

Hitchhiker's Guide to Stellar Setting

2017 RMFW Colorado Gold Conference

Warren Hammond

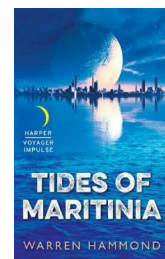
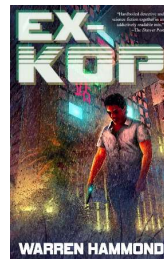
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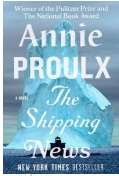
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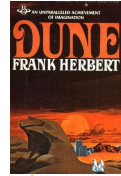
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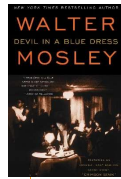
Books with stellar settings



The Shipping News
– Annie Proulx






Dune – Frank
Herbert








Devil in a Blue Dress
– Walter Mosely

Hallmarks of a great setting?

Hallmarks of a great setting

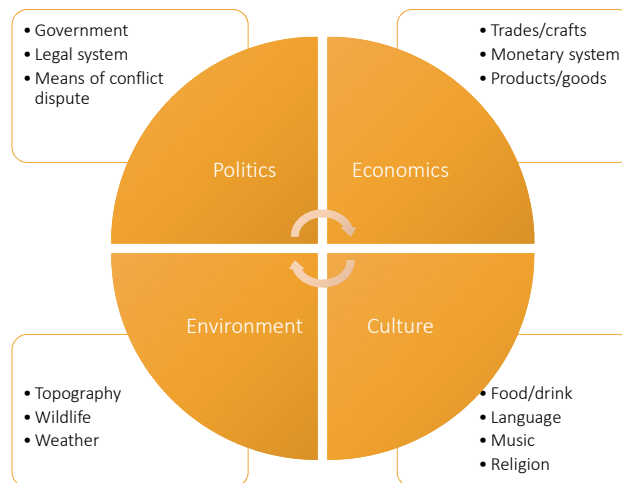
-  It's so integral to the story that the story couldn't be told anywhere else
-  It's like a character
-  It makes reading feel like travel, the ultimate escapism

This travel guide uses a five-star system

	Setting is genre appropriate Setting has execution errors
	Setting feels stock Setting offers promise, but ultimately underwhelms
	Setting is seamlessly incorporated into work Setting may be stock for genre, but is of publishable quality
	Setting is unique and acts as a selling point Setting and story are inseparable
	Setting is alive and unforgettable Setting is artfully woven throughout the text

One-star destinations

One-Star settings: Worldbuilding





One-star settings rely too heavily upon

Info dumps

Backstory



One-star settings may include

Consistency errors

Periods of characters standing on a blank stage

World for world's sake instead of world for story's sake

Two-star destinations



Two-star settings

Serve the story

Are easily understood

Have rules with consequences

Make sense



But two-star settings

Still disappear
too often

Rely too much
on description
and exposition

Force
unnecessary
details

Are flat and
uninteresting

Don't stand
out from the
pack

Three-star destinations



Three-star settings are seamlessly executed

No consistency issues

No historical inaccuracies

No confusion

Reader is never lost



Three-star settings are always present

Description

Dialog

Narrative

Exposition



Three-star settings are publishable but...

May not be
memorable

May be
interchangeable

Don't add much
of value to the
work

Rely heavily on
sight and sound

Four-star destinations



Firmly rooted in place/time

Plot

- Family of tenant farmers flee the dust bowl to find work in California. After a trying journey, they arrive to find the labor market flooded and wages suppressed so greatly that workers are battling starvation. Protagonist vows to help the oppressed while what's left of the family faces ever-worsening circumstances.

Setting

- 1930s
- Oklahoma
- Route 66
- California
- Hooverville



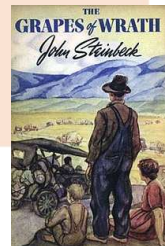
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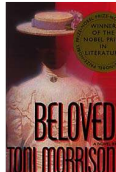




Story and setting are inseparable



Middle-earth:
3rd and 4th Ages



Kentucky/Ohio:
Civil War Era



Baltimore:
2000s



Four-star settings have a unique twist

Sure, my setting is firmly grounded in the tropes and expectations of my genre but...

I'm exploring a niche of the usual world

My dragons can...

