

A Sense of Place

Good evening everyone and welcome to 'A Sense of Place'.

Since I suggested doing this session to Helen, I have thought a lot about the meaning of the title and I now have a rather different take on what I think this - a sense of place - actually means.

Initially, I thought it was about how authors depict scenes – how they paint a picture of a sunrise, a windy city street, or the interior of a room following a burglary, for example - but then realised that this was portraying things in just two dimensions.

I'm **now** thinking more in terms of how, we as writers, create the illusion for our readers of actually being somewhere else – in a different place, in a different time...seeing the world through different eyes, hearing it with different ears, smelling it, touching and feeling it as if we were another person.

What we really want to do is **immerse** the reader in the place we are trying to recreate. To portray it so that it's far more like the world, or the experience, we get when using one of **these** [show a VR set]. Put one of these on and you are able to look around you as you walk through the ruins of an ancient city pursued by Barbarians; or move to meet the ball as you are playing table tennis in a sports hall; or you may be just lying on a tropical beach watching the waves as parrots cry from the trees behind your head. The effect is to be **part** of a 3D world, complete with sounds. It's like the difference between viewing a flat photograph, and handling a model you can pick up and feel; the difference between hearing music on a transistor radio, and listening to it on a sophisticated surround-sound system.

The most memorable film and theatre does this incredibly well. Think about the opening scenes of Dunkirk when you, as the viewer, are with the soldiers on the beach or running through the streets, bullets flying around your head. Or Les Mis, where for a couple of hours you are no longer sitting in a West End theatre but are there, manning the barricades, crying defiance to the enemies of the people. Or again, in a hushed National Theatre as Cleopatra makes her final speech and breathes her last. And then you come out into the cold night air and are plunged back into the reality of the present.

But for a while, at least, you **were** somewhere else.

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So, this evening we will be trying to figure out how good writers do just this – how they **transport** us to a different place. How they use words – description of physical places, and of the people who inhabit them - and utilise **all** of the senses, to create this sense of place, atmosphere, and mood.

We'll be looking at the works of good writers - most that you will have heard of, one at least you will not. And we'll include examples from fiction, memoir, travel writing, and poetry. This is because I believe 'good writing' is 'good writing' whatever the genre, and whoever the author happens to be.

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I'm going to continue talking for about another 5 or 6 minutes, and then we will look at the first of three types of setting – **indoor** settings – which should take us up to coffee time or, as I have it on my timetable, 'Beer Break'.

After that, we'll turn our attention to the great outdoors and consider first outdoor **rural** settings and lastly outdoor **urban** settings – and by that I really just mean 'those involving buildings'.

Some of the time we'll spend together as a large group and (if all goes to plan!) we'll also be going into breakout rooms where we will be able to discuss things in smaller groups. (Ca 4.00 mins)

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So...we are often told that there are certain elements that are normally considered to be the ingredients of good creative writing. These include:

- **Characters** – interesting, dynamic, relatable, heroes or villains, who develop as the story progresses
- **Dialogue** – naturalistic, helps drive the plot, reveals something of the characters' personalities, their intentions, their fears, beliefs and so on
- **Plot, storyline** – intriguing, page-turner, believable enough...
- How much to **Show** and how much to **Tell**? In most cases, Show is favoured over Tell
- **And a carefully chosen authorial voice** – From whose viewpoint are you telling the story? First person? Third person? Limited, or Omniscient?

But any story also needs a place and a time in which to happen – something that is often referred to as '**the setting**'. In fact, tonight these terms (*setting*

and a *sense of place*) will be largely interchangeable and I'm not going to get too hung up on any fine distinctions. As this is going to be the focus of the session, we are going to start with a quick overview of some of the considerations about settings that any writer has to make before putting pen to paper, fingers to keyboard:

- First - is the setting **Imagined or Real**? Examples of the former are Narnia, Hogwarts, Treasure Island, a Fairy Tale Castle; examples of the latter, Dicken's London, or Val McDermid's Edinburgh. But whichever we are writing about (even in actual or real settings) **the author will be selecting which aspects** to highlight, which to touch on, which to ignore altogether. So, there will always be choice and a certain amount of imagination at play wherever we set our stories.
- **Time** – past, present or future? Or a mixture? E.g., Set in the present with flashbacks. Tonight, I'm going to count 'time' as an integral part of our discussion as it is bound so closely to place in creating a story's overall setting. Setting a story in, say, nineteenth century London as opposed to 21st century London changes the setting, so that although you may be geographically in the exact same spot in both, the place has changed so much that it is effectively a different place. The same could be said when writing about Watford in December 2019 compared with Watford in March 2020- a vivid example of how economic or societal changes can also impact a story's setting.
- And then there's the **Fine detail** – for example, any story may have multiple settings. It may move from urban to rural, and back again, and will have scenes (whole chapters maybe) that are set mainly or exclusively indoors or out. There is no limit to the combinations and permutations here, but in order for the story to really work, each has to be presented, painted for the reader, so that they can visualise the place in which each piece of action is set.

Importantly, we need to ask: Why does any of this matter?

- The way that the setting (the time and the place) is handled will strongly affect **the mood and the atmosphere** of the piece. Critically, these are the elements that will create **emotional effects** in the reader and, as we know, you may forget the details but you will **never forget how a story made you feel.**

- All the advice points to the use of **specific details as the key to really effective description**. Katherine MacMahon stressed this in the masterclass she did with us last year, as did my tutor in the CityLit course I attended; and I have read it numerous times elsewhere.
- Describing the **small details that matter most to your characters** helps to capture *their emotional engagement* with their surroundings and helps to reveal the way that your characters see their world. So, for example, describing the things that your character chooses to surround themselves with can say a great deal about them and present a convincing picture of their state of mind.
- And lastly, just to share a hint I read recently, some writers believe that in any significant scene you should **try to utilise at least two or three of the five senses**. Something to think about, maybe, during the evening.

I believe that one of the best ways to understand and learn how to do things better is to actually study the writing of those authors we consider to be very good at what they do. As came up in Andi Michael's session last week, we need to 'read like a writer' which is a little different from the majority of people who are not interested in creating their own work and are happy just to read the stories for what they are.

So, this evening we will be using some extracts selected by me to illustrate what I think is writing that gives the reader a really good sense of place. To take us up to the break we will start by considering Indoor settings – the first, one from a piece of writing by George Orwell (**ca 9.00 mins**)