

## Setting

When and where does your story take place? Give us that place. Setting means a certain place at a certain time, a stage. You might even start your fiction by showing us the stage briefly. For example, Grand Central Station during the morning rush hour on the first day of winter in 1988. You might give us the details of the train station (the flipping of destination letters on the blackboard, slushy water on the tiles, crackling loudspeakers with Long Island nasality) and the people (the jacketed commuter crowd, a gaunt police officer with a startled dog). What startled the dog? We are ready to visualize the action now that we have the stage and something to look for on it.

### Place for a place

Do you need real places for your fiction? The strongest novels I can think of – *War and Peace*, *David Copperfield* and others – are set in real cities or during real wars. Setting has these days fallen out of fashion at the expense of character and action. Perhaps this trend has to do with our not being a society of walkers. Big writers used to be big walkers. Almost every day, Honoré de Balzac spent hours strolling the streets of Paris; Charles Dickens, the streets of London; Fyodor Dostoyevski, the streets of St. Petersburg. Their cities speak out from them.

There is a common argument against detailed descriptions of setting: They can be outright dull. In their eagerness for excitement, readers often skip the passages that deal with establishing the setting. I certainly do – it took me years to return to Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* because the first ten pages of the novel are spent mostly in describing landscape, and no matter how fine the descriptions, I suspect that even the English readers of the leisure class skipped those pages.

Many writers avoid laying out the setting because they fear boring their readers, but the lack of a vivid setting may in turn cause boredom. Without a strong sense of place, it’s hard to achieve suspense and excitement – which depend on the reader’s sensation of being right there, where the action takes place. When descriptions of places drag, the problem usually lies not in the setting, but in presenting the setting too slowly. Make your descriptions dynamic and quick; give bits of setting concurrently with characters and action. Take cues from drama: It would be a peculiar play in which all the props were displayed for half an hour before the actors walked on stage. Stage managers give you only the pieces necessary for a scene with actors already present. So as you write, though you may have sketched out all the jails, creeks, and mules, don’t show them all first, before the characters. And when you show the setting, be selective, giving only a few details that’ll evoke a place. If the chosen details are vivid, the reader will piece together the whole picture from her imagination. Leave her that pleasure.

I’ve mentioned vividness (a result of using setting correctly) as a necessity for excitement. Fiction, in many ways, is similar to painting. Henry James certainly thought so. In “The Art of Fiction,” he wrote: “The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle) is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other.” Medieval paintings had no landscape for background, and the characters they portrayed expressed little emotion – no laughter. By the end of the Middle Ages, exuberant life appeared in the foreground and landscapes and cityscapes in the background. Coincidence? I don’t think so. So, give your characters – children of your imagination – a lot of rich ground to move on, to play out their drama. A child with sand on a beach has a chance to be more active and creative than a child without sand.

These days, many writers – certainly not all – withdraw their gazes from city architecture and country life, and as they do, their fictional worlds diminish. The exterior and the interior go together. A destitute vision of what’s around us can’t result in a wealth of inner substance. Writing that deals only with ego – *Did my father abuse me?* – to my mind attains the humorless bleakness of a medieval painting, in which only the questions of sin (abuse) and pardon (recovery) matter. A character, let’s say a sculptor, is interesting by virtue of what he does to the stones around him. If we never see the sculptor tackle the stones and other materials, his being a sculptor is merely an abstract trait. Whatever happens psychologically can be expressed in the environment: Mark Twain’s humor in *Huckleberry Finn* would not work without the Mississippi setting.

Of the journalist’s six questions – *who, what, when, where, how* and *why* (a good piece of fiction strives to substantiate as much as a good piece of journalism does) – setting answers two – *where* and *when* – and therefore is extremely important.

## **Real or imagined setting**

Before beginning to write a piece of fiction, decide whether you want to use a real place for your setting or an imagined one. The advantage of anchoring your writing in a real place – entirely or partially – is that you will be rooted, you will draw new inspiration (and some old ghosts) out of the houses and streets. Each town, street, house has its own history; if you walk around a street, talk to its residents, read about it in old newspapers, you might unearth all kinds of interesting facts that'll compete to enter your fiction. In portraying a place accurately, don't fear a lawsuit, which could happen only if the locations give unmistakable leads to real people. So, import your characters from other places and mask them so that not even their fathers would recognize them, or better yet, make them up.

