

## Evoked a sense of place

Judy Darley, *Essential Writers* – April, 2010

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As a fiction and travel writer Judy Darley is well aware of the importance of a sense of place in all kinds of writing. Sights, sounds and smells all add up to an evocative image for the reader, and keep them interested in the story, regardless of genre. Here she offers tips on capturing the essence of a place.

Open any story or feature with a few words of description about where your scene is taking place, and you immediately provide the reader with a tangible image to hold on to as your tale unfurls. A location can set a tone, a mood, and conjure up an atmosphere far more adeptly than a lengthy description of your main actors' feelings and actions.

### Transport your reader

Storytelling is about transporting the reader, which makes the ability to create a believable setting one of the most important skills for a writer, whether the piece you are writing is factual or fiction, set in a real location or a fantasy land you've dreamt up. Handled well it can provide you with a wealth of metaphors, both overt and utterly subtle, that will enrich the tale you are trying to tell, and help add weight to the point you are making, and to exemplify the themes of your story.

One writer who was very good at doing this was JRR Tolkien. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is largely about the conflict between good and evil, and Tolkien used his description of fictional settings to underline this in each scene. Think about the "new green of Spring", "shimmering in the fields and on the tips of the trees' fingers" in the Shire inhabited by hobbits, compared with bleak Mordor's "dead land, silent, shadow-folded, waiting for some dreadful stroke."

### Consider the context

You can find countless examples of a sense of place in classical literature. Charles Dickens's London was as recognisable as any of his characters, and in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* the Yorkshire moors played as significant a role as either Heathcliff and Catherine - remove their love story to some peaceful village or a balmy Mediterranean shore, and the stormy sensual undertones would mutate into something else entirely.

In my short story *Restoration* two sisters are volunteering at a restoration project in a Victorian cemetery; if they had been volunteering at the local charity shop or donkey sanctuary the restoration of their relationship would have taken a very different tone. The

setting is key in providing a sense of mortality, and underlying the problems in the relationship between the women.

### Highlight your characters' emotions

The location for your story can also offer a means of highlighting your characters' states of mind, with a grey, dreary cityscape providing the perfect backdrop for an emotional breakdown. Equally effective is a setting that sits at odds with the protagonist's inner turmoil, such as a character in mourning wandering through a beautiful summer garden where everything is bursting with colour and life.

These kind of details slide into the reader's mind without them really registering it, but it will ensure that they soak up your character's sorrow, happiness or fear all the more successfully.

### Drive up the drama

In Willy Russell's play *Shirley Valentine*, which was made into a film with Pauline Collins in the title role in 1989, the exotic setting of Greece served as a strong contrast to Shirley's humdrum existence in the UK. The two, vividly different, backdrops emphasises the emotional changes Shirley goes through as she blossoms from a downtrodden wife who's so bored with her life that she talks to the wall to a gleeful, skinny-dipping vixen who has rediscovered a more spontaneous, confident side of herself.

**David Charles Manners is the author of *In the Shadow of Crows*, published by Reportage Press. Like Willy Russell, he uses the location in his novel to represent both the physical and emotional backdrop of his characters. "The protagonists are forced by circumstances beyond their control to abandon all that is familiar, taking the reader with them into alien worlds of constantly changing landscapes, cultures and languages. I wanted the reader to experience something of the intensity of that shifting sense of place, in order that they might share the characters' awe, bewilderment and, at times, alarm as they pass through these foreign realms in their search for refuge and personal redemption."**

### Give your location a voice

Monica Ali, the author of the award-winning *Brick Lane*, *Alentejo Blue* and *In the Kitchen*, has always found the setting of her novels as important as the characters. While *Brick Lane* and *In the Kitchen* both unfold in the UK, *Alentejo Blue* is set in the Portuguese region of Alentejo, which provides a completely different palette for her descriptions.

"Sense of place is really important to me. In *Alentejo Blue* it was almost the main character, given voice by the multitudinous characters of villagers and visitors. To give voice to a place you need to develop a chorus. A sense of place comes through an accretion of detail."

A setting gives you ample opportunities for using colourful adjectives - think beyond the clichés of blue skies to shocking azure, rich cobalt. For a hot summer setting, think hibiscus,

bougainvilleas, geraniums and orange blossom, while in a English autumn consider the smell of damp leaves on the ground, cars hissing by on wet roads, breath misting in the air.

