

Writing The Authentic West

By Anne Schroeder, anneschroederauthor.blogspot.com

Anne Schroeder © 2009

Lesson 3—THE PHYSICAL WEST

We're going to jump into the heart of this course now. I plan to present the information in several lessons, to allow time to really think about the concepts. Basically, we will be looking at three key elements to consider when writing authentic West. Today we will explore the Physical West.

THE PHYSICAL WEST

One of the hallmarks of western writing is the use of The West as a main character. As such it can play many roles....

Protagonist-

Beautiful scenery, grand rivers, lakes, mountains. These add elegance and a sense of wonder to the struggle that is going on within the pages. Characters fall in love under waterfalls, in lakes, in a beautiful copse of oak. They come upon an oasis and are saved. Stately villas or ranch houses, sod houses or even caves create a mood.

In movies, long angled cameras capture the glory of a beloved rancher's daughter as she disrobes for her swim. The setting becomes a protagonist when physicality creates motivation for the protagonist's actions.

For Esther Williams, a swimming pool/diving board became a main character. For Gene Autry it was Champion, but it was also a particular combination of soft lighting, rolling oak-filled vistas and dirt wagon tracks that we associate with his movies.

Movies are a good way to visualize how your writing can affect your reader because the movie experience has already prepared them for what you write on the page.

Antagonist-

Raging storms wash away a year's work, imperil everything the protagonist has worked for. Deserts, snow and ice, impassable mountain passes, wind, dust, drought, animals. Man against nature is a compelling theme. A couple can battle their antagonist and triumph.

Stern Taskmaster-

The West acts as a stern taskmaster, providing opportunities that will build a character—character. Through challenges, the girl protagonist from the East learns to cope through a series of humiliating gaffes.

Taken further, the man against man (or man against woman) scenes are dramatic and evocative when they battle each other's wills against a stern and unyielding Western backdrop.

Gracious Host—

The West provides a backdrop, an extra layer of lushness or harshness while the man against woman conflict unveils. Just like a book set in Hawaii, a Western setting makes everything just that much more compelling.

REMEMBER—YOU'RE THE BOSS!

The type of setting you choose will determine nature's moods and personality. For a while dude ranch settings were popular, but they became passé. How about a Grand Canyon burro tour where the helicopter breaks down? Mount Whitney? Colorado's Cave of the Winds?

An unforgettable setting creates a cultural experience that adds extra layers of value and readability to a book.

Think about the authors you collect—those favorites you couldn't possibly part with. You anticipate their next book because they've created added value in their books that transcends the subject matter. Why not create your own brand as a writer of the exotic American West!

But I digress....

In order to WRITE with AUTHENTICITY, we must THINK with AUTHENTICITY.

Here's what I mean. You want to include some spiffy terrain in your novel, right?

TERRAIN-

Flat, rolling, foothills or mountainous? Will your mountains be impassible or charming? Your flatlands arid or marshy? Each has its own set of dangers, temperature extremes, seasons, pesky insects, sunrise and

sunset, difficulty breathing. Each has its own trees and wildflowers, edible berries and roots, rate of decomposition.

Now let's go the other direction—

River bottoms? Canyons?

The West is renowned for its flash floods and monsoons. Which leads us to...

WATER-

Water or its lack is a HUGE factor in the West. Wars have been fought over it. Presidents have been elected for their promise to allocate it.

Raging river? Stagnant ponds? Alkali? Seasonal water flow? Windmill? Hand-dug well?

EXAMPLE: In 1862, our area got 30 inches of rain, an outstanding deluge that washed out bridges, flooded homes, created lakes where none had ever been. The next year the residents were hit with such a severe drought that many lost their ranches, animals, livelihood. Cows were run off of cliffs into the ocean to spare their owners their pitiful croaking. Indians were reduced to squatting on their former land with the permission of their new landlords.

NATURAL CALAMITIES-WEATHER-

The West varies hugely in its temperature, summer and winter. Some states have deep freezes, blizzards, ice storms. The plains states have tornadoes and inclement oddities that are fascinating to readers.

