

Setting

By Azalea Dabill

A good story setting gives the reader a sense of place, time, and mood, fascinating them. Setting should be faithfully crafted on the scene level and the story world level. Including foreshadowing, symbolism, and motif.

Donald Maass has excellent advice on how to build the body and soul of setting in *The Fire in Fiction*.

Connecting Character to Place Step 1: Select a setting in your novel. Note details that are particular to it. Include what is obvious but also include details that tourists would miss and only natives would see.

Step 2: How does your protagonist feel about this place? Go beyond the obvious emotions of nostalgia, bitterness, and a sense of “connection.” Explore specific emotions tied to special times and personal corners of this place.

Step 3: Weave details and emotions together into a passage about this place. Add this to your manuscript.

Discussion: It is impossible to powerfully capture a place via objective description—at least, to capture it in a way that readers will not skim. Only through the eyes and heart of a character does place come truly alive. Who in your novel has the strongest feelings about his setting? That character will be a good vehicle for bringing this place alive.

Mr. Maass recommends bringing a character to your setting, and getting his or her opinion and impressions of it, then bringing the character back a few years later, and watch how the setting changes because the eyes that your character sees through have changed. He continues,

Questions to ask about setting: What one or more events has happened here that people remember? What makes this place ordinary, or mysterious or magical? What personal, specific things connect your main character to this place? What does she love, hate, or fear about it? What stands out and makes it different?

Jeffrey Overstreet gives a spectacular world and scene setting in a prologue to *Cyndere's Midnight*.

A magnificent visorcat paws at the trunk of the coil tree, yearning for a summer sun spot up in the branches, his black fur glossed from grooming. The cat's rider, a girl no more than thirteen, slides from his back.

Impatient, the cat claws deep lines down through the bark. “Go ahead, Dukas,” says the girl, running her hand from his neck to his tail, tracing sturdy links of spine through the fur. The cat leaps into the tree and stretches out on a sun-warmed branch.

The girl is tempted to follow. . . .

A murmur of water deep underground draws her into a stroll around a flowered mound of stones, a weathered well. Something about that distant song is familiar. *How curious*, she thinks. *Why would anyone need a well here?*

She climbs up on the wellstones. Ivy has stitched the well's mouth shut, shielding it from summer's slow, golden dust. She tears the ivy loose and shoves her head in, then withdraws, brushing cobwebs and tiny white spiders from her silverbrown hair. Her eyes are wide. The sad, familiar music of the rushing water far below inspires her to imagine its source—a place of fierce purity, high above the world, in skies alive with color and light.

Inside the well a rope is bound to an iron ring. She seizes it and feels resistance. Persisting, she pulls until a sturdy bucket appears. Swirling water mirrors the layered ceiling of dark boughs, delicate leaves, and shining sky. She splashes it across her face. It is surprisingly warm.

She pours the water over the wellstones, washing away dust, webs, fragments of leaves, old spider-egg sacs. Beetles scramble, looking for new homes.

Arranging small glass jars of dye beside her, she takes tiny brushes of vawn-tail hair and sets about painting. . . .

A place is just a place. It isn't alive. It doesn't do anything. Only people do things. In other words, making setting a character isn't really about animating that locale. It is a matter of *you* building a history for it, making big things happen there, giving characters strong feelings about it, and, *in their minds*, making it a place that is magical.—Donald Maass

In this flyer where I use block quotes (if applicable), I have changed to single-spacing for readability.