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# Creating Place in Fantasy Fiction: Understanding the Role of the Reader When Writing Fantasy Worlds

**(Critical Essay)**

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NOTE: What follows is an edited version of the essay that differs from the original version submitted as part of the thesis. Sections relating to the creative component of the thesis have been removed.

## INTRODUCTION

> *I am probably one of many who, on a wakeful night, entertain themselves with invented landscapes. I trace great rivers from where the gulls scream at the estuary, through the windings of ever narrower and more precipitous gorges, up to the barely audible tinkling of their source in a fold of the moors. (C.S. Lewis 52)*

From the moment I began planning the fantasy novel that forms the creative component of this thesis, I saw setting as vital to the success of the narrative. In fact, it was a sense of place that first inspired me to write it. I had often travelled to visit friends in Germany, and the historic small towns and rich thermal springs of the Black Forest took on a mythic quality for me. In devising the fictional town of 'Issling' in my novel, I wished to convey the sense of magic and history I had felt in these places. Yet, I was aware that novels that put too much focus on setting could be laborious to read, and that 'good writing', as outlined in writers' workshops and guidebooks, focussed on narrative and character. This considered, some of my favourite fantasies were still those with well-developed fictional worlds. These worlds had absorbed and fascinated me and were a key part of why I kept returning to these books time and again. When I attempted to trace these places back to their origins—to the exact words that brought them into being—they could often be reduced to a few lines on a page, words that appeared to fall short of encompassing the complexity of the imagined space. I realised this was, of course, because of the large contribution my own imagination had brought to the work, and the way my mind had compiled the provided information to construct a world. I wanted to create an engaging fantasy setting in my own novel that would inspire and involve readers in the same way the worlds of these novels had inspired and involved me, and I sought to investigate how I could achieve this in the writing of this critical essay.

### *Argument*

In this essay I argue that existing advice on setting creation is primarily author-focussed and text-focussed, and emphasises standard tips and tricks to satisfy reader expectations without giving due consideration to the nature of the reading process and the reader's cognitive contribution to the building of imaginary setting. Here I wish to show, by examining and applying the theories of two reader-response theorists—Wolfgang Iser and Norman Kreitman—that a more in-depth analysis of the way readers interpret texts can aid fantasy authors in making the unique worlds of their invention more accessible and stimulating for readers. I will demonstrate that the most vivid and engaging fantasy settings are those where the writer takes into account the temporal and active nature of the reading process. These are settings that, among other things, focus on key stimuli, do

away with extraneous detail, provoke emotion and empathy, evolve and grow over the course of the narrative, and allow space for readers to infer and interpret.

### *Methodology*

This essay proceeds by defining and discussing the key terms 'setting', 'fantasy fiction', and 'the reader', and reviewing related literature. This is followed by a discussion of reader-response criticism that focuses on two reader-response theorists—Wolfgang Iser and Norman Kreitman—and their theories on the nature of reading, outlining how these theories are useful in understanding reader response to setting in fantasy fiction. The subsequent three sections, titled 'Emotion', 'The Repertoire' and 'The Horizon', use key aspects of theories devised by Iser and Kreitman and apply them in a discussion of techniques and problems associated with setting communication. The purpose of this application is to expand on and re-frame pre-existing advice on setting creation offered by authors and critics, as well as to provide new ways of approaching setting creation, in order to develop a set of guiding principles and techniques fantasy authors can use to make the unique worlds of their invention more engaging and stimulating for readers. Examples from successful novels that show these techniques and principles in use will be used to demonstrate that the most appealing and accessible settings are those where the writer takes into account the temporal and active nature of the reading process.

### *Setting: definitions and perspectives*

Many writers shy away from the word 'setting' when discussing the craft of writing, or attach long lists of warnings and cautionary notes to the term. Author Jack Bickham comments that setting is "seldom discussed at length in writers' workshops or addressed in any detail in texts for creators of fiction" (1), and critic Gillian Tindall says that "there are indeed many writers for whom place is so important that the very word 'setting' carries for them a faint but distracting overtone of misunderstanding. Their novels are not just 'set' in Paris, Paraguay or wherever; they have grown there" (1). This hesitation to use the word 'setting' is probably due to both a misinterpretation of the term, and to its association with unnecessary or tedious description. 'Setting' has come to suggest a static background, perhaps because of its association with the stage props and painted backdrops in theatres.

However, if fully considered, the term 'setting' implies more than just the scenery of a novel: it encompasses all the things that create a sense of place in a work. I define setting as including not just the physical scenery of a place, but the culture, the history, the social and economic climate, the religious and political forces, the weather, the language, and the mood of a

place. Other influential writers, such as Jack Bickham (1) and Robert McKee (69),[1] define setting in a similar way, stressing the importance of not considering setting as the disposable backdrop of a tale.

Yet even when setting is accepted as including all of these elements, the term is still plagued by association with the long scene-setting passages that readers often skim over. Too much description of setting is often seen as interfering with character and narrative and representative of dangerous writerly indulgence.[2] It is understandable that much advice on writing comes with a cautionary note suggesting that writers avoid delivering large chunks of setting description, instead advocating that this description should be “interspersed with actions or dialogue” (Grenville 128). Too much description of the setting in a story can undoubtedly be dull, especially when it is treated as an un-integrated background element.

However, this does not mean that the element of setting should be considered insignificant, particularly when examining the genre of fantasy. The experience of imagined place has been identified as one of the distinctive pleasures that people seek when reading in the fantasy genre (Touponce xiii). In his famous essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien states that for him as a reader “the making or desiring of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie” (41) and his concept of “secondary worlds” (new fictional realities that an author must construct and imbue with internal truths and logic so that readers will believe in them) has been built into many definitions of fantasy. Writers’ guides that focus on these genres often devote chapters to ‘world-building’: the process of devising and constructing an imaginary world. Lisa Tuttle comments that “world-building, in both SF [science fiction] and fantasy, is more than just background: it plays a role equivalent to that of a major character” (35).

Thus it is clear that setting is important, particularly in fantasy novels, but how should authors approach the process of devising and communicating a setting? Many authors and editors offer opinions on this. 'How to Write' books that discuss the fantasy genre suggest a variety of methods for getting ideas for fictional worlds and offer advice on how to deal with setting. Some examine the technique of communicating setting, often focussing on the untrue and fantastical nature of the fantasy world. For example, Brian Stableford’s discussion of fantasy settings focuses on plausibility and probability and the moral coherence of the fantasy world. Similarly, Lisa Tuttle and Fraser Sherman pay special attention to the internal consistency of fantasy worlds, stating that they “must have rules” (Tuttle 48). Crawford Kilian suggests that a well-developed fantasy world

[1] McKee went as far as describing setting as being “four dimensional”, these dimensions being: period, duration, location (which includes not only the landscape but the political, economic, ideological, biological, and psychological forces of the society) and perhaps more unusually, the level of conflict or “the story’s position on the hierarchy of human struggles”(69). He acknowledges that the forces in a setting are instrumental in shaping the events of the story.