LaVeryl Spencer wrote about a Minnesota blizzard in the Spring, where two farmers caught out in the deadly chill killed and gutted their Percheron horses and climbed inside the rib cages—and one survived. Fascinating! The stuff that makes a writer a legend.

In California, we have earthquakes, drought and erosion. (My book deals with the epicenter of the San Andreas Fault because I grew up fifteen miles from it.)

I know little about the effect of snow, lightning, wind, tornadoes or ice—that's why I love reading about it in a book written by someone who does!

The West didn't have one story—it has a million. Find a unique angle, research it and use it as a protagonist, an antagonist or a supporting cast member.

NATURAL RESOURCES-

Things like minerals, water, soil, buffalo, grizzly, grassland. Wars were fought over these resources. Use the violence and the protectiveness to add a layer of drama and tension to the human interest story you're writing.

Or romance. I once had an old miner who was smitten with me bring me a football-sized chunk of crystal that he'd hand-carried from a mile under ground. Think I'll ever forget that man? Not in this life!

PHYSICAL GLORY

Long before President Roosevelt created the National Park System, Indians and settlers lived among the natural wonders that fill the West. White ranchers owned them. Indians prayed and died defending their tribes' sacred places.

Setting a story in one of the natural wonders gives the reader an unforgettable cultural experience. Maybe she's already visited the site. Maybe, as a result of reading your book, she plans a vacation to see for herself. What a tribute to your skill!

Ever stood beside Asian or European visitors and watched their wonder when they see for the first time the natural resources that we take for granted? Revisit your West with a tourist's eyes and see what you discover!

CAUTIONARY NOTE: After I finished writing a novel about the Oregon Trail, my husband and I made a side trip along the highway that passed several spots I'd included in my book: Devil's Gap, Independence Rock, The Slough. In the wagon train days each was a day's journey apart. In my book I described bone-weary women slogging the bitter miles, step by step.

My husband and I happened to be on a BMW motorcycle traveling at 60-70 miles an hour. I was so glad I wrote first and saw last—there was no way I could have described the difficulties if I hadn't pictured it first in my mind. What was for the pioneers a days travel, we covered in 15 MINUTES. In 45 minutes we'd seen all three. Within a few hours we'd traipsed the sites and were on our way back, seeing them again. I was ashamed that the journey was so easy for us.

Here's another factor that sort of fits into the physical, although I'll talk about it later.

ECONOMIC BASE-

Are you writing about a rancher or a farmer? There's a huge difference. It takes from 100-200 acres to support a cow, depending on the year, the area and the grass. Eastern settlers were shocked to discover this fact.

Is your character land-poor? Did your character family arrive to settle a homesteader's claim?

Soil was often extremely unsuited to the East-Coast or European immigrants who arrived thinking the soil would be like the rich, loamy river bottom land they had left behind. Many immigrants lasted only a year before they moved on. Were they able to sell off their land before they left?

In places where there was no pressure for the land, people tended to be squatters. Do you know the difference between preempted and proved-up land? Prime land and dregs? Soldier's Land-grant act?

The circumstances of the land will create internal conflict for the story. Consider envy between neighbors. How about a story of a young widow with better land than her obstinate male neighbor?

Is your character a miner? How about a trader? —and if so, is he an ocean vessel, fur or Indian trader?

Every man had to make a living. But times were tough. In the era of the Old West, fortunes were made and lost in a week. Towns sprung up and disappeared with a bad drought or a dry silver mine. People moved on because they were caught in the throes of restlessness that gripped the country—a fear that they would miss something if they stayed behind.

Most times people eked out a poor living, and that's part of the story. Think about what we've explored. Maybe you can see why I'm so passionate about the West—it's limitless.

CLASSROOM TASK: Think of your ancestors' experiences. Interview your older family members for information—that one story that might jolt you into sharing it. share your feedback—some thoughts, additions or insights.

Time to hit the trail!