

## Experiments With Society

If a story is...um...a soup, and the characters and plot are, like, the meat and vegetables, then the story's societal milieu is the broth.

OK, that's awful. But it is true that a story's social environment is not something we take immediate notice of when we read, the way we might a strong character or dramatic event. It is, however, the matrix in which those things live—the glue that holds the story together. Dreiser's New York, Alice Munro's rural Ontario, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles underworld—these are the social settings which dictate what kinds of things happen, what they mean, and how characters react to them.

Writers of political fiction might use society as a battering ram to crush their agendas home—Ayn Rand is a good example here. Science fiction writers enjoy imagining societies whose rules are drastically different from our own, and setting their characters loose in them, to see how they behave. Writers of historical fiction research social mores down to the last tea towel to create a realistic world for their characters to inhabit. Literary writers may tweak familiar social arenas for strong effect: in next week's book, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, we get a fairly realistic urban America—with the peculiar difference that elevator inspectors are figures of considerable importance and fame. Shirley Jackson's famous “The Lottery” has surprised generations of readers with its creepy zinger of an ending, drawn from a small-town society much—but not quite—like our own.

Your assignment is to write a brief scene in which two lovers are breaking up. Except you should write it three times, the way it might play out in any three of the following societies:

- 1) A remote fishing village on a distant Pacific island, few of whose residents have had any exposure to modern civilization.
- 2) A new age religious cult that has sprung up in a failed suburb of Atlanta.
- 3) The human resources division of the third largest corporation in North America.
- 4) The White House.
- 5) A colony of human beings that has been established on Mars in the year 2146.
- 6) A refugee camp in Lebanon for Iraqis displaced by the war.
- 7) A summer academic retreat for high-achieving high school juniors.
- 8) The lost city of Atlantis.
- 9) The Hollywood set of a Michael Bay science fiction blockbuster-in-progress.
- 10) A senior citizens' gardening club.