Setting: Practical Tips for Building a World in Your Reader's Imagination

Fiction Craft & Criticism

Description:
One of the most powerful tools we have as storytellers is to place our readers in a tactile world, but the art of creating a compelling setting is quite a bit more subtle and nuanced than simply describing a room or street corner. How we select and arrange details that speak to all the senses are considerations that serve the narrative's tones and themes and fire the reader's imagination. Join a diverse panel of authors for a discussion on the technical aspects of composing written worlds.

Organizer and Moderator: Michael Spurgeon is a tenured professor at American River College, the author of the novel *Let The Water Hold Me Down*, co-founder of the Sacramento creative writing nonprofit 916 Ink, and one of the founders and organizers of SummerWords, American River College's summer creative writing festival.

Panelists:
Kirstin Chen's second novel, *Bury What We Cannot Take*, was named a best book of the year by Entropy, Popsugar, and Book Bub, and a top pick of the season by *Electric Literature, The Millions, The Rumpus, Harper's Bazaar*, and *InStyle*. She is also the author of *Soy Sauce for Beginners*.

Natashia Deón is a 2017 NAACP Image Award Nominee and author of the critically-acclaimed novel, *Grace*, which was named a New York Times and Kirkus Review Best Book of 2016. She is also a practicing attorney, law professor, and creator of the L.A. reading series Dirty Laundry Lit.

Rachel Heng is the author of the novel *Suicide Club*. Her short fiction has received a Pushcart Prize Special Mention and Prairie Schooner's Jane Geske Award, and has appeared in *Glimmer Train, McSweeney's Quarterly, Guernica* and elsewhere. She is a fiction fellow at the Michener Center for Writers.

Christian Kiefer is the author of the novels *Phantoms, The Infinite Tides*, and *The Animals* and the novella *One Day Soon Time Will Have No Place Left to Hide*. He is recipient of a Pushcart Prize and directs the low-res MFA program at Ashland University.

Panelists’ Opening Remarks Topics:

Kirstin Chen: I just read Matt Salesses's essay on redefining setting, in which he suggests that setting is a product of what the character/narrator/implied narrator observes PLUS who the intended audience is. (Eg. "A man walking to his car in the parking lot at the same time
as a female protagonist is a totally different setting than a man walking to his car in
the parking lot at the same as a male protagonist." And the female protagonist
would tell her story differently to an audience of women vs. a mixed audience.) So,
I think I'll talk about that.

Natashia Deon: I’d like to focus on setting as an interrogation. Treating setting as a
criminal...a liar, maybe, and asking tough questions to get it to reveal truths about itself.

Rachel Heng: What I'm working on right now is set in 1960s Singapore right now and a lot of the
decisions about setting have to do with audience; nationality, race, age even, so I'd love to talk
about that. I'm also interested in setting as character and as a way into new work, since
atmosphere and the non-human is frequently how I feel my way into stories. So I guess setting as
an active participant in creating stakes for characters rather than backdrop.

Christian Kiefer: I remain very interested in the “exoticizing” of the non-white experience in
American lit, the way, I mean, in which workshops have historically beaten writers of color into
the shape required of a particular kind of (white) readership at the expense of other kinds of
readers (and, I think, at the expense of the text). Issues, I mean, of narrative as a specific tool of
(white, capitalist, hegemonic) cultural power vs. Toni Morrison’s comment that she does not
write her books imagining white readers.

Questions

1.) Several of you have touched on what might be described as the transactional relationship
between the reader and the text, or for our purposes, the reader and the setting of a text. I
am very interested in the idea that we as writers arrange objects in relationship to one
another to create a physical world through which our characters and readers can move,
but the reader’s imagination paints the world between those objects. The reader’s
imagination does a lot of the work in creating the setting. I think it has been fairly well
established that although language, culture, and identity can shape perception slightly
around the margins, language, culture, and identity are decidedly not cognition, but some
of you seem to suggest, and I think rightfully so, that the reader’s identity is likely to
shape how they fill in the space between the objects. First, if that is the case, does that
force us to choose an ideal reader or to make assumptions about our reader? Second,
given that language, culture, and identity are not cognition, should assumptions about our
reader, conscious or unconscious, shape the choices about the objects we put in the text?
If yes, then how so? If not, why not?

(The entire panel could center around this first series of questions around the relationship
between reader and text.)

2.) Kirstin mentions Matt Salesses’s article on redefining setting which appears in Pleiades,
in which he talks about the importance of the reader or intended audience as somewhat
related to our discussion to the previous questions. But, as Kirstin notes, he also discusses how setting is a product of what the character/narrator/implied narrator observes. Who is doing the observing determines what is being observed, which strikes me as being much more true in prose than in reality. What appears in our narratives isn’t what is observed, it is to that which the observer directs our attention. What a narrator chooses to describe is not all she perceives, but the choices reveal her character and concerns. In light of this, are there any general rules or areas of caution we should be aware of as our narrator makes her choices?

3.) Settings are, at least in part, constructed of images. Can you share with us any tips you might have for creating compelling images? For instance, when I am teaching students about creating images by putting objects in relationship to one another, I often point to William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow” or how the Roman soldiers’ “javelins measured crowds” in James Wright’s “Saint Judas.”