

Experiments With Place

“An imagined town is at least as real as an actual town.
If it isn't you may be in the wrong business.”

-Richard Hugo

We are often told that, in writing conventional forms of fiction, we should strive for “a sense of place.” What does this mean exactly? Literally speaking, it refers to geographical area—a town, a city, an island, a mountain range. But it isn't enough to just give a town a name, a population, a lake to sit beside, and some streets that cut through it. To create a real “sense of place,” you have to make the town's very essence permeate every part of the story. Maybe the mayor is your protagonist's ex-boyfriend's dad. Maybe the apple orchard is the site of an 18th-century Indian massacre. Maybe your character's mother died in the church.

The connection between place and character is so profound that messing around with it—adjusting its relationship to reality—can introduce massive disorientation into the story. This is commonly seen in dreams, or stories that adhere to the logic of dreams, such as Kazuo Ishiguro's *Unconsoled*, or Nabokov's “The Visit To The Museum.” We can use this distortion for all kinds of emotional effects.

Here are a few places that have something wrong with them. Give one or two of them a shot.

- 1) A modern city with an “old city” section that is not simply characterized by architecture from the past, but in fact exists in the past. That is, when you enter it, you go back in time.
- 2) A town that is built entirely on a moving train.
- 3) A town obsessed with remaking itself, so there is never a single street, building, or green space that is not in the process of renovation.
- 4) A community built on a mountain, which has its own climate, its own mini-nations, and its own language. Nobody ever leaves the mountain.
- 5) An apartment building that extends infinitely into the air and downward, into the ground.
- 6) A heavily earthquake-prone area that has culturally adjusted to the inevitability of constant destruction.
- 7) A place where several different elections are going on at all times, where every single little thing is decided by referendum, and every resident holds some kind of public office.
- 8) A town where everyone is in jail.
- 9) Two neighboring towns that are in the throes of an unceasing, centuries-long war.
- 10) A town that all the men—or, alternately, all the women—have been kicked out of.