

## Setting And Description In Horror Fiction

Setting is an important element of any novel--it may serve to enhance the mood of the story, or simply to establish the time and place. In a horror novel, however, setting does more than simply enhance the story's mood; it creates the ambience, and the expectation, of terror. Whether you adopt the straightforward approach of the gothic novels and fill your scenes with gloomy derelict houses and dark, stormy nights, or you follow the example of King and Koontz and display the horror of your story in sharp relief against the familiar, mundane trappings of Main Street America, setting in the horror novel must be handled with special care. Too little and the mood is lost, too much and you run the risk of unintentional self-parody.

Horror writer Mort Castle prefers the contrast of the horrible event against an everyday backdrop. In *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, he writes, "Readers relate to the ordinary without your having to work at establishing that relationship. And readers will find your settings credible, as they must. . . . If you have an ominous, thickly atmospheric setting, the phosphorescent-fog-shrouded swamp, the torture chamber of a crumbling castle, the burial ground of a Satanic church, you will be hard pressed to spring a surprise on your readers, who rightly anticipate an awful or nasty occurrence in such a foreboding place. But . . . when the ordinary is invaded by the terrifying extraordinary, horror happens."

In a horror novel, your setting may contain elements of the supernatural or include magical or occult systems of belief, systems which have their own "rules." Granted, they may be rules you make up, but once established, they must be rigorously adhered to. Orson Scott Card, in *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, writes, "With magic, you must be very clear about the rules. First, you don't want your readers to think that anything can happen. Second, the more carefully you work out the rules, the more you know about the limitations on magic, the more possibilities you open up in the story." If you plan to use magic as part of your setting, take the time to work through the details of exactly how your system works, and what role it will play in your story.

The same theory applies to any supernatural aspects of your setting. In "World Building in Horror, Occult and Fantasy Writing" (Chapter 12 in *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*), Marion Zimmer Bradley puts it this way:

This kind of setting of limits is indispensable for all supernatural, or apparently supernatural, beings; an understanding of the laws by which they exist. For instance, if your ghosts can (and do) walk through walls, what is the explanation for why they don't fall through the floor?

. . . Whether you use traditional werewolves or African leopard-men (and they do not live by the same laws of magic), they too operate under whatever laws give rules to their existence.

Many writers choose to think of their setting as another character and use the techniques of characterization--narrative description, dialogue, and characters in action--to reveal the details of the setting. While your setting deserves special attention, be careful that it doesn't overwhelm the story. Always remember the story is of primary importance and should never be sidetracked for a travelogue. In addition to providing an anchor for time and place, setting can be creatively exploited to advance plot or illustrate a story's theme. Here are just a few ways setting can be used to enhance your story, with some examples from published horror novels:

**To establish the story's "tone" or illustrate the characters' moods and feelings.**

Horror novels are among the best examples of the use of setting to get the reader "in the mood." Darkness, foul weather, ancient decrepit buildings, chaotic urban streets and myopic small towns can all be used to creative advantage.

Castle Rock has been, at least in recent years, an unlucky town.

As if to prove that old saw about lightning and how often it strikes in the same place isn't always right, a number of bad things had happened in Castle Rock over the last eight or ten years--things bad enough to make the national news. George Bannerman was the local Sheriff when those things occurred, but Big George, as he had been affectionately called, would not have to deal with Homer Gamache, because Big George was dead. He had survived the first bad thing, a series of rape-strangulations committed by one of his own officers, but two years later he had been killed by a rabid dog out on Town Road #3--not just killed, either, but almost literally torn apart. Both of these cases had been extremely strange, but the world was a strange place. And a hard one. And, sometimes, an unlucky one. (*The Dark Half*, Stephen King--Viking)

**As a plot device.**

Isolated settings are popular in horror novels, and often play a critical role in the development of the plot. As William F. Nolan says, "Horror is much more frightening when your characters are isolated and vulnerable."

Ven was naturally cautious. He'd kept a close eye on the dock foreman. Once or twice he'd had a feeling, like a warning bell in his brain, that the foreman suspected something. But each time Ven had eased up a little, and in a few days the warning bell had gone away.

