



SETTINGS: WHAT MOOD DO YOU WANT TO CONVEY?

By Billie A Williams

Settings:

What mood do you wish to convey?

Mystery relies heavily on the theme of your story. Setting can further that theme, support it and give your reader a signal of what's to come.

Patricia Cornwell in *Trace* (GP Putnam, 2004) uses setting very effectively to establish a mood in this novel. As with many of her others, she sets the stage and the reader is hooked, pulled into it with the questions why, where, who when, and, perhaps, how. Here *Trace* begins.

Yellow bulldozers hack earth and stone in an old city block that has seen more death than most modern wars, and Kay Scarpetta slows her rental SUV almost to a stop. Shaken by the destruction ahead, she stares at the mustard colored machines savaging her past.

"Someone should have told me," she says.

We've been brought into the setting and know a lot of information.

Within a mere fifty three words given here, we've been brought into the setting and know a lot of information. We've all seen those bulldozers—yellow, noisy relentless in their task. In this scene they hack (very strong verb) earth and stone, we know more than an empty lot is before its blade. Her noun choices, tell us that. We can hear the noise, feel the rumble as it destroys a whole block, not just any block but a city block. That, as we know from seeing them, is a huge space. Then she tosses her reader a bone, where is this block that has seen more death than most modern wars? We know, at least on a perfunctory level, how many deaths war creates, but, this place has seen more, how? Why?

Other things we know from the way this brief paragraph is written is that Scarpetta is not in her home town. She is driving a rental vehicle, an SUV which may also tell us something about her personality. No little sports car, no 'family' car station wagon type, it's a Sport Utility Vehicle. It also tells us she has flown here and rented a vehicle for her purposes. Somehow, she is deeply connected to this spot. In a few more words we learn it's a place she's intimately familiar with. Its destruction scrapes against memories, she feels betrayed and hurt.

All this is gleaned from the introduction to Scarpetta's story. It sets us up. We feel, see, hear (if only in our minds ear) destruction tied to deep memories. The body count strikes fear, of a sort, in our hearts.

Many books, if not all, begin by setting the stage (pun intended) for the reader.

Many books, if not all, begin by setting the stage (pun intended) for the reader. Janet Evanovich sometimes raunchy, usually funny stories of Stephanie Plum, starts with setting. And so too does Barbara Delinsky in *An Accidental Woman* (Simon & Schuster, 2002) they both use setting well.

Repetition sets up suspense and setting

Delinsky puts us in a bedroom in the dead cold of February, at dawn. Danger lurks in the form of what her character hears and feels.

www.billiewilliams.com Visit today. Check out the Free Stuff page, sign up for the newsletter .

Repetition sets up the suspense, the fear and a good slice of the character's life right away.

After describing the very early dawn by showing us a barely cracked open window, and his wife asleep next to him, he lets us know it's not the children, his girls, that has set him on edge. We learn he lives in a rural area surrounded by woods and the danger is 'out there'.

Third paragraph, *"No what held him totally still, eyes on that inch of open window, was the sound that came from beyond. Even in winter, the woods were filled with live things, but what he heard now was neither deer, nor owl, nor snowshoe rabbit. It was a car, moving very slowly down the snow-crueted drive toward the small house that Micah had built for his family. Get out of bed, cried a silent voice, but he remained inert. Barely breathing, he listened. No one car. Two. They inched their way closer, then stopped. Their engines went still.*

You can almost feel his heart squeeze in his chest with this realization of something outside, not animal, but human and more frightening than a wild animal...at least to him.

Do you see how the author milks this setting for all the trepidation she can put into the readers mind? Do you see how setting is used as so much more than a dray description of time, place and character development? But it does also develop character. We know a ton of information about Micah before we leave the first page.

Jude Devereaux, (*Wild Orchid*, Atria Books, 2003) Uses setting so deftly to elicit character and mood, her prose flawlessly produces mind pictures with each sentence. Her writing, like Natalie Goldberg's (*Writing Down the Bones*, Shambhala publications, 1986-2005) makes the reader acutely aware of how deeply they are drawn into the lives of the authors characters, how intimately we know them in a mere paragraph. Devereaux's words are chosen so adeptly and appropriately we know exactly – time—place—character and mood of the story.

In *Bleachers*, (Doubleday, 2003) John Grisham expertly uses a returning football hero to introduce us to the milieu that is setting. We quickly learn about the town, legend and lethal, we assume in the first pages. The lives interwoven and mixed into the setting support what follows. Would you call someone's mind a part of the setting? If you are reading Lisa Gardner *Live to Tell*, (Bantam Books 2010) you might. As everyone processes a setting differently putting experience, knowledge and life style into that process, Gardner takes no chances. She put us firmly in the mind of the protagonist or whatever view point character she's using to "see" with that character's senses what the story now is.

