**Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers**

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**World as Character—**

**Bringing Your Setting to Life**

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**Place, Setting, and World Building**

It is easy to take place for granted, to think of it only as a backdrop against which the action of a story occurs, but there is so much more setting can do. It can carry mood and tone, function as a mode of conflict or tension, or act as a character. And if a sense of time or place is integral to your piece, or if you’re creating a new world entirely, finding ways of weaving in world building is a crucial technique to master.

Setting is also *more* than time and place—it is a set (or sets) of ideologies, cultural beliefs, laws, and institutions, which can both create and inform characters and conflict in the narrative.

Let’s look at some of the many things setting can accomplish and practice methods for artfully building story worlds. Whether you’re working in speculative, historical fiction, memoir or fiction with a strong relationship to setting, we’ll work on generating ideas and honing skills to exploit the potentials of place.

**Sensory Detail—The Seven Senses**

* SIGHT: What does the character see? What do things look like? If this were a movie scene what would the viewer see? Are there metaphors, similes or images to describe what this looks like? (The sunset looked like a melting scoop of orange sherbet.)
* HEARING: What sounds are here in this place (inside, outside)? What does the character hear? What do voices sound like?
* SMELL: What does the room/air smell like? What do the people smell like, what do they smell? Are there ambient smells like food, pollution, flowers, waste, etc.?
* TASTE: What is the character tasting (either outside, like food, or in their body, saliva, blood)? Can you imagine what a scene might taste like? For example, imagine what a beautiful sunset would *taste* like if it were food; use metaphors.
* TOUCH: What do things feel like to the character? What are they touching, bumping, interacting with?
* ORGANIC: What does it feel like inside the character’s body? Is their heart racing or going slow? Does their chest feel tight? Do they have any pain? What emotion are they feeling and what does that feel like in the body?
* KINETIC: What does the world around the character feel like? Is there movement? Do they feel rushed passed, or calmly carried along?

*Opening Exercise: Texturizing the World—Sensory Details*

1. Select an image of a place. Close your eyes and imagine yourself there. What are the sounds and smells there? What does it taste like, what tastes are part of this place? What can be touched/felt, what does a body feel in this place, what does your body do in this place, what is done to a body?

2. For five minutes, write a setting description of this place. Write what is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt (touch, organic, kinetic). Use as much sensory detail as you can.

3. Now imagine a character in this place. Who would be here? Why? What might happen here? What event might take place?

4. Write a scene in which this character does something in this setting, in which some event or action or “plot” happens. Or perhaps the character is witnessing an event here. Even a holiday or celebration or tradition of some sort. Or a disturbance to the status quo.

5. Write the scene, the event, adding in as much setting detail and description from your first piece as you can/as feels right and necessary to the scene. Notice if any of the details you noted in the first passage feel right (or wrong) in this one, in terms of mood and tone. Notice if it matches or conflicts with the emotions of the character. How can you use this (either of those scenarios) to your advantage?

**Setting as Mood, Tone, and Metaphor**

Setting can be used for pacing, for creating mood and tone, and to create or underpin metaphors for larger or underlying thematic work.

“Brokeback Mountain” Annie Proulx

Both slept in camp that first night, Jack already bitching about Joe Aguirre’s sleep-with-the-sheep-and-no-fire order, though he saddled the bay mare in the dark morning without saying much. Dawn came glassy orange, stained from below by a gelatinous band of pale green. The sooty bulk of the mountain paled slowly until it was the same color as the smoke from Ennis’s breakfast fire. The cold air sweetened, banded pebbles and crumbs of soil cast sudden pencil-long shadows and the rearing lodgepole pines below them massed in slabs of somber malachite.

During the day Ennis looked across a great gulf and sometimes saw Jack, a small dot moving across a high meadow as an insect moves across a tablecloth; Jack, in his dark camp, saw Ennis as night fire, a red spark on the huge black mass of a mountain.

