

## **LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION.**

A workshop by Ian Welland

16 May 2022

### **SLIDE 1**

The idea of this workshop is to encourage your writing in terms of exploring places and locations; and emphasising the importance of places and locations – the emotions, feelings, characters and memories they can conjure up.

In my writing, whether it be academic writing, historical fiction or poetry, places and locations have been central. Indeed, I would say in the case of my own historical fiction and poetry, places and locations have often been mapped out before characters or intended plots and circumstances. Such has been the importance I have made of places and locations.

I have always had an appreciation of the importance of places and locations – not only for my writing, but also in my professional career. For over thirty years, I have worked as a property manager for leading commercial real estate companies and agencies; and have found myself in different towns and cities across the UK. Not only have some of the places I have worked in, left their indelible marks on me, but they have also continued to interest me even though I no longer live or work in them – Southampton; Chesterfield; Aylesbury – all three of these continue to weave their mischief inside me. Others also dance around me – Oxford; Northampton; and London of course.

What is common for all the aforementioned places and locations, is that they have taken up their own residency in much of my work and no doubt will continue to do so.

## SLIDE 2

I first became interested in places and locations in the early 1980s, when my reading really took off.

In those days, I read:

- *Cider With Rosie* – Laurie Lee’s Gloucestershire countryside memoir of his early years
- *Brideshead Revisited* – Evelyn Waugh’s autobiographical 1920s/1930s book on his days in Oxford and travels
- *Clayhanger* – Arnold Bennett’s northern industrial tale set in and around the Staffordshire towns and cities
- *Love for Lydia* – H E Bates’s autobiographical 1920s/1930s novel set in the Northamptonshire countryside
- *Brighton Rock* and *End of the Affair* – Graham Greene

I soon realised was that there was an emerging academic platform in understanding places and locations, simply called:

## **URBAN STUDIES**

With the tie-in of literature, so **LITERARY URBAN STUDIES (or LUS for short)** was born; and is today so widely respected that new studies, seminars and conferences are held across the globe. LUS also feeds into other agendas such as conservation, preservation, climate change and sustainability.

### **SLIDE 3**

To date there have been several academic studies; of which the following selection perhaps present the most accessible:

- The City in History by Lewis Mumford (1961)
- The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature, edited by Kevin McNamara (2014)
- Literary Urban Studies and How to Practice It by Jason Finch (2021)

### **SLIDE 4**

#### ***THE CITY IN HISTORY* by Lewis Mumford**

First published in 1961; Lewis Mumford is perhaps better known as an American Art Historian and journalist focusing on Abstract Expressionism (i.e., Jackson Pollock; Mark Rothko etc).

Mumford's study of, the City in History, is very much the starting point for understanding the origins and evolution of towns and cities – how they became geographically important; how they became centres of excellence and of innovation; plus, how they became woven into the social, cultural and spiritual fabric of the lives of those who migrated to them and settled in them.

Mumford's study, recognised as the foundation in the study of urban environments from their early settlement beginnings to their post war redevelopment, very much emphasised the reasons why people migrated to urban areas and developed them in large scales – housing, employment, wealth, and lifestyle.

## **SLIDE 5**

**The Cambridge Companion to The City in Literature (2014)**, moves Mumford toward the weaving of “society and stories” into the underlying fabric of towns and cities; and their uses as outlets, for living, for working, for worship; but also specifically for the keeping of records, chronicles and scriptures –

- Ancient civilisations such as the Chinese and Asian sub-continent
- Greece - Athens
- Early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century – The library at Alexandria
- Rome
- London
- Paris

And later,

- Towns and Cities in the USA

## **SLIDE 6**

The latest study of LUS is this impressive one by Professor Jason Finch, published in 2021.

What Finch’s study does, is it advances Mumford; but complimenting the Cambridge book, looks at how successive societies have taken a place or location in a new or transforming direction; shaping it to modern times, whilst attempting to keep the very essence of “centre” still intact – that is, a town or city or location whilst evolving, will always have historical relevance that will be at the heart – of people and their uses.

Although academic in format, it is accessible and has some very useful exercises for the writing mind!

## **SLIDE 7:**

So, in summary, what are Literary Urban Studies (LUS)?

