

“The Inner Music that Words Make”:
The Importance of Setting
By Daniel Stashower

“The rain fell in torrents, except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets, rattling along the house-tops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness. Through one of the obscurest quarters of London, and among haunts little loved by the gentlemen of the police, a man, evidently of the lowest orders, was wending his solitary way.”

Now that’s a reasonably atmospheric piece of scene-setting, right? I mean, in a 19th-century sort of way. Is it Wilkie Collins, do you think? Poe? Hang on, let me check the notes – oh, wait! I forgot to read the opening line. Bear with me for a minute . . . yes ... here it is, the open line of that passage is: *“It was a dark and stormy night.”*

We live in a precarious world, where a few simple words can make a reputation or skewer it. The wisdom of the ages tells us that this passage is not only bad, it’s famously bad. Majestically bad. Moose Murders bad. But can we look at these lines and say – in clear, quantifiable, analytical terms – why the passage is such a stinker?

Of all the topics covered in the MWA University workshops – Structure, Character, Editing -- I believe that Setting is the one that’s hardest to define. It’s like rack and pinion steering, or the Electoral College, or any of those many other things we think we understand until it comes time to cough up a definition. We know it’s important; we’re just not 100% sure how it works.

Here’s what it’s not. It’s not about whether you should set your book in a small town or a big city, or whether you should choose the real-life mean streets of Los Angeles or some fictional realm of your own, like St. Mary Mead. Of course these are important decisions in the life of any writer, but setting is something more than a simple time or place.

We’ve all heard the buzzwords. “Setting as character.” “Creating a milieu.” “Connecting character to place.” All of this is important, as we wend our solitary way through the obscurest quarters of London, but there’s also something organic that has to be there from the first line. Used properly, setting is a tool that advances your agenda on every front and contains mirror elements of character, mood, tone, theme and more besides, helping you to hook your reader in ways that may not be obvious on the surface, but will exert a kind of emotional undertow. If you’re doing it right, you will make your readers *feel* things.

By now you’re saying to yourself, this is all quite interesting in a pedantic sort of way, but what does Elmore Leonard think about it? As it happens, Elmore Leonard stirred up something of a hornet’s nest a few years ago with his 10 Rules for Writers, several of which were aimed squarely at this subject. “Never open a book with weather,” Mr. Leonard advises. Also: “Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.” And, my personal favorite: “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.” He candidly admits that this last one sounds pretty glib, but he goes on to explain what he’s getting at:

“Think of what you skip reading a novel: thick paragraphs of prose you can see have too many words in them. What the writer is doing, he's writing, perpetrating hooptedoodle, perhaps taking another shot at the weather, or has gone into the character's head, and the reader either knows what the guy's thinking or doesn't care.”

Some of that, I admit, is pretty technical – I mean, “hooptedoodle” is a subject we usually only cover at the graduate level – but I think we can all grasp the basics here. Elmore Leonard is being deliberately provocative and more than a little tongue-in-cheek, but he's absolutely right. All too often the passages where an author attempts to set the scene are the clunkiest and most disposable parts of any book. Look Ma, I'm writing.

How can we avoid this? P.D. James has something to say about that: “The technical problems of a detective story are to me fascinating,” she tells us, “how to balance setting, characterization and plot so that all three are interrelated and contribute to the whole . . . Setting, important in any work of fiction, is particularly so in a detective story. It establishes atmosphere, influences plot and character and enhances the horror of murder, sometimes by contrast between the beauty and outward peace of the scene and the turbulence of human emotions. For me the novel invariably begins with the setting.”

For me, what jumps out there is her instance that setting must “interrelate and contribute” to the whole, to all of the other elements of storytelling. I take that to mean that each element of your setting must work on more than one level. Not simply a flat, overly literal description – “It was a dark and stormy night” – but something that pulls the narrative in the direction of your story, characters and themes. That's the difference between something that's integral to the story and something that Elmore Leonard would flip past.

So, how does P.D. James do this? Here's her detective Adam Dalgliesh approaching a crime scene in *A Taste for Death*:

Before he concentrated on the actual scene of the crime, Dalgliesh always liked to make a cursory survey of the surroundings to orientate himself and, as it were, to set the scene of murder. That exercise had its practical value, but he recognized that, in some obscure way, it fulfilled a psychological need. Just so in boyhood he would explore a country church by first walking slowly round it before, with a frisson of awe and excitement, pushing open the door and beginning his planned progress of discovery.

That's probably as close as P.D. James has ever come to telling the reader in plain terms what she's up to. “The promise of discovery.” “The frisson of awe and excitement.” Dalgliesh is setting the scene by describing the setting of a scene. Somehow it works, conveying the sense of “I can't wait to see what happens next.”

Let's consult one more expert. I wonder, could Edgar Allan Poe possibly have something instructive to say? Why, yes, I find that he does. In a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales*, Poe spoke of the ideal workings of a literary artist:

If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents -- he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentences tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

That sounds pretty good in theory, but how does it work in practice? Let's join one of Poe's unnamed narrators as he contemplates the ancestral home of his friend Roderick Usher, one of the "boon companions of his boyhood," who has sent a mysterious summons in which he speaks of nervous agitation and mental disorder:

I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit . . . I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul . . . What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discolouration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. . . Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Vacant eye-like windows. A place where everything appears solid until you look closely and see signs of decay, especially under the roof. One would almost think that Poe is trying to tell us something. Later in the story – spoiler alert – we discover that all is not well with Roderick Usher and his tenderly beloved sister Madeline. We begin to suspect that the title of the story -- The Fall of the House of Usher -- can be taken on more than one level. And in the final stages, as Poe rushes us outside -- under a blood-red moon, no less -- we have cause to remember that barely perceptible zig-zag fissure, as the house cracks open and the fragments are pulled into the earth, which closes "sullenly and silently" over the last vestiges of the house of Usher.

It all works just as Poe said it should. You even hear some of the same words he used at the beginning, as he set the scene, repeated at the end to underscore the horror of what has happened. His very initial sentences have tended toward the "outbringing" of his effect.

During the MWA University sessions we spend a fair amount of time on what I call the "Goofus and Gallant" portion of the workshops, in which we take a look at especially effective illustrations of setting and description and compare them with other, perhaps less successful examples. See if you can spot the differences in the two passages below. The first is drawn from an obscure work called *The Holcomb Horror*, by a now-forgotten author named Norm D. Plume, and the second is the opening paragraph of Truman Capote's masterful *In Cold Blood*. First, Mr. Plume:

Holcomb, Kansas, has a population of 2,026 people. It is located in Finney County, in the western part of the state, and the median income per household is \$47,115. The principal crops are wheat, corn and soybeans. The land is very flat, allowing visitors to see for miles in every direction. The locals take pride in the appearance of their village. At a recent meeting of the town council it was decided to approve a \$23,000 ordinance to beautify the sidewalks outside the county buildings with a pebbled concrete border.

Very informative, right? Now try this:

The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

I don't know about you, but I hear music in those lines. Every word rings with authority, from the beautiful word choices – the “barbed” accent; the “hard blue skies” – to the deceptively simple accumulation of detail that builds to the apt and surprising image of the Greek temple. “To me,” Capote once said, “the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it’s about, but the inner music that words make.”

Something to think about, on a dark and stormy night.