



Make it up—or KEEP IT REAL?

The three approaches
to fictional setting
each have potential
strengths, weaknesses

Using a real setting, such as Harvard, has the virtue of saving readers from pages of exposition, but it's not always the best option.

By Tanya Egan Gibson

While setting a fictional scene at Harvard, one of my writing friends became thwarted by real-life security. Needing to get her protagonist, a non-student, into one of the libraries in a life-or-death hurry, she was devastated to find herself (and her character) stopped short by a small but crucial detail: turnstiles.

Having grown up around Harvard, my friend had originally envisioned the scene by using her memories of the campus, but she'd recently learned that increased security had changed the setting considerably. Those turnstiles, where students now had to swipe their college IDs to gain admittance, would make it impossible for her character to dash inside. Worse, it turned out that the turnstiles were not within the lobby where she had hoped her character might use her social skills to con library personnel into letting her in.

"So just set it at Marvard," I told her. "Or Larvard."

OK, I was kidding about the rhyme-like name, but not about the concept. If she invented a college in the Cambridge area that evoked an Ivy League vibe, people would *get* that it was a fictionalized Harvard. At Larvard she could put

the turnstiles wherever she wanted. For that matter, at Larvard she could invent an entirely *new* security system for her character to circumvent. And while she was at it, she could map an entirely new campus and change the buildings and ...

Yeah, I get excited at the idea of inventing entire institutions, towns, worlds. Because my next novel is set in a made-up theme park, I'm constantly sketching maps and inventing rides, an activity that amuses me beyond words. My friend, however, didn't look amused; she looked annoyed.

"Larvard," she said, "is not the same."

True. When I consider all that the name "Harvard" brings to mind, and add in my friend's familiarity with the campus, I do, of course, understand why she might not want to invent an entire new institution. The school, after all, carries connotations of tradition, privilege and intellectualism that spare a writer from having to *explain* much about it. Why reinvent the wheel when there's a perfectly good round, axle-like thing right in front of you?

But on the other hand, what if the wheel doesn't fit? Or what if you don't want your wheel to look like everyone else's wheel? Or world?

The world of a story includes, but is not limited to, a place's geography, to-

pography, and the ways (via foot, car or public transportation) by which one can navigate and experience it: architecture, floor plans and furnishings; music, art and literature; flora, fauna and weather; values, culture and customs; clothing, foods, drinks and brands; jargon and slang; politics and religion; history; and so on. Unless you are writing fantasy (and probably *even* then), you will borrow some facets of your fictional world from real life, and invent others from air. But how do you decide what to make up and what to keep real?

When you make it up

Hitting an impasse, as my friend did with the library's security system, is probably the most common reason that writers of fiction opt for made-up places over real ones. In trying to make the real Harvard work in her book, my friend asked the library for details of its security system. Not surprisingly, the staff was unwilling to divulge them, even for fictional purposes.

Similarly, what if you want characters who are walking through a real-life park to take shelter in a structure when a rainstorm hits—but no such structures *exist* there? If you move the turnstiles at Harvard or insert a building where there isn't one in Central Park, readers will

notice. Because such decisions on your part will be taken as mistakes and wake readers from the fictional dream, you might need to invent a library or park.

Not wishing to offend or libel people, institutions or companies is another strong reason to invent celebrities, politicians, places or brands. While it's fine for your characters to grab a bite at Taco Bell, for instance, you probably don't want to attribute an epidemic of zombieism to the consumption of gorditas.

Specific references to songs, TV shows, brands and celebrities can also date your work in way that makes it seem old only five years after you've written it. Creating your own brands, celebrities, TV shows and other pop-cultural details also allows you to be playful, creative and even satirical.

When you keep it real

Using real-life details, on the other hand, can save you considerable writing time and save your readers from pages of exposition. Plus, needless re-creation of the wheel can end up calling too much attention to itself and being silly. Why create a new brand of luxury car and spend three paragraphs describing it if it is nearly identical to a BMW? (On the other hand, if the book is *about* a character who develops a new car, creating a brand is probably called for.)

