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- Careers
- Contests
- Community & Calendar
- Magazine & Media
- AWP Conference
- Writers' Conferences & Centers

Move Mountains: Activating Setting

Benjamin Percy | December 2016

I.

People are always asking why I write about Oregon, a question I find bewildering. That's where I grew up after all. That's the place I lived longer than anywhere else. And on so many levels it's a dynamic, fractured environment, a great stage for drama. Geographically, the Cascade Mountains fence the state in half—the east side high desert, the west side rainforest and pasture that runs into ocean. It's politically divided as well, the spur-jangling rural areas at odds with the hempy vortexes of liberalism you'll find in Portland and Eugene. And it's culturally confused, with the influx of Hispanics and rich, retired Californians. I could go on—about meth sheds and snowmobiles, vultures wheeling in the sky and rattlesnakes coiling under porches—but I'll save it for the fiction. Why do I write about Oregon? Why wouldn't I write about Oregon?

Place matters. That's what so many people seem to have forgotten. Is it because they spend most of their time indoor or online—so that they've lost touch with their environment? Is it because every city contains the same neon-and-concrete gauntlet of Targets, Little Caesars, Subways, GreatClips—so that

every place looks like every place else?

Someone once told me, “I want my work to feel like it could happen anywhere.”

To which I responded, “Huh.” That’s like saying you want your character to seem like she could be anyone, Margaret Thatcher or Pippi Longstocking, or you want your story to seem like it could happen anytime, a thousand years ago or a thousand years in the future. Abstraction sucks. Good writing relies on the particulars.

Maybe your character wears a pale blue bathrobe all day, every day, stitched with extra pockets that jangle with cigarette lighters and screws and marbles. Maybe your story takes place in the era when the Beach Boys blasted from radios and cars sported whitewalled tires and boys slicked back their hair and rolled cigarette packs up the sleeve of their white T-shirts. This same standard applies to place.

Brady Udall—my former professor and the author of *The Lonely Polygamist*—once warned me that seventy-five percent of fan mail sneaks in a critical remark about how there isn’t a meatpacking plant in this town or a green fire hydrant on that street or an old oak tree at the intersection of Empire and 7th. And he was right. That’s one of the reasons I don’t often write about Illinois or Wisconsin or Iowa or Minnesota or any of the other places I’ve briefly lived in my nomadic adulthood. I don’t know them well enough.

It takes a long time to know a place. I’m not just talking about its geography. I mean its history, its culture, its politics, its myths. Does Bigfoot or the Hodag lurk in its woods? Is Elvis Presley or Paul Bunyan its most famous citizen? Can you see the northern lights coloring the horizon? Did the river, once so full of chemical runoff, catch fire and burn for three days? Is there a hot air balloon festival every August? How do they pronounce the word *roof* or *bagel*? Know a place the way Cheryl Strayed knows the Pacific Crest Trail, the way Marquez knew Maconda and Hawthorne knew New England and Faulkner knew Yoknapatawpha County.

When I ask people to tell me something interesting about where they live, they often tell me, “Nothing.” Maybe, if you’re from a place that isn’t a booming metropolis or a tourist destination, you think it’s an unworthy stage for fiction. Look closer. Start listing off curiosities. Let’s say you’re in a small town in Iowa. How about the way, when the wind shifts just so, the air smells like the slaughterhouse twenty miles north? How about the murder-suicide that happened five years ago in the house across from the high school? How about the radioactive waste buried beneath the soccer fields? How about the tornadoes that unspool from the sky every spring and vacuum up the earth? How about last summer’s flood, the one so bad that people were canoeing down Main Street? How about the clouds stacked up like mountains and the fertilizer that runs off the cornfields and mucks up the rivers? How about the bluegrass band that made it big and tours internationally but still lives on a hobby farm outside town?

Write about your own backyard. Claim your own forty acres. Use it as a stage on which your characters will perform.

When a reader first picks up a story, they are like a coma patient—fluttering open their eyes in an unfamiliar world, wondering, *where am I, when am I, who am I*? The writer has an obligation to quickly and efficiently place the reader in the story.

Which is why writers should avoid opening with dialogue. I know, I know—you can think of ten thousand awesome stories that do exactly that. I still think it’s a mistake. With one exception—

"Where's Papa going with that axe?"—from the beginning of *Charlotte's Web*. It works because E.B. White fills the white space: immediately establishing three characters, one of them caught in the middle of an arresting gesture.

And that is your job, to fill in the white space. Imagine a blank canvas. Now imagine a sun *boing*ing up until it settles on an afternoon angle. Then a hundred or so trees spike themselves into a distant forest. A field of corn unfurls from the furrows—and a combine grumbles through it. In the cab of the combine sits a teenage boy with an Adam's apple the size of his fist. He's wearing Carhartt coveralls and has a cell phone pressed to his ear. His attention obviously isn't on the field—the combine is veering right—and from the gravelly roar below him, he ought to be powering down the engine: too much corn is getting mowed down too quickly. "You're sure?" the boy says, his voice pitched high. "You're sure you're ready?"