[2] For example Bickham, Harland, Lombardi and Ramet warn writers not to indulge in too much setting description.

revolves around the central genre elements of magic and power, and should have a direct influence on the story and its outcome (139-42). Other fantasy writers' guidebooks focus on the process of world-building that the author undertakes before writing a fantasy novel. For example, Orson Scott Card provides a step-by-step discussion of how he constructs imaginary worlds, describing how he moves from the germinating idea or principle through to populating the world, mapping it, and devising its history and rules. Poul Anderson's essay, "The Creation of Imaginary Worlds", while not a guidebook, is essentially a step-by-step guide detailing how a writer might build his or her own planet.

While it is clear that these guidebooks for fantasy writers usually focus on how to *devise* a setting, guidebooks that examine other genres tend to focus more on how a writer should *communicate* a setting to an audience. When examining the broader field of writers' guidebooks, certain core principles and techniques with regard to setting and description repeatedly emerge. The concept of appealing to the five senses by describing setting through touch, smell, sight, taste, and sound is advocated by many authors,[3] and the need to use strong verbs and nouns, focus on specific details, and avoid the overuse of adjectives and adverbs is almost always a key piece of advice.[4]

While the techniques suggested by writers' guidebooks, such as those cited above, are undoubtedly useful in the construction of a fictional world, the authors of these books generally provide very author-focused and text-focussed discussions of setting that are often quite anecdotal. While we are occasionally told what a reader wants, we are usually not told *why* they want it. The reader's cognitive contribution to the building of the imaginary setting is not a central focus. This is neither unusual nor unreasonable, given that authors who are drawing from their own creative practice write the majority of these guides. The author is, however, only part of the picture. A more in-depth analysis of the way readers interpret texts would provide further understandings of how writers might best communicate a setting.

### *Defining fantasy*

While many scholars offer definitions of fantasy, few agree on the key features, whether formal or thematic, by which fantasy should be categorised. One of the earliest and most prominent attempts to define the genre was made by Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic.* Todorov's study outlines several genres within the fantastic mode (the fantastic, the marvelous and the uncanny), which all revolve around the reader's response to a supernatural element in the text. Later prominent fantasy critics W.R. Irwin, C.N. Manlove and Eric S. Rabkin offered new definitions;

[3] For example see Bickham, Disher, Harland, Lombardi, Lowry, Marsden, Noble and Ramet.
[4] For example see Bickham, Bird, Browne and King, Disher, Grenville, Gussoff, Harland, Lombardi, Marsden, McKee, Noble, Strunk and White, Tuttle.

publishing books that became seminal works in the study of fantasy and offering their own definitions of the genre.[5] Irwin's definition is the most appropriate to this study. However, before examining his definition and the justification for its selection more closely, it is important to define 'genre' as a concept, and how genre will be viewed in the context of this essay.

As critics have continued to search for exact definitions of what does and does not constitute 'pure' fantasy, they have often become too focussed on creating mutually exclusive genre categories.[6] In *Genre*, John Frow argues "texts—even the simplest and most formulaic—do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them" (2). He believes genres are open-ended, can be merged or crossed with all other genres, and that every individual work of literature to some extent modifies the genre that it is part of (53). These genres "have a common core and then fade into fuzziness at the edges" (Paltridge qtd. in Frow 54). It is this fuzziness that has so confounded scholars in their search for the precise definition of fantasy. Wilkins also argues that we can only ever define the core element of a genre (i.e. all we can say with certainty about a romance novel is that it includes romance), and that "the rest of the elements are under constant negotiation and renegotiation" (38). She points out that within the genre of speculative fiction[7] "hybrids abound," "sub-genres proliferate" and "new sub-genres form," (39-40) often defying the boundaries of the genre labels placed on them. As such, in the search for the defining properties of a work of fantasy, we will only ever be able to create definitions that identify the core elements of the genre. These definitions will not enable us to separate all texts into concrete mutually exclusive categories, but will aid us in discerning what texts *use* the genre of fantasy.

In this essay 'fantasy' refers to "a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility"(4): the definition offered by Irwin. While this definition has at times been criticised for being too broad, it successfully encompasses the core essence of the fantasy genre and is not counterproductively reductive or restrictive. It excludes the genre of science fiction, as authors of science fiction texts typically aim to present the unreal elements of their stories and worlds as scientifically *possible*, but includes the high fantasy[8] and low fantasy[9] sub-genres. Fredericks believes it is one of the more constructive definitions of the genre, because it forces us to look widely in our definition of what books are considered to be fantasies (36).

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[5] An analysis and evaluation of each of these definitions is beyond the scope of this essay.

[6] For example see Laetz and Johnson's *What is Fantasy?*

[7] Speculative fiction is a broad genre generally accepted as including the sub-genres of fantasy, science fiction, and horror (Wilkins 39).

[8] High fantasies, also known as 'epic high fantasies' are narratives that take place in vast invented worlds. They usually involve epic quests and heroic characters, use archaic language and an elevated style, are inspired by the medieval era, and draw on Norse and Celtic mythology ("High Fantasy" np; Burcher et al. 227; Wolfe 31).

[9] Low fantasies are narratives that are set in the real world (or have a strong real-world influence) and include magical or supernatural elements ("Low Fantasy" np). Low fantasy is usually considered to include the sub-genres of contemporary fantasy and urban fantasy.

Attebery also adopts Irwin's definition of fantasy,[10] satisfied with this broader definition because he believes some critics have "limited their studies by over-exact definition, giving the name fantasy to what is only a minor subtype of fantasy" (3).

***Defining 'the reader': the issue of subjectivity***

Not all readers will respond in exactly the same way to a text, as their response will be to some extent influenced by their subjective viewpoint. Thus it seems impossible for a writer to pre-emptively anticipate how a reader will construct the world of their text, and to discuss 'the reader' of a text as if they are a single and predictable entity. However, theorists such as Iser, Hans Robert Jauss and Stanley Fish argue that great similarities in interpretation occur amongst people with shared history and culture. Fish contends that a reader has 'competences' made up of both syntactic knowledge and semantic knowledge, and that these competences would be largely shared across mature readers in the same language group and time period ("Literature"). Jonathan Culler makes a similar argument, saying that readers have "literary competence": the ability to interpret literary works through an understanding of the codes and conventions of reading (113). Iser takes a similar stance, basing his analysis of the reading process largely on his own experience as a reader, which he contends is similar to that of other readers that share the same set of competences. Yet some readers share a very different set of competences to others, particularly readers from different cultures or thought schools. Fish addresses this problem by introducing the theory of "interpretive communities" ("Variorum" 182), arguing that readers and critics who fall within certain groups tend to interpret texts in similar ways.

