

# The Power of Place

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Presented by Donna Meredith

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Note: All books in this presentation are by authors with a West Virginia connection. With a major shout-out to Phyllis Wilson Moore, who has guided my reading of West Virginia authors and helped me rediscover the power of *THIS* place. And thanks to Peg Holmes, who gave me the best gifts ever: her friendship and many books by WV authors.

## Foreground: Character

## Setting: Background

**But just because setting is the background, don't underestimate its importance. Characters grow out of the soil they are planted in, either nourished or starved.**

Setting is the Time and Place a Story Takes Place

- Can be real or fictional or combination

## Setting is the Crucible

We use setting to bring characters together into a cauldron of conflict.

- *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck
  - Rise and fall of a farming family's fortunes in China
  - Husband's betrayal of hard-working wife by taking a second wife
- *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles
  - World War II stirs competitive instincts for survival
  - At prep school, awkward scholarship student Gene is jealous of athletic, outgoing Finny

## Creating Fictional Place

- Select telling details.
- Weave setting details into every scene through action.
- Avoid catalog or travelogue.
- Sprinkle details, don't flood.
- Use every sense.
- Make some of your characters in conflict with the setting.

## Accurate Details

- Name plants and trees
  - grow in the area
  - bloom time
- Bodies of water
- Animals
- Architectural styles, both exterior and interior
- Furnishings
- Landmarks

## Choose sensory details to evoke place

Today is Sunday. Nick Tucci will run his push mower along the berm of the alley, to keep the weeds down. He does it after dusk, when he gets home from weekend overtime at the factory and he's had supper and beer, and the grass smells like one sharp green thread sliced open.

*Lark and Termite* by Jayne Anne Phillips

## You Manipulate Narrative Time

- Summary
  - Long period covered quickly
  - Use sparingly
- Scene
  - Short period covered in detail
  - Allows reader to enter fictional or remembered world
- Flashback
  - Use sparingly
  - Slows forward motion
  - Can reveal character
  - Transition in and out
  - Use “had” only with first verb
- Flash Forward
  - Hint at what’s to come can create suspense
  - Be cautious—it can seem tacky
- Slow Motion to show emotional drama

## Character is shaped by Setting

- **Geography**
  - Town/country variations
  - Available Jobs
  - Season & Weather
  - Language
- **Historical Era**
  - Social norms
  - Economics & Politics
  - Clothing

## Geography

Clarksburg lies in a cup of the West Virginia hills, but level sites can be found at the east and west ends of the town. Grandfather preferred to be a block from his office and the courthouse, and go straight up in the air.

*Legacy of Love* by Julia Davis

Some men need mountains  
and some men don't.

*Cheat*, Norman Julian

## For some, the influence of mountains may never fade: From Huntington to Wyoming

Instead, I watched the clouds slowly eat the Bighorn Mountains. There was a little early snow up there, and the setting sun was fading it from a kind of frozen blue to a subtle glow of purple. I had lived here my entire life, except for college in California and a stint in the marines in Vietnam. I had thought about those mountains the entire time I was gone and swore that a day wouldn't go by when I got back that I wouldn't look at them. Most of the time I remembered.

*Cold Dish*, Craig Johnson

## Love/hate relationship with the Mountain State

Writers can recreate the tension and inner conflict that exist in characters when this dual feeling festers in them.

### The Good and the Bad

West Virginia is called “the Mountain State” and it is indeed beautiful to look at. Digging out the coal and making a living here for most people is another matter. Of all the states, West Virginia is, I’m told, probably the most backward and underdeveloped, but one of the most scenic.

(This novel about a Greek immigrant family also examines KKK activities in WV.)

*Miss Fourth of July, Goodbye*, Christopher G. Janus

### Some stay.

Growing up here, you get the message very early on that your place is more backwards than anywhere in America and anybody worth much will get out soon as they can, and that doesn’t come only from the outside.

To leave home is not just to leave a piece of land and family and friends, it is to leave your reputation, the respect you’ve earned from others.

