



Writing About Place: Five Days to Immersive Setting

Day 1: Setting as a Character

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It's what we all want, isn't it? We want the reader to feel the setting of our story is so vivid, so rich that it acts like another character. We want the reader to look up from our story and be amazed that she is not in 1920s Paris or Middle Earth.

Two questions may spring to mind.

1. **What does that mean "acts as a character," exactly?** Very simply put, the reader feels the setting is another character because it has value. Setting and place are given an important status in the plot.
2. **How do we do that?** Note that this doesn't mean pages of long-winded description or stuffing sentences with every adjective imaginable. There is a tried and true method: We're going to apply the principles of characterization to setting.

Today's lesson has a broad scope in the way that setting and place build over the course of the story. Not all of these tips will apply to your story. I've included questions after each tip to get you thinking about how you can incorporate these suggestions. Let's dig in!

Setting as Character Tip #1:

Have the setting undergo change during your story.

By this, I don't mean to change physical locations. You don't have to uproot the characters from the Bahamas to Burbank. Like major characters, settings and places can be dynamic. In this tip, **the setting is a reflection of the characters.**

Have you read Ann Patchett's novel *Bel Canto*? If so, you'll remember that story was set in an unidentified South American country. How can that be memorable? Read on.

The story's setting is the vice president's mansion, where hundreds of party guests are taken hostage. Over the course of the novel, the house and what it represents changes. First, it becomes a prison; then an Eden (for both the hostages and the terrorists, who bond during the months of negotiations); and then a trap, as the police invade, guns blazing.

Each change in the house parallels the changing emotions of the people in the house. (More on this tomorrow!) The way the characters, and therefore the reader, interpret the setting is reworked as the characters themselves change.

This tip can be implemented on a small or large scale: one room of a house, a high-rise office building, an entire city.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ How can the setting of your story change to reflect the characters' changing emotions?
- ✓ We will be discussing how to use sensory images to bring a setting to life. How will the sensory images change as the setting changes?

Setting as Character Tip #2: Create stakes for the setting.

Thinking about setting as a character in the story points us in the direction of two elements of characterization: goals and consequences. If you've taken my suspense class, you already know that I am a stakes vigilante. Without goals (what the character wants) and consequences (the potential ramifications of those goals, or stakes), your character will fall flat for the reader. The same is true for setting. **Your story's setting can have goals and consequences also.**

Let's look at an example from Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* offers **characters that reflect the setting rather than vice versa**. In the novel, the African American town of Ruby has a house with a history. Known as the Convent, the house was first an embezzler's folly, then a convent and boarding school, and then a haven for misfit women. And in the first chapter of *Paradise* it is clear that the house, the Convent, is under attack by the town, Ruby.

Chronologically, the brutal attack is the last act of the novel, but Morrison places it in the first chapter, establishing that the individual characters are influenced by the two settings in which they live. In fact, this chapter is full of details of place, and almost no details of character. By opening her novel this way, she shows us that these aren't just people battling for survival, but places battling for survival.

The residents of Ruby believe they are under threat and have found protection in their insularity. Because the arrival of the women at the Convent coincides with an increase in trouble and crime in Ruby, the town wrongfully believes that by destroying the Convent it can protect itself. What's at stake for both Ruby and the Convent is survival.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ What is at stake for your story's setting? How can you increase the stakes?
 - ✓ How can the characters reflect the setting?
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Setting as Character Tip #3: Explore the setting's backstory.

There. I've used the B-word: backstory. Don't be afraid to include backstory. Every place (like every character) **has a past, which informs its present**. Without knowing about that past, the setting can feel untethered, not rooted to anything important.

In Tatiana de Rosnay's novel *The House I Loved*, Emperor Napoleon III wants to modernize Paris. His vision is wide, tree-lined boulevards to bring grandeur to the City of Light. The flip side of this means razing entire neighborhoods, bringing an end to generations of history, and putting thousands of people out of their homes. The main character, Rose Bazelet, is determined to keep her home.

The wrecking crews get closer and closer to her avenue, and all of her neighbors flee. The inevitable is at hand. Rose hunkers down in her basement right to the bitter end. She knows she cannot save her home, yet she cannot live without it either.

Rose had promised her now-deceased husband that she would never leave the home that had been in his family for generations. Part of her dedication to the house is this promise, this last link to her husband. But there is more than that.

