

# Setting

- Designing a setting means designing the greater world as well as the immediate one. Setting can include:
  - Physical location
  - Time period
  - Social mores
  - Typical ways of life for wealthy and poor
  - Travel, money, politics
  - Methods of achieving power
  - Typical family structure
  - Flora and fauna
  - Laws and law enforcement

And so on . . .

- Fiction authors: I'm starting with this because it's what you think about when you don't know what to write.
  - You can also start with a character, but that approach won't work if you don't know your genre. You'll just have a cool character wandering aimlessly through a poorly defined world, with no real goal in mind.
- Non-fiction, memoir & biography writers: You've got to pick your subject or topic first.
  - Once you've decided, setting is your next step, because you've got research to do.

## Slide 2: SETTING IS GENRE

- You can't skimp on your world building or your description of the setting, because many of the conventions that signal genre are setting elements:
  - Example: dark sky, rickety, broken-down and abandoned house, bare trees, remote location, dark windows, dark basement.
  - Example: Misty forest, pure waters, magical creatures, quest.
  - Example: chapel, small town, youth, bouquets, springtime.
  - Example: Woman running for her life down a deserted street, urban setting, no police vehicles in sight, dark sky, old sedan with one headlight out
- Genre is not just the premise, the character archetypes or the plot. The setting itself tells the reader what kind of story it will be.

## Slide 3: STORIES ARE ABOUT PEOPLE. ALWAYS

Good worldbuilding is not enough. A fast-paced or intricate plot is not enough.

Example one:

The old house on the hill was a dangerous place. There were rumours that it was haunted. The house was rickety and gray, the front door didn't close properly, and the front yard was full of weeds and here and there, the fragile skeletons of long-dead birds and squirrels.

Example two:

Molly planned to spend the night in the old house on the hill. She'd heard all sorts of rumors, and truthfully, it was creepy that the front door didn't close properly, and the front yard was full of weeds and here and there, the fragile skeletons of long-dead birds and squirrels. But if she could make it through till morning, she'd win the bet and pocket twenty bucks.

## Slide 4: SETTING IS NOT JUST A PLACE WHERE THINGS WILL HAPPEN

The setting should both establish the status quo and move the character towards change.

- Something about the setting must be personal for the main character.
  - Example one:
    - Detective travels to a small town where he discovers that someone was murdered—drowned in the pond behind the local inn.
  - Example two:
    - Detective travels to **his old home town** and discovers that his first love was murdered—drowned in the pond behind his family's inn.
- The setting should be either:
  - Too restrictive
    - Lords and ladies in regency romances live pampered, lavish lives. But daughters are expected to submit to an arranged marriage, often to a much older man.
    - Too restrictive, forcing the character to leave her comfort zone.
  - Too scary
    - There is an unfamiliar, bare room. The muffled sound of a phonograph playing a scratchy old tune comes from the other side of the only door. The floor is concrete and has a drain in the middle. There's a workbench with tools spread over it, and there are suspicious red stains on the tools and on the concrete.
    - Too scary, forcing the character to take action to protect himself.
  - Too unstable
    - The spaceship carrying explorers to a new planet runs afoul of space pirates and suffers a hull breach.
    - Too unstable, forcing the character to take action to protect himself, his goals or his world.
  - Too painful
    - The soldiers are undernourished, sick and terrified that the coming winter will mean death by hypothermia. The war has gone on for three years already. But surrender will mean enslavement for their wives and children.
    - Too painful, either emotionally or physically

## Slide 5: SETTING IS:

- A place where things can go wrong:
  - You don't just want a flawed character, you want a flawed reality.
    - Is the story happening on a cruise ship? Make the hull damaged.
    - Is the story happening on a mountain? Make it a really tall mountain, and make it January.
    - Is the story about a naval battle? Put your characters on a British warship in 1776, off the coast of Massachusetts.
- The best place to confront weaknesses:

- Setting changes as your story changes, but you must always move your character from one uncomfortable setting to another, and those uncomfortable settings must always be designed to force your character to make a choice.
- Character choices drive stories. Your main character is the one who is making the choices which move the story forward.
- Full of people, animals, plants and inanimate objects—90% of which the reader will never see:
  - You need to be fully familiar with all aspects of the world the character is in, because if you're not, you will run into plot problems.
    - Example: The hero is supposed to explore a cave in this scene—but his village is in the grasslands.
  - However, most of that worldbuilding will not be mentioned in the story.
    - The village is now on a mountain with lots of caves, and although the grasslands at the foot of the mountain still exist, there might never be a need to mention them.
    - Because you know the grasslands are there, you have additional plot opportunities.

