

MAKE SETTING MATTER



**It's More Powerful Than
You Think**

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To my fellow writers,

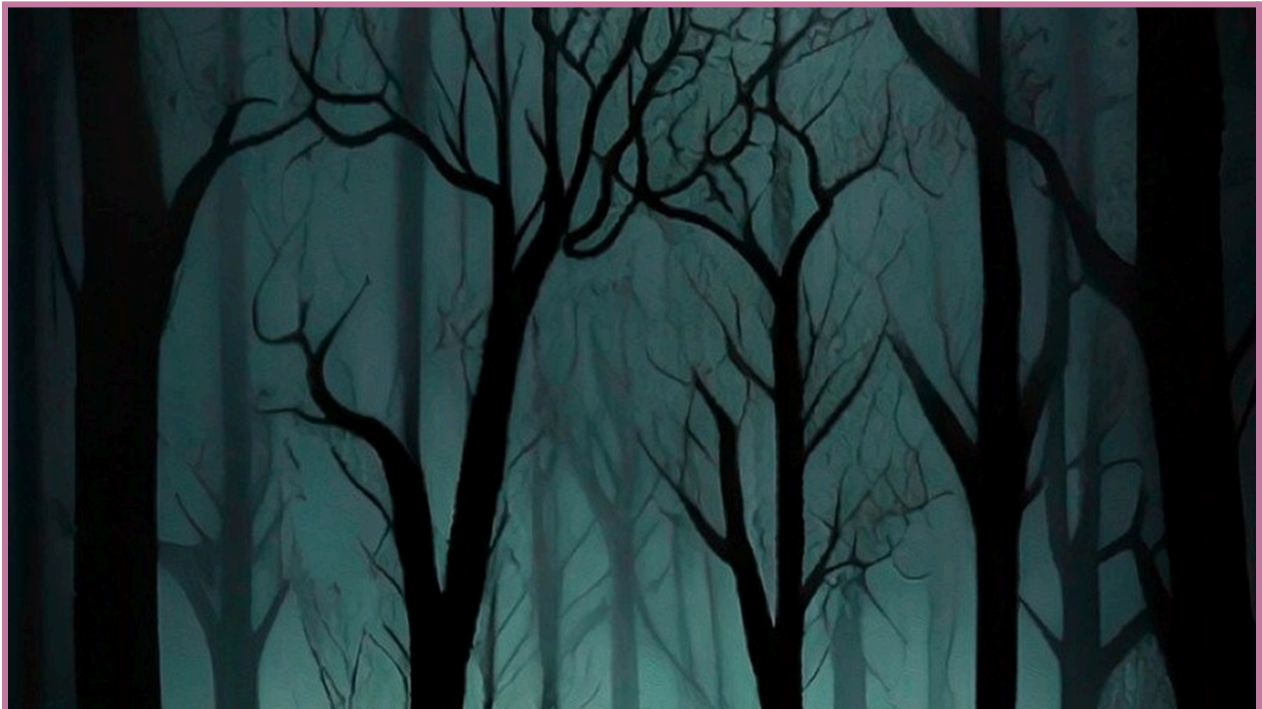
Choosing ways to use the setting(s) in a novel is one of my favorite topics to talk about with students. On the one hand it seems so obvious, so mundane. Your setting is where the story is located. Right? And yet, a story's setting is also like a quilt, offering up multiple layers of color and textured fabric to choose from.

I decided to put this little book together based on feedback received from people after giving a talk on "*How Setting Can Enhance Atmosphere and Suspense*" at a number of writing summits. It appears that many writers don't realize how much potential a story's setting holds for them. Thus, the book.

I have expanded the subject beyond suspense and atmosphere, however, showing you how versatile setting can be and how much it can add to your story's overall reader impact.

Anyway, enjoy. And I hope this gives your writing a boost.

Lynn



By the end of this short book, my goal is that you will realize the tremendous power that lies within a story's setting(s). Used properly, a setting can evoke fear, anxiety, dread, laughter, sadness, happiness, and even nostalgia within a reader, bringing the reader closer to the heart of the action.

Yes, it has that much power.

Unfortunately, many writers (especially new writers) don't see this potential, partly because they are so busy (and overwhelmed) assembling all the other aspects of their story. After all, new writers are lucky to get through the first rough draft of their manuscript without giving up.

Let me say this: I firmly believe that all authors should consider setting as an important tool in their writing toolbox and take full advantage of it.