Where Fish highlights the importance of selecting a particular *readership* when determining response, Jauss (11) sees the commonality in reader interpretations as inextricably linked to *genre*, arguing that a common frame of reference could be derived from an understanding of the form and themes of similar works. Culler (114) and Frow (6-8) also highlight the importance of genre. Both critics use the example of a piece of journalism being re-framed as poetry to demonstrate that the comprehension of a poem is not only reliant on the reader's understanding of language, but on their understanding of "the special conventions for reading poetry" (Culler 114).

In consideration of these theories, 'the reader' in this essay will be presumed to be part of an interpretive community that is familiar with and has an appreciation of the conventions of the fantasy genre as it circulates in contemporary western writing in English. This is the most appropriate interpretive community to an English-language study of writing fantasy. As a member

[10] Though he rephrases it to make his own definition of "any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law" (Attebery 2).

of this interpretive community myself, I am able to draw on my own experience as a reader, and the experiences documented by critics and authors from this community, to assist in determining the likely genre and culture-related expectations and reactions of 'the reader'.

Although the kind of reader that will be discussed in this essay has been established, a key question remains: how are we to understand the process that this 'reader', equipped with a set of standard reading competences and a knowledge of genre conventions, actually undergoes when reading a text? And how are we to apply this understanding to the construction of fantasy settings? A pragmatic solution might be to conduct extensive reader surveys to find some common denominator that will unlock the mysteries of the reading process, or to form a psychological study to analyse the mental processes that occur when people picture the worlds of fantasy novels. Aside from the fact that studies of this nature would be hindered by all the problems associated with applying a quantitative method to an intangible, complex and highly contextual process, they are also unnecessary. Many scholars have already poured time and thought into answering the question of what happens when the human mind processes literature, and have come up with theories as diverse and complex as the reading process itself. These scholars can be broadly categorised under the title of 'reader-response theorists', and their theories on the experience of the reader could provide valuable insights for the writer.

While to some degree writers are already guided by an understanding of the reader's experience (writers of both fantasy and literary fiction have stressed the importance of the reader in filling in the unwritten elements in their work[11]), the element of setting has not been extensively examined from this perspective. Similarly, the critical methods to assess the value of literary works that have been developed by reader-response theorists have not been directly linked to the creation of setting in fantasy fiction. This essay aims to establish that link.

***Reader-response criticism***

During the 1970s and 80s a wave of critics embraced the study of the reader's response to literature. This was inaugurated by Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author*, in which he argued that criticism had too long focused on the author and the author's intentions as the locus of meaning in the text. Barthes openly rejected the author-focused and text-focused formalist methods of New Criticism, a rejection that was taken up by many critics who set out to study how the reader interprets texts.

Despite their common preoccupation with reader-response, the theories and methods of reader-response critics differ greatly. Some, such as Gerald Prince, Michael Riffaterre, and Jonathan

[11] For example see Virginia Woolf (qtd. in Iser *Implied Reader* 275), Stephen King and Umberto Eco.

Culler take a structuralist approach that examines the effect of textual structure, signs, and signifiers on the reader (Tompkins ix-xiv); while others like Norman Holland and David Bleich use psychoanalytical theory to explore how the reader's sense of identity influences their experience of texts (Tompkins xviii-xxi). Stanley Fish presents yet another approach, his controversial post-structuralist theory claiming that a text and its meaning *only* exist within the mind of a reader ("Literature"). Fish approaches texts by asking what they do, not what they mean, and his method involves "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time" ("Literature" 73).

Yet another approach to reader-response theory is that taken up by those who adopt phenomenological tools and perspectives. Roman Ingarden, Georges Poulet, and Wolfgang Iser, for instance, focus on the role the reader plays in imagining and experiencing the *world* of the literary work, including how the reader experiences imaginary place. Wolfgang Iser—arguably the most prolific and renowned critic in the phenomenological field—believes that the world provided by the author is, in fact, incomplete, and that the process of reading "brings the literary work into existence" (*Implied Reader* 275). His theory, which draws heavily on the ideas of German philosopher Roman Ingarden, centres on the concept that the unwritten elements of the work must be "concretized" by the reader (Iser *Implied Reader* 274). Iser is also inspired by Georges Poulet (47), who, like Iser, believes that the literary text is actualised by the reader and says that a book "lives its own life within me [the reader] and gives itself a meaning within me". However, in Poulet's analysis of the reading process, the reader is trapped in the consciousness of the author and acts out a passive role, whereas Iser sees the reader as cognitively active and creative. Iser's theory focuses on the reader's experience of the world of the text and views the reader as actively engaged in the world creation process. He sees every text as a dormant temporal experience that is brought to life in the reader's mind, and examines reader-response not only on a sentence-by-sentence level, but also by looking at the effect of the work in its entirety. His phenomenological view of an active reader that engages in the world-completing process provides a comprehensive conceptual framework for the practice of communicating fantasy worlds.[12] It is therefore the most useful theoretical model for the discussion presented here.

While Iser's theory provides a detailed examination of the nature of the reading process, it offers little discussion of the reader's emotional response to fiction. This is because Iser saw the reader as largely cognitively involved in a work, and placed value on works that he believed cognitively involved the reader. However, many fantasy critics have acknowledged that sublimative

[12] Critic William Touponce also uses the work of Iser in his analysis of fantasy and science fiction texts, and argues that only a phenomenological account like Iser's "is capable of treating adequately the irreducible nature of fantastic worlds by describing precisely how such worlds are built up in the reading process" (xii).

thought and emotion are important in a reader's response to fantasy. There has been considerable debate concerning the reader's psychological experience of fantasy, and whether it is largely cognitive or sublimative. As Touponce (xiii-xv) and Fredericks (42) suggest, it is more valuable to assume that cognitive and sublimative thought are both at work when reading fantasy. Consequently, in addition to Iser's cognitive-focussed theories, I will use those of Norman Kreitman to further explore issues of emotional response to place.[13]

## EMOTION

It is important to note that the experience of the world of a literary work, while similar to our experience of real places, is in many ways fundamentally different. This is perhaps best outlined in Iser's discussion of the experience of seeing the filmic adaptation of a book after having read it. Though his example is specific to character in a novel, it is equally applicable to place, and examines the nature of our mental generation of images as opposed to our optical reception of them:

> If, for instance, I see the film of *Tom Jones*, and try to summon up my past images of the character, they will seem strangely diffuse, but this impression will not necessarily make me prefer the optical picture. If I ask whether my imaginary Tom Jones was big or small, blue-eyed or dark-haired, the optical poverty of my image will become all too evident, but it is precisely this openness that will make me resent the determinacy of the film version. Our mental images do not serve to make the character physically visible; their optical poverty is an indication of the fact that they illuminate the character, not as an object, but as a bearer of meaning. (Iser *Act of Reading* 138)

The substance of imagined place is as much emotion, mood and meaning as it is accurate visual and spatial picturing. The unfinished nature of the written objects requires us to fill them in, and most importantly to relate them to one another and make connections in order to generate meaning. Gillian Tindall recognises this, saying that in fiction "actual countries become countries of the mind—their topography transformed into psychological maps, private worlds" (9). Harland also argues that "what readers nowadays notice aren't the objective facts of the setting—the diagrammatic aspects, as it were—so much as the subjective impressions. It's the feel of the place that's important" (2.i). Yet creating this 'feel'—this emotional sense of place—is more complex than simply filling descriptions with sentimental adjectives.

[13] Kreitman is a psychiatry scholar who has published many papers on, among other things, readers and their emotional responses to fiction.

Norman Kreitman contends that our emotional reactions to fictions are of the same substance as our emotional reactions to reality. He outlines three prerequisites that fiction must have to evoke an emotional reaction (drawing heavily on cognitive psychology and George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory). These prerequisites are that the fiction must have *coherence*[14] (be "neither externally nor internally contradictory"), *vivacity*[15] (be "presented with sufficient specificity"), and must *relate "to things that clearly concern us*" (because personally relevant events or events that relate to our wellbeing are always emotionally charged) (615). If all of these conditions are fulfilled, "we shall react on the basis of our prereflective knowledge, which is always emotionally charged" (615). Thus, if a fictional world is to inspire emotion, it must be logical and believable, appear unique and specific, and be relevant to our wellbeing (or by proxy, the wellbeing of the characters).

### *Setting, character and action*

Kreitman argues that one of the prerequisites for an emotional reaction to fiction is that *events presented must concern us*, and in the case of fiction, must concern the characters with which we are empathising. Thus, it could be argued that setting should only be presented when it is relevant to the story, action or character, and indeed many writers' guides do argue this.[16] However, this advice is only valid when taken in a broader sense. Setting elements are not only important in their direct link to the current action of a story or a character's movement. For example, a house in a novel is often not just a physical space which a character inhabits and in which the reader must picture the action, but can be a harbourer of meaning or emotion for the characters, a reflection of a character's personality or history, a source of atmosphere and mood, or a symbol. Editors Browne and King warn writers not to ruthlessly cut everything that doesn't immediately advance their plot, saying "atmosphere is an important element, even if its impact on the plot is often subtle" (73).

It is also important to note that fantasy readers take pleasure in the details of invented settings. Small details of the way magical communities work or the way magical plants and animals behave create the feelings of wonder and other-worldly experience that are so important in this

[14] Kreitman cites this *coherence* as including: "conformity of a literary representation with its context, especially the preceding text," concordance of the literary text with "our prior, extra-textual knowledge," and adherence to the rules of logic (the text must not "manifest mutually incompatible attributes"—i.e. something cannot be both present and absent at the same time). (613)

[15] Kreitman talks about *vivacity* mainly in terms of characters in fiction, saying that if an author can succeed in making their characters seem like individuals, rather than categories of persons, they will inspire an emotional response in the reader, because an individualised personal viewpoint is essential. (614)

[16] For example Disher, Grenville, Harland and Tuttle. However, Grenville does concede that setting description does not always have to be important to the plot, but can help set the mood in a story (128).

genre.[17] As such, it is true that setting details need to have a purpose with relation to character and plot, however this purpose should be taken broadly. A setting detail may be important to flesh-out the story world and make it seem real, vivid and wondrous.

While setting details should not simply be functional appendages to the action of a narrative, it is also important to note that details that have no relation to the character or the plot, and do not enhance the story greatly, should be avoided. For example, when a character is used to describe the history of a town without indicating why he or she is thinking about the place, what his or her attitude is to it, or how it may be important to the story, then it is not only unlikely to hold the attention of the reader, but may also seem to be an artificial "info dump". These "info dumps" are a particular danger in fantasy, where writers need to introduce information about new fantasy elements and concepts, and in doing so, may compromise the plausibility of the characters and their perceptions. This point leads to the larger issue of how relationships are established between character and setting, and how setting is shown *through* character in fantasy fiction.

### *Setting through character*

Most writers agree that for setting elements to be relevant or interesting to the reader, they should be shown through the lens of character (thus satisfying Kreitman's third prerequisite: that they concern us or someone we empathise with). Tuttle says that setting needs to come with an "emotional charge by being filtered through the character's perceptions" (53). This is sound advice. However, it does not mean that everything that relates to the setting must come with an indication of exactly how the character is feeling about it. Often places will come with an emotional charge simply because of the emotionally-loaded repertoire associations they tap into, for example, dark towers protruding from fog and storm clouds at sea. At other times, places come with an emotional charge because of internal associations the reader will make and logically relate to the wellbeing of the protagonist. For example, in the novel *Obernewtyn,* a remote prison-like institution for the treatment of 'Misfits' (people with mental powers) presents an obvious source of danger and fear for the protagonist Elspeth, not because Elspeth tells the reader explicitly, but because the reader knows she is a 'Misfit' (Carmody 27).

Thus, it is important that setting be relevant to character and story, and be shown through the lens of the character, though advice in this direction should not be taken to the extreme. A setting

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[17] Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them,* and Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* are prime examples of books that expand on the worlds of these authors' existing fantasy novels and cater to the desire amongst many readers for detailed portraits of fantasy settings.

described only in relation to current action, or one constantly qualified by obvious references to the character's feelings, is unlikely to inspire and engage a reader.[18]

### *Setting as character*

Some of the most memorable and popular fantasy settings are those that appear to be living, almost sentient places, effectively becoming characters whose experiences 'concern us' as readers. As human beings we often attribute human thought and motivation to animals and inanimate objects—in effect humanising them—in order to develop a stronger emotional connection to these things. This is particularly important in fantasy, where the setting, or elements of it, might actually possess human traits and faculties. Lands inhabited by the villains of a fantasy story are often barren and wasted, and every creature and element that populates them is bent to evil purpose.[19] Trees, forests, castles, and houses may come to life, and seas may swell and rage to fulfil their own agendas. In *Sabriel* the narrator says of a centuries-old weathered stone wall that divides two kingdoms:

> The very stones crawled with Charter marks [magic spells] - marks in constant motion, twisting and turning, sliding and rearranging themselves under a skin of stone. (Nix 27)

This attribution of human-like qualities to the setting is a powerful way to draw the reader into the story world. Even if the setting is not at all sentient, its descriptions can be infused with human descriptors (such as the use of the word 'skin' in the Sabriel example provided above) in order to provoke an emotional response. However, these techniques should be used very sparingly, as overuse of personification can create confusion and alienate the reader.

