

## Around the World in 80 Murders

Regular maps have few surprises: their contour lines reveal where the Andes are, and are reasonably clear. More precious, though, are the unpublished maps we make ourselves, of our city, our place, our daily world, our life; those maps of our private world we use every day; here I was happy, in that place I left my coat behind after a party, that is where I met my love; I cried there once, I was heartsore; but felt better round the corner once I saw the hills of Fife across the Forth, things of that sort, our personal memories, that make the private tapestry of our lives.

~ Alexander McCall Smith, *Love Over Scotland*

It is a pity indeed to travel and not get this essential sense of landscape values. You do not need a sixth sense for it. It is there if you just close your eyes and breathe softly through your nose; you will hear the whispered message, for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. 'I am watching you — are you watching yourself in me?' Most travelers hurry too much ... the great thing is to try and travel with the eyes of the spirit wide open, and not to much factual information. To tune in, without reverence, idly — but with real inward attention. It is to be had for the feeling ... you can extract the essence of a place once you know how. If you just get as still as a needle, you'll be there.

~ Lawrence Durrell, *Spirit Of Place: Letters And Essays On Travel*

Buildings and landscape have their own intents, and they don't need humans to get on with getting on. Spend some time thinking about what buildings and landscape get up to at night, when humans aren't around.

~Deborah Biancotti, Australian fantasy writer

If you want to know a country, read its writers.

~ Aminatta Forna, writer, born in Glasgow, raised in Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom, and now divides her time between London and Sierra Leone

### Ten things about writing place

- The best preparation for writing about a place is to have lived there; the second best is to read talented fiction and non-fiction writers who have lived there.
- It helps to build a place notebook, full of useful bits, particularly related to sensory details. Even if this is a different place from where we intend to write about, it gives us a sense of what place details get caught in our filters.
- Vision is the most overused sensory detail. Give smells, tastes, sounds, colors, temperature, and tactile experiences their fair due.
- Time is a huge component of place: not only large time slices, such as what was this place like in 1916 as opposed to 2016, but what is Sunday like compared to Wednesday, and what is 10:00 am like compared to 10:00 pm?
- Google searches are good for maps, weather and climate information, times for sunrise and sunset, dates, and events.
- Things Google searches can't provide: smells, tastes, colors, background noises, look and feel.
- Exploration, extrapolation, and experimentation are useful tools.
- A character, particularly an outsider, will have a different place perspective than the majority of people who live there.

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- Nothing turns a knowledgeable reader off quicker than tripping over an incorrect detail. If we change something for dramatic necessity, mention it somewhere. (“Those readers familiar with Calgary will know ... . For this story, I ... .”)
- Never lose sight of the idea that the landscape is watching us while we are watching it.

Authors who use place well

- A. D. Scott, Joanne Ross series (Scotland, 1950s)
- Dana Stabenow, mystery writer (Alaska, modern)
- Declan Hughes, Ed Loy series (Republic of Ireland, modern)
- Richard Hugo (1923 – 1982), poet (use of triggering towns: small Northwest US towns, which he never visited, but imagined what they were like for his poems)
- James Lee Burke, mystery writer (Louisiana, Texas, and Montana, modern day)
- Jenny White, *The Sultan's Seal* (India, late 1800s)
- Lois McMaster Bujold, fantasy writer, Vorkorsegan family saga (my all time favorite for world building. In my head, Barrayar and the other twenty-eight planets she invented exist.)
- Martin Walker, Bruno, *Chief of Police* (contrast between France in World War II and modern times)
- Patricia Sprinkle, *Daughter of Deceit* (nails the southern atmosphere)
- Steven Booth, mystery writer (England's peak district, modern)

Feel free to circulate this to other writers. For any commercial use, contact me first.

Got questions? Want to discuss these ideas? Love to hear from you.

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