Like a garden shovel, a story's setting can accomplish more than one thing, i.e. it's not just a location. A shovel can certainly dig a hole, but it can also edge your lawn, scoop up gravel, create a trench. It can even kill someone by hitting them over the head with it. Okay, I'm a mystery writer, but you get my point.

If all you do is to think of setting merely as the location in which your story or scene takes place, you'll be committing what I consider a writing felony. Perhaps that's too strong an word, but once again, you get my point.

Over the next twenty pages or so, I hope to illustrate the different ways in which you can use setting to strengthen your narrative and help to immerse your readers in the story.

First rule of thumb: In its simplest form, setting helps to ground your reader.

What does that mean?

Readers need to feel a sense of place as they begin this journey with you. If you open your story with a lengthy string of dialogue and no description of where the characters are, readers will begin to feel disoriented, almost as if they are floating in space, because, well, they are. You haven't grounded them.

Even a minimal location description, whether that's on planet earth, another world, or even in someone's mind, will give the reader a place to plant their feet.

"Jane!" Mary shouted from across the room.

That simple dialogue tag is all that is necessary to help the reader to feel grounded. Point being—you don't have to take up a lot of real estate to ground your reader.

Let me explain grounding a bit more.

When I was in the midst of finishing my graduate degree in theater, I learned how directors need to ground the viewing audience through the use of the physical stage setting or the actors themselves (through their dialogue, costume, or movement).

Let's say there are only two characters whispering on stage while sitting at a small table with nothing else visible to ID their location. Where are they? They could be almost anywhere.

Does the fact they are whispering automatically mean they are in a library? No. They could be in a church or sanctuary. They could be in the waiting room of a hospital, or a cafe where they don't wish to be overheard. They could even be two people meeting in someone's backyard while a party goes on around them.

When an audience is left to guess where the scene takes place, you're taking a big risk. Not only could the audience guess wrong as to where these two characters are, if you leave them guessing long enough, they may begin to miss parts of the dialogue and possibly the entire scene because they're distracted by the question of location.

The solution is simple. Add something—dialogue or another character—to ID the location.

For instance, you could have a third character arrive on stage wearing an apron and carrying a menu. Okay, now we know they are in a cafe or restaurant. Or, perhaps one actor says, "Keep your voice down. I don't want the other teachers to hear us." That tells us they are probably in a school. If we hear organ music in the background, we can assume they are in a church.

Once the viewer feels they know where the actors are, they will stop wondering about the location and focus back on the dialogue and what's happening in the scene. And that's where you want them.

The same is true for the novel you're writing.

I am not suggesting that you need to launch into a detailed description of the setting within the first page. In fact, I'd recommend NOT doing that. Gone are the days when most readers want to wade through lengthy paragraphs of description.

But if you wish to begin your story with a lengthy string of dialogue, give your readers a cue or a suggestion of where the characters are so they don't feel as if they are missing something, and you don't immediately lose them in the process.

Remember the first rule of thumb: Use the setting to ground your reader.



What constitutes setting?

As the subtitle of this book suggests, setting can be much more than the location where your story and/or scene is set. Even if you choose to use setting as only the backdrop to your story, there are multiple layers to that choice. Let's review.

1) **Setting=Place**

The most obvious use of setting is 'place,' or the physical location where the bulk of the action happens in your story.

That could be the Alps, a small cafe, a farmhouse in Kansas, or the outer reaches of another world. And remember! Everytime a scene changes in your story, the setting may change as well.

2) **Setting=Time**

'Time' can be an important element in establishing your setting, whether that's :

- **Time of day**
- **Time of year, or**
- **Time period (historical or futuristic).**

You can easily use the 'time of day' to create a mood or change in feeling. Consider this example from the beginning of *Inn Keeping with Murder*, the first book in my Old Maids of Mercer Island series. The opening paragraph from Chapter One is set when the world still sleeps, while the opening paragraph from Chapter Two is only a few hours later, when life is in full gear.

CHAPTER ONE

It was early morning and still dark. No one was about. An insidious breeze skimmed the lake as she stepped onto the porch of her million-dollar home on Mercer Island. The breeze came unchallenged and alone, bringing with it the smell of lake water and pine and just a pinch of foreboding. As the breeze slithered past the tree branches and rustled the leaves, it seemed to whisper her name... *Ellen Fairchild*.