Maybe the boy is talking to his girlfriend and maybe she is at last ready to have sex with him at the gravel pit—or maybe he is talking to his father, who has decided to put the farm up for sale after a real estate developer expressed interest in building a subdivision on their land—or whatever. I'll trust the mystery will drag my reader forward. Because at this point they are invested in a world and character.

But if I had opened with that line of dialogue? "You're sure? You're sure you're ready?" It would not only mean nothing—but it would be ungrounded, a genderless, ageless voice echoing through white space—and I would have to store it in my short term memory and carry it with me for several sentences until it was at last contextualized. You don't want your reader working that hard at the start of a story. Moving from this world, with its myriad distractions, to the world of the page is hard enough. Place solidifies the otherworld we're entering and anchors your characters in it.

Abstraction sucks. Good writing relies on the particulars.

II.

Never give us a generic description. When we enter a new space, show it to us—but through a particular lens, your character's point of view, modified by mood.

So maybe we knob open the front door, step onto the porch and… "The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike. Since this had been a fashionable neighborhood forty years ago, his mother persisted in thinking they did well to have an apartment in it. Each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child."

In this passage—from Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge"—the setting is polluted by Julian's vision. He's a nasty piece of work. Bitter, jealous, insecure, spiteful. Most characters, when the sun sets, wax romantic about the halo of light burning behind a mountain or the pink and purple rafters lancing the sky. But to him the sky is "dying" and so is the neighborhood. The houses are ugly and dirty and "liver-colored." The grubby children don't play in the yards—they sit—as if stunned by their rotten surroundings.

He resents his childhood home, the place his mother was proud to raise him. This not only characterizes him but also contributes to narrative conflict. His mother wears dressy gloves, brags about her expensive hat, talks about how Julian's grandfather was a "prosperous landowner" and how his great-great grandfather was governor. She insists on their class—that they are a certain "kind of people"—a notion

wrapped up in her very different perception of their surroundings. Julian is at odds with his environment, he is at odds with his mother, and we know something will snap as a result of this tension.

O'Connor is so good at this sort of thing that I can't help but include another example, this one from "The Artificial Nigger":

> Mr. Head awakened to discover that the room was full of moonlight. He sat up and stared at the floor boards—the color of silver—and then at the ticking on his pillow, which might have been brocade, and after a second, he saw half of the moon five feet away in his shaving mirror, paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter. It rolled forward and cast a dignifying light on everything. The straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr. Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant…

Mr. Head lives up to his name. From this description he's obviously big*head*ed and thinks the world of himself. His vision makes silver out of wood. He imagines brocade rising lushly from his pillow. The moon waits for his permission to enter. A chair is like a servant carrying the clothing of a great man. There's a hint in that paragraph that all is not as it seems: his shaving mirror is only five feet away. We might mistake him for royalty if not for a detail that implies cramped quarters. Soon we'll discover his alarm clock is broken and sits on an overturned bucket. This inflated sense of self—demonstrated by the setting—will later bring trouble to the story.

David Fincher's adaptation of *Fight Club* does something similar. The Edward Norton character moves through his apartment and sees everything as it appears in a catalogue: the price, the serial number, and product description. A coffee table in the shape of a Ying Yang, the Hovetrekke home exer-bike, all the IKEA products he believes define him as a person. Everything is factory-made, owned by tens of thousands of others. Nothing is unique, nothing has a story. His apartment has no soul. When he opens his fridge, he fittingly finds it empty of everything except for condiments. His whole life is surface, no substance. His transformation as a character will be matched by his setting as he blows up his apartment and moves into the piss-stinking, rotten-walled animal den that is the house on Paper Street, the place he will become truly wild and alive, a thing that bleeds and hungers. Through setting we get a stabilizing stage, a glimpse of character and a map of his emotional arc.

It takes a long time to know a place. I'm not just talking about its geography. I mean its history, its culture, its politics, its myths.

III.

Just as you should orient us in the beginning, you should orient us throughout. Every time we jump to a new setting (whether that's a character climbing on board a plane or entering a locker room or dropping through an open manhole), we need to feel immediately stabilized.

Give us the New Mexico desert—give us the mining camp—give us the splintery whorehouse—give us the bedroom with peeling wallpaper and lace curtains—give us the brass bed on which your characters lie tangled. Not always in that telescoping direction, but moving between the faraway and the nearby gives a sense of life, of three dimensionality. The constant negotiation between place (and space).

But simple staging isn't enough. A descriptive string like "There was a table. There was a lamp. There was a couch. There was a painting of hogs eating snakes," orients us, sure, but it's a passive

construction. Make it active. Make it come alive.

