

Setting as antagonist

In a wide range of stories – westerns, journey stories, nature adventure stories, detective stories, war stories, prison stories, Gothic romance and most successful nongenre stories – setting provides the groundwork for the action. For example, Guy de Maupassant set many of his stories in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. In this story “Ball of Fat,” he describes Rouen before the arrival of the Prussian troops:

A profound calm, a frightful, silent expectancy had spread over the city. Many of the heavy citizens, emasculated by commerce, anxiously awaited the conquerors, trembling lest their roasting spits or kitchen knives be considered arms ... Shops were closed, the streets dumb.

When the Prussians come:

A strange, intolerable atmosphere like a penetrating odor, the odor of invasion ... filled the dwellings and the public places, changed the taste of food ...

Since a character can be shown better in defeat than in victory, Maupassant uses the setting to unmask people. A prostitute is brave and generous – she shares her last food with a group of rich travellers and lets herself be raped by a Prussian officer in order to set the travellers free. When it becomes their turn to share their food, they refuse, despising her on “moral” grounds.

The man-against-nature story (in which a character struggles, usually for survival, against a natural element) depends entirely on setting. (See further discussion of this kind of story in chapter four.) For example, in “To Build a Fire” by Jack London, a man encounters a powerful antagonist, the cold, while he hikes in the Yukon territory in the middle of winter.

As he turned to go on, he spat speculatively. There was a sharp explosive crackle that startled him. He spat again. And again, in the air, before it could fall to the snow, the spittle crackled. He knew that at fifty below spittle crackled on the snow, but this spittle had crackled in the air. Undoubtedly it was colder than fifty below.

London describes how creeks freeze through the bottom, except for springs under the snow which “hid pools of water”:

Sometimes a skin of ice half an inch thick covered them, and in turn was covered by snow ... There were alternate layers of water and ice skin, so that when one broke through he kept on breaking through for a while ... wetting himself to the waist.

In subzero temperatures, being wet means freezing to death, unless you build a fire. The man falls into a spring and builds a fire, but a wind buries it in snow, and he freezes to death. After reading this story, you will remember the crackling of spittle in the cold much better than the man. (This detail, by the way, turns out to be false – I’ve spat in windchill of minus eighty in North Dakota, and nothing crackled. But for me, London’s description still crackles.) The setting is the main character of the story, as grand and unforgiving as God in the Book of Genesis.

Setting can sometimes generate the plot directly. For example, Nikolai Gogol based his novel *Dead Souls* on nineteenth century rural Russia,

where a population census was conducted once every five years. If the last census was in 1830, and a serf died in 1831, the serf's death would be registered in 1835. Gogol's plot: A schemer travels around the country buying up dead serfs – relieving the landowners of the tax on them – to appear rich so he can mortgage his fictitious property and raise cash to buy real property. The schemer relies on the distance between the villages so that he won't get caught as a swindler.

The setting need not be exotic, nor do you need it only if you write a long story or a novel. Even a short piece of fiction benefits from a strong sense of place. Jim Heynen, the author of the story collection *The One-Room Schoolhouse*, sets his stories on an Iowa farm. I suppose if you don't live in Iowa, the setting may strike you as exotic, but if you do, it will not. The same applies to any place. Heynen's trust in the place created a genre: midwestern farm tale. Here's an excerpt from one, "Dead Possum":

The boy whose job was to check the level of the big cattle drinking tank found a dead possum floating in it ... The dead possum had a big red apple wedged in its wide-open mouth. It looked like somebody with a big mouth who had been bobbing for apples.

The boy wanted to yell for the others to come see, but knew they wouldn't believe him, or even if they did, wouldn't be in the mood. One of them would probably say something like, A dead possum with an apple in its mouth? Why don't you ask him to share?

Isn't this something? he said to the cows. Isn't this something?

Some nodded, then stepped past him to drink.

Heynen does not even have a distinct character here, just "the boys," which gives us more of a setting of boyhood than a single boy as a character. The place – populated with animals, vegetables, and farm boys – makes the story. Heynen gives you the place – no more than necessary – as the story moves along. This way, there's no risk that the reader will say, "When does this description end? I hope soon."

He offers you two viewpoints taken by the boys. Some treat the dead possum as quite familiar – and one boy treats it as something truly extraordinary. The group of boys, feeling jaded, familiarize even strange things, but the boy who checks the water level "defamiliarizes" them, finds something exotic in the potentially drab place on a dreary day. As a writer you should attain the skill for defamiliarizing your immediate surroundings, like the boy.

Every place is exotic to those who are far away from it. Write about the places exotic to you, but it's cheaper (no air fare), and usually more effective, to find the exotic in the familiar. The trick is to treasure your impressions of the places you know well. When you neglect a place, you impoverish yourself.

Heynen is right to give us a young boy as the bearer of the freshest vision. I took my eight-month-old son to the zoo to see the elephants. He found a bee circling around us far more intriguing than a dancing elephant. Instead of gibbons leaping in trees, he noticed fish in the water. It struck me that his perspective had a tremendous advantage over mine. He saw the world while I saw the zoo.

By noticing with a fresh eye the fall of a common apple, Newton revolutionized science. He did not need a pineapple.

But you need not limit yourself to the places you know. If you write science fiction, you do not run away from the obligation to give us a setting. Without creating a thorough setting – imaginary science and technology, fashion, architecture, cuisine, drugs – you don't make a good science fiction story. So devise ideas and images that will be unfamiliar to the reader, but make them appear familiar.

And for historical fiction, you can't have experienced every place and time. So you research to make sure that your characters in 1920 don't watch television and that your characters in Philadelphia of 1840 have the option to ride trains or at least listen to the whistles.