De Rosnay allows us to dig into the house's past. She shows us what the house has endured and the secrets it contains as it silently bore witness to decades of the lives therein. We feel anguish for the house itself, just as we do for Rose. This is only possible because we understand the house's history, thereby making Rose's ultimate decision understandable, even inevitable. The true work of the backstory is to reinforce the decision of the character. Without it, the house is just brick and mortar and Rose's decision would feel untenable.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Consider the past of your story's setting. Does it have any bearing on the present for the characters?
- ✓ Also consider any objects important in the world of your story. Objects can be infused with the meaning your characters give them. For example, does a character have a special piece of jewelry or musical instrument?
- ✓ Does a character need to make a decision with this past in mind?

Setting as Character Tip #4:

Consider the reader's perception of the setting.

In many cases, something about the setting changes during the course of the story. There are external forces transforming the nature of the place.

On the other hand, perhaps the setting of your story doesn't change, but the way the reader relates to the setting does. **The setting is not changing, nothing is different except how the characters have re-evaluated their relationship to the place.** The character's perception of the setting is transformed thereby changing the reader's perception also.

Let's look at two short examples.

1. The neighborhood that seems threatening at first also provides comfort (“Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin).

“Sonny’s Blues” is a short story set in Harlem, which Baldwin sets up as a place from which people want to escape—through drugs, movies, enlistment in the army, education—yet it’s a place from which no one escapes. They may leave physically, but, he suggests, it will haunt them the rest of their days. Then throughout the rest of the piece in vivid backstory (see tip #3 above), the unnamed narrator relates the warm memories he has of Harlem such as visiting church friends and the music of a street revival. By the end, the narrator, and therefore the reader, has a new appreciation for the setting in all of its complexity.

2. The children’s convalescent home that feels depressing at first turns out to be a place of no regrets. (*The Golden Age*, by Joan London).

As *The Golden Age* opens, London plays upon the reader’s assumptions of the essence of a children’s convalescent home, and a convalescent home for polio victims in the 1950s at that. The descriptions of the rehabilitation room, the sleeping wards, and the medical equipment are what the reader would expect. One of the protagonists, thirteen-year-old Frank Gold, describes himself as a pirate landing on an island of little maimed animals. Then the third person narrator shows the reader the universal emotions of love, loss, hope, and fear through character development of the patients, their families, and the nurses. *The Golden Age* is a microcosm for the world at large—not any better or worse—and not deserving of the reader’s pity.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ Is your setting static? Can the main character’s perceptions of the place change over the course of your story? Or can the narrator clue the reader to an objective truth about the place?
 - ✓ Is it clear to the reader that they should feel differently about the place?
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Setting as Character Tip #5: Include round and flat places.

Novelist E.M. Forster describes two types of characters: round and flat. **Flat characters, he says, are defined by a single trait.** Think of these characters as the ones in supporting roles. The

cheeky waitress. The wisecracking kid. The lovable but goofy handyman. These are one-note characters, and they are useful as a kind of shorthand.

Round characters are dynamic. They are multi-faceted and thought-provoking. They may have paradoxes and behave inconsistently. They are what Forster calls, “surprising and convincing.” That is, a character who surprises the reader in a convincing way.

The same can be said of setting and place. Not every location in your story needs to be round, i.e. surprising and convincing. Sometimes the character simply needs to go to a laundromat or the grocery store.

The setting of Anthony Doerr’s memoir, *Four Seasons in Rome*, is one of the most recognizable. It would be easy to load the prose with adjectives and melodrama in an effort to surprise and convince the reader about a setting that has been the focus of thousands of stories. Of course, Doerr doesn’t fall prey to that option.

He does two things to create a round setting from a location that has been lavished with every conceivable description:

1. He has to change the reader’s relationship to the place. To do this, he first has to develop a unique relationship to the place himself. Rome is, Doerr writes, “an iceberg floating beneath our terrace, all its ballast hidden beneath the surface.” He spends much of the memoir looking at Rome under the surface.

2. He has to select right details and put them into the right places in the story. This means that he allows some places in Rome to be round and others to be flat. He gives the flat places their supporting role. Then he digs into the round places and takes his time unpacking them so that readers can look at them with the new relationship cultivated above—surprising and convincing.

Immerse Yourself

- ✓ How can you change your relationship to the setting of your story—whether that is your neighborhood park or a place you’ve never been?
- ✓ Which locations in your story are candidates to be round and flat? In other words, which locations will you devote effort into making surprising and convincing, and which can be defined by a single trait?