## THE REPERTOIRE

> *Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new'. (Jackson 51)*

While fantasy writers create unfamiliar settings, characters, and narratives, they always make use of the reader's knowledge of the real world in doing so. If they did not, their novels would be

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[18] It is also important to note that setting in fantasy is not always shown from the perspective of a character. Fantasy novels occasionally include passages where information is given from an omniscient perspective (such as the introduction in Isobelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn*). Jack Bickham provides examples of such omniscient passages, and acknowledges that while they are sometimes effective and necessary, setting should usually be shown through character (14-15).

[19] A prime example of this is the land of Mordor in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which the characters first encounter in the second book of the trilogy, *The Two Towers* (Tolkien).

incomprehensible. It is the unusual combinations of familiar ideas that make the worlds of fantasy novels seem new. Iser dubs the bank of contextual knowledge that the reader draws on 'the repertoire':

> The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged—in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called the "extra textual" reality. (Iser *Act of Reading* 69)

Thus fantasy, like other forms of fiction, is heavily reliant on the common associations and understandings writers use in their creation of texts, and that readers use in their actualization of them. Kreitman describes fantasy as "a widely free-ranging but never random manipulation of the raw material of prior experience." (613), and uses the example: "the giant in the fairy story is a fiction, and so is his blue hat, but blue is a perfectly real colour" (616). As such, fantasy settings are reconstructions and manipulations of the world we know and other worlds we have read about. What is on the page is in fact a set of clues to place, which are then used as stimuli for the reader to draw on their repertoire of prior experience and imagine the fictional space.

This section of the essay looks at how a focus on the reader's use of the repertoire might be taken into account by writers in the creation of fantasy settings. Often this application simply expands on pre-existing advice regarding setting creation, and at other times it provides new insights and ways of approaching setting creation not previously considered by writers' guides.

### ***Some common writing advice seen through the lens of the repertoire***

#### *Omit needless words*

"Omit Needless Words" (23) was a piece of advice given in Strunk and White's famous manual on writing, *The Elements of Style*, a line later praised by Stephen King in his book *On Writing.* Strunk and White elaborate on this phrase as follows:

> Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (23)

However, this presents writers editing their own work with the perplexing question: what words are needless?

As previously discussed, much writing advice suggests writers use adjectives and adverbs sparingly (which is sound advice), and cut down on the amount of setting description altogether. Yet if there is too little description of setting it creates a problem known as white space, where “action and dialogue are happening, but they seem detached from the surroundings. The reader can't visualise the scene and so it loses its impact and invites skimming” (Wilkins 44). This is why many writers advise against indulging in too much description of setting, while simultaneously stressing the importance of setting in creating engaging literature. Wolfgang Iser acknowledges this fine line, saying that successful texts lie between the boundaries of “boredom and overstrain” (*Implied Reader* 275). Unfortunately, these boundaries are rarely defined, and it is difficult for writers (and particularly novice writers) to know what to leave out without jeopardising the evocative depiction of their setting.

Approaching the editing process from the perspective of the repertoire can help isolate words that may be already evoked by the common associations of other words in the sentence or paragraph, or by contextual associations within the work. To illustrate this idea at a very basic sentence level, take the example of the description of Ollivander’s Wand Shop in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*:

> The last shop was narrow and shabby. Peeling gold letters over the door read Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 BC. A single wand lay on a faded purple cushion in the dusty window. A tinkling bell rang somewhere in the depths of the shop as they stepped inside. It was a tiny place, empty except for a single spindly chair which Hagrid sat on to wait. Harry felt strangely as though he had entered a very strict library; he swallowed a lot of new questions which had just occurred to him and looked instead at the thousands of narrow boxes piled neatly right up to the ceiling. For some reason, the back of his neck prickled. The very dust and silence in here seemed to tingle with some secret magic. (J.K. Rowling *Philosopher's Stone* 63)

The setting archetype of an ‘old English shop’ is evoked in this passage through the use of a few brief details such as the “faded purple cushion in the dusty window”, the “peeling gold letters over the door,” and the “tinkling bell”. This archetype does most of the work in this brief one-paragraph description to create a sense of place in the mind of the reader. Rowling also likens the shop to a “strict library,” bringing further associations of the library archetype: silence, cold, towering shelves, dust, a sense of the history and secret magic of ancient books. These associations

are naturally inferred by readers through the recognition of these setting archetypes, and mean that Rowling does not have to use adjectives like "wooden" or "dark" at any point in her description of the shop: readers naturally presume that most of the shop and the furniture in it are made from wood (wood is also implied in the use of adjectives such as "spindly," which is used to describe a chair) and that it is the kind of shop that would be dark (also implied through the use of the words "depths" and "dust"). Similarly she does not need to go to lengths to describe the counter, the floor or the exact dimensions of the shop, or even the creaking sound of the door as it opens; all of these things are rendered unnecessary by the repertoire associations of the reader. Tapping into key images or ideas in the repertoire of a reader is a powerful way to evoke setting in a few simple words.

This concept of the repertoire can also be extended beyond the sentence and paragraph level to help writers consider what to include or omit on a larger scale. Longer passages of setting description (usually relevant to more important places in the novel) can be examined for what they add to the work; and perhaps whole paragraphs, sentences, or concepts can be identified as having already been evoked through repertoire associations or by other details in the work.

*Show don't tell*

While using the repertoire to generate associations is an effective way to trigger a more vivid creation of setting in the mind of the reader, it is important to note that if it is used in the wrong way, settings can become cliché, uninteresting, and formulaic. One of the ways the repertoire can be used ineffectively is illustrated by the common phrase "show, don't tell". This phrase is often used when giving advice on writing,[20] and can perhaps be traced back, as a basic concept, to the writings of Aristotle. In *Poetics*, Aristotle urged the playwright to "speak as little as possible in his own person, for it is not this that makes him an imitator" (109). He suggested a poet should bring in character and action to tell a story rather than relying too heavily on omniscient narration. While Wayne Booth later acknowledged that the modern penchant for trying to strip a work of all signs of the author's rhetorical presence was simplistic, impractical and ultimately impossible, the basic concept of favouring a less direct and expository form of storytelling still has merit. However, the way this concept of "show don't tell" is to be implemented during the writing and editing process can often be confusing and abstract. To clarify how this implementation may be approached, I will consider Iser's notion that texts must allow the reader space to fill out the work and interpret it:

> The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's

[20] For example, this phrase is discussed by Cleaver, Browne and King, Kenigsberg, Marsden, McKee and Ramet.

> willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game. (Iser *Act of Reading* 108)

When a writer *tells* something, what they are doing is allowing little or no space for the reader to make repertoire associations. Take for example a writer trying to create a sense of an insular, suspicious, and hostile community in a small village. The writer could simply say: “The people in the village were suspicious and hostile. It was an insular community wary of strangers.” While this might be acceptable, a more evocative way of doing this would be to *show* the nature of the setting through the behaviour of the inhabitants, the detail in the physical environment, or symbolically through the description of the light, sounds, colours, or weather in the village. This allows the reader to perceive signals or clues as to the nature of the setting, and deduce meaning using their knowledge of the way places and people work in the real world and in other stories. The culture of the world then appears to “emerge naturally as we watch the inhabitants go about their business” (Kilian 142). Editors Browne and King comment, “when you show your story rather than tell it, you treat readers with respect. And that respect makes it easier for you to draw them into the world you’ve created” (19).

While this concept of “show, don’t tell” is nothing new, Iser’s concept of the repertoire offers a new way of looking at it: namely as illustrative of how the writer must allow the reader to actively participate in the creation of setting.

*Telling detail*

Another way in which the repertoire can be ineffectively used in the creation of setting is through the constant use of broad details, which can result in the feeling that the work is vague, unspecific, and false. As such, a common piece of advice given to writers is that they should include “telling detail” in descriptions of setting and characters[21]—but what exactly is “telling detail”? In the context of the repertoire and reader experience, it is probably best described by Kreitman, who discusses the importance of ‘vivacity’ in fiction (614). He argues that generalised allusions in fiction are not sufficient to inspire emotion in the reader because the reader needs to feel that characters in a novel are specific and real in order to empathise.[22] Thus he stresses the importance of “telling detail”, which he describes as: “an attribute that differentiates between two or more taxa but has low or zero correlation with other attributes” (614). In other words, “telling detail” is specific, and narrows down the number of repertoire associations the reader experiences. It gives

[21] For example, telling detail is advocated by Bickham, Carter, Lombardi, Marsden and Tuttle.

[22] Although Norman Kreitman used the term ‘vivacity’ in a discussion of character in novels, it is equally applicable to setting.

the reader solid details to anchor on and use to produce meaning, enabling him or her to bring all the elements of the surrounding setting into sharper relief. Thus while more generic details in the description of Ollivander's wand shop in the *Harry Potter* series load on all the common emotional and imagistic associations of old dusty shops and libraries, the setting feels more concrete and specific because of the selection of details like the wand on the cushion or the spindly chair (J.K. Rowling *Philosopher's Stone* 63).

### *Setting Archetypes*

There is no doubt that the use of archetypes in the creation of fantasy worlds can be powerful. Lisa Tuttle advocates the use of fantasy setting archetypes like dark woods and endless seas, saying that "there is something both comforting and deeply powerful in the best symbolic landscapes" (49). The other advantage of using common fantasy archetypes is that readers are likely to be familiar with them, obviating the need to communicate the basic components of such a setting to a reader. For example, when Hogwarts is first described in *The Philosopher's Stone*, Rowling does not need to (and indeed, does not) spend a long time introducing the concept of a castle:

> The narrow path had opened suddenly on to the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers. (*Philosopher's Stone* 83)

A castle, as an archetype, already provides a solid foundation on which to build a setting: a known concept that provokes a myriad of repertoire associations from literature, film and real life.

While using setting archetypes can be powerful and advantageous, the author runs the risk of providing cliché settings that feel more like convenient backdrops than real places with specific histories and inhabitants. Tuttle comments that a 'fantasyland' full of elves, castles, and dragons is the default setting for fantasy. While these elements are so recognisable that the reader immediately feels at home and "fills in the gaps," these can be very forgettable fantasies (Tuttle 50). Australian fantasy and science-fiction author Richard Harland also remarked, "for fantasy authors, the danger is relying on standard pre-established fantasy elements without bothering to make them fresh" (2.viii). Perhaps the best way to make these elements 'fresh', and to achieve what Tolkien dubbed the 'recovery'[23] of an archetype, is to consider the previously discussed notion of 'telling detail'.

[23] Tolkien used the term "recovery" to signify the presentation of old imagery and ideas in new fresh ways. He applied it specifically to the use of typical fantasy images, ideas and objects that readers have encountered many times before (usually inspired by medieval times and mythology), and how authors could 'recover' and renew these images and make them seem new and fresh ("On Fairy Stories" 58-59).

Kreitman cites *coherence* and *vivacity* as two necessary prerequisites for establishing an emotional reaction to fiction. By this he means that events and characters need to be contextually logical and be "presented with sufficient specificity" (615) so that readers feel they are engaged with a real person or place. A work may deal with impossible supernatural happenings and worlds, but they need to be presented in a believable way, and made to feel real. As Lin Carter aptly says, the fantasy writer has to temporarily persuade the reader "to believe in dragons" (176), and to do this he advocates adding realistic detail:

> We enjoy reading a fantastic scene all the more when it is intensely realized on the page, brought into sharp visual focus, rendered with sensuous immediacy through imaginative effort. There is a certain innate pleasure in reading of dragons and castles and magicians *per se,* but that pleasure is intensified when the scene is made vivid through carefully-chosen, crisp detail. "All magic dies at the touch of the commonplace" [quote from C.S. Lewis]. *Au contraire*: far from withering before the homely bit of detail, Faerie can actually be enhanced by it. (220)

Consequently, if a writer uses an archetype like a castle, the details of the character's experience of this castle as a real place are important. It is through Harry's countless trips to the potions dungeons, the herbology greenhouses, the divination tower, and the Gryffindor common room—with all the detail provided as relevant to his daily life at school—that Hogwarts is made to feel more like a real place than a generic cardboard cut-out of a castle from a history book. Rowling also places emphasis on the elements of the castle that are specific and unique: the moving staircases, the paintings that come to life, the fake image of the sky in the roof of the great hall. An archetype is powerful, but it is more powerful when enriched by detail and built into a setting that feels real and specific.