CHAPTER TWO

It was a balmy day in the middle of May when the normal rhythms of my life were suddenly and inextricably altered. The sun was out, a rare treat this time of year in the Northwest, encouraging bulbs to sprout and trees to blossom. Sailboats glided gracefully across the lake, and I took the opportunity to work outside in order to lighten my mood after a long, slow winter.

Notice how each paragraph is written to illustrate the different rhythms of that moment in time and the ensuing mood—one dismal and a bit scary, while the other one is light and cheery. And yet, the same basic location only hours apart.

The concept of time can also mean ‘time of year,’ so that holidays and the change in seasons can impact your story. Many cozy mysteries are purposely set during a holiday season so the author can utilize the decorations and special events common at those times in their story. The movie *Insomnia* is set in Alaska during the summer and 24-hours of daylight. In this story, the location and time of year play a key role in the detective’s altered state of mind.

When it comes to using ‘time period,’ consider programs like *Bridgerton*, which is set in the Regency Period in England (1795-1837). The show is a master class in how everything from dress to dating practices to marriage expectations affect the actions of the characters. Time period incorporates all of that and more. The location of a story during a specific time period also makes a

difference. For instance, the 1920s in New York City would be very different from the 1920s in London.

3) Setting=Weather Conditions



Using weather to enhance your story should be a no-brainer, because people often have such strong feelings about the weather. For instance, my daughter LOVES the heat, while I swelter in it, which means that while many people move to Florida when they get older to find warmer weather, I would

avoid it because of the humidity.

This means that you can use the weather in your story to deepen the connection with your readers. For instance, John Grisham is a master at describing the sultry, steamy temperatures of the South so that readers almost feel the sweat pool beneath their armpits. Sebastian Junger's description of the devastating storm off the Grand Banks of Newfoundland in *The Perfect Storm* is so realistic the Los Angeles Times described it this way: "*There is nothing imaginary about Junger's book; it is all terrifyingly, awesomely real.*"

Be careful when using weather in a way that seems cliché, however, such as the storm that shuts off access to the big bed and breakfast where a murder just took place. It's been used a million times.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Too many writers jump into describing their setting(s) before they have really thought through how they could use setting to enhance their story experience. Let's look at some of the questions you should consider before you sit down to write.

a. *Will your setting serve only as a backdrop for the story?*

While I personally think this is a waste of resources, there are situations where the setting might serve best as merely the backdrop to the story. An example are the police shows on TV where the precinct serves as the background for whatever is going on between the lead characters in the foreground.



In a situation like this, the background scene lends credibility to the primary action. In other words, it helps us to believe that the two lead characters really are police officers when we see all the hustle and bustle of other officers in the background.

When a setting is meant to serve only as a backdrop, however, characters have limited interaction with it. In the case of the police precinct, the two main characters might say hello to someone or bump into someone, but other than that, the setting is only meant to frame them in a snapshot of their environment.

b. *Do you intend your setting to drive the plot?*

In many stories, there would be no story without the setting. Consider the movie *The Mountain Between Us* with actors Kate Winslet and Idris Elba. The story takes place after a plane crash in the high mountain wilderness of Utah, leaving these two characters injured and stranded in the snow. The story is all about how they survive the mountain. Therefore, the mountain and the harsh weather drive the plot.

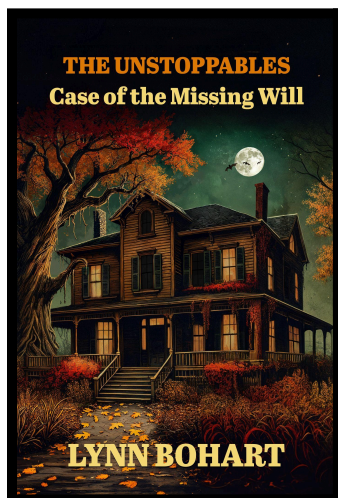
Same with the movie *Titanic*. We all know the boat will sink, but because of the boat, the two main characters meet, fall in love, and then are separated forever by the tragedy. Without the boat, there would be no story.

If you choose to use your setting to drive the story, then take great care in how you introduce it and maintain its role in the story as the journey progresses.