My perspective is unique

I focused on a factor for today's audience

I created a new mashup



Four-star settings: traits infect characters

In the way
they talk

In the
occupation
they hold

In the
traditions they
care about

In the
mannerisms
they display

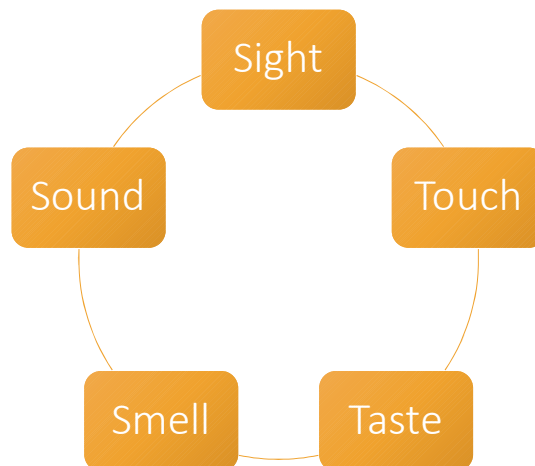
In the
attitudes they
hold

In the way
they dress

In the way
they think



Four-star settings use all five senses



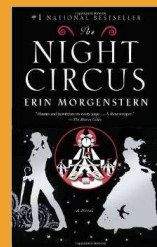
The circus looks abandoned and empty. Autumn leaves rustle overhead. You see signs for popcorn and caramel apples, and you think perhaps you can almost hear a carnival barker's invitation riding the wind.

Sight and
sound only

The circus looks abandoned and empty. But you think perhaps you can smell caramel wafting through the evening breeze, beneath the crisp scent of the autumn leaves. A subtle sweetness at the edges of the cold.

Underutilized
senses

THE NIGHT CIRCUS – Erin
Morgenstern



Five-star destinations



Five-star settings

Transport the reader to
another place, time *and*
emotional state



Five-star settings invoke mood

Eerie	Romantic	Amusing	Dark	Melancholy	Twisted
Adventurous	Wondrous	Conspiratorial	Gritty	Dreary	Chaotic
Bleak	Bountiful	Glamorous	Unsettling	Wistful	



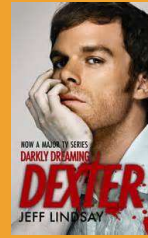
Five-star settings force characters to have involuntary reactions

Physical reactions	Emotional reactions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sweat • Shiver • Itch • Recoil • Squint or blink • Sigh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excitement • Fear • Awe • Sadness • Anxious • Centeredness

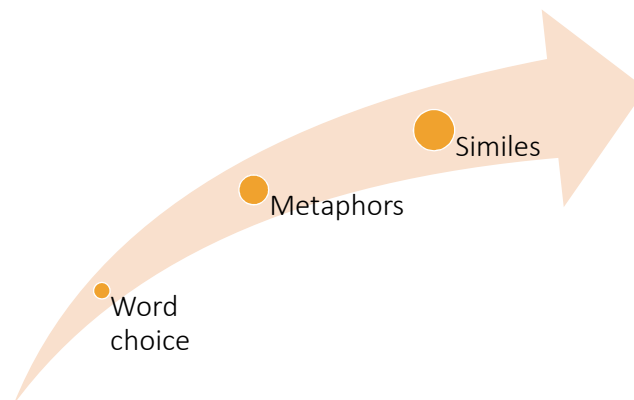
Moon. Glorious moon. Full, fat, reddish moon, the night as light as day, the moonlight flooding down across the land and bringing joy, joy, joy. Bringing too the full-throated call of the tropical night, the soft and wild voice of the wind roaring through the hairs on your arm, the hollow wail of starlight, the teeth-grinding bellow of the moonlight off the water.

Character reaction

DARKLY DREAMING
DEXTER – Jeff Lindsay



Five-star settings infect the prose



A group of detectives and crime lab techs in white smocks were surrounding a table, looking down at it, jabbering and gesturing away. I joined the throng, muttering “Holy fuck” when I saw what was _____ them.

Setting-themed word choice

Animating?

Exciting?

Stirring?

A group of detectives and crime lab techs in white smocks were surrounding a table, looking down at it, jabbering and gesturing away. I joined the throng, muttering “Holy fuck” when I saw what was _____ them.

Setting-themed word choice

THE BLACK DAHLIA –
James Ellroy



A group of detectives and crime lab techs in white smocks were surrounding a table, looking down at it, jabbering and gesturing away. I joined the throng, muttering “Holy fuck” when I saw what was *jazzing* them.

Setting-themed word choice

THE BLACK DAHLIA –
James Ellroy



While Dennis talked, a short, wrinkled man came to the doorway, leaned against the frame. He looked like a _____, but for his mauve face.

Simile Choice

Prune?

Piece of dirty laundry?

Stump?

While Dennis talked, a short, wrinkled man came to the doorway, leaned against the frame. He looked like a _____, but for his mauve face.

Setting-themed prose

THE SHIPPING NEWS –
Annie Proulx



While Dennis talked, a short, wrinkled man came to the doorway, leaned against the frame. He looked like a *piece of driftwood*, but for his mauve face.

Setting-themed prose

THE SHIPPING NEWS –
Annie Proulx



Settings summary

★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★★★
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • World-building • Info dumps • Backstory • Consistency errors • Blank stage • World for world's sake 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve the story • Consistent • Easily understood • Make sense • Few to no errors • Flat • Rely heavily on description and exposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Error free • Publishable • Always present • Rely heavily on sight and sound • Interchangeable • Not memorable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firmly rooted in place and time • Can't be separated from story • Unique • Traits infect characters • Use all five senses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport reader to another emotional state • Invoke mood • Force involuntary reactions • Infect the prose

Questions?

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