***Symbolism***

Setting elements can also be used symbolically to add meaning and depth to a fantasy work. As Iser argues, reading a novel inherently involves consistency-building, which "is the indispensable basis for all acts of comprehension" (*Act of Reading* 125):

> The lack of availability of the whole work during the act of comprehension, which is brought about by means of the 'moving viewpoint', is the condition that necessitates consistency-building on the part of the reader. (Iser *Act of Reading* 16)

Thus, while reading a novel, readers are constantly processing and connecting the signs within it to deduce its meaning. This happens both on a small scale within sentences and paragraphs, and on a broader scale, as readers form and re-form connections between different parts of the novel. Reading behaviour is a meaning-making and symbol-reading process, in which readers are primed to recognise symbols and connections as they try to make a "whole" out of the literary work.

Symbolic setting elements provide the reader with the opportunity to make more connections—to connect elements of the physical environment of the story world with themes and character behaviour—which can add to the sense of wholeness, meaning and coherence. In addition, the more setting is integrated with the themes and ideas of a story, the more it will feel a living part of it. For example, rivers are an important setting element in *Sabriel,* because the necromancer protagonist regularly enters the river of death that exists in parallel to the world of the living.[24] They are both a source of danger—because the river of death might tug away your soul at any moment as you wade through it—and of refuge—because malevolent revenants cannot cross running water when the character is in the living world. These rivers act symbolically to provide a sense of the inevitable flow of life: the idea that in the end no one can avoid death, and that no one should try to do so. This is a core theme of the work, and a core principal that the central characters live by as necromancers: they try to keep the dead dead, try to keep the living alive, and accept death when it is their time to do so. Here rivers within the work provide the potential for multiple connections: for the reader to draw links between the rivers of life and death, and between these rivers and the themes and ideas of the work, adding to the sense of unity and coherence. These rivers are not just landscape features; they are important symbols that echo the themes of the novel.

It is important to note that forcing or overdoing symbolism is unwise. Bickham rightly warns that just because symbolism can enrich setting and story, it "does not mean that you should set out on a mad quest for symbols and metaphors in your setting. Symbolic meaning, when it occurs, is usually an outgrowth of the creative process itself" (Bickham 87).[25] A need for symbolic restraint, or use of only 'natural' symbolism, touches on a similar idea presented by McKee: that symbolism is most powerful when it is subliminal and "bypasses the conscious mind" (407). Iser argues that one of the features that has made the novel so enduring is that it requires the reader to work to build consistency and that it can never quite be fully grasped or tied to one exact meaning (Iser *Act of Reading* 16). If the writer presents a work that is too unified, with connections that are

[24] The river of death in *Sabriel* has obvious symbolic resonances with the river Styx from ancient Greek mythology. This is a prime example of how fantasy novelists often use settings inspired by myth, legend and history to tap into a myriad of cultural repertoire associations. These associations lend settings a sense of authenticity, wonder and timelessness, and imbue them with meaning.

[25] Perhaps the form of setting-related symbolism to be most wary of is pathetic fallacy (where the weather reflects the character's mood). Lowry and Disher agree that pathetic fallacy can be cliché, Disher saying that while it works in poetry, it is often "indulgent" in fiction (38).

too obvious, readers may resent this clarity. Thus symbolism should be a natural and inconspicuous part of the narrative, and a writer should not attempt to give a work one sole and exclusive symbolic meaning.

**THE HORIZON**

Iser uses the term 'horizon'[26] to refer to the reader's ever-changing experience of the literary text. When a person reads they are engaging in a constant process of consistency building: they process new information and connect it with other information in the text to infer meaning.

> Psycholinguistic experiments have shown that meanings cannot be grasped merely by the direct or indirect decoding of letters or words, but can only be compiled by means of grouping. (Iser *Act of Reading* 119)

Iser uses the analogy of the horizon to explain the process of anticipation and retrospection that occurs while reading—a constant changing of the reader's understanding and attitudes as they group information to create meaning, and re-group it as new information becomes available (*Implied Reader* 278). The horizon line ahead of the reader represents their foreshadowing of what is to come in the text, and the horizon behind them represents their retrospective re-evaluation of what has come before. He argues that the reader is always thinking ahead while reading and guessing at the multiple possible outcomes that *might* eventuate in the narrative. This horizon is constantly changing as new information becomes available and the reader's expectations are subverted, modified, or fulfilled. Similarly the horizon behind the reader (what they have already read) is being retrospectively modified as they re-interpret or re-consider past events and information in light of new knowledge.

Iser's concept of the horizon is important in its focus on the text—and the world of the text—as an experience rather than an object. Novels are, in essence, stories, and they take readers on an emotional and intellectual journey. To make this journey compelling, things must change over the course of the narrative: action must happen, stakes must be raised, a conflict must occur and a resolution must be reached. Yet writers rarely give the same conscious thought to the changing nature of setting throughout a novel as they give to that of character or narrative. Setting is, again, often just seen as the background: the solid theatre stage in front of which other things move and change. However, if a setting is to be dynamic and engaging it must exploit the temporal nature of

[26] I wish to clarify that I am using Iser's notion of the horizon, as opposed to Hans Robert Jauss' 'horizon of expectations'. While their concepts are similar, Jauss used the term largely in the context of genre and the genre expectations readers bring to a work, whereas Iser's horizon denotes the changing horizon of expectation and retrospection that occurs while reading.

the written form and use the changing horizons of the reading experience to its advantage: it must change and expand and evolve. This section of this essay explores what this means in practical terms for a writer aiming to create such a setting.

***Introducing setting incrementally***

Lisa Tuttle warns writers to resist the urge to convey a whole ream of information about a story world immediately, saying readers are “happy to wait” (51). She is one of a number of writers that warn novices not to dump large scene-setting passages at or near the beginning of their novels. These writers recognise, as Iser does, that reading is a temporal experience. Rather than aiming to introduce a comprehensive imagined world at the beginning of a narrative, a writer can gradually and strategically introduce information about setting to create a fantasy world that is rich, complex, dynamic, and ever-changing. Editors Browne and King advise writers: “a good rule of thumb is to give your readers only as much background information, or history, or characterization, as they need at any given time” (31). If information about a setting is learnt gradually, it allows the reader to build up a mental picture of the world over the course of the novel, and this gradual introduction is more harmonious with the natural consistency-building process that readers undergo when reading.