*Later in the story…*

They never talked about the sex, let it happen, at first only in the tent at night, then in the full daylight with the hot sun striking down, and at evening in the fire glow, quick, rough, laughing and snorting, no lack of noises but saying not a goddamn word except once Ennis said, ‘I’m not no queer’ and Jack jumped in with ‘Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody’s business but ours.’ There were only the two of them on the mountain flying in the euphoric, bitter air, looking down on the hawk’s back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs and distant from the tame ranch dogs barking in the dark hours.

…

The first snow came early, on August thirteenth, piling up a foot, but was followed by a quick melt. The next week Joe Aguirre sent word to bring them down—another, bigger storm was moving in from the Pacific—and they packed in the game and moved off the mountain with the sheep, stones rolling at their heels, purple cloud crowding in from the west and the metal smell of coming snow pressing them on. The mountain boiled with demonic energy, glazed with flickering broken-cloud light, the wind combed the grass and drew from the damaged krummholz and slit rock a bestial drone. As they descended the slope Ennis felt he was in a slow-motion, but headlong, irreversible fall.

*Exercise—Setting the Mood*

In a Masterclass on dramatic writing, playwright and filmmaker, David Mamet said: “Everyone probably knows what a tree looks like, so if you’re describing one, tell the reader what makes it different or why it’s important *from your character’s point of view*. You’ll want to let your reader know what it feels like for them, what it sounds and smells and tastes like.”

1. With this in mind, select a place where something in your story takes place, and a character involved. Remember to connect the character to the place—setting should not be arbitrary, it should have some emotional resonance, meaning, or metaphoric value for the character and/or narrative. Note: If it doesn’t, that means you’re *not* exploiting the full potential of place.

2. Before you begin writing, consider, what is the character feeling in this moment? What are some of the emotions and/or thoughts the character has been grappling with in the story before this scene?

3. Now write a scene in which the character interacts with the setting. (Preferably something somewhat active, not entirely passive—though by active I do *not* mean it needs to be adventurous or physically exerting. They can be sorting laundry, skipping stones, having a conversation while their hands pluck grass at their side.)

4. Include descriptions of the setting itself and when you do, do so with the character’s emotional state in mind. Attempt to convey the emotion through transference to the world around them. The object correlative is your friend here. Personification is welcome. Images and metaphors are your tools.

5. Do *not* (for this exercise) tell or explain what the character is feeling, but instead allow the place to do the work of creating mood, tone, emotion.

This exercise helps illuminate the organic and interdependent relationship *between* character and place. These elements do not exist in a vacuum but inform and affect each other.

Extra Credit: When you’re finished, choose a new emotion. Write a scene where the same character is in the same (or similar) setting, but feeling very differently. (This may be a piece that wouldn’t fit in your work, but just play here.) Write the scene and see how what and *how* the character sees, changes.

**Place as Conflict**

Overt conflict: person v. nature (person v. person, person v. self)

Cover/subtle conflict: a sense of discomfort, unease; a feeling of impending doom; foreshadowing

“The Frogs” from *Claire of the Sea Light* Edwidge Danticat

It was so hot in Ville Rose that year that dozens of frogs exploded. These frogs frightened not just the children who chased them into the rivers and creeks and dusk, or the parents who hastily pried the slimy carcasses rom their young ones’ fingers, but also twenty-five-year-old Gaëlle, who was more than six months pregnant and feared that, should the temperature continue to rise, she too might burst. The frogs had been dying for a few weeks, but Gaëlle hadn’t noticed at first. They’d been dying so quietly that for each one that had expired, another had taken its place along the gulch near her house, each one looking exactly the same and fooling her, among others, into thinking that a normal cycle was occurring, that young was replacing old, and life replacing death, sometimes slowly and sometimes quickly. Just as it was for everything else.

After one sleepless night during which she’d been haunted by visions of frog carcasses slithering into her mouth and down her throat, Gaëlle had lingered under the mosquito net draped over their mahogany four-poster bed, as her husband, Laurent, slipped out of the room.

…

Soon after he was gone, she got up. Without changing out of her nightgown, she grabbed the ceramic chamber pot, which she kept by her bed. With the ever-vigilant Inés out of sight, Gaëlle walked out of the house and followed the almond grove that veered into a field of wild vetiver grass, then into a brook.

