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Maximize Your Setting: Bringing Locations, Eras and Worlds to Life on the Page

By: Guest Column | June 14, 2018



When the reader can feel as if they are physically in your story's setting, they will be more inclined to let themselves experience what the characters are seeing and hearing. Here, author Curt Eriksen offers considerations for bringing the locations and eras in your fiction to life.

By Curt Eriksen

Joseph Conrad defined the job of the writer who aspires to produce art as that of making you, the reader, "hear"—via "the power of the written word." It is, he wrote, my task "to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see."

Conrad's emphasis upon the presentation of sensory material has been echoed in every MFA program across the country. Aspiring writers are told to affect the senses of their readers by providing them with concrete stimuli. Or, as Nabokov put it, "Caress the details."

But I have always understood Conrad to be referring—when he uses the word see—not only to those fictional facts capable of transporting a reader and placing them within any particular scene, as a witness to what is happening, but to the necessary vision of the writer, which underscores the action and acts as a sort of superglue, holding everything together.

That vision, or glue, is what unites the disparate elements of any story. And makes that particular version of a story, told numerous times by numerous authors, unique.



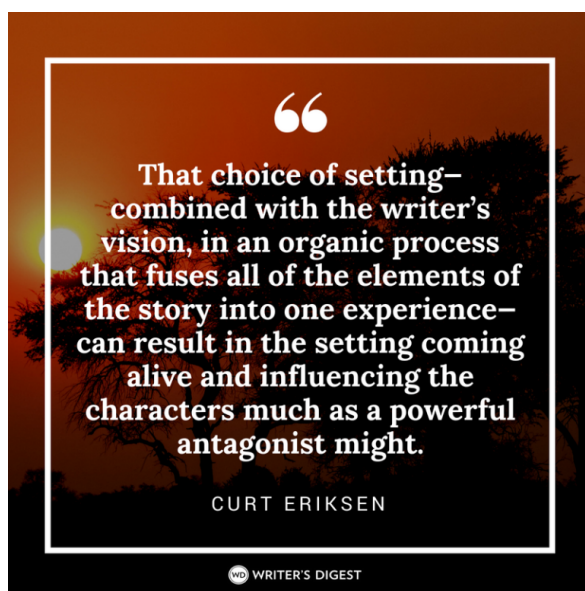
Among the elements held together in this way are setting, character and theme. And among the very first decisions a writer makes, whether deliberate or not, is the decision of where to set the story he or she wants to tell.

That choice of setting—combined with the writer’s vision, in an organic process that fuses all of the elements of the story into one experience—can result in the setting coming alive and influencing the characters much as a powerful antagonist might. When the reader can feel as if they are physically in some place they might have actually never been—like Conrad’s Dutch Congo, in *The Heart of Darkness*—they will be more inclined to believe what they are seeing and hearing.

The Serengeti Plains, where my novella is set, is a landscape bristling with threat. Living is intense there, and exotic to most readers, because we’re not used to seeing so much dying occur before us so routinely. The violence involved in being eaten—while still alive—is fierce. By setting the conflict between my protagonists—a wealthy, fifty-something entrepreneur named Richard, and the younger freelance writer Sofie—in this potentially ferocious environment, I was able to add considerable tension to the story of two lovers who hoped to discover paradise on a two-week trip to Tanzania, half a world away from their ‘real’ lives in Minnesota.

Just as a war zone—or a colonial crusade into the upper reaches of the Congo River at the end of the 19th century—provides any story set there with intrinsic danger, any journey into a seere and unforgiving landscape full of predators presents many possibilities for heightened drama.

That said, I’m not suggesting that a writer choose a dangerous setting for their story in order just to increase the excitement in that story. The setting of any story has to fit together seamlessly with the other elements of that story. But had my story of two lovers involved in an affair been set in their hometown, Minneapolis, there would have been none of the opportunities for metaphorically portraying their dilemma that arose, quite naturally, out of the setting and circumstances of my story. Or at least those opportunities would have been very different.



Chekov’s treatment of this classic situation in “*The Lady with the Pet Dog*” is set in Yalta, on the shores of the Black Sea, a setting most of his readers would have been familiar with, if only in terms of its reputation. So my story of illicit love far from home could have been set anywhere. But setting it in the Serengeti allowed my vision of a doomed relationship to be enhanced by my protagonists’ surroundings.