It is important to note, however, that even staggered introductions of setting information must be short and vivid, and should not extend to long passages. Authors like Ann Radcliffe and J.R.R. Tolkien spend pages describing landscape—painting the sublime peaks of the Alps and the great forests of Middle Earth—but writing conventions have changed considerably since these authors were published. In the 21st century authors simply can’t afford to devote lengthy passages to setting description. Publishers are unlikely to publish a book that begins with ten pages of scene setting, and modern readers won’t tolerate excessive descriptive writing.[27] Editors Browne and King describe the literature of today as “leaner and meaner” than its Victorian predecessors, saying that it is “a good idea to give your readers just enough detail to jump-start their imaginations so they can picture your settings themselves”(8).

This restriction of description should not be seen as something negative, but rather as an opportunity to engage the reader in the construction of setting. Reading is, after all, a consistency-building experience in which the reader fills in the gaps:

> The artistry of designing plausible imaginary worlds is as much a matter of leaving things out as putting things in; as long as you can convince your reader that everything you actually

[27] Writers of epic high fantasy, which by nature runs to long word counts and relishes the detail of imaginary worlds, may be able to indulge in more of this kind of writing, but the principle still applies.

> mention is part of a coherent whole, the whole itself may remain vague. (Stableford 10)

Fantasy writers might imagine and plan their fictional worlds in great detail, and be tempted to convey *all* of this detail to the reader. This could actually be counterproductive to the effect they are trying to achieve. Readers are intelligent, and capable of inferring information, responding to stimuli and collecting and connecting information. “Strangely enough, the strength in fiction seems to lie as much in what is left out as in what is included; as much in the spaces between the words as in the words” (Bird 23).

### ***The changing perception of setting***

Iser discusses the importance of subverting or constantly changing the reader’s horizon of expectation, saying that if this is not done a text will become predictable and un-engaging (Iser *Act of Reading*). He believes that texts should be rife with twists and turns and unfulfilled expectations, and that the reader’s expectations should be modified throughout the text. While I would argue that Iser places too much stress on this, not acknowledging that many expectations need to be fulfilled in order to offer a satisfying reading experience,[28] to some extent this ‘modification of expectation’ principle is important when considering fantasy settings. As McKee points out, an author “must not only fulfil the audience anticipations, or risk their confusion and disappointment, but he must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments, or risk boring them” (80). If the places shown in a novel are always what the reader expects (because of the various repertoire associations they have made from previous passages in the book, and from knowing the genre of the book) and do not change, the world of the work risks becoming cliché and offering nothing new or unexpected for the reader to discover. Engaging settings are dynamic, changing, vivid and sometimes unpredictable. This does not mean the house a character is living in must constantly sprout new rooms and shift doorways. Setting needs to come with an “emotional charge by being filtered through the character’s perceptions” (Tuttle 53), so while a place in a novel may not physically change, the character’s (and thus usually also the reader’s) attitude to it or understanding of it may.

A prime example of the transformative possibilities of setting is demonstrated in the depiction of the manor of Obernewtyn in Isobelle Carmody’s series *The Obernewtyn Chronicles*. In the first book, the institution of Obernewtyn is a frightening, imposing, and prison-like place, but over the course of the series it becomes an unexpected haven and familiar location of safety and community for the characters. Consider also the final novel in the Harry Potter series, where the familiar setting of Hogwarts suddenly becomes a battleground. The very castle seems to rise up

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[28] Particularly in fantasy fiction, which was not a focus of Iser’s study.

against the threat as the suits of armour are brought to life and the magical plants from the herbology greenhouses are prepared for the battle against the Death Eaters (J.K. Rowling *Deathly Hallows* 483-84). Part of the emotional impact of this sequence comes from the strong associations with Hogwarts that the reader has built up, and how this familiar place now transforms in a last stand against the threats that have lurked outside—and even inside—its walls throughout the entire series.

Reading is, as Iser points out, a temporal experience that can be likened to the way we experience reality (*Act of Reading* 68) and just as our understanding and perception of a place can change in real life through our experience of it, so can that of the imaginary places of fantasy novels. A reader's expectations and perceptions of place can thus be modified throughout a narrative to give the sense that the world of the text is a character in itself: a multi-dimensional personality with a wealth of undiscovered secrets, histories, and hidden corners to reveal.

***A sense of history***

Setting not only becomes emotionally loaded by being associated with human emotions and traits, or by being shown through the emotional lens of the character, but also by being imbued with a strong sense of memory and history. In the foreword of the book *Literary Houses*, which contains artists' renditions of famous houses from literary works, Rosalind Ashe comments:

> … it is hard for even the most down-to-earth of us to resist the strong impression that, in some strange, organic way, those old walls actually store impressions of the generations they have sheltered … The houses in these novels are more than mere stage sets: they are almost 'characters'. They linger in your mind long after the book is closed. They have become real. (4)

History, whether it is the implied history that happened before the events of the novel or series, or the events that take place within it, can make a setting seem richer, deeper and more real to a reader. It suggests a far-reaching horizon that stretches backward through a series and beyond the beginning of the first novel, enhancing the sense that the setting is an ever-changing space that contains more than the events of one human lifetime. This is particularly important in fantasy, where history and legend are a vital part of creating a sense of the epic and the wondrous. A fantasy setting is given depth not only by its physical attributes, but also by the events that have taken place within it and the people that have known it. Creating a strong sense of these past events—these stored memories—is important in achieving a profound sense of place.

## CONCLUSION

Writing is, of course, not an exact science. It is a creative act that can't be achieved solely by following a list of do's and don'ts. Every author has his or her own unique writing style, and it is impossible for a writer to follow a formula that will guarantee the creation of the 'perfect' fantasy setting. Yet it *is* possible, as I have shown in this essay, for writers to give the rich fictional worlds of their device the best chance for successfully communicating to a reader.

Iser and Kreitman have presented a picture of the reading process that, while not necessarily complete and infallible, clearly presents it as an active, temporal, and emotional activity. These theorists have demonstrated that reading involves concretizing written objects and filling in gaps using prior extra-textual knowledge, grouping information within a text to make meaning, forming and reforming expectations in light of new information, and connecting emotionally to fictional characters and their environments. Therefore, if a fantasy writer wishes to create a setting that is best poised to engage and involve the reader, they should communicate this setting in a way that is harmonious with this reading process. They should focus on key stimuli and avoid extraneous detail, leaving space for the reader to infer and interpret. They should introduce their setting gradually, and create worlds that grow and evolve over the course of the narrative: worlds that inspire empathy and interest. They should make skilful use of symbolism and archetypes, and imbue their settings with a sense of history and depth. These are the kinds of worlds that make a reader pick up a novel again and again, and read it not just to remind themselves of the plot or the characters, but to return to that magical imaginary space: a world that comes closest to existence only during the transient experience of reading, when a few words trigger whole realms in the endless spaces of the mind.

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