It is...

1. The concept of a town or city
2. The historical context of how towns and cities have evolved
3. How towns and cities have influenced and will continue to influence researchers, writers of fiction and non-fictional work; plays; poetry et al.

## **SLIDE 8:**

So how have places and locations played an important role or part in writing and helped shape our understanding and of history?

Examples:

- C.1390 – Chaucer: Canterbury Tales
- Pepys – Diaries (1666 – The Great Fire of London)
- 1802 – Wordsworth's Lines composed on Westminster Bridge... and then of course, The Lake District
- Charles Dickens – Victorian London; Tale of Two Cities
- Thomas Hardy – Dorchester / Dorset
- Ridley Scott – Bladerunner – the futurist forecast of metropolis

I'm sure you will have your own examples...

## SLIDE 9 / 10 / 11 / 12

What I would like to do now is to show you some examples of works associated with places and locations that have featured in my own writing:

➤ Peter Ackroyd: London – The Biography

There is a lovely passage defining London in the early 1950s:

*“So, London was drab. Compared with other great cities, such as Rome, Paris and New York, London was ugly and forlorn: for the first time in its history it had become something of an embarrassment. And yet, there were already stirrings of change, arriving from unexpected quarters. The Teddy boys of Elephant and Castle and other parts of south London, were joined by the bright young things of the Chelsea set and the beatniks of Soho, as objects of moral outrage. And came new social housing ventures such as the rehousing of Bethnal Greeners (Essex; other Londoners to new towns such as Stevenage, Harlow and) Basildon; (and to expanding towns of Bedford and Northampton); and high-rise (replacing prefabs)*

London became “Greater London” spanning Bucks, Herts, Essex and Kent borders.”

*“The two great set-pieces of London theatre were the Festival of Britain (1951) and the Coronation of HM The Queen (1953). This gave London a sense of renewal as a successful and enthusiastic community, re-enforced by the resurgence of orthodox values and conventional activities.”*

➤ Delft – guidebook from the late 1960s. How the city has changed though kept some of its 17<sup>th</sup> century face.

- *They Came to Bath* by William Lowndes – chronicles the lives of those who ventured to “Aqua Sulis” and helped bring about a Georgian renaissance albeit with a backdrop of wealth, commerce and greed.
- *Bath* by Edith Sitwell – the first real study of Georgian Bath shaped by those who visited (of course, Jane Austen was heavily influenced by Bath – Northanger Abbey being a prime example)
- *Oxford* – inspiration for Evelyn Waugh (*Brideshead Revisited*) and Colin Dexter (*Inspector Morse*)

### **SLIDE 13 / 14 / 15**

Now I want to bring you closer to home...

- Watford – two very good sources of material courtesy of Watford Observer.
- Watford – the excellent book on Cassiobury by Paul Rabbitts and Sarah Kerenza Priestley; and one of John Cooper’s many “postcard” books on Watford.
- *Turning Corners* by Brian Bold – full of important anecdotes of places and locations, lived in and travelled to...
- *Cruel Deflections* by Geoff Brown – Italy, Paris, London et al
- Mike Lansdown’s books of course – Australia, London, travels et al

- Susan Bennett's wonderful assessment of the diary of Georgiana Jane Henderson – lots of places and locations are central to the telling of this “life”.
- Christopher Anstey – *The New Bath Guide* (1766), written almost entirely in the form of Letters in verse / rhyme and telling the story of Bath 18<sup>th</sup> century high society – how the topography of Bath was crucial to the social aspects of life at the Bath – the affordability of accommodation through to the leisure and intrigue.

Two quotes from Anstey's marvellous book which emphasise the significance of place and location:

*“’Twas a glorious sight to behold the Fair sex  
All wading with gentlemen up to their necks,  
And view them so prettily tumble and sprawl,  
In a great smoking kettle as big as our hall.  
And To-day many a person of rank and condition,  
Were boiled by command of an able physician.”*

Extract above is from LETTER VI – People came to Bath to take to the waters as a cure for Gout and indulgent vices... Bath as a Spa became “the” place and was developed as a cultural centre for the rich and famous.