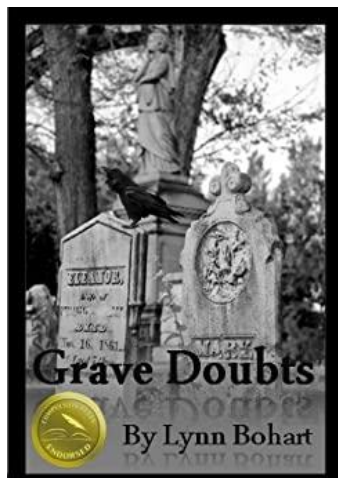
c. Will your setting impact or set the pace of your story?

Believe it or not, your setting can impact the pace of your story. Consider a scene where two characters are walking and talking on a busy street in New York City. The location demands the description of the sights, sounds, and smells as people bump into each other as they pass, all of which adds to a fast pace.

On the other hand, if your book is set on the small, treeless islands of Shetland, ala the TV show *Shetland*, the setting itself will probably slow down the pace of the story because of the large expanses of land between the town and people's homes. Things just 'feel' slower.



In my YA book *Case of the Missing Will*, I used a Civil-war era home built with secret tunnels and doors purposely to quicken the pace of a chase scene between a group of teenagers and several bad guys. Then, by booby-trapping the house, I was also able to manipulate the erratic pace to my advantage.



In my standalone book *Grave Doubts*, I used a cemetery in Oregon with its mold and mildew covered headstones to create a dismal feeling and slower paced opening scene for a lead character who is burdened with dread and sadness at just being there.

When it comes to pace, think about spy stories where someone is being chased from city to city or country to country. When the story necessitates quick scene changes like that, the pace picks up.

d) *Could your setting complicate or facilitate the action in the story?*

In *The Mountain Between Us*, the mountain and bad weather clearly complicate the story. In my book *Mass Murder*, a large Catholic monastery complicates the story because the building serves as an obstacle to the detectives, holding the secrets necessary to solve the murder. On the other hand, in *Case of the Missing Will*, I used that Civil War era house to facilitate my story by setting up places the kids could hide and trap the killers.

Bottom-line... think about *how* your setting, whether it's the overall setting or a specific scene, can change the pace of your story.

e) *How might your setting impact your characters?*

As humans, we are affected by the physical world around us. Buildings, streets, parks, rooms, outdoor venues, can all have emotional meaning for us. For instance, if you have a teenage protagonist stuck in a little town in the middle of nowhere, the setting might make her feel oppressed and trapped. On the other hand, that same location would make someone else feel safe and secure.

Let's say that your character leaves the small town and lives for many years in New York City. Perhaps she liked living in the big city, perhaps she didn't. But when she comes back to that small town, how does she feel? That small town could feel small, backwards, and dull after living in New York. But if she hated living in such an urban area, maybe she feels welcomed back by the small town.

We all carry memories associated with various environments in our lives. Allow your characters to show their feelings about where the story is set. It will add depth to your story and help draw your reader in.

f) Could your setting shape the mood or atmosphere of the story?



Of course it can. Think of every haunted house story you've watched or read. Think of every adventure story or thriller. Setting and environment play a huge role in creating the mood or desired atmosphere in those types of stories.

Whether you're going for light and sunny or dark and scary, open and airy or close and claustrophobic, your setting can impact the psychological mood of the character(s), even to the point of driving them crazy.

Ever watch *Psycho* or read *The Shining*?

Here's the thing, though. The setting can also impact the reader, making them feel queasy, scared, anxious, or light and filled with hope. The elevator in *The Shining* scared the hell out of me when I was young. On the other hand, I'm often filled with a sense of wonder when I read Sci-fi fantasy novels because of their fantastical settings.

Here's a hint: To use your setting to help create a specific mood or atmosphere, lean on the five senses: sight, touch, smell, sound, taste.

g) Do you want your setting to come alive to the point of becoming an essential character in the story?

This is a really powerful way to utilize your setting. Be sure, however, that you are careful in how you do it. You don't want to keep pointing a finger at a house, room, or location in your story and then not follow through with why that location is important.

I have only created settings that doubled as another character twice: in *Mass Murder* and *Case of the Missing Will*. My decision to do so was purposeful, and because of that, the buildings in those stories appeared often and carried a lot of weight.



A better example, however, is *Harry Potter* and Hogwarts.

The Harry Potter stories would be nothing without Hogwarts and all of its eccentricities. J.K. Rowling purposely created the school so that it became a living, breathing thing. And it plays many roles within the labyrinth of the long storyline—not just a school.

What kind of story are you writing, and do you have an opportunity to create such a memorable setting as Hogwarts?

h) Do you want your setting to create suspense?