*Strange as this Weather Has Been* by Ann Pancake

### Some go.

(From my review of *Crum* by Lee Maynard)

*Crum* is bad-boy literature with gross-out scatological details and adolescent sexual obsessions. But those who stick with Maynard’s novel will find one of the best articulations ever of the love/hate relationship so many Appalachians have with their hometowns. Anyone who has said goodbye to friends and family might recognize, as I did, the pangs of loss packed in that suitcase along with the hope for greater opportunity.

Early in the novel, the narrator lets us know he wants to leave home: “For me, money was one thing and one thing only, but a thing I thought I would never have—a ticket out of Crum. I used to read library books and make lists of all the places I would go when I had made enough money.”

### *Crum* (continued)

Beneath the crumbling surface of a town with “no water system, no sewer system, no systems of any kind,” eventually the narrator realizes Crum possesses some of the same traits that bind most Appalachians to their home.

Not even he can deny the beauty of the hillsides in autumn, “the one season of the year that God seemed to have put there just for the beauty of it.” From a hilltop, the narrator stares at the “fairy tale” village below until, aching inside, he turns away: “It was too nice up here, Crum looked nice and it would just make my decision too hard, to look at Crum and find it beautiful.”

### *Crum* (continued)

Though Maynard never lapses into sentimentality, people exert an even stronger pull than the region’s natural beauty. One friend follows the narrator to the edge of town as he leaves, tries to give him what little money he has, and reveals he committed a crime once to keep the narrator from receiving a severe beating. The confession is upsetting: “Nip was doing just what I tried to get away from, making me feel there was something to Crum, after all.” It takes all of the narrator’s resolve not to “walk across that road and pull his little ass off that bicycle and hug the shit out of him...to resist this attempt to make him “feel like a human being. Like Crum was where [he] belonged.” All along, the narrator has known that leaving home “would have to be an act of surgery, a falling ax on an outstretched limb.” He knows he must “bolt, quickly and efficiently, severing everything at once.”

### **Some can't stay away**

Even you commented on West Virginia's low status, its reputation maligned thanks in part to industrialists, Johnny Carson, and Virginians—our Siamese twin still fuming over that nervy Civil War split.

You asked why I stay when I could live anywhere—Neuschwanstein Castle, for example. I stay because it's home, Archie, a place of both mystery and mayhem that has cast a spell over me. A lesson I learned during my ten-year banishment when all I wanted was to return to this patch of dirt, even with all the horrid memories buried beneath it.

*The Patron Saint of Ugly* by Marie Manilla

### **Where a person lives can cause conflict. Not all Appalachians are alike.**

It's always made me a little uneasy, roosting where West Virginia parts company with Virginia. I am one hundred percent West Virginian and proud of it. But there's a lot of West Virginia I don't know anything about. Never been to a coal camp. Never even toured the exhibition coal mine in Beckley. I hear there are glass factories all over the state, but I couldn't tell you a thing about them. . . My land may resemble parts of Virginia, but those folks don't seem like my people. When my grand-niece left her husband and went to work in Roanoke, people at work teased her, called her a hillbilly, told terrible jokes about incest. I believe they're still smarting over losing a big chunk of land during the War Between the States, so they try to make themselves look bigger at the expense of others.

"Twilight Dawn," *The Well Ain't Dry Yet*, Belinda Anderson

### **Even poems can create a strong sense of conflict over place.**

Two bridges  
spanned the creek  
from Fourth Street to Sixth Street  
their hovering edges  
defining the ghetto gardens.

The new bridge was cement  
and the old one iron and wood.  
the old bridge grumbled  
with every passing car.  
And the  
grumbling bridge,  
frail, umbilical cord,  
connected us with the  
"American side—The other side."

And we  
crossed the bridges  
sometimes arrogantly,  
sometimes like sycophants,  
and we  
slowly learned their hoarded ways.

"The Bridges," *Poems from a Mountain Ghetto*, Russell Marano

## **Wild tales—bland doesn't sell as easily**

Let me say a few things straightaway about that wild, wonderful world called West Virginia, gentle reader.

