

sharon page

## 5 Critical Ways to make Setting Work for You: Beyond the ‘Laundry List’!

By Sharon Page

### 1) Setting Reveals Character:

*“With a sigh, Venetia plopped her brush in the jar and swirled it until the water blushed pink, lit by the fragile spring sunlight that spilled through the paned window. The only raven-haired scoundrels in her life lived on the canvases stacked on the narrow shelves of her studio, all safely hidden beneath muslin covers.”*

(From Sin, © Sharon Page 2006)

Setting reveals character through:

- the details that your character notices. A woman will notice different details than a man. Social status can be shown, conflict can be revealed.
- the setting your character chooses to live in and how that character ‘styles’ their setting
- how does your character feel about the setting—does your character hate the cheap furniture she has to live with, does she love the self-reliance represented by her log cabin, does she love the success represented by her mansion?
- adjectives chosen show how the character feels. Does someone see blue curtains? Tattered curtains? Heavy, overly ornate curtains? Or curtains that would make a great dress?
- Think of walking into someone’s house—it’s impossible not to become more aware of someone’s character by looking at what they possess.

### 2) Setting is Character:

Your setting can become a character in your story, though a more omnipotent one. The island on the television show LOST is a great example. Think of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, or Manderley in *Rebecca*. The sea can be a strong character, which your other characters bestow ‘human’ qualities on.

- your setting has moods, and these establish atmosphere
- your setting can act like a villain to the other characters—in a race against time, does your setting throw up obstacles?
- your setting could need to be conquered, embraced, etc.

### 3) Setting is Conflict

This extends from setting as a character—where your setting can create obstacles. Climbing a mountain on a sunny day is much different than confronting a blizzard.

Your setting can suggest your plot. Agatha Christie liked to isolate her setting in her stories, making it smaller and smaller—an island, a house party on the island, then the final revelation takes place in one room in the house. This shows a tightening web of intriguing and danger, and gives the reader the same claustrophobic sense of doom that the characters are feeling.

A ranch setting surrounded by dangerous terrain can suggest what types of danger the character will face. A bucolic farm could represent a home worth sacrificing everything for.

Live up to your setting—it's like introducing a gun in chapter 1. You have to use it. If you have a raging river or a valley called Death Ravine, how will this be used in your story? You can't have a ship without a potential drowning—or can you? Amanda Quick starts a story where the villain uses the underground rivers so the climax of the story circles back to that location. This allows you to foreshadow some of the dangers, so the reader isn't suddenly thinking—wait a minute, where did she find that poker to brain the villain with?

#### **4) Setting is Fantasy**

By this I mean that setting is the location the reader is escaping too.

Think of the 5 senses. Again, not a laundry list. Use them to enhance setting. Make your desolation desolate, your heat scorching, your cold frigid.

Example from Kelley Armstrong's *Bitten*: "The lights seemed dimmed, as if overpowered by the emptiness." She highlights this emptiness in the 5 sentences of the paragraph, using different details—she's showing her werewolf heroine's sense of isolation.

Think of the logical order of the 5 senses. You go to a Victorian house, long abandoned. You have only candlelight. What will you experience as soon as you step off the threshold? Sight is limited, but smell will be instant. Hearing would likely come after that. Sight and the sensation of touch (what you feel, what your skin feels). And taste, of course, if you taste air, or taste dust, etc.

Think of specific details about the setting—what makes a room unique. In my book, *Hot Silk*, my heroine meets her cold aristocratic grandmother for the first time. The first thing she notices is her grandmother's idiosyncrasy—books are laid everywhere, opened or marked all close to the beginnings—she's like a chain smoker of books, fleeing to the next for excitement, unable to commit to one.

Think of settings your reader wants to visit—a lavish ballroom, a charming country village, a wind-swept manner, the acerbic bustle of a NY office.

#### **5) Setting is Marketable**

Think of your "marketing hook" in your setting and try to use your setting to help show how your story is unique.

*Grey's Anatomy* has been described as junior high with scalpels—stick a 'teen' drama aimed at adults in a medical setting and you've got something fresh.

What would vampire stories be without New Orleans? Or gritty urban fantasies without large, dangerous ominous cities such as New York and Los Angeles? What if *Anne of Green Gables* had been set in Mississauga? Small towns are either beloved or stifling, big cities are either exciting or terrifying and can be used to enhance what's unique about your story.

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Mysteries series do this a lot—there's coffee shop mysteries, gardening mysteries, winery mysteries, horse racing mysteries—all these examples show that readers are attracted to the setting and will purchase a book to be a part of the setting.