Setting – World Building

Just like characterisation, you, as the creator, need to know the world your characters inhabit. The setting is important because it can help define who the character is and also what the reader can expect from your story.

Setting up the Who, What, Why, When, Where, How of your story can be an intricate process and sometimes a lengthy one but if you don't take the time to get to the know the world your characters will inhabit, then you risk confusing the reader. Spending the time to create a setting, to build a world will also help provide you with different sources of conflict which means that when you come to write, you'll never run into the problem of having a 'sagging middle.'

For some examples, look at the first five to ten minutes of a film. Do you know the Who, What, When, Where? You may not know the Why or the How just yet because that's what you're going to find out as you watch the film. Book, however, take a little longer than film for set up but by the end of the first three chapters, you should be able to answer a few of those "W's". Doing your research by studying film or by studying the genre in which you wish to write is necessary.

It might be that you grab a large piece of paper or a white board and jot down your thoughts, brainstorming as you go and changing things around. This may be all you need or you may like to form a list, clearly expressing the answers to Who, What, When, Where, Why and How. The process for each writer is different and it may take some time to find out what works best for you.

When creating a setting or building a new world, YOU are the artist, the creator. You are starting with a blank screen and filling it with colour, life and emotion. You get to say whether there are two suns in the sky or blue grass on the ground. You also need to set the parameters for the world your characters inhabit. If it's futuristic, can cars fly? If so, how do they fly? (Back to the Future/Blade Runner) If it's historical, the mode of transport can assist us in pinpointing the time period – ie Sherlock Holmes and Downton Abbey – motor cars and horse drawn carriages together. Once you have the big pieces in place, then you can start on the more intricate matters your characters will need in order to progress through the story.

If your story is set in the contemporary world, the setting can tell us a lot about the pace. New York? Outback Australia? Reykjavik? The Andes? We may not need to tell our readers that there is one yellow sun, blue sky and green grass but the seasons, the lifestyle, the house, the clothes, the things that are important to your characters, are all involved in building their world. As I write Medical Romances for Harlequin Mills & Boon, it would seem ridiculous for my story to be set in a law court or a school. The contemporary world my characters inhabit must involve a medical setting, whether that be hospital – large or small, private practice – rural or urban or any other new twist I can come up with. In a contemporary setting the rules of our present world – ie gravity, modes of transport etc, still apply which means the world building I undertake with each new story, begins at a more intimate level.

Creating the right setting for your story means that your setting, your new world, now becomes a character within it's own right. The colours, the mood, the style, the *essence* of this world should become tangible to your characters. If you were to walk into a room that was painted black, completely black – the walls, the ceiling, the carpet, the curtains – and there was one bright red chair in the centre, how would the room make you feel? Is the chair comfortable? Hard? Old? New? Each chair can promote a different sensation and it's *this* that gives the setting *essence*, it's something that promotes an emotional response within your character.

Colours can play an important part in structuring your setting. For example, in *The Matrix*, when Neo was in the matrix, the film was tinged with green. When he was in the real world, the film was tinged with blue. The blue and the green. The real world and the fake world. In the British TV

mini-series, North & South (by Elizabeth Gaskell), the producers played with the film colours and also the colours of the costumes, so that when the characters were in the South at the beginning of the series, the colours were bright, vibrant and happy. In the North, the colours were dull, dark and depressing. As the series continued, they swapped these two around so that at the end, the North was vibrant and the South was dull. These colours were used to reflect the protagonists emotions and as *they* changed, so did the colours.

Try an exercise, of describing the room you're in now. Of not only giving us a sense of its dimensions, of what it looks like, but of how it makes you feel? Sad? Happy? Indifferent? Melancholy? Trapped? Frustrated? Disorganised? Confused? Even you just write a list of emotions, of different things that are going through your mind. This is just a writing exercise so nothing you write is wrong.

In most books, television series and films, and indeed, even in our own lives, there are usually *three* main places we inhabit. Home, Work and the *third place*. If you look at the TV show *Friends*, they have their work, their apartment and the coffee shop – where they all come together and where a lot of the structure and plot for that episode is churned, discussed and acted upon. Sometimes that *third place* might be the coffee room at work, or the dining room at home, so it doesn't need to be an actual venue but somewhere where your characters can impart information and move the story forward.

Some film examples to consider:

You've Got Mail – the opening scene with the drawing, shows the audience immediately how this world is being constructed – meticulous, determined, proud. These adjectives also apply to the protagonists, Kathleen and Joe. The audience is immediately given a sense of setting – New York.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and *Firefly* – these television shows are setting up the parameters for this new world. Whilst *Buffy* is set in the contemporary world, the audience still needs to know the Who, What, Why, When, Where, How for killing demons and vampires. What are the "rules" the characters must abide by? *Firefly* is set in space but again the world building is there, explaining that things are now controlled by the Americans and the Chinese. If you're able to get these DVD's, I'd highly recommend listening to the commentaries by writer/director Joss Whedon, because he explains how he went about building these worlds (*Buffy & Firefly*).

The UK television series *An Idiot Abroad* – in the opening title sequence, clearly states the world, setting and parameters for all the episodes. A man, Karl Pilkington, leaves his comfortable structured world and is sent out to discover the 7 wonders of the world. Each week, we see a new place, new experiences, and the discovery of a new *world* through Karl's perceptions. A different palette of colours, of mood, of style each week and as the series progresses – and even into the 2nd series of the same name, we watch Karl as his own perceptions begin to change.

The television series *Doc Martin* uses setting brilliantly in order to provide conflict. Although it is set in the contemporary world, the change of setting for the character, promotes a different 'world'. When you take an arrogant, London surgeon, who has developed an aversion to blood, and plonk him down in a small rural fishing village, then conflict abounds.

Historical stories, like a contemporary world, have many rules that need to be followed because there are points in history that are absolute but think of the movie *Titanic*. The writers created a fictional story using the structure of an historical event. They built a world within a world and in doing that, they brought the tragedy of the Titanic to life, they made it real for the viewers, they created emotion through the setting.

Setting – World Building

The *Percy Jackson* and *Harry Potter* books start off in the contemporary world and then build from there – a world *within* a world. *Doctor Who* does this as well. Each week building a new world within the parameters set by travelling through the 'time vortex' brings adventure and excitement (emotion). However, the entire world of *Doctor Who* - the TARDIS, the history of Gallifrey, and the intricacies of The Doctor, himself, still need to be followed, regardless of where the next episode is set. A world, within a world.

So, how will you colour your world?

Further Reading

I do like reading books written by writers on their writing process and as such, cannot recommend highly enough:

Nerd Do Well – by Simon Pegg ISBN 978-0-09-955155-3
- – Although this is listed as an autobiography, as a writer, director, producer, performer, Simon covers all aspects of his career from a stand-up comic (and how he learned to write material) to writing movies such as *Sean of the Dead, Hot Fuzz* and *Paul*.

http://www.bookdepository.co.uk/Nerd-Do-Well-Simon-Pegg/9780099551553

The Writer's Tale – The Final Chapter – by Russell T Davies and Benjamin Cook
ISBN 978-1-846-07861-3
- – This is a brilliant book if you want to understand what writers do and how they write. Of course, this is only the way Russell Davies writes but even if you're not interested in writing scripts, through an email correspondence with Benjamin, Russell explains – in a lot of depth – his process for not only writing but producing the hit television series *Doctor Who*. You do not need to be a *Doctor Who* fan to read this but you'll get much more out of it if you are.

http://www.bookdepository.co.uk/Doctor-Who-Writers-Tale-Final-Chapter-Russell-Davies/9781846078613