

PLACE AS CHARACTER

Stories from the Heart Conference • April 16, 2016

“Sometimes I banged around the farmyard on the heels of my cowboy boots, seeing if I could make it the whole way between the shop and the house without lowering my toes. Sometimes I went barefoot. My toes gripped the hard-packed clay, spread over its knobby surface, and brushing back and forth, managed to raise a powder. One summer I wore sandals, little pink-soled princess things with glitter embedded in the clear plastic uppers. Wearing them... I danced in the dust of a fairy’s wand.”

—Julene Bair, “Dirt Princess,” from *Dirt: A Love Story*

SENSE(S) OF PLACE

The landscapes of our lives are more than mere scenery; their very nature—the landforms, weather, and the community of other-than-human lives shapes the people who live here and the stories we tell.

In fact, landscapes are often characters themselves. How can we bring a specific place/landscape to life in our writing, going beyond description and into the soul of the land? How do we find words to convey that essence—the texture and smell of a place, the way it affects our lives and our stories?

When we talk about place as character, we’re talking about writing that shows place as one of the factors in what happens in the story/essay/memoir/poem. Place has a profound impact on the stories of our lives.

How do we write place as believable, authentic character?

- **Know it** so well that you “live inside of it.” Spend time in the place, and if you can’t do that, read voraciously, talk to people who live or have lived there. Soak yourself into the place until it takes over mind and imagination.
- **Use rich sensory “data”** to evoke place. Go beyond what we see: describe how the wind sounds, what the place smells like, how the sleet feels....

PRACTICE

- Think of a climactic scene in your memoir or life-story. Now describe the smell of that scene in one or two words. Don't spend a long time thinking about it; use the first word or words that come to mind. Use those words to begin a free-write, following the smell wherever it takes you. Write for five minutes and then stop. Were you surprised by where the writing took you? What did you learn about your story?
- Go outside and spend five minutes sitting with your eyes closed. Note everything you hear, smell, and feel—without opening your eyes. You'll be able to read most of it when you're done. Then prepare to be surprised at how much you notice when your dominant sense (vision) is turned off. This "turing off" of our dominant sense works to give you a richer experience of place even indoors.

VOCABULARY OF PLACE

- **Get the details right:** Is the bluff tan or ochre? Is that a speeding pronghorn (American West) or antelope (Africa)? Is the shrub that perfumes the air after summer rains big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata* with the turpentine pungence) or *Chamisa* (rabbitbrush with the fall "crown" of golden flowers) or purple sage (*Salvia dorii*, with purple flowers and a fragrance somewhat like its relative, cooking sage)? Is that river the Purgatoire or the Picketwire? Is that large black bird soaring overhead on stiff wings a raven or a turkey vulture? If your characters are riding toward a rising full moon, make sure they're headed east. If you don't know the details, learn them. Buy field guides, ask experts, go on nature or geology walks, look up details on the internet (and make sure you're finding authoritative sites, as in from universities, government, researchers, or others who know their stuff).

Questions after the conference? Email me: susan@susanjtweit.com

HOMEWORK: VOCABULARY OF PLACE WORKSHEET

You know your physical address, your cell phone number, your email address... But do you know your “land address”? These questions will help you focus on the details of place.

What watershed is your place part of? _____

What's the name of the nearest branch of that watershed? _____

What bioregion is your place part of? (Great Basin, for instance, or Cascade Range)

What is the name of your specific part of that bioregion? (Columbia River Plateau, Palouse Hills, etc) _____

What is the name of the closest prominent local landmark? _____

Name ten native plants characteristic of the place:

Ten birds:

Twenty animals/fish/insects/reptiles:

Name ten historical figures whose lives or actions shaped the story of the place: _____

Five local experts who could answer your questions: _____

Which Indian groups lived in the area? What were there names for the place? _____

On a separate sheet of paper, list as many place-specific words as you can think of to describe the particular weather, winds, shapes of the land, drainages, fragrances, sounds, wild inhabitants, cultures...