For one thing, West Virginia is populated by regular, respectable, upstanding, hard-working everyday folks just like the folks you can find in any part of America. And West Virginians become defensive when outsiders characterize them as ignorant, incestuous, dangerous, armed-to-the-teeth hicks and hillbillies. West Virginians want the world to know they can be as bland and boring and ordinary as anybody else in this television-leveled land called homogenized America.

*Last Mountain Dancer*, Chuck Kinder

Then Kinder goes on to write about moonshiners, snake-handlers, mothmen, blood-feudists, and legendary mountain dancers. He's interested in the "bloody mine wars, the ritual disappearance of revenueurs and scabs, . . .doomed and despairing barroom brawlers, deep mine disasters, and the souls of lost buried miners rising like smoke from mine-ventilation holes in the hills."

## **Many immigrant stories**

Italians are a very diverse group. So, too, are West Virginia Mountaineers. [This book] is merely a hodge-podge of memories of one child born a half century after the Italians came to settle in Central West Virginia. A child who was often confused by the culture clash of a largely old-world based family in a unique American environment. A child who, at the time of his upbringing, was not remotely aware of his tremendous good fortune, namely that of being an "Italian Hillbilly."

*Ravioli and Rhododendron: A Collection of Childhood Memories of an Italian Hillbilly*, Tom Oliveto

## **Town vs. country stereotypes**

"It was a narrow, pulverized coal road, and I held my breath as we started up. This was Odell Hollow . . . Aunt Pearl said she heard that they still made illegal moonshine liquor up here, and I heard from someone else that there were little hollows off of Odell Hollow where people married their sisters and brothers and the children were all retarded monsters."

*Higher Ground*, Meredith Sue Willis

## **Town girl meets future in-laws from country**

The clock ticked off the seconds more noticeably than before, it seemed to Sarah . . . She gestured toward the spooky glass eyes staring down from oak-paneled walls. Huge horns curved back from small white ears. "Is that a Rocky Mountain sheep?"

A prize brought back by his own father from a trip out West, Frank said. He himself never left the state. Saw no need to. Frank's eyes lit up. "Do you like to hunt?"

She knew better than to confess she could barely stand to watch the death throes of a spider or roach. "I've never tried."

*The Glass Madonna*, Donna Meredith

## **Jobs dependent on geography and often cause of conflict.**

## **You won't find this kind of midwife and her herbs just anywhere. The midwife is in love with the mother's husband.**

If you were born in Kettle Creek or hereabouts on our part of the Tygart River Valley, your name was written in the ledgers that lined our shelves. . . Wasn't long before the floor was damp with birthing fluid and I wondered how much more there could be inside of her . . . Fear of a dry birth ate its way through my belly. My herbals were useless. I had given her blueberry root and hardhack. I'd forced bitter summer cohosh straight down her throat. . . We were both fighting now to get this baby out, and whatever jealousy I'd carried was lost in the heat of the battle.

### **Conflict created by oil & gas industry**

Summer surveyed the devastation. So, this was the Marcellus Shale Formation . . . About half a mile distant, Summer noticed a spacious log cabin with floor to ceiling windows nestled into the valley below the drill site. On one side of the house, thin fingers of mature pines cast long shadows on an amoeba-shaped pond fed by a shallow creek. She couldn't imagine a more delightful site for a home.

Except for what was happening on this hill.

Indicating he was ready to leave, Joe gave her a hand climbing back onto the trailer.

"Who owns that cabin?" she asked.

Every trace of friendliness left his face. "My brother."

That must be the E. L. Glover on her possible test list. "He's okay with the drilling?"

"It's my hill." Joe stomped to the front of the tractor and fired the engine. "I can do any goddamn thing I want with it."

*Fraccidental Death*, Donna Meredith

### **Conflict created by timber jobs**

The country was a child's sloppy painting of green: spruce and fir in the highlands, hardwoods in the foothills and on the flanks of mountains . . . The few residents welcomed the saws, selling rights to visit tracts with little ceremony and a little profit. The land, when cleared, would amount to free new ground with none of the work, the land agents said.

*Honey from the Lion*, Matthew Neill Null

### **Tunnelitis at Gauley Bridge**

"Eli's dead and gone, Frog. Time to go to work."

"Nothing to do with Eli—it's something in me, bossman." He pointed to his ribs, "In here, it hurts when I breathe. Bad."