The sun had not been up for long, but it was already blazing in the middle of the sky. Still, the rocks and pebbles around the brook felt icy under Gaëlle’s bare feet. She walked on them as she would a bed of dirt or grass, following the water’s flow downstream until she spotted her first frogs. Just a few inches from the nearest lily pad, she noticed a green-horned frog that looked like a leaf with horns.

…

Gaëlle looked more closely. All three frogs, she saw, were dead, though of a more natural-seeming death than the frayed remains she’d seen in recent days. The three dead frogs were in crouching positions, as though frozen mid-jump or -crawl.

Rubbing her belly, she crouched down to pick up the frogs, then dropped them into the chamber pot. As she walked toward the base of a particular almond tree, where everyday in the last week she’d performed a wordless burial for a handful of frog skins, she cradled the pot against her stomach. Most mornings when she’d reached the brook, she’d hoped to find at least one live frog, but carrying the dead frogs away made her feel useful, as though she were performing a crucial service that no one else would or could do.

…

“This heat and all this trouble with the frogs is surely a sign that something more terrible is going to happen,” Laurent told her when he came home that evening from town. He bent over to kiss her cheek, his face soaking with sweat.

*Exercise—Stirring Conflict*

1. Write a scene in which the external world (place, setting, environment and/or social norms, laws, institutions, etc.) creates an obstacle or blockage for a character in getting what they want or accomplishing what they’ve set out in the scene to do.

2. Think about how the setting might act as an antagonist. How might the world function as a character itself?

3. This is the more overt form of conflict we discussed, but also consider opportunities for covert or subtle tension, discomfort, unease. Consider possibilities for using place to foreshadow future narrative conflict.

**World as Character—World Building Beyond Environment**

Place, setting, world are more than just the physical environment.

Time and place converge in CULTURE. Setting is also the cultural and ideological milieu in which characters are steeped.

Part of the work that setting is *always* doing is holding the cultural and ideological soup that surrounds the characters—and is therefore *very* effective at reinforcing the deeper themes and collective stories underlying the surface character narrative.

E.g. In *Brokeback Mountain*, the setting is both Wyoming and a collective cultural backdrop of homophobia. In “The Frogs,” the setting is both Haiti and a collective cultural backdrop of gangs and violence, stemming from a history bound up in slavery, racism, revolution, global exclusion, and poverty.

For setting to work most effectively, the personal conflicts, trials, and losses of the characters should in some way mirror or interact with those of the culture and world around them. At least, this is one of the richest opportunities our settings can offer us. The following excerpt and exercises explore ways these two elements can intersect and interact.

“Ava Wrestles the Alligator” Karen Russell

My sister and I are staying in Grandpa Sawtooth’s old house until our father, Chief Bigtree, gets back from the Mainland. It’s our first summer alone in the swamp. “You girls will be fine,” the Chief slurred. “Feed the gators, don’t talk to strangers. Lock the door at night.” The Chief must have forgotten that it’s a screen door at Grandpa’s—there is no key, no lock. The old house is a rust-checkered yellow bungalow at the edge of the wild bird estuary. It has a single, airless room; three crude, palmetto windows, with mosquito-blackened sills; a tin roof that hums with the memory of rain. I love it here. Whenever the wind gusts in off the river, the sky rains leaves and feathers. During mating season, the bedroom window rattles with the ardor of birds.

Now the thunder makes the thin window glass ripple like wax paper. Summer rain is still the most comforting sound that I know. I like to pretend it’s our dead mother’s fingers, drumming on the ceiling above us. In the distance, an alligator bellows—not one of ours, I frown, a free agent. Our gators are hatched in incubators. If they make any sound at all, it’s a perfunctory grunt, bored and sated. This wild gator has an inimitable cry, much louder, much closer. I smile and pull the blankets around my chin. If Osceola hears it, she’s not letting on. My sister is lying on the cot opposite me. Her eyes are wide open, and she is smiling and smiling in the dark.

“Hey, Ossie?” Is it just you in there?”

