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**Setting: Building Place©**

**By Caroline Allen**

While new writers may acknowledge the importance of characterization, many skip over setting, as if the place where the story is occurring is an after-thought.

Your setting should be as deeply evolved as any one of your characters. It is your job as writer to capture and convey a sense of place. Whether it is a rural setting, and you’re writing about the pulse of the land, or it’s a city and you’re capturing the pulse of the big city, your setting needs to be explored and integrated into the storyline. The characters need to be affected by and they need to have an effect upon the setting.

Think about Moby Dick and how the setting IS the story to a large degree. Or how the South after the American Civil War defines the characters in Gone with the Wind. John Cheever is famous for writing short stories about suburban America, and is sometimes called “the Chekhov of the suburbs”. He uses setting to demonstrate the alienating nomadism of modern suburbia. Think of how much creative energy goes into developing a sci-fi or fantasy setting. Some writers create whole new worlds for their books.

Say you’re an expat, and you’re living in an area that is opposite to the setting that formed the essence of who you are – even THAT is interesting. A setting in that case could be jarring to the characters – what great tension and drama this could create. The seasons, weather, a posh or poor setting, all of these can add tension, drama and life to your story, not just the story you’re writing for this course, but in the writing you do for the rest of your life.

Remember, no setting is more or less important than any other – the only job you have as writer is to capture place deeply and integrate it.

Assignment

1. This is what I call the Nat-Geo Stream of Consciousness exercise. Pretend you’re a National Geographic photographer sent on an assignment. Let’s use my novel Earth as an example. I’m a photographer, and I’m sent out to capture this small rural area of mid-Missouri. I begin with some kind of aerial view, perhaps standing on a hill, even better if I can take shots from a helicopter. At first, I capture the farmlands, forest and snaking rivers from above. It’s a patch-work quilt and gives me some idea of how WILD this place is. Wolves, deer, all sorts of creatures, wild turkeys, pheasant, duck, possum, squirrels, wild boar – the very earth thunders and twitters with life. I get closer and from a hill take a picture of the rural neighborhood where the story takes place. It’s called Indian Hills, small German houses surrounded by wild, brambly forest. Closer I go, taking a picture of Cochise Lane, the street on which the story occurs. Children run wild through the neighborhood, dozens of them. Then I’m shooting the front of the house, the snow hardened front yard and the girl standing in the dormer window. Now I’m inside the house. Now I’m photographing the living room, typical 1970s rural Missouri living room, except the shag carpet has holes and there are deer heads and Jesus pictures on the walls. Closer still to get the flavor of it, and I’m taking pictures of the plaid sofa and there’s a couple of lamps that are blue swirls and look like a bad tie-dye job. My job as photographer is to capture the entire scene, from the epic to the tiniest detail.

Do this exercise for your own setting of one of your own stories. Take “snapshots” of it far away, and get progressively closer until you’re in the room where the event takes place. The idea of this exercise is to give you details about your setting you wouldn’t otherwise consider.

1. Take out a journal and answer the questions about how the space is affecting the events and people in your story. How does the setting affect your characters? Did many generations grow up there? Is that important to your story? Does the setting have a certain economic class to it? We grew up in a working class neighborhood. The class of the neighborhood is part of the setting and can affect your story. Imagine if you’re wealthy, but somehow you’re in a poverty-stricken setting – imagine how much that would affect your story. Or let’s say your story is about a boy who lives in the inner city, and a teacher takes the class to some wild natural area, with rivers and rope swings and forest. You’d want to do a lot of description of both the inner city and the wild natural setting in your story to capture such a profound shift in consciousness for the character. How did the weather affect your story? How did the climate affect it? Was it night or day? If it’s night-time, you might want to go further into what it was like to be outside in the dark. How did you feel about the setting? How did you other characters feel about it?

How does the setting affect the actions of your story? In one of my favorite short stories (novella?), To Build a Fire, by Jack London, a man hikes out into a frigidly cold winter’s day in the Yukon, and a series of mishaps later, he has to build a fire to survive, but his fingers are too frozen to hold a match. The setting in this case IS the story. Does your setting affect the actions of any of the characters in your story? I know in mid-Missouri, it was a tough environment to settle, and the people who ended up there were tough cookies. And so my ancestors, my parents and myself have been toughened up by that environment. You chopped wood, dug wells, tilled the garden, butchered your own meat – and you started at age 5. The setting DEFINED you. How does your setting define your characters?

1. Add weather to your story. Was it snowing, raining, blustery? Was there a storm raging? Was it deceptively sunny and bright outside, while inside a storm brewed? Throughout history, writers have used weather to create mood. What mood does your weather create? For me in Little Women, I feel the slow crunch and heft of winter weighed upon the shoulders of the characters, and I want to show that.
2. Where can you add sensual details around the setting, from smell to sound? Of course setting isn’t just about the visuals. Remember in good writing, the more sensual details you use, the more senses you cover in your manuscript, the more the reader is pulled into the story. What smells were prevalent? Did your setting have a particular texture? Were there sounds, like seagulls or freight or passenger trains, or cars? Was it eerily peaceful? What were the tastes of the setting? Describe the taste of food if you’re eating. We used to eat the dirt in the garden – what a great setting sensual detail that would make. When it comes to textures, I always remember how scratchy our plaid sofa was. You couldn’t sleep on it because the fibers were so rough and bristly. Sights, sounds, textures, smells, tastes, which of these can you add to your setting to deepen the pulse of your story and pull the reader fully into your piece?