Now he checked his watch. Eleven o'clock. He heard a door opening, then closing, from around the corner. The office was dark, deserted, as he knew it would be. With a last glance, he edged around the corner of the building, onto the docks.

. . . Ven passed a small freighter berthed along the wharf, its heavy hawsers dripping black water onto rusted bits. The ship seemed deserted, not even a harbor watch on deck. He slowed. The warehouse door lay directly ahead, near

the end of the main pier. Ven glanced quickly over his shoulder. Then, with a quick turn of his hand, he unlocked the metal door and slipped inside.

. . . Inside, he saw the darkened warehouse resolve itself into a vague landscape of cargo containers and packing crates. He couldn't chance a flashlight, but it didn't matter: he knew the layout well enough to walk it in his dreams. He moved forward carefully, threading a path through the vast mountains of cargo.

. . . As he was about to squeeze behind the large crates, Ven stopped abruptly. There was a strange odor here: something earthy, goatish, decaying. A lot of odd cargoes had come through this port, but none smelling quite like this.

His instincts were going off five-alarm, yet he couldn't detect anything wrong or out of place. He slid forward, between the Museum cargo and the wall.

He stopped again. Something wasn't right back here. Something wasn't right at all. (*Relic*, Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child--Forge)

**To trigger flashbacks or character introspection.**

The smell of freshly-mown fields, the familiar strains of a favorite piece of music, the sound of gunfire, almost any manner of sensory input can send a character into his or her memories or trigger internal reflections-these triggers can be used in sequels to action scenes (but use them sparingly so the plot isn't forced to a standstill).

He kept moving, and in one small mound of dirt, he found an earthworm. It was still moist, glistening, but dead.

He uncovered a wad of decaying vegetable matter, which seemed to be ficus leaves. They peeled apart like layers of filio dough in a Mideastern pastry. A small black beetle with stiff legs and jewel-green eyes was entombed in the center of them.

Near one of the nightstands, Harry found a slightly misshapen lead slug, one of the rounds that Connie had pumped into Ticktock. Damp earth clung to it. He picked it up and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger, staring at it thoughtfully.

Connie came farther into the room to see what he had discovered.

"What do you make of it?"

"I don't know exactly . . . though maybe . . ."

"What?"

He hesitated, looking around at the soil on the carpet and the bedspread.

He was recalling certain folk legends, fairy tales of a fashion, although with even a stronger religious overtone than those of Hans Christian Andersen. Judaic in origin, if he wasn't mistaken. Tales of cabalistic magic.

He said, "If you gathered up all this dirt and debris, if you packed it together real tight . . . do you think it would be just exactly the right amount of material to fill in the wound in his throat and the hole in the side of his face?"

Frowning, Connie said, "Maybe. So . . . what're you saying?"

He stood and pocketed the slug. He knew that he didn't have to remind her about the inexplicable pile of dirt in Ricky Estefan's living room--or about the exquisitely sculpted hand and coat sleeve sprouting from it.

"I'm not sure what I'm saying just yet," Harry told her. "I need to think about it a little more."

As they passed through Ordegard's house, they turned off the lights. The darkness they left behind seemed alive.

*(Dragon Tears, Dean Koontz--Putnam)*

## **Description**

From your reading in the Guidebook, you know that background details can be incorporated into your story in three ways: through straight description (often presented as a character's perception of his or her surroundings); as part of the action in a scene, with the setting details punctuating the action; or as part of the dialogue between two or more characters. Our examples above have used all three methods; here are a few more:

### **1. Description (through the eyes of the viewpoint character):**

Outside, the sun had dipped below the Shrine. It was my first night in the city; my first night away from home. The sky was glorious, indigo and violet and gold, and there was a warmth and sweetness to the air that I could taste in the back of my throat, burnt honey and car exhaust, and the damp promise of a thunderstorm charging it all. I walked slowly across the Mall, alone save for one or two hooded figures I glimpsed pacing the chestnut allées beneath the Shrine's eastern tower. I finally halted atop a small hillock where a single oak sent shadows rippling across the grass.