Suspense is all about expectation, so think about every horror or hardcore crime thriller you've ever read where something is on the other side of that door. Ever hear the phrase *the suspense is killing me*? That's because suspense creates a verifiable physical reaction in people. Your heart rate goes up, along with your temperature, and feelings of dread.

How can your setting help to create suspense? Use it to create expectation in the reader.



Let's use a love story as an example. Maybe there is something suspicious about the male love interest. He's a shifty character, and there's a big inheritance involved. Friends don't like him and warn the female protagonist, but she ignores them and marries him. During their honeymoon, the groom invites her to take a hike, and they come to the rickety bridge pictured here. Depending on how you create a sense of expectation, readers should be screaming, "Don't cross that bridge!" right about now.

In my short story *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, I took great pains to describe a house and surrounding outdoor environment to feel threatening. Although the fear is in the protagonist's head (she's running away from something she cannot see), every creak of the house, twig snap, or leaf rustle creates expectation, until she comes to the end of the line, and what she's running away from finds her.

i) How can the location facilitate the scene's action?

Always ask yourself how the location in a scene might aid you when it comes to action in the scene.

In *Mass Murder*, the murder victim was a woman attending a writers' conference held at a large Spanish monastery. I purposely wanted to raise questions about how the body got to where it's found, and I wanted the body to be found in an unusual way. Therefore, I had the villain hang the petite woman by her bra strap on a utility hook in the back of the supply closet located down the hall from the catering kitchen. This raised the question—how did the killer get her there without guests and/or the caterers seeing him? In that way, I made a normally mundane location serve my purpose.

Let's use another example of a man asking a woman he loves to marry him. This is already a cliché moment, so how do you make it stand out for the reader? You either make it so outlandishly different (he pops the question while skydiving) or so quietly intimate that it's unforgettable. Clearly, either way the location would be critical to your success.

In the end, always ask yourself how the location of a specific scene might add or detract from the action you have planned between characters.

j) How do the characters in the story feel about the location they are in?

As I said earlier, we often attach feelings to certain locations. Whether it's because the location reminds us of something in our past or just the ambience of the location itself triggers an emotion.

Let's stick with my example from *Mass Murder* when the woman's body gets found in that supply closet. It's the cleaning guy who discovers her body late that night while a party goes on in the dining hall.

Syd stepped into the closet and flicked on the light with its single 40-watt bulb. It only illuminated the area right next to the door, but Syd could have found his way around blind, he was that familiar with how things were organized.

His lungs inhaled the comforting sweetness of the powdered soap that sat in boxes on a shelf to his left, but an almost imperceptible tingling at the back of his neck made him think there was something more. It was an odor he didn't recognize, something dank among the aroma of pine and borax. With trembling fingers, he tucked his lunchbox under one arm and reached for the small flask he now carried in his pants pocket.

Syd normally feels at home in this dingy little supply closet. That is, until he smells something else—the dead woman, which immediately yanks him out of his comfort zone, putting him on alert. This contrast was achieved through the location description.

Think about the various locations you've been at today. Mentally, go back and put yourself into one of them again. How did you feel stepping into that location? Stressed or confined? Relaxed? Welcomed?

In truth, locations hold a lot of power over us. If your lead character was beaten as a child in an orphanage, entering a building that looks anything like that building will churn the pit of his stomach. If a couple learns their adoption has just come through while they were at a 4th of July fireworks display, fireworks may always make them happy. If your character lost the love of their life from cancer while sitting with them in a hospital, then hospitals will probably hold very bad memories.

Think through how your characters may be affected emotionally by the location in your story, and if you can, put that to good use.

k) *How do I want my readers to feel about this location?*

If you want your location to merely serve as a backdrop for the story's action, then worrying about how your readers feel about it doesn't matter. But... if there's a possibility the location, coupled with the action that takes place, can spark emotion in your reader, then go for it.

Perhaps you're writing a psychological thriller. Then, using the location to deepen the feeling of suspense or dread within your reader will heighten their connection to the story.

If you want readers to share a feeling of hopelessness with your characters, then you'll need to help them visualize why the location feels so overwhelming. The idea of living in a swamp or a marsh would scare me to death and might make me feel trapped and hopeless. However, in *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens created alternating feelings of safety and danger for the main character Kya when it comes to the marsh because that's where she lives. When Kya is initially left alone within the confines of the marsh, she has haunting memories of her mother and doesn't know how she'll survive. Eventually, however, the marsh becomes her safe

haven, a place she knows so well that she can hide for days within it, avoiding authorities. Owens was so good at describing how the character felt about her home, that as a reader, I began to share the wonder of the marsh.

