

Place Names: Wisdom Sits in Places

A few years ago, when preparing to lead a "Writing Along the Rim" retreat at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, I came across the book ***Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*** by Keith H. Basso.

In Chapter 1, p.7, "Quoting the Ancestors," he writes: "In modern landscapes everywhere, people persist in asking, 'What happened here?' The answers they supply, though perhaps distinctly foreign, should not be taken lightly, for what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves... If place-making is a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of *doing* human history, it is also a way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities. **We are, in a sense, the place-worlds we imagine.**"

"But more is contained in Apache place-names than frozen ancestral quotes and ageless images of a new and striking landscape...place names can offer evidence of change in the landscape, showing clearly that certain localities do not present the appearance they did in former times...the environment of the ancestors differed in key respects from that of their modern descendants..." (p.13)

Apache Vocabulary of the Landscape

Water Lies With Mud In An Open Container
 Valley with Long Red Bluffs
 Water Flows Down On A Succession Of Flat Rocks
 Water Flows Inward Under a Cottonwood Tree
 Line Of White Rocks Extends Up And Out
 Scattered Rocks Stand Erect
 Juniper Tree Stands Alone
 Green Rocks Side By Side Jut Down Into Water
 Trail Extends Across Scorched Rocks
 Circular Clearing With Slender Cottonwood Trees
 Whiteness Spreads Out Descending To Water
 Gray Willows Curve Around A Bend
 Widows Pause For Breath
 They Piled On Top Of Each Other
 Two Old Women Are Buried
 She Carries Her Brother On Her Back

Birds' Water
 Snakes' Water
 Foul Water
 Bitter Agave Plain
 Stand Of Arrow Cane
 Grove Of Cottonwood Trees
 Line of Blue Below Rocks
 Navajos Are Coming
 She Became Old Sitting
 Lizards Dart Away In Front
 They Are Grateful For Water
 Rotten Field
 Yellow Rocks Jut Out
 Fly's Camp
 Children's Footprints
 Trail to Life Goes Up

WHAT MATTERS TO APACHES IS WHERE EVENTS OCCURRED, NOT WHEN.

Western Apache place-names were created by their ancestors, they were/are the ancestors *very own words*. "The place-maker's main objective is to speak the past into being," writes Basso (p.32), "to summon it with words.... describing ancestral events 'as they are occurring' and creating in the process a vivid sense that what happened long ago—right here, on this very spot—**could be happening now.**"

Questions to Ponder: In what way do these Apache place names show a relationship *between* "place" and "character?" Do you feel the movement and action inherent in these names? What relationship does *your* character have with the place where your story takes place? What relationship do you have? How does place differ from locale?