

Secrets of Romantic Suspense: A Series of Eight Lectures

By Lisa Gardner

This continues this series of eight lectures, which started with the first installment, "Introduction."

Lecture III. Establish a Setting

I have to start today's lecture with brutal honesty. I hate setting. Frankly, I moved to writing suspense because I can't describe my way out of a paper bag. Killing people, on the other hand, seems to come quite naturally to me. Go figure.

Setting, however, is a lot more than picking a location for your novel, then using a Thesaurus to come up with a list of adjectives for said place. When done extremely well, in fact, setting can become one of the most important aspects of a novel. For example, what would *Wuthering Heights* be without the Scottish moors? Can you imagine Sandra Brown's novel, *Slow Heat in Heaven*, set anywhere but sultry, summertime Louisiana? Better yet, would *Psycho* still be *Psycho* without the Bates Motel?

So first, let's discuss what setting can do for your novel.

Five Tips for Proper Setting

1. Add to mood and tone. The Gothics do it best. From the cold, stark Scottish moors in *Wuthering Heights*, to the mysterious mansion in *Rebecca*, setting is integral to mood. Scenes happen at night, staircases like to creak, and all homes have one locked room set tantalizingly atop a dusty flight of stairs. The descriptions make us shiver with unease long before anything bad actually happens. Of course, setting doesn't have to be bleak. Nora Roberts uses the wide-open space of Montana in her novel, *Montana Sky*, to evoke a feeling of fresh starts and new opportunities. Likewise, Barbara Delinsky draws upon a quaint coastal home in *For My Daughters*, a book about family intimacy and family healing.

2. Build a sense of urgency. My all-time favorite use of location is the cold Minnesotan winter in Tami Hoag's *Night Sins*. From the very first chapter, she establishes the isolation and danger that comes from deep winter in a small Minnesota town. The beginning of each chapter notes the temperature outside, and as the race begins to find a lost child, there is no illusion that the hero and heroine are battling the cold as valiantly as an unknown assailant. After all, the chilling temperatures can kill a missing child just as easily as a human predator. By the time you're halfway through this novel, you'll find that you're compulsively turning up the thermostats in your home and wearing lots of layers. The cold is that well done. In Tami's own words, she considered it a second character.
3. Provide a sense of movement. Another trick, especially in suspense novels, is to have many settings. For example, the classic on-the-run novel catalogues the hero and heroine racing from place to place to place. The constant change in scenery provides real-time movement, plus it heightens the sense of steadily approaching danger. There is no place that is safe. These people have no home, so to speak. When I wrote my novel, *The Other Daughter*, I dramatically switched settings from upper crust Bostonian life, to a cheap, Huntsville, Texas hotel to signal a huge leap in the heroine's perception of reality. She had thought of herself as an adopted daughter of privilege. Now she fears she is the birth daughter of a white trash serial killer. The change in setting allowed me to give the book genuine movement, after three hundreds pages of dialogue, dialogue, discussion, dialogue.
4. Add to sex appeal. Let's face it—Sandra Brown's *Slow Heat in Heaven* wouldn't have worked if it had been set in Bangor, Maine. For one thing, the characters would end up with frostbite in interesting places. For another, there's just something about the Deep South that makes people think of sweaty bodies, heady nights, and lustful longings. We're not seeing many of the New Orleans-style books anymore—I think so many were done in a row they became a stereotype—but that doesn't mean there isn't another sultry location just waiting to be discovered. Find it first and you can put it on the map.
5. Establish period and place: Historical writes do an amazing job—and have an amazing burden—of incorporating numerous historical details into their novels. Fans of historical novels want to feel transported in time and place, meaning authors have to consider everything from language to clothes to food to modes of transportation. From Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*, which does a fascinating job of depicting early twentieth century forensics to Amanda Quick's *Slightly Shady*, which depicts the confines of Victorian culture on an aspiring female PI, these books make time and place both an obstacle and an attribute in the development of the suspense plot. Leaping ahead in time, J.D. Robb also incorporates numerous details to make her futuristic romantic suspense novels come alive.

Having now waxed eloquent about the virtues of setting, what are the problems?

Three Setting Traps to Avoid

1. Too much setting, too little purpose. Setting is not important in all novels or in all scenes. So you have to ask yourself, why am I including details about shrubbery here? If you don't have a good answer, you don't need that shrubbery. Many top writers from Iris Johansen to Elmore Leonard to John Sanford hardly use setting or description at all. Their novels focus on dialogue, action, and dialogue. The time, place, clothing, etc., is of no relevance. This is not good or bad, it's simply their style. They don't need setting and they know it. How about you?
2. Setting the stage, then resetting it over and over again. The beginning of a book should naturally have more details about time and place than the ending of the novel. The reader is meeting characters and locations for the very first time, and wants to have a feel for the world that she is about to enter. That's fine, but if at page two hundred and twenty the writer is still describing the heroine's house or the quiriness of small town life, it can be very tedious. Does the writer think she didn't describe things well enough the first time? Does the writer think the reader forgot? Don't sacrifice pacing to setting; most readers skim description anyway.
3. Wearing the mood thin. As much as I enjoy the classic gothic novels, most of them are a bit overdone by today's tastes. The first time the staircase creaks, we're intrigued. By the fourth time, we're yelling at the heroine to invest in WD-40. If your book calls for mood, then establish mood, but don't punch up the same cues over and over again. You risk making your setting melodramatic and you risk bogging down the book's pacing. Sometimes, less is more, which can be a very fine line in fiction writing.

Conclusion

Setting is well done when it's done well. You need some details, but not others. You can use setting to move the book forward, unless you're overdoing it, which will hold the book back. You can also use setting to establish mood, unless it's cliché, which will ruin the mood. Is that clear for everyone? I thought as much. ☺

Next up, developing those characters, including the villain.