

WRITER'S DIGEST

5 Steps for Using Setting to Write Compelling Middle-Grade Narrative Fiction

Author Heather Mateus Sappenfield discusses the importance of setting the stage in middle-grade fiction with five steps for using setting to write compelling middle-grade fiction.

- HEATHER MATEUS SAPPENFIELD

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Middle-grade protagonists and readers have minds hungry to define their worlds. It's the work of this age group, after all, before they grow into young adults with the angst of determining how they fit, or do not, into the worlds they've defined. For this reason, setting is vital to middle-grade narrative.

I live in Vail, Colorado, where our inclined Rocky Mountain setting is obvious. Many people live or travel here to ski, snowboard, hike, bike, raft, hunt, kayak, Jeep, camp—to interact or recreate with nature. The surrounding peaks' zig-zag horizons and seasons set the pulse of our lives, so my latest middle-grade novel, *The River Between Hearts*, beats to this rhythm. The novel's opening paragraph reads:

My tree house, Fort Kruse, wasn't far from home if you had wings. But if you were stuck on the ground, stubby cliffs blocked the way, so the trail looped around. Behind me the

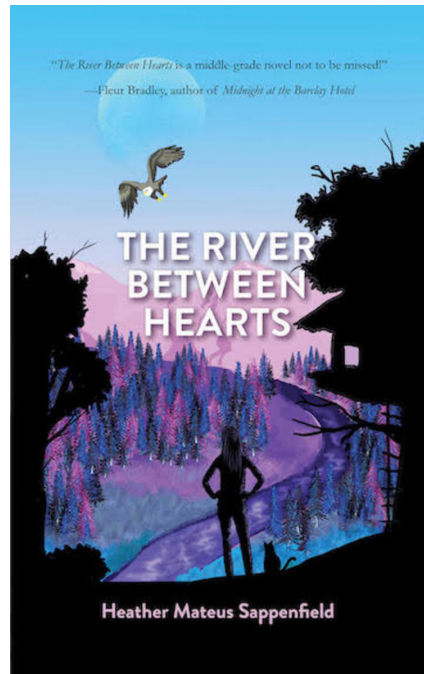
creek nagged *Rill! Rill! Rill!*, making me mad enough to spit. Rosebushes scratched my arms and legs, and spiderwebs stuck to my face. Clifford shot between my shins, making me scream like a girl, which I guess was all right, because I am one. But still.

Right out of the gate I strove to make this novel's setting crucial, not only as where the story was unfolding, but also in conveying the narrative. Here are five steps I followed to accomplish this.

Build a Stage

From a narrative's first word, readers begin interacting with the writing to form meaning. Providing a stage on which to place the characters and their actions is essential for comprehension of and connection to any story. With middle-grade readers, however, its construction must happen on the move. Sensory details bring settings to life, drawing the reader further into the narrative. My protagonist is almost-11-year-old Rill, and her first-person narration above draws upon the senses of sight, touch, and sound, all of it happening via action.

Keep in mind that there can be setting within setting. Here, Rill is on the mountain behind her house, but on this mountain is a tree fort, nearby is a riding stable, town, and her family's combination home and rafting company. Each of these micro-settings operates within the larger macro-setting, and they interact, creating dimension and depth.



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Make the Characters Real

Setting offers a marvelous route to establish and hone character. Rill views and interacts with her setting differently from how a teen or an adult would. For example, she's short. For another, as a tomboy, and in her current mood, she couldn't care less about the roses on the bushes; she realizes only their thorns. Someone else might love the sound of the rushing creek, but it makes Rill mad enough to spit. Each of her descriptions reveals a clue about her emotional state, and because she does realistic things in them, her believability as a resident there is established.

Create Tone and Voice

The above paragraph's details are useful, but the cranky way Rill describes them weaves another layer that instills her voice and lays the foundation for her story arc. The daily backdrop of a protagonist's life and their attitudes

toward it—the things they notice or do not, focus upon or ignore, love or loathe—are marvelous opportunities to infuse not only story texture and tone, but clues for the reader about their struggle.

In first-person narration, staying in the protagonist's lens is easier. When writing third-person, double-check that the narrator is mindful of this lens, and if they stray beyond it, they will need to make clear why.

Infuse Metaphor and Symbolism

Without divulging spoilers, I'll share that the *wings*, the *stubby cliffs*, and the *river* all take their first symbolic steps here. As the story continues, these elements echo throughout the action. The wings and especially the river become a refrain, and Rill's interactions with them indirectly show how she's faring. By the novel's final third, the wings and river have grown into metaphors for her journey.



Elevate Setting as Character

If a setting is so thoroughly established that it operates as character, I'm hooked. Never do we live in a vacuum; setting continually influences our

experiences. Let your protagonist interact with the setting—thinking about it, confiding in it, lashing out at it—as if it were a person. Perhaps even have it reveal details that the protagonist has omitted, or not noticed, because of their conflict.

This revelation of the protagonist’s omission allows readers to have fabulous *aha!* moments. Often this also creates suspense—a friction, as readers realize they must weigh what the protagonist/narrator is allowing them to discover. Always, when this occurs, characterization has been deftly enhanced.

The mountains are my beloved home, and thus my setting. But these craft elements would function just as well for a crowded inner-city, a farming town on the plains, a tropical island, or a fantasy world. What matters is intimately knowing the stage you set, so it can be infused with sensory detail while also functioning on multiple levels, and this helps young on-the-go readers define their worlds.



BY

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Heather Mateus Sappenfield loves adventures, especially in the Rocky Mountain landscape that’s been her lifelong home. As part of women’s teams, she’s won 24-hour mountain bike races and road bicycling’s Race Across America—San Diego, California to Atlantic City, New Jersey. She’s also competed in the Mountain Bike World Championships; ski instructed for Vail Resorts, and loves backcountry ski touring. Her toughest adventures, though, arise in the writing of stories. She is the author of two contemporary YA novels, *The View from Who I Was* and *Life at the Speed of Us*, a Colorado Book Awards Finalist. Her story collection, *Lyrics for Rock Stars*, released as winner of the V Press LC Compilation Book Prize, was nominated for the MPIBA’s

Reading the West Awards, was a silver medalist for the IBPA's Ben Franklin Awards, and was featured on Colorado Public Radio. Her most recent book, *The River Between Hearts*, runner-up for the Kraken Prize, is a middle-grade novel about friendship and healing. For more information, visit heathermateussappenfield.com.