In *Mass Murder*, I purposely wanted readers to relate to the detective's frustration when the big monastery seemed to prevent the investigators from finding necessary information. How did I do that? I created a scenario where the monastery had been built upon the ruins of an old Spanish rancho, creating a number of secret underground tunnels. This allowed me to have several scenes where the investigators came close to solving the puzzle, only to be blocked until they finally got hold of the original building plans.

Once you know 'how' you want to use your setting, you'll need to decide how much detail is necessary to achieve your desired results. Too much, and you risk losing them. Too little, and you risk confusing them.

WHAT DO READERS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SETTING?

This is an important question because readers don't need to know everything. And yet, many writers (me included) tend to include too much. Too much description slows the story down.

2nd rule of thumb: When you describe a location in your story, delete extraneous verbiage and only use what will actually enhance the story for the reader.

Let's say that you want to establish the tone or atmosphere in a psychological drama or thriller. Well, then, describing the colors, smells, and textures of the location will help put readers in the right frame of mind, while also supporting the action.

Maybe a certain location will play an important role later in the story, so a detailed description in the beginning might be important. In my book *Grave Doubts*, I had a big chase scene in a lumber mill at night. To make sure my readers didn't get lost, I created a reason for the protagonist to visit this enormous complex earlier in the day. That way, I could write a seamless chase scene set at night.

Oftentimes, readers need to know the importance of a location to a specific character. In *Lord of the Rings*, the entire story revolves around Frodo taking the ring to the fires of Mordor to destroy it. Why? So that it can't destroy his cherished home—the Shire. Tolkien purposely introduces readers to the Shire early in the story so that we understand its importance to the characters.

Before you begin to describe a location, ask yourself what the reader *needs to know* about that particular location.

For instance, is it important to know how many chairs there are around a long dining room table? It does if there are only twelve chairs but thirteen guests. Does it make a difference that all the curtains in the room are closed? It does in the movie *The Others* because the children in that horror story are severely sensitive to light. Does the reader need to know in intimate detail what the marsh is like in *Where the Crawdads Sing*? Yes, because the marsh is where Kya is abandoned by her family and chooses to live out the rest of her life.

Deciding on what a reader really needs to know about a location is one of the most difficult questions you'll have as an author because, as authors, we love to include everything down to the color of the sofa in a character's living room. After all, writers love to write.

When you're describing the room that sofa is in, however, you'll have to decide if the color is important. Normally, it probably wouldn't be. But let's say the color of the sofa helps to illustrate a character's personality or mental state.

Here's an example of how that might play out. In *Mass Murder*, Detective Giorgio Salvatori visits the home of the man who organized the writers' conference where the woman was killed. See if the description of this man's small home in Pasadena gives you a sense of his personality.

Giorgio entered Marsh's dingy living room, immediately noticing the stained shag carpet, stale cigarette smoke smell, and stacks of books and magazines that filled every corner of the room. Mismatching table lamps cast a dim glow across the large velvet painting of a scantily

clad woman with big breasts leaning against a vintage car that hung above the fireplace. The room reminded Giorgio of the small apartment in which his uncle had lived after his aunt died. The lack of personality, worn furniture, piles of books and magazines, and musty smell spoke volumes about his uncle's state of mind. It seemed that John Marsh had an equally dim view of his prospects in the world.

Never forget that the settings you create have the potential to influence the plot and evoke an emotional response in the reader. For that reason, pay attention to them.

Now that we have explored all the ways you might choose to use your setting and how much information to include, let's take a few minutes to review ways to describe and/or reveal your setting to your reader.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN DESCRIBING YOUR SETTING



Here are four examples of houses. They are technically all houses, and yet, they are quite different and require very different descriptions.

Take a moment to study each one. What types of words or phrases would you use to capture the essence of each one?

How you reveal your setting to your reader is everything. Let's look at some specific writing techniques you might use to bring your setting to life.