A good portion of my novel *The Dead Lands* takes place in post-apocalyptic St. Louis. It is a walled-in environment, run by fear-mongering politicians, and believes itself to be the last outpost of humanity. An expedition will later set off across the irradiated landscape in search of life, but before the quest begins, I needed to not only give my reader a sense of The Sanctuary—as the city is known—but also how the world has moved on. In an early draft, I delivered the geography and sociology like a kind of Wikipedia entry. It was mildly interesting but lacked *oomph*, movement, propulsion. So I added a robot owl.

One of my central characters, Lewis, is a scholar, an inventor, a kind of magician. This owl—a hat-tip to one of the favorite films of my childhood, 1981's *The Clash of the Titans*—is one of his devices. Its eyes can record and project and it serves as his spy.

> The bird perches on the wall. It observes the prisoner hauled away, the crowd scattering, and then, with a creaking snap of its wings, it takes flight. It appears to be an owl, though not like any other in the world, made of metal and only a little larger than a man's fist.
>
> Torches flare up all around the Sanctuary to fight the intruding night, and the owl's bronze feathers catch the light brightly when it flies from the wall, then over the gardens, the stables, the ropes of smoke that rise from chimneys and forges and ovens, the twisting streets busy with carts and dogs and bodies that stumble out of doorways. The wind blows cinders and dried bits of grass up into dust devils, and the owl blasts through them.
>
> The skyscrapers and high-rises needle upward from the center of the Sanctuary—Old Town, they call it—and the mechanical owl darts between the canyons of them now. Some of them still have windows, but most are open-air, so that they appear like a vast and rotting honeycomb inside which people crouch like brown grubs.
>
> The owl's wings whirr. Gears snap and tick beneath its breast. Within its glass eyes, an aperture contracts or expands depending on whether the owl casts its gaze at light or shadow.

This continues for another page and a half as the owl bombs through the city and the point of view whirls as we observe the citizens that it startles in its passing—a blacksmith cooling a red hinge in a bucket of horse piss, a dentist ripping a rotten tooth from a mouth, a granny lounging on a balcony—and so this new world is not only illustrated but activated.

I should not compare this weird, ridiculous, high-octane sequence to *The Great Gatsby*, but I'm going to, not because my work belongs on the same shelf with Fitzgerald, but because he's pulling off the same trick more elegantly and quietly in this passage:

> We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.
>
> The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in

> white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back after a short flight around the house. I must have stood still for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.

Hot damn! I'm not the kind of guy who gets profanely exclamatory about descriptions of sitting rooms, but in this case, I'll make an exception. Nothing is happening—outside of Nick walking into the room—and when nothing happens, stories stall. But in this case, Fitzgerald fights the lull by making everything come alive. The wind—his robot owl—does most of the work. Knocking curtains, twisting shadows, rippling dresses and groaning pictures. Everything feels so animated, from the grass that appears to grow its way into the house to the window that booms shut. The space is so physically active it might as well be a character.

I rarely see this, as obvious as the move may seem. More often space is treated as emotionally active. At its worst, the move comes across like so: The character looks out the window… and thinks about the pansies growing in the garden. The character stills, the landscape moves, some realization is achieved. The outward is a servant of the inward. Landscape as epiphany. La dee da!

I get it. It works. I've done the same. I'm not asking you to stop doing this. I'm asking you to find other ways to activate the stage your actors occupy to make for a more engaging story. No one wants to watch a theater production of a man staring at his kitchen with his hands in his pockets reciting a lengthy monologue about how he feels no regret for murdering his mother. Move those feet, unholster those hands. Rip open some drawers, withdraw some knives, chop some onions, make him knuckle away tears even though he feels no grief and try to splash the irritant away in the sink. Think about the visceral as much as the cerebral.

Never give us a generic description. When we enter a new space, show it to us—but through a particular lens, your character's point of view, modified by mood.

IV.

Setting should serve mood and theme. A wonderful example of this comes from *A River Runs through It*. Norman MacClean writes, "All things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time.... I am haunted by waters." From the very beginning to the very end, water and religion and family foam and roil together. But note that the characters aren't chilling on their Adirondacks. They spend a lot of time splashing through these waterways, hooking fish, fighting currents and each other.

This combination of the muscular and the mindful informs this excerpt from Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*:

> The horses stepped archly among the shadows that fell over the road, the bracken steamed. Bye and bye they passed a stand of roadside cholla against which small birds had been driven by the storm and there impaled. Gray nameless birds espaliered in attitudes of stillborn flight or hanging loosely in their feathers. Some of them were still alive and they twisted on their spines as the horses passed and raised their heads and cried out by the horsemen rode on. The sun rose up in the sky and the country took on a new color, green fire in the acacia and paloverde and green in the roadside run-off grass and fire in ocotillo.

