

Landscape as a Tool in Creative Fiction

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When it rains, we know to use our umbrella. When it rains in a novel, we suspect that something sad is coming. A writer's mode of describing a story's setting tells us, the readers, about what they want us to see in it. But what if setting could do more? I grew interested in seeing how writers put setting to other narrative uses. In pursuit of an answer, I read and reflected on several relevant novels, then composed a novel set in coastal Maine that employed what I had learned about the sense of place that defined the novels from my reading.

I first read J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine*. It is a deeply perplexing novel, not least because it can scarcely be said to have a plot. Setting, for once, is not the backdrop but the primary method of storytelling. Almost every line is dedicated to descriptions of birds, weather, or landscape, yet it manages to tell a complex and interesting story about a man and his fascination with endangered peregrines. That it can do so with such an emphasis on sense of place is a testament to the potential of what more setting can do in storytelling than it currently might.

I continued to read and analyze in this thread, reflecting on my questions about setting as I went. For example: some of the novels I read (to name a couple: *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, *The Bird Artist* by Howard Norman, and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald) only made sense in the place they were set. If they had been set somewhere else, all else remaining the same, the story would cease to make much sense. *The Great Gatsby* set in rural Wisconsin would not be *The Great Gatsby* at all. I was interested in why this was and how I could replicate it and noted what characteristics they shared that pertained to setting, such as their interests in local politics and social strife or representation of greater struggles through interpersonal ones.

I then progressed from reading to writing and considered what sort of place-dependent story I might tell. Having grown up here, much of my sense of the world comes from my sense of the Maine coast; it seemed natural for any story of mine, especially one with setting at the forefront, to take place there. The first chapter was the hardest for me to write, but every draft invariably began in the same place: a bluff by the Atlantic, far north and high enough to provide a sight of the surrounding landscape. There would be dozens of houses dotting the shores, tourists in the distance, and myriad complexities that a novel, excitingly, can never tell.

So I focused on just one of those many possible stories, aiming to intertwine the many lives of larger-than-life people that had been springing into my mind since before summer began. Even with those characters in mind, it was difficult to bring a word (much less forty thousand) onto a blank page. But in difficulty is reward. My skills have grown throughout this challenge, and my initial excitement to work with books has resolved itself into a silent, rapt appreciation for stories and the way we tell them—and I hope to tell many more.

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Faculty Mentor: Brock Clarke

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