Keeping it real allows readers to identify with places and experiences. Most people know what a 7-11 or a Burger King is like. Real-life references allow readers to define a character quickly: *Oh, she's a girl who listens to Train. Or shops at Gap. Or eats Twinkies.*

Most important, the restrictions real life imposes on your story can actually strengthen it. Restrictions are *key* to a good story—characters must *do* things to overcome them, thereby advancing the plot and revealing themselves.

Say you want your protagonist to escape her pursuer by running down the front steps of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and jumping onto a bus heading uptown, where 30 blocks away a safe house awaits. But then you discover, much to your dismay, that in real life Fifth Avenue only runs *downtown* from there. (Any New Yorker will notice if you reroute traffic in your

novel.) Should you change Manhattan to "Gotham"? Maybe not. Maybe having to get off the bus and run again (or catch a cab) with the bad guy still in pursuit will add to the story. Maybe the turnstile obstacle will force my friend to make her character even more resourceful or talented than before.

Mixing the real and the made-up

Bringing fiction to life, in most cases, requires a blend of invention and fact. Mixing and matching the real and invented lets you go over the top with made-up brands, places or entertainment without *seeming* to be that over-the-top. The real part of it makes the "unreal" believable. (This is one attribute of good urban fantasy. Yeah, there's a vampire. But the fact he's at *Starbucks* ordering a half-caf-Grande-soy-latte sort of naturalizes him.)

Inventing things shouldn't be an excuse to avoid research, either. In fact, good invention requires plenty of it. Research *types* of things—menus, amusement park rides, about-to-go-extinct animals, names of nail-polish shades—before you make up your own restaurant, theme park, endangered species or cosmetics company. You might hit upon the perfect real-life detail by accident. And if you don't, your made-up choices will sound natural instead of overly clever or silly. The more outrageous and eye-catching your made-up place is, the more it needs to be dead-on real.

Some writers thinly disguise real places so that they can keep some aspects of a place yet not impugn a community, as in the case of Anne Lamott's *Imperfect Birds*, in which she uses the name Landsdale for a suburban area that stands in for Fairfax, a town in Marin County, Calif. In Lamott's novel, teen drug abuse is endemic. By fictionalizing the place, Lamott implies the universality of this problem (rather than attributing it to a specific community), while keeping intact much of its geography and notable "parkade"—a raised parking area where people, especially teen-

agers, congregate.

Most important, your choices to invent or borrow should, in the end, have a sense of consistency and meaning. Though F. Scott Fitzgerald set *The Great Gatsby* in real-life areas of Long Island that roughly corresponded to Kings Point and Sands Point, he chose to call them "West Egg" and "East Egg," giving him freedom to play with the geography of Long Island, and adding to the sense of unrealness or ungroundedness of these moneyed, suburban places. Once characters pass out of suburbia through the "Valley of Ashes," however, the landscape becomes grounded in reality. When his characters enter Manhattan, Fitzgerald adheres to the true geography of the city and its places.

I set my own novel, *How to Buy a Love of Reading*, an homage to *Gatsby*, in the fictional town of Fox Glen, "a third egg Fitzgerald forgot to mention." Doing so gave me the freedom to set the town on the shore of the Long Island Sound, where I wanted much of the action to take place, without having to

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set it in any specific real-life community. Inventing an "unreal" version of Long Island also gave me the freedom to play with the transportation system, shopping malls, and other features to make them work better with my story than the real Long Island would have. I echoed Fitzgerald's choice of making the landscape of Manhattan, in contrast, more grounded in reality. The subway system,

for instance, is true to life.

Whether you end up inventing your details or borrowing them, remember that readers will react to them with a wide range of associations—the mention of "Armani" draws in some folks while repulsing others—and your choices will never please every reader. Your obligation is to choose details that feel organic to the story and integrate them into your world.

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