In addition to that, and as a consequence, I think of the synergy that occurs while involved in any creative project, a second story took shape while I was writing my novella, framed, as it turned out, within the parentheses of the larger narrative.

In this second story a young lion has been driven out its pride and forced to look for another group of lionesses among whom it might reign. Driven by hunger this lion attacks an aging Cape buffalo and tries to bring it down. While Sofie witnesses this eternal battle between predator and prey, Richard is off on a parallel adventure: searching for a miracle cure to his cancer diagnosis.

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The landscape of my story—that desolate yet teeming wilderness—produced not only the drama of the hunt, but the context for two lovers who, once they finally get the chance to be alone with one another for a prolonged period of time, find that the secrets they have kept from each other—Richard’s diagnosis, and Sofie’s involvement with Zuri—have the power to destroy not only their love, but hope for any future at all.

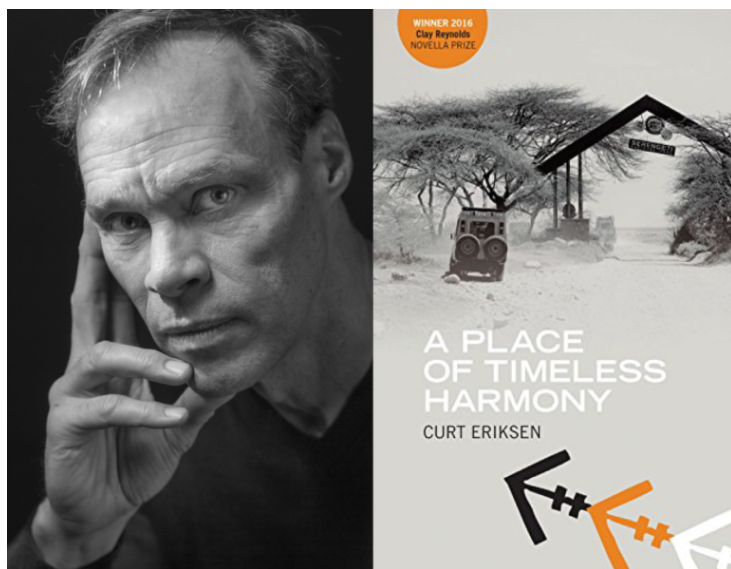
It was never my intention to write this second story—or that of Richard’s pursuit of a miracle cure—allegorically. Instead this is something that occurred quite naturally, through the process of telling a story set in the plains of East Africa. Although these paired stories do reinforce each other in some ways, they are not identical. Richard is not the aging Cape buffalo, struggling to fend off the attack of the lion, who is not Zuri, the young Tanzanian who approaches Sofie on the beach in Zanzibar while Richard dives among the coral reefs.

But the juxtaposing and intertwining of these two stories of desire and survival does suggest that, in some ways at least, Richard could have been that aging Cape buffalo and Zuri might have been that outcast lion.

...

It is my hope that a reader of *A Place of Timeless Harmony* might feel as if they were right there, in the heat and the dust and the cold at night, where lions have always stalked their prey and Cape buffaloes have always fought back. It is my hope that a reader might actually hear that call of the lone lion in the middle of the night, while lying beside Richard and Sofie in their camp bed, privy to the secrets they have kept from each other.

Because, if that happens, my mission as a writer is nearly complete. And I can leave the reader alone with the vivid sensory impressions of a fictional trip through the Serengeti. And that reader can judge the story of Richard and Sofie’s love for themselves.



Curt Eriksen was born in Kansas, but spent half of his life in Europe. He currently lives between the Sierra de Gredos, in western Spain, and Boston. Eriksen’s short fiction, novel extracts, and political commentary have appeared in numerous print and online journals in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, India, and Spain, including *Blackbird*, *Rosebud*, and *Alba*. Currently unrepresented, Eriksen is working on a novel about the origins of salsa in the early days of the Cuban Revolution. Learn more at www.curteriksen.com.

Learn more in the online course [Description and Setting](#) from [Writer’s Digest University](#).



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