. . . "You been to the doctor?"

"Yes sir. Told me I had tunnelitis. Give me them little black pills, same ones he hands out to everybody. They taste like candy. Don't help me none, though; don't help nobody."

*Witness at Hawk's Nest*, Dwight Harshbarger

### **Season, Weather, Time of Day**

The forest seemed to be on fire. The yellow leaves of the poplars, the brown of the white and black oaks, the red and purple of the maples, and the green of the pines and hemlocks flamed in a glorious blaze of color. A stillness, which was only broken now and then by the twittering of birds uttering the plaintive notes peculiar to them in the autumn as they band together before their pilgrimage to the far south, pervaded the forest.

*Betty Zane* by Zane Grey

**Place determines language:** It influences how a person thinks, what metaphors she would use, what expressions and slang.

### **Keep in mind, not all Appalachians are alike! Language reflects place, education.**

There is many a way to mark a baby while it is still yet in the womb. A fright to its mother will render it nervous and fretful after it is birthed. If a copperhead strikes, a fiery red snake will be stamped on the baby's face or back. And a portentous event will violate a woman's entrails, grab a youngun by the ankle and wrench a life out of joint.

Me and Dillon Lloyd spoke of such things on the night Rondal was borned. It was eighteen and ninety, the year the railroad come in and took up the land, two year before the land was give out from under us to the coal company.

### **Nylons suggest the era.**

“Did you see those soldiers give you the once over?” my stupid fat Aunt Hilda asks my Ma.

“Don’t be silly,” Ma says.

“They were giving you the eye all right.”

“Don’t talk foolish.”

“Well, I caught you checking your seams.”

“For God’s sake, Hilda!” Ma says, laughing. “You are so full of shit.”

*Snakehunter*, Chuck Kinder

### **Cultural exposure & metaphors**

*A woman in Saudi sees the man she loves this way:*

When he hauled the rope from the water—bent over, one knee on the ground, and his head turned at an odd angle, like a man inspecting the underside of a camel—the fabric of his shirt pulled taut against his back. Even from meters, she saw the muscles—a landscape of softly cut dunes, elegant, vast.

*Kingdom of Strangers*, Zoe Ferraris

*She sees movement this way:*

Her practical walk, her efficient movements from one part of the room to another, revealed the solid determination of a lone shrub in the desert.

*City of Veils*, Zoe Ferraris

*A timberwolf in WV sees morning:*

When he woke, he could see nothing through the fog, not even their own guidons, but then a molten sunrise spilled into the mountains as if tipped from a jug.

*And a colleague this way:*

Green’s face had a rich uneven surface, like marly limestone.

*Honey from the Lion*, Matthew Neil Null

### **Light and the perfect metaphor**

*Note: Rayburg is fictionalized Wheeling.*

The sky was the vivid color it ought to be and seldom was in Raysburg; the light was so intense it hurt his eyes. Then, looking out across the roof-tops, Sarsfield saw the heart-stopping gleam of the Ohio River; reflecting back the sky, it was blue as steel.

*Light in the Company of Women* by Keith Maillard

### **Influence Of Era**

*Clothing, Historical period, Family roles and mores, Economic influences*

### **Clothing & expectations**

The big Independence Day barbecue was one of the most popular annual events at the Rayburg Country Club . . . An unspoken protocol at the club requires that girls who were graduated from high school but not yet married—“debs” and “post-debs” Gloria supposed they’d be called in some larger city where girls actually came out—dress to the nines on the Fourth, which meant, no matter how hot and muggy the night, nylons. It was a barbaric custom, she thought; viewed from an anthropological point of view, it probably had to do with displaying oneself to the males who were potential mates, because, the moment one married, one could show up in shorts and a halter top.