From the Shrine's bell tower came the first deep tones of the carillon calling the hour. I turned, and saw in the distance the domes and columns of the Capitol glimmering in the twilight, bone-colored, ghostly; and behind it still more ghostly buildings, their columned porticoes and marble arches all seeming to melt into the haze of green and violet darkness that descended upon them like sleep. City of Trees, someone had named it long ago; and as I gazed upon the far-off buildings and green-girt streets my heart gave a sudden and

unexpected heave, as though someone nudged it.  
(*Waking the Moon*, Elizabeth Hand--Harper Prism)

## **2. Incorporated into the scene's action:**

From street to alley to street, across yards and between silent houses they ran, clambering over fences, through a school playground, footfalls vaguely metallic, where every shadow seemed as permanent as iron, where neon lights burned steadier than any Harry had ever seen before and painted eternal rainbows on the pavement, past a man in a tweed coat walking his Scottie dog and both of them motionless as bronze figures.

They sprinted along a narrow stream bed where runoff from the storm earlier in the day was time-frozen but not at all like ice: clearer than ice, black with reflections of the night and marked by pure silver highlights instead of frost-white crystallization. The surface was not flat, either, like a frozen winter creek, but rippled and runneled and spiraled by turbulence. Where the stream splashed over rocks in its course, the air was hung with unmoving sprays of glittering water resembling elaborate sculptures made from glass shards and beads. . . .

Although they seemed to move as easily in this petrified world as in the one to which they were accustomed, Harry noticed that they did not create a wind of their own when they ran. The air parted around them like butter around a knife, but no turbulence arose from their passage, which indicated that the air was objectively denser than it appeared subjectively. Their speed might be considerably less than it appeared to them, in which case movement required more effort than they perceived.  
(*Dragon Tears*, Dean Koontz--Putnam)

## **3. In character dialogue:**

"Tonight, my dear, you shall sleep upon the bones of barbarian kings." So the Baron announced as, after days of jostling travel, our coach at last turned into the winding road that led to the gates of the Frankenstein home.

"Shall I indeed?" I asked, looking to Victor and the Baroness to explain this extraordinary remark.

"You shall. For Belrive is that old and older. Its foundations might have been laid by Charlemagne himself. Yet even deeper than those foundations we have found the skulls of Helvetian chieftains grinning up at us out of the dust. Dark ages, my child, dark ages. The record of folly, ignorance, and savagery all now laid to rest in the mouldering Earth. And good riddance."  
(*The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein*, Theodore Roszak--Random House)

## **Foreign words and phrases**

If you want to use a word or phrase in a foreign language, be sure you use it in such a way that, if you don't actually translate it, your reader will be able to understand its

meaning from the context. Similarly, you may have certain words and phrases that, while not precisely foreign, you've created to describe or name concepts or objects that do not exist in the "real" world.

These are the kinds of details that add authenticity to your setting, but you must be sure your reader understands them (without your giving a linguistics lecture in the middle of an action scene!). Introduce any unfamiliar term or foreign word or phrase in one of two ways--use it in a context that makes its meaning perfectly clear, or provide a brief (nondisruptive) definition or translation. Here are two examples from published horror novels, the unfamiliar words appearing in red:

. . . A cold wind blew down from the mountain pass to the north, sending skeins of mist racing across the encampment. Magda shivered in her heavy Icelandic wool sweater and wondered why she'd thought this was a better idea than the Yucatan. "He says the whole valley is stantikic't-"

"What? Haunted?" Janine interrupted derisively.

George squatted in front of the hissing campfire and lit a cigarette. "No," he said, and tossed his match into the flames. George had majored in Slavic languages at Georgetown and was hoping to find linguistic links between the Estavians of the Psalgyuk range and the neighboring Cuclterinyi culture in the Transylvanian Alps, and even modern Crete. "Isch'raval, that would be haunted. This is more like tainted."  
(*Waking the Moon*, Elizabeth Hand--Harper Prism)

"Beethoven's String Quartet in F Major, Opus 135," he said. "But no doubt you knew that, Lieutenant. It's the fourth movement Allegro, known as Der schwer gefaßte Entschluß--the 'Difficult Resolution.' A title that could be bestowed on this case, as well as the movement, perhaps? Amazing, isn't it, how art imitates life."  
(*Relic*, Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child--Forge)