

A DIVA'S CHRONICLES...

Using Setting As Character

by Sela Carsen

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Setting is a vital part of any story, but it's one that many writers forget about. Plot, characterization, story arc – all vital story-telling elements, but nothing happens in a vacuum.

Setting isn't just where things happen. It's a character in and of itself.

Like any character, it has backstory. It has an appearance. It has moods. It interacts with the human element. It even has its own voice. Setting isn't just a place geographically. It's a place, psychologically, socially, culturally.

The voice of a small town is very, very different than the voice of a big city, but every small town has a different story to tell.

Robichaud, Louisiana was settled by Cajuns and Creoles. Up the river from New Orleans, generations of families have lived and worked and died there. After a hundred years, the same names still populate the town. Sitting down to rehash the high school football game is a decades-old tradition that involves everyone from grandparents who long-since graduated to infants who have pennants attached to their baby carriers. The scent of the river, the lazy flow of it, sets the rhythm of the town. Nothing happens quickly in Robichaud. There's no need to rush. Everything will still be there tomorrow.

Misquapaug, Rhode Island was a departure for me simply because I'm Southern through and through. That didn't stop me from knowing my town. A small, sturdy fishing village that nonetheless was the home of a Gilded Age industrial baron and his progeny. A place where, as long as you worked hard and didn't harm anyone, you were quietly accepted. They didn't do tourists and they didn't get on with folks who just wanted to laze about. My hero, though he grew up wealthy, absorbed that ethic completely.

Culford, South Carolina was a trip back home. I could walk down Main Street in my mind and tell you exactly what shops lined the streets. I could guide you from the high school down to the City Hall and out to the swamp. I just know my town. I know its history and its hardships. I understand that it battles against dwindling resources and struggles to find a way to succeed through education and better technology. I have sat in Charlene King's salon chair. I've walked through the musty library with the founder's portrait staring down at me.

Settings have souls that inhabit the story as surely as the characters do.

And you can't just plonk a set of characters down in any setting, though, and expect everything to sail on smoothly. Your characters can interact a certain way in LA that would be completely inappropriate in Maycomb, Alabama, but even then you can use setting to your advantage to create useful conflict – comic or dramatic. What happens when your urban chic vamp ends up in the rural South? In the city, there's a ready food source out on the streets at all hours of the day or night. In an area where everyone knows everyone else's business, it's going to be a lot more difficult to find a meal.

Your setting creates a mood, a tone to which you must be faithful. A lone werewolf running loose in Prague at midnight creates a very different expectation for the reader than a lone werewolf who happens to be a park ranger in a Carolina swamp.

It's an often-used trope to plop your city-girl character in the middle of nowhere. In that situation, your setting is almost an antagonist to your main character – challenging her and tripping her up at every opportunity because she doesn't know the rules.

Setting can also be used as a way to layer depth into your character and your story. When one of my characters who hadn't seen his hometown for a very long time (more than a century) returns, he finds some changes bewildering, but also finds comfort in the familiarity of his setting. He is part of the town, part of his setting, regardless of the passage of time.

So as you write, don't just drop your characters into some location that sounds interesting, but has no heart. Create your setting as carefully as you create your characters. Interact with the setting as if it was a living being and you'll find that it helps to make your story live on the page.

ABOUT SELA:

In addition to writing, I'm a wife to a Darn Near Perfect Husband and mom to Two Great Kids. They used to be the Monkey children, but they seem to have settled down a bit. (That's going to come back and bite me on the butt as soon as you read this!)

I have a BA in French (utterly useless, but fun at parties) and another BA in Communication. While I was getting the Communication degree, I wrote for my alumni magazine, dipped my feet into advertising, took want ads at the local paper and even wrote obituaries. I was also a reporter at a small-town daily, but soon realized I didn't have a true journalist's instinct.

After that, I was busy being married and having children, but when my youngest was about a year and half old, I was standing in the shower when a scene popped into my head. Why does that always happen when you're in the shower and you can't get a pen and paper? Anyway, I got the soap out of my eyes, dried off and headed straight for the computer where I wrote it all down.

And boy, did it stink. Whew!

I'd been reading romance novels for years so I figured I should be able to write one, right?

Are you done laughing? Let me know when you're finished.

*Ok, then. It took about twenty false starts and a work I now call *The-Regency-That-Wouldn't-Die* before I finally got disgusted with myself and started writing this funny little scene in a Louisiana cemetery. That little scene became *Not Quite Dead* and it's the first manuscript I ever finished. After much angst and rewriting on my part, I eventually sold it to Samhain Publishing, who released it in August 2006.*

Since then, I've placed several other stories, but that first one will always be special to me.

I'm a member of Romance Writers Of America and can usually be found at the bar during national conferences.

For more about her, visit her online home at <http://www.selacarsen.com>