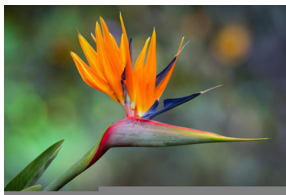
- *Deploy things like contrast, images, similes, metaphors, and personification to help you readers visualize the setting.*

In *Mass Murder*, as Detective Salvatori is interviewing people at the scene of the crime, a huge storm approaches. Look at the following sentence:

The golden moon stood alone in the night sky, challenging a bank of clouds gathering to the east.

I could have just said that storm clouds were gathering to the east. Instead, I added the moon, standing alone as if to hold back the clouds. This metaphorical image gives readers a visual of two contrasting forces, which seems more powerful than the clouds alone.

Now, look at this paragraph, which appears a chapter or so later. Detective Salvatori is exhausted and goes outside for air.



Giorgio decided he needed more air and stepped outside. A burly wind now whipped the graceful neck of a Bird of Paradise along the walkway, making it look like a hen pecking for crumbs. He wandered down the brick path, past a clump of billowing Pampas grass to the drive. The valley lights, which had burned so brightly only hours before, had been replaced by pregnant clouds threatening to deliver their load at any moment. Even the palm trees that lined the drive had become a row of dancing men swaying in rhythm to the wind.

The storm is about to descend upon them, and I used descriptive language (burly wind), more metaphors (pregnant clouds), and full blown visual images (palm trees that became a row of dancing me swaying in rhythm to the wind) to make readers feel this storm is a living breathing thing.

- *Use light and shadow to reveal important aspects of the scene.*

Spending a moment or two to focus on light and shadow in a scene will help to amplify the emotion you're striving for. Light typically evokes a

feeling of clarity, hope, or positive emotion, while darkness and shadow are often used to obfuscate details in the scene and create a feeling of dread, fear, and even hopelessness. See how I used light and dark in this scene from *Mass Murder*.

Giorgio returned inside, shutting the fairytale door behind him with a dull thud. Outside, the wind dragged bushes across the exterior of the building with the same spine-tingling sensation fingers create when scratching across a blackboard. When he turned away from the door and saw the boy at the top of the stairs, he stopped so short his feet could have been planted in cement.

The boy was nine or ten years old, with round eyes rimmed in shadow. He was dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt and dark knickers, with thick suspenders pulling at his narrow shoulders. A pale, vaporous mist illuminated him in a halo of light, and he stared at Giorgio from the landing like a barn owl in the dark.

- *Use sensory details (sight, smell, touch, sound, taste).*



Using the five senses is one of the best ways to draw a reader into a scene so they can almost feel the slick touch of oil or rancid taste of smoke. Check out this scene from the third book in the Giorgio Salvatori mysteries, *The Essence of Murder*.

Giorgio and Rocky communicated in whispers (*sound*) as they moved along the trail. The forest was still except for the occasional rustle of leaves as the breeze shifted through the trees above them. (*sound*) Since the small flashlight cut only a narrow swathe of light through the darkness, (*sight*) they were forced to move slowly.

They pushed forward until the old house and small family graveyard emerged from the shadows (*sight*) like an ominous warning. Giorgio held out his hand to stop Swan and both men drew their weapons. With a nod, Giorgio crept toward the old structure.

He stopped when they were close enough to peek through one of the cracked and weathered window frames, (*touch/texture*) revealing only the unearthly silhouettes of the abandoned furniture in the dark. No sounds emanated from the dilapidated building. There was just the musty smell of dust motes, old piss, and rat droppings. (*smell*)

- *Can you use the setting to foreshadow future events in the story?*

Thrillers often use the setting to foreshadow something that will happen later in the story. Picture the bedroom of a 6-year-old child who has gone missing, and the author goes to the trouble of describing many of her belongings, including a favorite stuffed bear sitting on her bed. The girl's mother even mentions to the detectives how her daughter has trouble sleeping without the bear. Then, a chapter or two later, her mother goes into the bedroom and is surprised to find the bear is gone. That's foreshadowing.

Consider this opening scene from *Mass Murder*.

Premonitions were taken seriously in the Norville family. Syd's old Chevy truck pulled into the west parking lot of the massive Catholic monastery where he worked five nights a week as a janitor. He climbed down from the cab and let his right hand linger on the tattered steering wheel cover. A glance at the hazy moon peeking through a clump of trees at the south end of the property made him shudder. Something was wrong. He could feel it. And his impulse was to run.

Of course by the end of this first chapter, Syd finds the body of the dead woman, and the premonition is revealed.

