

Show us Your World: Writing Setting and Description in Fiction

by Nicole Evelina

A lot of factors go into creating a rich world for our readers, but two of the biggest are setting and description. These are what immerse us, what help us believe this place we're reading about – whether it's a colony on another planet in year 6054, a tribal gathering of 14th century Native Americans, or a bright, sunny day on the beach in modern Los Angeles – are real. They are also two things that often trip up writers because doing them correctly is a delicate balance between too much detail and not enough.

Obviously, historical, fantasy and paranormal authors will have more description in their works because they have to build a world for their readers different from their own. But description is just as important for those of us who write contemporary. It can help our bustling urban cities, cozy villages, and small towns become characters just as much as the people who inhabit them, which helps make our readers loyal to our places as well as our characters.

Here are a few tips on handling description in ways your readers will love:

1. Remember that your settings are there for a reason – Only describe them to the level they are important to the story or its characters. I LOVE to write descriptions. So, I describe everything in as much detail as I want in the first draft. That's because I, as the author, need to know. But when I get into the second draft, they start to disappear. By the time we're in final draft, they are only there if they are important for story or characters.

2. Let us know right off the bat where we are – No matter when we experience it, wondering where we are pulls us out of the story and reminds us that we are reading – which we forget when we're really absorbed. So, even if it's just a brief mention, make it clear to your reader in every scene where the characters are. Sometimes we know through your prose that the location hasn't changed; that's fine. Other times all we need to know is that we're defenseless in a dark alley. Our imagination, along with the rest of the plot for the scene, can provide the rest.

3. Sprinkle in description where it's natural – There are places in a novel where you're more likely to give a full roof to floorboard description – toward the beginning to establish the setting, when a character is seeing a place for the very first time, or if the details of a location are particularly important – and those are fine. Just keep them few and far between. The rest of the time you can give your description bits and pieces, usually as things come up in conversation, action or casual observation.

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Think about how you notice things in real life. If a place is new, you're going to take in much more detail than if it's a place you're very familiar with. For example, when I go on vacation, I notice how the air smells and the tap water tastes. On the other hand, when I go to my office five days a week, I rarely notice the color of the walls or the pattern of the carpet. It's so normal, I'm blind to it. If there's something like this that it's vital for characters to know about, throw in a change. I can guarantee I notice if someone has moved my red Office Space stapler, and that makes me notice the things on my desk around it.

4. Keep it interactive – Having your characters interact with their setting is the best way to “show” it to us, rather than “tell” us about it. They don't have to do Parkour down the street, but if that fits your story, go for it. Something as simple as tapping a champagne flute to find out if its glass or crystal tells us a lot, both about the person and the setting, based on the expectation and outcome.

5. Keep pace and atmosphere in mind – I know George R. R. Martin gets away with it, but please don't go on for pages and pages describing a single dinner setting. That is overkill. A general rule of thumb is that lengthy descriptions slow down the pace. Action scenes usually have less setting description and more movement, whereas if your character is lost in the fog, you may want to extend your description a bit to provide a sense of helplessness and confusion.

6. Use all five senses – Probably because we grew up with TV and movies, we tend to default to the visual as our primary mode of description. But we can also touch fabric, wood, stone and skin. We can smell the sea breeze, the putrid alleys, and our lover's perfume. We can taste kisses or the emotion behind words. We can hear the ticking of a clock or the hum of an air vent. If you want to learn from a novel, read Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, which just won the Pulitzer. Because one of the main characters is blind, he gives descriptions in ways you may never have thought about. And you can use that to your advantage. Next time you're tempted to describe what something looks like, close your eyes and describe it using two of your other senses instead. You'll come away with more engaging writing.

7. Stay in your character's POV – Every scene has a point of view character. That is the person whose eyes your description should come through. His or her thoughts and experiences will influence how he/she describes a place or object. A person who is afraid of cats will see something very different in a feline than will the crazy cat lady down the street. Also, keep in

(Cont. p 9)



(Show Us from p 8)

mind that based on time period, job, or location people will notice different things. For example, Deb Harkness reminded me in a writing class that people pre-1800s wouldn't have looked up at the stars and thought about the vastness of the universe because they didn't have the knowledge to think of it in those terms. Also, as an ordinary person, I may not notice the fabric or cut of someone's clothing, but a tailor, fashion designer, fuller or even a model might.

