

## **The Character of Place: Worldbuilding Essentials**

**by Danika Dinsmore**

Literary agent Donald Maas, author of *Writing the Breakout Novel*, says that to make your characters universal, you must make them unique, which sounds like an oxymoron. But readers don't connect with generic, stereotypical characters because humans are quirky. Our uniqueness is the universal thing about us.

It's the same with setting. Generic settings are flat and uninspiring. It's the uniqueness of our landscapes that brings them to life. In speculative fiction, worldbuilding is akin to research. You wouldn't write a novel set in Hong Kong without researching what makes Hong Kong unique. You'd learn its history. Discover its quirks. Find its secrets.

Your characters shouldn't exist in a world you haven't researched. The source material comes from mining your imagination. Flora, fauna, and other objects shouldn't be cardboard props, nor should the setting be tacked up like a backdrop, existing separately from the characters. Readers should arrive in your world believing they can touch, smell, and hear what's around them.

### **Nothing exists in isolation**

Even if your character never leaves their hometown, readers should have a sense of the larger world beyond their story. Whether consciously or unconsciously, humans constantly interact with the landscape. Our environment elicits happiness, joy, sadness, despair, comfort, stress, longing, and more often a combination of these. When we walk into a new room – be it in a hotel, friend's house, or restaurant – we immediately scan and judge. The objects around us trigger memories and emotions.

Your imaginary surroundings can distract your characters, inspire your characters, upset your characters, or challenge your characters, as in the gritty urban landscape of China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* in which getting across town is a complicated exercise of strategy and avoidance. Then there's the impossibly cavernous spaceship world of Beth Revis's *Across the Universe*, the fabricated noir-ish Sitka, Alaska of Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union* with its mash-clash of cultures, or Robin Hobb's dangerous and beautiful rain forests in her Liveship Trader and Rain Wild series.

If you plucked a character from one of the above settings and placed them in another, their story would be completely different, even if the character remained the same.

Your character was born in a specific place and time with natural, familial, social, and political influences. These influences shape their life. No one lives in a vacuum.

There is always something happening in the "background" of your character's life. It could be a war on another continent or animal calls in their backyard. For example, when I work with my students to create imaginary beasts, we not only create pets, domestic animals, and food sources, we create background animals. Do butterflies and dragonflies flutter in the trees or do rats and cockroaches scurry just out of sight?

### **Everything has a history**

The invented items in your character's surroundings did not just appear out of nowhere. That wand came from a specific tree branch in a specific forest and was selected in a specific manner. It was carved by specific hands and enchanted by specific knowledge.

Part of your research involves knowing the history of the things your character interacts with. Of course, their country and family have a history, but so do their belongings. Their antique ring was stolen by their uncle from a dead king. The blind cat that hides in the forest behind their cottage was cursed by a witch when she tripped over it.

Knowing the historical details breathes life into your story, and even a minor object can be the seed for inspiration or connect the dots as your story emerges.

In my first novel, *Brigitta of the White Forest*, I needed a way for my heroine to get down from a mountain through a poisonous fog. I invented a plant she could eat that would stave off the poison. I not only decided how that plant looked, smelled, and tasted, I discovered how it got on that mountain in the first place. When I realized a very minor character had brought it there, it inspired me to tell that character's story later in the series.

### **Magic and technology have a cost**

When writing speculative fiction, we turn to the magical, fantastic, and technologically advanced. These magical and technological objects have history, properties, purpose, and *effect*. It doesn't take much imagination to see how technology has shaped and changed our world. If you create a helpful spell or technological marvel, consider both its history and its effects on the surroundings. How did this magic or technology arrive? How might it shape the larger world? What might happen if it were in another character's hands? What are the consequences of using it?

It may seem excessive to dive into the history of every object, plant, or animal your character encounters, but even if this information is never used in subsequent stories, they'll become interconnected. This layering and interconnectedness gives your world consistency and, subsequently, believability.

I've found the best way to approach my "research" is to brainstorm via pen on paper. Discovering on the page is more effective than squeezing my brain for information. I set a timer for 20 minutes and lead with a line such as *This plant came to be when . . .*

Inspiration is the bonus of thinking these things out on the page. You may discover a completely new story within the history of one object. A chip in a dish received as a wedding gift could be a jumping-off point for storytelling as much as any character or plot idea.

## Worldbuilding Exercises

### 1) **Meditation on The History of Objects**

Visualize yourself in your ideal place to write. Surround yourself with all the things that make you feel *writerly*. Where is your desk? What is on your desk? Are there writing implements, an inbox, a coffee mug, a computer, a window, photographs of your family? Place yourself there, working on your novel.

Pick the story you are building a world for. Visualize a character from your story walking into your space and picking up an object from your desk. What does he or she pick up? Your character then asks you a question about it. What does he or she ask? How do you respond?

Your character puts the object away and says, “Now let me show you something,” and from the folds of his or her clothes, pulls out a “sacred” object and places it on your desk in front of you. What is it that he or she put there?

Now write, without crossing off, without stopping to think or edit, just write. Let it go in the direction it wants to go, there is no right or wrong, just writing. Use the start line: *My character’s object sits on my desk like a...* (10-15 minutes).

2) **Visual Exercises:** Draw a map of the streets, cities, countries, etc. of your world. Maps not only help you visualize your world, they help you see what might be “in the way” of your character getting from one place to another. Draw other objects and structures. You do not need to be a visual artist. Just give yourself time and let your instincts take over. Illustrating the items of your world is another way of brainstorming on the page.

3) **New location:** Whenever your character arrives in a new location, take 10-15 minutes and do a free-write about the surroundings: natural objects, inventions, domiciles, animals, etc. Not just what these things look, smell, and sound like, but how they make your character feel and the memories they might jog.

- 4) **No dialogue:** Write a scene with at least two characters that has no dialogue. Just action and description. Have them interact with their environment and express themselves through it.

Good luck and happy worldbuilding!

Well-seasoned writer, educator, and spoken word artist Danika Dinsmore earned her MFA in Writing and Poetics from the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University. Since then, she has published four books of poetry, a spokenword CD, and a six-book children's fantasy adventure series, *Faerie Tales from the White Forest*. She often takes her interactive Imaginary Worlds Tour on the road, performing and teaching worldbuilding and creative writing at schools, conferences, and festivals across North America. She is drawn toward the quirky, oddball, whimsical, and fantastic.

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