- *How can you use your setting to create a question in the reader's mind?*

This is a great way to bring the setting into the action of the scene and create a question in your reader's mind that screams to be answered. Here's an example from *Mass Murder*. After Syd has ignored his premonition, he has moved on to the supply closet to get busy cleaning the large monastery.

With the feeling of dread beginning to fade, Syd stepped into the closet and flicked on the single 40-watt bulb that served as an overhead light. It only illuminated the area right next to the door, but Syd could have found his way around blind. He was that familiar with how things were organized. His lungs inhaled the comforting sweetness of the powdered soap that sat in boxes on a shelf to his left, but an almost imperceptible tingling at the back of his neck made him think there was something more. It was an odor he didn't recognize, something dank amongst the aroma of pine and borax.

Since this is a murder mystery, readers will assume that what Syd smells is the dead woman. But Syd doesn't know what he'll find, and a dead woman is probably the last thing he'd think of. The point, however, is that I purposely raised a question in the reader's mind, because that increases suspense.



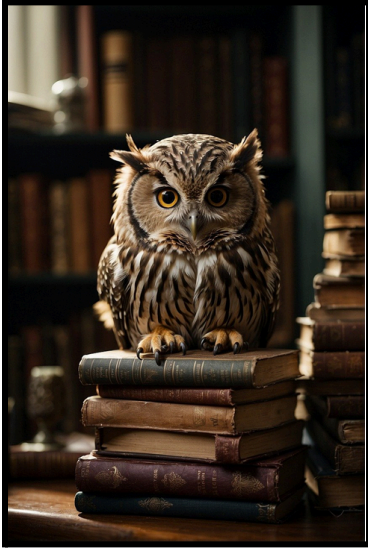
Any way you look at it, not taking full advantage of your setting is a mistake. It is especially important for creating visual images that will grab and hold a reader's attention.



In closing:

- 1) You can choose to use the setting merely as a backdrop to your story. If you do, however, you'll be missing a slew of opportunities to enhance the atmosphere, suspense, or general feeling of the story.
- 2) Remember that your setting is a tool that can impact or change the trajectory of the story, influence the characters, or influence the readers.
- 3) As you map out your story, mark places where your setting could be used for more than just the backdrop. Then, once your first draft is finished, go back and flesh it out.
- 4) If you have trouble coming up with the kind of description you want, take some time to look at pictures on the internet that match what you have in mind and take note of how that image makes you feel. Pay attention to your emotions, memories, and thoughts. Then, recreate that.

The truth is that it's your story, and you get to use the setting in any way you choose. My advice...



Choose wisely.

Dear Fellow Writers:

I hope you have enjoyed and benefitted from this short eBook. If so, I'd appreciate your thoughts. Feel free to email me a **Lildog67@icloud.com** to let me know how you think this book might help. I also love working with emerging writers, so reach out and let me know how I might be of service to you as you take this writing journey. You can also access other free and low-cost writing tools on my website at: www.lynnbohmart-author.com

Happy writing!

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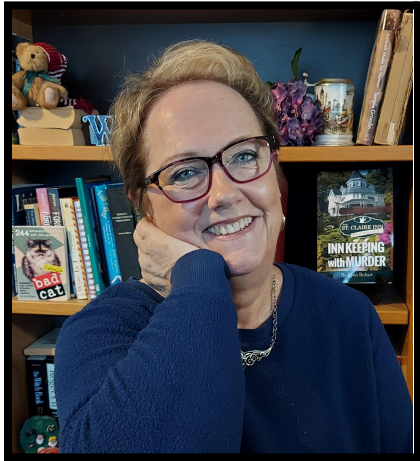
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After retiring from a 35+ year career in the nonprofit world, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company, Lil Dog Communications, and now writes for clients all over the world. She holds a master's degree in theater, has taught "Crafting the Story" through Green River College for 10+ years, and has written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter.

Currently, she has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and now three nonfiction books on Amazon, along with several books on writing offered through her website.

As a mystery and true crime aficionado, she has redesigned her author website into ***The No Alibi Zone*** to showcase criminal investigations. Her bi-monthly newsletter called "Let's Talk About Murder," includes blog posts and interviews with people who talk about, write about, and investigate crime as well as information on writing, her summit presentations, and her books. You can sign up to receive the newsletter for free by going here on her website: [Sign up here](#).

If you're interested in Lynn's story coaching services, you can reach out to her here: Lildog67@icloud.com or visit her website.

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