

PLACE AS CHARACTER

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“The birds and I share a natural history. It is a matter of rootedness, of living inside a place for so long that the mind and imagination fuse.”
—Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*

When we talk about place as character, we’re talking about writing that shows place as one of the factors in what happens in the story/essay/memoir/poem. Place, especially place in the West, where our spaces are so large, our skies so vast and our weather so unpredictable, has shaped and continues to shape the stories we write, whether real or imagined.

How do we write place as believable, authentic character?

- **Know it** so well that you “live inside of it.” Spend time in the place, and if you can’t do that, read voraciously, talk to people who live or have lived there. Soak yourself into the place until it takes over mind and imagination, as Terry Tempest Williams says.
- **Use rich sensory “data”** to evoke place. Go beyond what we see: describe how the wind sounds, what the place smells like, how the sleet feels.... If it’s hard to think of sensory details other than the visual, go outside and spend five minutes sitting with your eyes closed. Note everything you hear, smell, and feel (yup, without opening your eyes. You’ll be able to read most of it when you’re done). Then prepare to be surprised at how much you notice when your dominant sense (vision) is turned off.
- **Get the details right:** Is the bluff tan or ochre? Is that a speeding pronghorn (American West) or antelope (Africa)? Is the shrub that perfumes the air after summer rains big sagebrush or *chamisa* or purple sage? Is that river the Purgatoire or the Picketwire? Is that large black bird soaring overhead on stiff wings a raven or a turkey vulture? If your characters are riding toward a rising full moon, make sure they’re headed east. If you don’t know the details, learn them. Buy field guides, ask experts, go on nature or geology walks, look up details on the internet (and make sure you’re finding authoritative sites, as in from universities, government, researchers, or others who know their stuff).

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