"Started in the dining room," Detective Phil Leblanc was explaining to Detective D.D. Warren. Phil wore a pair of chinos and a white-collared golf shirt with a ketchup stain above the embroidered emblem. Apparently, he'd been at a family barbecue when he'd received the call. Now he pointed to the rectangular table, currently set for six. The plates held traces of a recently consumed dinner, with several empty serving platters in the middle. D.D. counted three empty cans of Bud Light, two at one end of the table, one at the other.

The table was old-looking, a warm hued oak. A nice table, she was willing to bet, maybe an antique. The chairs, on the other hand, were more blue folding chairs, companions to the ones on the front porch. So the residents

Billie A Williams

could afford a solid wood table, but not yet he chairs. That fit with the overall feel of the space. Freshly painted, but conspicuously empty. "

You see how Gardener moves us through the dining room without really noticing anything—at least not that we will remember until later.

So you see setting is more than fauna and floor boards, or people and places, it's a milieu of mundane and magnanimous details shown to the reader with carefully chosen, specific information.

If the author redirects our attention, we may miss an obvious clue.

Did you miss observing the dining room table in the previous example of *Live to Tell* when you read the book's Chapter Three beginning pages? Gardner showed us the table through DD's (the protagonist's) eyes. We missed it because we were so intent on the phrase placed in the forefront several times –basically, a code red, a horrific crime that led D. D. here in the first place. Yet, so far, all we've seen is neat and orderly. We are busy looking for the crisis. When we start finding bodies, we no longer think about the dinner table, not even after we are shown several times, the five bodies—4 murder, 1 suicide—isn't it? Until—we are back at the dining room table and it's pointed out to us. Setting is used very well here to both cover and reveal.

Read with a writer's eye as you try to see what setting does for story.

Take one of your favorite author's books from your shelf and read how they deal with setting. Read with a writer's eye. What information can setting deliver in an economical and emotional filled way?

=====

SOURCES

- *Trace*, Patricia Cornwell, GP Putnam, 2004
- *An Accidental Woman*, Barbara Delinsky, Simon & Schuster, 2002
- *Setting*, Jack M Bickham, Writer's Digest Books, 1994
- *Wild Orchid* , Jude Deveraux, Atria Books, 2003
- *Writing Down the Bones*, Shambhala publications, 1986-2005
- *Bleachers*, by John Grisham, Doubleday, 2003)
- *Live to Tell*, by Lisa Gardner(Bantam Books 2010)
- *Whodunit? A Mystery Writer's Primer*, by Billie A Williams, Word Crafter Communications, 2011



Billie Williams Mystery Book Club January 2011

GoTo: www.billiewilliams.com
where you will find a sign up button.

Print Book Club:

Includes:

1. Autographed copy of the current month's book
2. Bookmark/and/or Post card of the book cover
3. Reader's Guide (Questions for you to answer as you read the book)
4. A live teleclass with the author at the end of each month where you can ask questions about the book, about writing, about the author, or whatever you choose.
5. Once a month drawing for an autographed cover flat of the book, mug, t-shirt, cap and other items as appropriate such as Cook Books, Special Reports and more.
6. Club Newsletter (PDF Format)
7. If you develop a local chapter of Billie Williams Mystery Bookclub, I can ship the books to one address - saving everyone hassle and you'll receive a special bonus for doing that. Email me if you set up a readers group and give me the details.
8. The first 25 members to join the print book club will also get a free copy of *The Capricorn Goat* – a mystery suspense novel.

E-book/Electronic Book Club:

Include:

1. Readers Guides,
2. Teleclass or online chats with you - or your local book club chapter where I can answer your questions, we can talk about the current book or whatever else is on your mind.
3. Book Marks to download and print out,

Billie A Williams

4. Book Club Newsletter (PDF format)
5. Short short stories to download and more...

As special premiums, for contests or names drawn at random: Cookbooks, t-shirts, caps, mugs, and more as available for certain books.

Book List in the order they will be delivered:

1. Knapsack Secrets (Rock Soup story and recipe)
2. Small Town Secrets (cookbook premium)
3. Ancient Secrets (African FolkLore)
4. Skull Music
5. Ghost Music of Vaudeville
6. Death by Candlelight (How to Make Your Own Candles booklet)
7. Candlelight and Shadows
8. The Pink Lady Slipper
9. Bed and Breakfast Murders (Cookbook)
10. Diamonds, Death and Deceit (African Folk Lore)
11. Tracker (Bloodhound facts booklet)
12. Watch For the Raven (Native American Recipes)

Print Book Club: \$22 per month. E-book/Electronic Book Club \$10 per month

Sign up with be through PayPal - if you do not have PayPal it is free and easy to sign up and the safest way to make purchases on the internet. For more information [email me](#). Please put Book Club in the Subject line. Thanks

billie@billiewilliams.com

www.billiewilliams.com