Engage all your senses to draw an evocative scene - what herbs can you smell, what birds and insects can you hear, how does the ground feel beneath your bare feet? How does the scent of roasting coffee taste in the back of your throat?

### Capture the essence

One of the reasons I became a travel writer was my love of trying to capture the essence of place in a few brief sentences. Nothing compares to a few delicately selected details written down while on location, and it's a good excuse for an escape. I often turn to the sense of taste, and find that describing a region's traditional dishes will often imbue a piece of writing with a more three-dimensional sense of place than merely describing what I see and hear.

During a recent trip to the Alentejo region so well captured by Monica Ali, I made notes about the desserts made from egg yolks, ground almonds and sugar. Though I don't have a sweet tooth myself, I knew they would offer my readers a shortcut to the type of places I was visiting, the evidence of Moorish influences that still remain and the simple pleasures the inhabitants enjoy.

Yes, views of ancient villages, wheat fields, olive groves and cork forests are all important ingredients of the portrait of the Alentejo, but those vast, sweet sticky cakes seem to contribute something no amount of glossy descriptions can.

The sense of taste is almost as firmly linked to memory as smell, which makes it the perfect tool for a writer intent on conjuring up a credible scene, as the reader fills the space between the lines with their own experiences of places similar to the one the writer describes. The more convincingly the writer does this, the more successfully the completed novel, travel feature, short story or poem will resonate with the reader.

### Draw your reader into the scene

As the author of the best-selling memoirs *Snowball Oranges*, *Manana, Manana*, *Viva Mallorca!* and *A Basketful of Snowflakes*, all set on Mallorca, Peter Kerr is well aware of the importance of a sense of place. The inspiration for Peter's books comes from his own experience of leaving his life in Scotland and moving his family out to Mallorca to take on a run-down orange farm. One of the reasons for the books' success is Peter's ability to draw his readers into a scene with a few carefully chosen words.

"For me, it's all in the mind's eye - I never write about a place when I'm there, but always a while later when I'm somewhere else entirely. I suppose that this approach acts as a kind of filter - the less important details having disappeared through the passage of time, while the main features remain vividly in my memory. It's then up to me to put these recollections of views, sounds, smells and characters into words that accurately reproduce that sense of place for the reader."

## Use this power regardless of genre

Since leaving Mallorca, Peter has gone on to write about Scotland in the same way, before moving on to writing fiction. He says that his writing method stays the same, regardless of the genre or subject.

“It’s the absolute foundation of what I do, be it fiction or non-fiction. I have to place myself in the scene I’m writing about, but in a fly-on-the-wall capacity, not as an active participant in what’s going on - and that’s even if I am an active participant in what’s going on, as in the non-fiction stories about life with my family when we were growing oranges for a living in Mallorca.”

Peter offers a scene from his book *Viva Mallorca!* as an example.

“Passing through orchards already spangled with ripening oranges, I stopped for a moment in a place where the low domes of some younger trees allowed an uninterrupted view of the encircling mountains. Thin threads of wood smoke were spiralling upwards from the forested slopes, marking the location of little hidden fincas, in which I could imagine families already sitting round their hearths, as if practising for those chilly nights of winter now being heralded by the shortening days. An owl hooted somewhere in the wooded distance, adding a note of eeriness to the gathering twilight.”

He says: “Once you’ve set the stage, it’s your world to do with as you want, and the only limits are the bounds of your own mind’s eye.”

## Enjoy the journey

Straightforward travel writing, as opposed to travel memoir, is a very different genre. Often your editor will have a particular focus in mind, and whether that’s gastronomy, property or a particular hotel group, it will necessarily underpin your depiction of a place. Word counts need to be strictly adhered to, which means that each and every sentence needs to be as tight as possible, which puts a stop to lengthy descriptive passages, and relies more than ever on your ability to inject a sense of place into a few brief sentences.

Hannah James, the former editor of *Real Travel Magazine*, understands this only too well, both through the features she edits and those she writes herself.

“A great trick to help evoke a sense of place is to provide more than simply factual information. Try and take the reader there, include information about every sense - not just sight. Tell them what it sounds like; describe the smells that wafted towards you; how does it feel - is it humid, cold, crowded, empty? This literally brings a place to life. Readers want to be taken away, whether it’s to a fictional destination or a factual one. Evoking a real sense of places is exciting and makes your writing become real.”