

Do you ever write about the places you've been? Or, you know, real places? It's a common question I hear, and the simple answer is yes— and no. It can be difficult to write about the places we know and not find ourselves overwhelmed and wrapped up in the most minute of details.

One of the projects I'm currently in revision mode with takes place between two made up countries, and a real one. The real country just so happens to be The Island we lived on for fifteen years. I spent an entire day working on writing two small paragraphs. Small might be generous in wording, it was more like a few sentences.

Why? I was hung up on the smallest of details. Should I share those tiny things in the story, or ignore them? Did they matter? I found myself scouring photos, articles, and doubting everything I remembered. It was quite funny to sit there, close my eyes, and see all the curves and hills of the paths I walked on a daily basis for years. I discovered that putting them to paper took more work than actually walking uphill on that boggy wet sand and straight into oceanfront winds. (If you've never had the pleasure of such a walk, you're really missing out!)

And all that thinking led me to wondering if I needed to include the oceanfront wind, and what about the mystery log people pose for photos on? Or the funny guy who always rode his bicycle and would stop from time to time to glare up at trees and shake his fist at them? Did specific road names matter? What about the water rat who lived down by the docks? Or the resident seal, should either of them make an appearance? And what on earth was the name of the statue that I sat near every week while writing in the library?

The whole experience of attempting to write this scene gave me profound respect for some of the works I've critiqued over the years. One particular fellow came to mind who was writing a fictional autobiography of sorts. He was really hung up on the smallest of details to the land he'd tended, the house he'd built, the fences erected, and the animals that roamed that area.

The description was so rich in detail that it was easy to imagine myself there. The downside was that the author had become so caught up in all the tiny little details that the story was

lacking. The action was glanced over and moved to the side so we could hear about property boundaries, and cooking over an open flame. I remember reading it, shaking my head, and trying to find a polite way to express the issues reading that work of heart.

In my own story, I spent far too much time trying to get the details right. I wanted them balanced without overwhelming the reader, and I ended up overwhelming the author and had to lay the story aside. For how long? It's still sitting there, basking in its glory of defeating the writer. It snickers at me from time to time.

So, I switched tactics and picked up a different project that needs to be revised. It is also set in places I've been, but in a much quieter way. I don't name the exact location, because I created a fictitious small town that mimics several real ones I've been to before. They could be that tiny backwater town you're thinking of right now. Maybe one you grew up in, or one you visited on a family vacation. Or, at least I hope that's how it reads.

I tried to keep the details minimal, with small town vibes. It's a small farming community, although I only talk about the largest of the farms. The majority of the town's businesses are all located on the main road. They have their own school, library, and even a few fast food joints. Some are famous, and you might be able to guess their names if you take note of the small details.

The idea being that I wanted the reader to imagine themselves in that small town. To want to meet the townsfolk, to know the family who lives on that farm, to imagine themselves as part of their lives. And, the only map to its location might be the flora, fauna, and wildlife that makes sporadic appearances.

There are places, both local and far away, that I've drawn on for this town of make believe. While working on a particular scene for this story last week I had to pause, and decide what I was basing that small location on. The scene depicts a father and daughter walking through their country property. The destination isn't that important, although they are headed towards the woods. The importance of the scene isn't even what the area looks like, but the conversation that unfolds. In the end, I decided to smoosh two well known paths together to create the one in my story.

One of those paths I've walked a few hundred times, but feels far more like a million. The other I've never walked, but I've driven and walked past it often. Always conjuring up the beginning and end of the path— the portions I cannot see.

I've even borrowed the layout of a friend's former home for inspiration in one of my stories. That particular story has been lying dormant for years because after getting the basics of it down. The original plan went in a completely different direction then when my pen hit the paper. Someday I'll dust it off, and return to it, but for now it sports a lovely home that's far too large for the occupants that live within it.

Of course, I never told the friend that I borrowed the layout of their former home, and who knows if they'd even recognized it, because often the real place or building becomes the base structure for the fictional world that is built around them.



Dear Reader,

I suspect at least one person will ask why I don't just write places and buildings exactly as they are. And my answer is often quite simple: Sometimes, I need to write in a little something that doesn't exist in order to help my characters achieve their goal. Or to prevent them from reaching that goal too quickly.

There's also that nagging fear that just one misrepresentation of a location, person, or place could open up a world of backlash. It happens, and perhaps that's a silly reason, too. But there's nothing quite so disconcerting as reading along about a place you know so well, and suddenly finding that some feature is wrong. Not just the blue house being white, but a whole new road constructed, or some other change that is large enough to draw you out of the story and back into the real world.

Besides, when one writes about small towns, no matter how fictional the story is, someone is

bound to think you are basing it on real people. And while some of my characters are inspired by real people, none of them are a true reflection of any one person. I would hate for someone to think, “Oh surely the villain is based on...” or “Do you think ... is the hero, and if so did all those things really happen to him?”

And so, I throw a little real and a little fiction together, stir them up, and let them spill out onto the paper. Hoping there’s a sense of realism, but knowing that it’s all fiction.

As for that story about the small family hiding out on The Island, I opened it up again for the first time in months, and was delighted to see that despite the overwhelm, I had reigned in the description. Instead of flaming hot cheeks of embarrassment as I read it, I nodded and thought, “Not bad, not bad at all.” Followed right up with, “But now that I think about it, maybe I should scrap this entire scene, and instead....”

The Reluctant Author