## **Slide 6: SETTING IMPOSES LIMITATIONS**

You have to consider distance, chronology, square footage, light level, ambient sound, laws, time period etc.

- Exactly how many days will they need to travel to get from point A to point B?
- Did that highway exist in that time period?
- Is it high or low tide when the boat runs aground?
- Is the alarm so loud that there's no way the character could miss it?
- Is it too dark in the woods at night to keep to a trail?
- Is that mountain range actually crossable at that time of year?
- Is there a front desk at the police station, and is there actually any way the character could sneak past it?

You have to block out the locations of people and objects within each scene.

- How close are the characters standing?
- How many characters are in the room, and where are they in relation to one another?
- How many paces across is the room?
- Where is the furniture, and do people have to walk around it to talk to one another?
- Is somebody close to the fireplace and too hot? Is somebody next to the window and getting rained on?
- If someone is shouting, can anybody hear anything else? If somebody is whispering, are other characters close enough to hear?
- If somebody fires a gun, will the bullet go through the door and hit someone in the hall? Will it slam into the wall or break a window?

## **Slide 7: SETTING DETERMINES MOOD AND TONE**

- Picking a genre isn't enough. You need to know your subgenre. In fantasy, for example:
  - Dark fantasy:
    - Setting elements: war or evil overlord, monsters, untrustworthy law enforcement or government, magic with a harsh cost (bloodletting, human or animal sacrifice etc.)
  - Romantasy:

- Setting elements: castle, lush forests and gardens, royalty with magic powers, Medieval-ish society and world
- Urban fantasy:
  - Setting elements: city, law enforcement system, werewolves and vampires and a caste system, weaponized magic

## Slide 8: CRAFT YOUR SETTING SO THAT ONLY YOUR HERO CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM

- The setting should be designed so that nobody else is available (or qualified) to save the day.
  - Example one (weak plot): the solution could come from an outside source or different character:
    - The power went out just as the teacher and assistant in the preschool class were putting the kids down for an afternoon nap. But when they tried to call the office, nobody answered. A man was shouting in the hall. There was the sound of gunfire.
    - In this example, there are two possible heroes (teacher and assistant) and the students are already in a room with a door that can be locked, allowing time for a third hero to intervene. More importantly, both teacher and assistant still have their smartphones, which they can use to call the police.
  - Example two (strong plot): the main character must solve her own problem
    - The power went out just as the babysitter was putting the kids to bed in a house way out in the country. The nearest neighbor was half a mile away. A stranger was slamming a crowbar against the front door. The babysitter called the police, but the stranger was going to break the door down before the police got there.
    - In this second example, we know exactly who the hero is, because nobody else is available to save the day.

## Slide 9: RESEARCH IS FOR EVERYONE.

- If you aren't absolutely certain, **look it up**.
- Base as many things on reality as possible, even in fantasy novels.
  - Know exactly how long "five paces" is.
  - Know how long it takes to make stew.
  - Know how far you can realistically travel by horseback (or by foot) in the mountains in one day.
  - Know whether it's actually possible to find your way through the woods at night without a flashlight.
  - Know the difference between a sheath and a scabbard.
  - Know the difference between riding a stallion and riding a gelding.
  - Know how long torches actually burn (15-20 minutes at most), and how cumbersome it is to carry one.

## Slide 10: MEMOIR, BIOGRAPHY & NONFICTION MUST ALSO HAVE DETAILED SETTINGS.

- Memoir & Biography:

- Pick a time period in world history or in your history that was pivotal. In that time period, everything changed.
- What was the world like then?
- What was an average day like?
  
- Nonfiction: Difficult times require innovation and people of strong character.
  - What was going on in the world that led to this particular event?
  - What did the world look like overall in that time period?

## **Slide 11: FANTASY AND SCI FI BUILD FROM THE GROUND UP**

This is what people who love these genres are in it for. If this is your genre, be prepared to world-build extensively:

- Magic system?
- Hard science or hand-wavium (a la Star Wars)?
- Flora and fauna?
- Geography and weather?
- Length of days/seasons/years?
- Money and trade?
- Gender norms?
- Family norms?
- Police & government?

. . . And so on.