The second quote exemplifies Bath as a place and location in social terms:

*“Thank Heaven of late, my dear mother, my Face is not a little regarded at all public Places;  
For I ride in a Chair with my hands in a muff,  
And have bought a silk coat and embroidered the cuff,  
And what can a man of good fashion denote,  
Like an ell of good ribbon tied under the throat,  
My buckles and box of exquisite good taste,  
One is of paper, the other of Paste.”*

Extract taken from LETTER X – Parading around Bath in late morning or Sunday afternoons – to be seen in the right places among the right people. Harrison’s Walk, Grand and South Parade, the Gardens, the Squares, the Coffee houses.

## **SLIDE 16**

So, what are the main influencers for writers?

- Geographic positions of places and locations  
A number of towns and cities are either adjacent to or close to rivers – rivers provided links for trading and commerce of course
- Buildings – architectural fabric of towns and cities
- People – the migration of people to towns and cities in search of better living conditions and employment (stability)
- Creation of cultural and spiritual centres as “living” places
- Time period
- Towns and Cities – **they play on our senses** - evoke atmosphere, give rise to activity, emotion(s), feeling(s), experience(s), memories

## **SLIDE 17**

**Exercise 1** – Select a town or city (or another place / location / destination) for a story or piece of writing that is going to form a central part of the story alongside a character or characters...

## **SLIDE 18:**

Discussion

## **SLIDE 19:**

Focusing on a place or location: What to find out (before the writing really begins):

- Geographic location of a place or location
- Specific topography – how is the place and location set out?
- Significant buildings or areas in the place or location
- Specific places for activities
- History of a place or location
- Cultural events and activities
- People / diversity / cultural elements?
- How do you feel about the place; what is significant for you?

## **SLIDE 20**

Seeing and imagining

- Can you see your story and your main character(s) in your chosen place or location?
  
- Have you given them a reason to be located there?

- Relevance to them as a character – will the place or location help shape their character? Change them as people? Evolve?

## **SLIDE 21:**

### **EXERCISE 2:**

#### **Building the place, space or location**

- Drawing the narrative out concerning a place or location and giving your reader every opportunity to form an impression in their mind of the place or location:

#### Examples:

- *KES* by Barry Hines – the industrial landscape and harshness of life in the mining community of the north of England (Barnsley was used as the location for the film – the book’s actual setting is unspecified but thought to be north Derbyshire (Chesterfield) and South Yorkshire (Barnsley, Sheffield, Rotherham).
- *TREASURE ISLAND* by Robert Louis Stevenson – the Admiral Benbow, an Inn on the North Devon coast located adjacent to the Bristol Channel
- *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE* – Thomas Hardy’s 1886 novel based on Dorchester, Dorset.
- *CANNERY ROW / TORTILLA FLAT / OF MICE AND MEN / EAST OF EDEN* – all by John Steinbeck – set during the great depression of the 1930s, in and around Monterey and the Salinas Valley, California.

- *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED* – Evelyn Waugh – Oxford; London and Shire Counties
- *INSPECTOR MORSE* – Colin Dexter – Oxford

What's important to note in all of these, is the sense of place and location; conjured up and described at length by the authors that is integral to understanding the central character(s) and their lives; their social positioning; their thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions.

What is also key to this, is the selection of a place in time – in history; or in the present? That is the question...

Example:

*Life on Mars* and *Ashes To Ashes* dramatised for TV from the scripts of Matthew Graham; Tony Jordan and Ashley Pharoah, were interesting in that they were initially set in the current year, but found their central character waking up in 1973 (Manchester) and 1981 (London) respectively.

## **SLIDE 22:**

Discussion

## **SLIDE 23:**

People

The placing of your character(s) – who, where, why, when?

## **SLIDE 24:**

### OUTLINE

Once decided on the place and location, one hopes your character(s) will be starting to form in your mind – now the time has come to sketch out a plot / scenario to be taken forward...

## **SLIDE 25**

Discussion

## **SLIDE 26:**

Your mission should you choose to accept it is:

To develop your place / location and write a piece to be shared next week as a writing prompt...

### Other recommendations for further study:

- Pevsner Guides (The Buildings of England) series – devoted to all areas of England.