

Setting Your Story



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When you plan a book how much time do you devote to setting? Wait. Don't answer. I have stronger questions. Who doesn't want to go to school with Harry Potter? Did you ever climb into a corner of the rocking wagon that carried Laura Ingalls and her family from their little house in the big Wisconsin woods to their many homes on the prairie? What is your most vivid childhood memory?

I can still smell the scent of gunpowder from the Fourth of July fireworks on the Tybee Island pier. I can hear the branches hitting our roof like so many rocks thrown by an angry fist the night we didn't leave ahead of a hurricane. When I think of the gunpowder I'm happy. Those branches, skittering along the roof still make me uneasy. That's because my early life was set on a small Georgia island where the community gathered for fireworks and collectively fled from hurricanes.

We all understand setting because we see life through our eyes. We lace memory with the scent that surrounds us on important occasions like Christmas or a family wedding. Most of us know the blue-gray color of the sky when it's about to unload a blizzard. We've all felt the sting of tears we didn't want to cry.

Setting is the tool a writer uses to evoke empathy in a reader. Even if you've never been to Pamplona to run with the bulls, you've sat on a hot street waiting for something to happen in sunlight that made you long for rain. You can add that heat and your impatience to a running-with-the-bulls story.

For a suspense scene, why not borrow from Alfred Hitchcock? Show a reader a young family in a Norman Rockwell household, and then bring killer Uncle Charlie to the front door.

When you're editing and you feel as if you're cruising on top of the words, look a little deeper. Use setting to anchor your characters. Evoke emotion with a familiar sight or sound or scent that brings the reader to live inside the character's skin. As a writer you must view your story from inside your character's senses.

Describe the world you feel, taste, hear, see, and touch when you are the character you're writing. If you're Uncle Charlie, you'll be happy to see your doting family, relieved to be wrapped up safely in their cozy, loving small-town world. But you won't be able to resist slipping your hand into your coat pocket to find the reassuring cold points of the emerald ring you stole from your latest victim.

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Paint your setting with honest, familiar brushstrokes to engage your readers. Invite them to feel what a loving niece feels as she uncovers the secrets that have turned her devoted uncle into a heartless killer. Close the gap between your reader and this young girl by setting her in a world the reader can live in, too.

Special thanks to Alfred Hitchcock's Shadow of a Doubt. Anna Adams most recent release was *Maggie's Guardian*, a September 2002 Harlequin Superromance. She's currently working on a trilogy for Superromance, *The Calvert Cousins*. Look for the first cousin in *The Secret Father*, out in September 2003.