8. Do your research – If you use real places in your fiction, travel to them if you can. I know that's not always possible, but there really is something to be said for getting the feel for a location in person. Every location has its own vibe and your characters would sense that. Similarly, the light looks very different in the desert than it does in the Midwest. If you get the chance to be in your location, walk the same paths your characters would take. You'd be surprised the details you'll come up with. If you can't travel, take advantage of technology. Look at online pictures, use

Google maps, talk to locals on social media about what it's really like to live there – it's the next best thing to being there in person.

If you choose to fictionalize your town, especially if you write contemporary, you may want to base it on somewhere real and do the same kind of research you would if it were an actual place. To me, that's key to making it feel believable. Obviously you have more leeway for making things up when your location is fictional, but whatever rules you establish, make sure you're consistent.

9. Read authors who are known for their attention to place – As we all know, one of the best ways to learn a new aspect of writing is to read it done well. In the romance/women's fiction genres, Mary Kay Andrews is well known for bringing her locations to life and there are many, many others.

These are just a few of the things you can do to making your setting descriptions come to life. I'll be talking these in more detail and adding others during our Coffee Talk at the November meeting. Hope to see you there! If you have questions, feel free to ask me at a meeting or email me at nicole.evelina@att.net.

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“Tall, Dark and...Despicable!”

by Kadee McDonald

I had a work-in-progress and a dilemma.

I thought my hero had a lot going for him...handsome (of course), athletic, pretty well off financially, and absolutely sure the heroine was the last woman in the world he'd ever fall for. Unfortunately, in the first draft, he also came across as arrogant, opinionated, and a man with definite unresolved anger issues.

If you're thinking that no sensible woman looking for a serious relationship would ever want to get too close to this guy, you'd be right. 'Despicable' might be too strong a word to describe him, but when the heroine first meets him, he has all the appeal of a wool turtleneck on a hot summer day.

If I couldn't find a way to redeem this ill-begotten fellow in my heroine's eyes, there'd be no love story. And, of course, there had to be a HEA...the epilogue shows they've been married for thirty amazing years and have two grown children who are following in their parents' professional footsteps. (Yes, it's a 'vintage' romance set in groovy 1970.)

So, how could I rescue this man? I didn't even have to thumb through a book on 'writing great characters' to find my answer, and I knew it would be more complex than having him 'save a cat.' I had to show his problems and his vulnerabilities. In other words, I had to make this 'beast' human.

First, I gave him a solid reason for all that anger, misdirected toward the heroine though it might have been. I decided to add more scenes from his POV because, frankly, Lucy, he had some 'splainin' to do. His father died in WWII, leaving him as a boy with no strong male role model to emulate. (I hope you're starting to like him a little more already.) His mother dies when he's a teenager and the rest of his formative years are spent with a beloved aunt whose health is also now failing. Finally, he was jilted a few years earlier by his fiancée when she discovered he wasn't as rich as she thought he was.

The story is still a WIP, but I trust I have enough ways now to steer him into a sympathetic hero that my heroine can adore, despite his surliness to her in chapter one (and chapters two and three).

In fact, by the time I'd discovered all the reasons he was so emotionally stilted and combined those with the way I already saw him, I was just about ready to marry him myself! When the story is finished, I hope readers will feel the same way.

Kadee McDonald writes "books that believe in happily ever after" and is especially fond of Regency romance and vintage romance. She's been a member of RWA and the Beau Monde chapter since 2013 and joined LARA in 2014. She has two traditional Regencies released through Musa Publishing's Aurora Regency line. Visit her site (www.KadeeMcDonald.com) and feel free to connect with her on Twitter (@KadeeMcDonald) and Facebook (Kadee McDonald Author).