Notice how proud people are if their town has been used as a setting for a movie. The same is true of a successful book that uses an authentic setting. However, if you fear lawyers, you can always change the name and the looks of the town and its streets, and lie in a disclaimer on the front page that any resemblance to real places is purely accidental. I think, though, that if you have a talent for lying, you are better off transforming the places you know in your fiction than making such disclaimers.

## **Setting as the groundwork of fiction**

For me, setting has been the primary source of fiction. Once I left Croatia, I began to set most of my stories there. That caught me by surprise because I had been terribly eager to get to the States. My stories gained resonance from my knowledge of Croatian towns far more than from American settings, which took time to reach my imagination. People ask me if my work is autobiographical. "No, it's topographical," I say, and though people stare at me blankly, I do mean it. I write about places.

The importance of the setting could be expressed in this formula: Setting = Character = Plot. Out of a place, a character is formed; out of a character's motives, plot may follow. This may sound like a psychological theory that the milieu is everything, that a character is a product of her environment. On the other hand, to disregard the importance of setting and to rely on a character's innate nature may sound too much like determinism. If the genes or something else in a character take care of everything, why bother playing out the drama in the environment and on a novelistic stage? Without places and actions influencing the character, you can't have much link between events. For a novelist, the theory favoring environmental importance can usually function better than the theory disregarding its importance.

A compromise, giving weight to both nature and nurture, works best. This approach could be expressed as Setting + Character = Plot. Out of a character's relationship with the setting, or out of the character's conflict with the setting, you get the plot (or at least a part of the plot, or a dynamic backdrop for your plot). The character, of course, has some independent inner core, some traits that can't be explained merely by environmental influences.

Let me illustrate this formula in practice. In my story, "Rust," a setting and character in conflict with each other generate the plot:

If you walk through the green and chirpy tranquillity of the park around the castle at Nizograd, Yugoslavia, past the Roman Baths, you will come upon this monument: two dark, bronze partisans stuck on a pedestal uncomfortably high, back to back, one perpetually about to throw a hand grenade, another shoving his rifle into the air and shouting a metallic silence, his shirt ripped open. Their noses are sharp, lips thin, cheekbones high, hands large and knotty ... The monument was done by Marko Kovachevich, a sculptor educated at the Moscow Art Academy who was a Communist before the war and one of the first partisans.

The sculptor's work, as a part of the place, introduces to us the man and, later, his home completes the picture.

His house was a grand sight – the redness of its bricks cried against the forest in the background. Its massiveness cast a long shadow over the backyard, prostrate and vanishing in the darkness of the woods. What was in the shadow attracted even more attention, so much so that the bright house would sink into a shadow of your mind, while the darkened objects in the backyard would begin to glow – planks of wood with bent nails sticking out, bike chains, rusty train wheels, tin cans, cats, buckets, winding telephones, a greater disarray than Berlin on May 2, 1945. The backyard seemed to be a witness to the collapse of an empire. Marko seemed entrenched in a war of sorts, with chaos gaining the upper hand.

By casting the shadows of World War II in a story set in the seventies, I build the plot. Marko, as a World War II guerrilla fighter, continues his fight, now against his former comrades, against the town and against himself: because he does not know how to live in peace. Instead of working as a sculptor, he makes tombstones, to bury communists. Just as his iron-strength rusts, and he collapses, without ever conforming (since he got stuck in the past), so does Yugoslavia collapse, for the second time (since she got stuck in the World War II mentality, which gutted any kind of progress). The setting is as much a character as Marko is. I wrote this story in the eighties – before Yugoslavia collapsed. I don't mean that there was anything prophetic in the story. The setting gave me nearly everything – the seed for a grand character and for the intuition about Yugoslavia's doom.

Even if the setting and the character together do not give you the plot, your story should appear as though the formula worked so that the place, the people, and the action are integrated. If you import a plot from a newspaper (or wherever) and apply it to places and the people you know, you must transform the places and the people so that the plot – what happens – would be completely believable. Your characters should have sufficient motives to act the way they do, and these motives should be tied to the environment. To give a simple example, don't organize a water polo game on a baseball field; or if you insist, you must first make a swimming pool in that field. It's simpler to find a swimming pool elsewhere.