My older sister has entire kingdoms inside of her, and some of them are only accessible at certain seasons, in certain kinds of weather.

*Exercise: What Has Been Lost?*

Goal: To learn a character’s vulnerabilities, their weaknesses, the chinks in their armor. To gain a deeper understanding of and empathy for our characters.

1. Think of a character and give us a list of things they have lost. Include losses of concrete objects, personal losses (like relationships or deaths), metaphorical losses, and social or beyond-the-personal losses (world-building losses, perhaps)—several of each at least.
2. Now choose one of these losses and write a scene or reflection about or in response to it.

What do you learn about characters through this exercise (either this character specifically, or character development in general)?

To me, it’s a stripping down of character, getting to their bare bones, their most vulnerable places. Knowing our characters vulnerabilities is key. Also, making the list helps situate them and their place in the world of the story—what is their relationship to the world around them? This exercise can often generate an entire (new) story itself, or can be used to deepen your understanding of and empathy for your character.

*Exercise: What Has the World Lost?*

This version of the exercise is similar, but is applied to a whole world, to world building, rather than a single character: it treats the world AS a character. What do I mean by that? Well, think about our world currently. What are some things—abstract, metaphorical, and literal—that have been lost, stolen, or are missing? In what ways is the world imbalanced, where does it lean? This can be the physical world (loss of established homeostasis: climate change), social (loss of a sense of equality: racism, sexism), governmental or infrastructural (loss of sanity in a political system), etc.

* Make a list of these world losses (6-10).
* Write a scene in which we see one of these losses in play. It can be on a grand, world-level scale, or in one of its manifestations on a more personal level—we can see the ways this loss affects a particular character, for example.

**For the road… More prompts for setting:**

* Look at a picture/photograph of a place similar to one of your settings (landscape, city, etc.) and describe it, as if you’re trying to explain it to someone who is not there (as if you were on the phone, trying to tell them what it looks and feels like). Use all seven senses. (What are the smells, sounds, tastes in the air, what does it feel like [air, temperature, humidity, weather, sun], and what do you see [colors, objects, people, animals]?)
* Have a character describe a new setting they’re encountering through negation: by referencing things that are *not* there (that would be in a setting they’re used to), absences, differences. Have them notice and register what is different and strange. (This, perhaps, will help elucidate two settings, the new and the old, through their contrast.)
* Ekphrasis: look through some landscape paintings or photographs. Choose one that doesn’t remind you at all of any of your settings. Describe it. Paint the picture of it with your words.
* Choose one of your settings. Make a list of descriptions of the place for each of the five senses: what are the sights, smells, tastes, sounds and feels of the place? List at least five things for each sense. Now write a scene incorporating ALL of your descriptors.
* Imagine one of your settings and put a character in it. Now pretend that character is standing with another character, who is blind (blindfolded?), and the first CH has to describe everything in the environment, including how to move through it and what obstacles there are, to the second. Use sensory details. (Again. Always.)
* Blindfold a character and have them experience ONLY the other senses of a place. Have them describe what they hear, smell, feel, and taste.
* Blindfold yourself. Sit for five minutes in a place, preferably one slightly unfamiliar to you, with you blindfold on. Notice all your other senses and all the sensory detail of the place (sounds, smells, touch [the air on your skin, the material you sit/stand on, etc.], tastes). Take the blindfold off and write for 10 minutes describing that place with all the senses intact. Then set a character in the same place and have them interact with the environment.
* Have a character smell something (you choose what) that recalls a memory. Have them retell the memory, focusing on the smells.
* Think of a sound that embodies an emotion or thematic resonance your character is dealing with. Write a scene in which that sound recurs, and does the work of relaying the emotional tenor of the character to the reader.
* Focus on memorable details, and keep them grounded in a character’s sensory experience. Everyone probably knows what a tree looks like, so if you’re describing one, tell the reader what makes it different or why it’s important from your character’s point of view. You’ll want to let your reader know what it feels like for them, what it sounds and smells and tastes like. No matter what kind of world you’re creating, this technique can bring more vividness to your writing. (From David Mamet on Dramatic Writing)