> As if the rain were electric, had grounded circuits that the electric might be.

Setting is first something to overcome—traversed and endured. It is miserably hot. We know that from the way the bracken steams and the sun hangs overhead and the acacia is described like green fire. Everything appears a threat. A storm has come through and with its winds hurled birds into thorns that speared them. Something electrical seems to snap in the air and carry the risk of shock. But beyond this—the obstacles of the landscape—the setting is projective as well. It forecasts terribly what awaits them around the next bend, when some predatory men will approach the boy in this company as prey.

Something similar happens in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. A young couple wanders up to a dark-windowed, paint-peeled farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. The camera holds back as they climb the porch, as if afraid to draw too close. The man knocks on the door and while waiting for a response his shoe nudges what turns out to be a black-rooted tooth. "I've got something for you," he says to the young woman and drops it in her hand. She's frightened and revolted and leaves him in a huff. He should get the hell out of there, but of course he doesn't. He knocks again—and this time, the force of his fist batters the door open. The angle shifts. We're inside now, looking out at him. The darkness of the interior harshly contracts the sun-bleached day and makes us even more uncomfortable: this is a place where even at noon it feels like midnight. He hesitates at the threshold, calling out, "Hello?" and "Is anybody home?" When we shift back to his perspective, we can see a lit doorway down the hall. The wall is red and crowded with skull and antler mounts. A blood-colored museum of the dead. The setting has alerted us: bad things are going to happen in this place. There is a sound—what might be the squealing of a pig—that draws him inside. He hurries forward, stumbles over something on the floor, and here—before the red wall of skulls—Leatherface appears, striking him in the temple with a mallet, dragging him out of sight and then slamming a metal door shut with a heart-stopping boom. This is one of the most frightening scenes in film, thanks in large part to the way the setting is managed. The stage anchors us and the staging engages us.

Sometimes I'll sketch out a scene quickly and then return to it later to fill in the blanks. I might have something that's purely dialogue, like this:

> "Hey."
>
> "Hey yourself."
>
> "We need to talk."
>
> "Okay."
>
> "I need to tell you something."
>
> "Okay."
>
> "I'm late."
>
> "To what?"
>
> "I'm late."
>
> "Oh."

> "So I took the test. And it's positive."
>
> "You're positive? I mean, you're sure?"
>
> "Yes."
>
> "Wow."

I'll be thinking about gestures of course—the way he knifes into his steak, shrieks the blade across the plate—the way she crosses her arms as though hugging herself—but I'm also going to play around with staging. I'll build a set and make the characters interact meaningfully with it.

Maybe the sun is low in the sky, so that its light streams through the window. It could throw black bars of shadow across the couple, contributing to a sense of sudden imprisonment. Or maybe I would station one of them in front of the window—say, the woman—so that he would have to squint to see her. If she does this on purpose, it contributes to character (she wants to shield her own wounded expression from him). If she does it absentmindedly, it could contribute to mood, making him feel visually as well as emotionally bewildered. I might put it right after the line, "So I took the test and it's positive." And maybe I'd interrupt his follow-up with a gesture; after he says, "You're positive?" I'd have him lift a hand to shade his eyes, adding another beat before he says, "I mean, you're sure." If the linoleum floor or formica counter is peeling up at the edges, that could contribute to the frayed emotions of the moment and it could also add to character (he doesn't take care of his house, so he won't take care of her)—I might lead or close with that. Maybe there's a parrot in a cage, rattling the bars, cackling and whispering cuss words. This could give the moment a more menacing, chaotic feel. Or maybe the bird is almost infantile, something he adores but she despises, something that's always come between them. There are infinite possibilities. Teakettles could whistle, phones could ring. The carpet could be stained, the radio could be playing, the kitchen could be in the middle of a remodel. Or what if it was a restaurant instead? Or a park? Or a rodeo, a 4th of July parade, a hospital waiting room, a cleared-out college classroom after a bio exam?

At the art museum, I love a good still life, but on the page, I'm looking for a more animated landscape that will transport and embellish and engage. Give us a lantern-lit cave and make us feel fear. Give us a suburban neighborhood and make us feel phonily manicured and trapped. Give us a snow-scalloped slope and then send your lost hikers across it. Give us a reservoir that goes deeper than any anchor and then send some divers into it to retrieve a body. Give us a neon-lit strip and then send your teenagers down it in their mom's station wagon. Setting can go from being one of the most lifeless to one of the most lively and functioning ingredients in your stories.

Benjamin Percy *is the author of three novels—*The Dead Lands*,* Red Moon*, and* The Wilding*—as well as two short story collections. He is a contributing editor at* Esquire *and writes the Green Arrow series for DC Comics. This essay will also appear in his craft book,* Thrill Me: Essays on Fiction*, published by Graywolf Press.*

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