draw them shade

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19 Ibid., p. 43.

20 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*. London: Gollancz 2007, p. 43.

21 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man's Fear*. New York: Daw Books 2011, p. 698.

22 Katherine Briggs: *An encyclopedia of Fairies, Hobgoblins, Bogies, Brownies and Other Supernatural Creatures*. New York: Pantheon 1976, p. 191.

23 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*. London: Gollancz 2007, p. 93.

24 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man's Fear*. New York: Daw Books 2011, p. 747.

in a piece and call it “The Eld”. You might as well burn a hole right through the map for what good that does.<sup>25</sup>

So blanks in the maps are glossed over simply by naming them which fits the books’ overall concern with names, naming and namers, which provides – besides the motifs of nestled boxes and locked doors – another of the underlying themes of the series.

#### 4. “A thousand half-cracked doors that lead between my world and yours”: the *Fae* episode

Coming back to the motif of the nestled boxes it could probably be said that the *Fae* is an additional world nestled within the more mundane world of the Four Corners and, coming back to the motif of hidden or locked doors, the next phenomenon to consider are the so-called greystones or waystones. These menhir-like standing stones are interspersed throughout all realms of the Four Corners and a number of beliefs and superstitions have become attached to them over time. Some of those beliefs are that they mark the roads of a perished empire, or that they mark roads to “safe places”<sup>26</sup>, another is that they mark doorways into the *Fae*<sup>27</sup>. The latter idea seems to be proven in volume II when Kvothe returns from his stay in the *Fae* by walking around a pair of standing stones which quite obviously form a sort of gateway. How exactly the passage from one world to another works stays obscure, as Kvothe is led by Felurian and then told to shut his eyes and walk in a circle. He claims to observe “a subtle change in the air”<sup>28</sup> but no more information is given. However, linking back again to the motif of boxes within boxes, it could be said in Farah Mendlesohn’s terms<sup>29</sup> that with the *Fae* episode there is a portal fantasy nestled within the more or less immersive fantasy of the three narrative levels, which in turn features occasional intrusions of an Otherworld (Bast, the demons).

Apart from the waystones strewn across the country, the waystones make appearances also in the name of Kvothe’s current home, the Waystone Inn, although the readers don’t learn anything about the origin of this name. Possibly, there is a waystone close by or even part of the building – which might also explain the presence of Bast. Another place that recalls a waystone is the archive building of the university. It is repeatedly described as a tall, windowless edifice which resembles a big block of stone – also it contains a mysterious stone door which is off limits to university

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25 *Ibid.*, p. 623.

26 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*, p. 123.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

28 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man’s Fear*, p. 770.

29 Farah Mendlesohn: *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press 2008.

students and therefore a constant source of interest for Kvothe during his time there. Possibly, the archives could be read as a big waystone containing at least one, if not several, gateways – in the physical as well as in a figurative sense, in the sense of gateways to new worlds of knowledge.

The *Fae* episode is interesting insofar as here not only worlds are transcended but the spatial confusion that is part of the main narration is here extended to temporal confusion. While in the *Fae*, Kvothe's sense of time is disrupted, as in this realm, there is no earthly rhythm of night and day. Instead the whole realm seems to spread out a day-night axis and depending on where one is, the place will either be completely dark, twilight, full day or any shade in between, but permanently so. Directions in the *Fae*, therefore, are not North and South but Day and Night. For Kvothe it becomes difficult to estimate how much time has passed while he has been with Felurian and, being aware of tales told of the different nature of time in fairyland, he fears that on his return a whole century might have passed. However, when he does return, a mere three days have gone by in the Four Corners. So time in the *Fae* does not pass more slowly than time in the Four Corners, rather, it is the other way around – which is less common in actual folktales but not unheard of, as Briggs reports<sup>30</sup> – for Kvothe seems to have aged a little more than would have been possible within three days. Discussing the question with his university friends he is unsure about the answer but eventually settles for a period between three months and a year<sup>31</sup>, adding a temporal vagueness to the general feeling that space and distances are relative within the narrated universe. In the beginning of both books it is mentioned how Kvothe is – in years – still a young man but looks older and often also behaves 'old'<sup>3233</sup> and even claims to be older than his years: "Chronicler paused, suddenly awkward. 'I thought you would be older.' 'I am,' Kvothe said."<sup>34</sup> A statement which might refer metaphorically to the adventure-filled life Kvothe has lived since losing his parents as a boy but which can also be explained on a more literal level if we take into account that Kvothe has spent time in the *Fae* and might have done so more than once, thus aging faster than if he had spent his life completely in the Four Corners world.

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30 Katharine Mary Briggs: *An encyclopedia of fairies: Hobgoblins, brownies, bogies and other supernatural creatures*. New York: Pantheon Books 1976, p. 398.

31 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man's Fear*, p. 1057.

32 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*, p. 11.

33 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man's Fear*, p. 8.



## 5. Doors of stone

Apart from the waystones which are, as it appears, in a manner of speaking doors of stone, actual doors made of stone appear several times throughout the books. One, as already mentioned, Kvothe has physically encountered in the library of the university and this stone door is remarkable because it has neither lock nor handle, much like the legendary door which is said to be situated on the estate of the Lackless family.<sup>35</sup> Another couple of “doors of stone”<sup>36</sup> are cited by Felurian in a legend about the creation of the Fae world and it has been said that a great enemy has been locked behind them and a similar expression is used by an old story-teller in the first volume<sup>37</sup>, even though it does not become clear if these are the same doors. Finally, Kvothe dwells on doors or gates of the mind when he talks about being traumatised after his parents’ murder and how a traumatised person might try to pass these gates in order to escape the trauma: the doors of sleep, forgetting, madness, and in the most extreme case, death.<sup>38</sup> It is to be assumed that connections between those metaphorical and the more or less physical doors of stone will be revealed in the third volume of the trilogy. Or possibly, they will not – as the books have set out to continually elude readers’ expectations, the final volume may continue to do so and leave the readers still disoriented, with an unsolved puzzle.

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34 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*, p. 47.

35 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Wise Man’s Fear*, p. 443.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 746.

37 Patrick Rothfuss: *The Name of the Wind*, p. 178.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 123.