*Gloria* by Keith Maillard

Note: Rayburg is fictionalized Wheeling

### **Economic Environment**

*The year is 1907. . .*

By October 11, “ready cash” had almost disappeared from the Kanawha Valley. No greenbacks in the pocket. At four-thirty in the afternoon of November 25, Mr. Tompkins left the company store . . . He walked the ties of the railroad that split what had once been the family farm and that ran from all the way down Kelly’s Creek, past the mansion, spurred out toward the river, crisscrossing the valley like a cat’s cradle of iron and soot, built through the center of the new coal town, another layer of civilization that had gradually replaced the fine farm of 1844 . . . The family swore ever after that the train came out of Ward Hollow without lights. Maybe that was part of the reconstruction of something that happened that was too harsh for the truth? Was there a second when he could have jumped free and didn’t? Did he freeze? Did he see the lights ahead of him in the mansion, or was he in a darkness of his own so deep that he saw nothing?

*Addie: A Memoir* by Mary Lee Settle

### **Another economic atmosphere**

In the summer of 1929, all the talk was of “get rich quick.” Even in our Appalachian town, stock tips were the subject of the day. Dairy farmers, potato growers, and moonshine makers passed on the latest inside tip. Buy as much as you can, 10 percent down, the rest on margin. Andrew Mellon is the head of the federal bank and he’s buying it. Herbert Hoover says we have nowhere to go but up.

*Sins of the Seventh Sister* by Huston Curtiss

### **Fish Out of Water: Isolation and loneliness can grow out of place.**

*Lonely black child in Clarksburg*

He looked around at the pink-rosed wallpaper. Everything was strange here, he decided. From the time when his cousin put him on the bus and he’d been left alone, sitting all by himself in the back of the bus watching the smooth West Virginia mountains already tinted by patches of red and brown and gold, he had had the feeling he sometimes had when walking on a strange street in a strange neighborhood . . . A feeling of vague, itchy fear. . . He wished he were back in his room at home in Pittsburgh.

*Beetlecreek* by William Demby

*Out of place at this conference*

“Hi!” I set my tray on the table. My purse slips from my shoulder and when I try to catch it, I knock over my glass of milk. “Uh oh! Sorry!” I smile and start mopping up the mess with napkins. . .

“I need to make a call,” one woman says and takes off. “Me, too,” says another. The other one just shakes her head and walks away. . .

My throat hurts. I will not cry. I will not. I will not.

“Who in the world let her into this conference? A couple of girls about my age are talking at the table behind me. My heart starts thumping, but I try to chew my hamburger.

“Just ignore her. It’s obvious she’s got developmental problems.”

“Fitting In,” *The Well Ain’t Dry Yet*, Belinda Anderson

### **The Third Element**

Something in setting mirrors or magnifies action or mood. Put these into your biggest scenes.

- Jackhammer outside window during argument.
- Scent of honeysuckle as couple kiss in garden.
- Fluorescent light blinking and buzzing during tense moment.

### **Can you spot the third element?**

Sometimes Jimbo felt he did not have hope in anything any longer and he was lonelier than ever before. He had been banished to live at his grandmother’s home in this southern West Virginia boondock coal-mining town and he was lonely in this his senior year as the small local high school’s only poet. It was Judy’s turn to call, goddamn it! . . . The lights from the coal tipples on the hill across the narrow valley

looked hazy through the wet glass a halo sparkling about each one. A freight train rumbled along the tracks through the valley, hooting its whistle as it approached the small coal town's first road crossing.  
*Silver Ghost* by Chuck Kinder

### **Race and Glass with a Third Element**

Mann Glass liked its janitors black, the Federal Housing Authority liked their vets white, and neither party made an effort to hide such things.

Ledford didn't take to such small thinking . . . In Ledford's office, the rotary fan hummed metallic. He shut it off. Noises had begun to get under his skin.

"You want off the swing shift?" Ledford ran his fingers along the desk's beveled edge.

"That would help," said Mack Wells. . .

"Mold maker it is . . . I'll speak to somebody in the 75 about you."

Mack shook his head no. The Local 75 would sooner deunionize than offer membership to a black man. "We could hold off on that," Mack said. Couldn't figure out if the white man before him was on the level.

*The Marrowbone Marble Company* by Glenn Taylor

### **Human Event Mirrored in Nature**

As I cut off the engine, the full impact of what I was going to have to do hit me like a Burlington Northern. How do you tell parents that their child is dead? Sure, they'd heard it through the grapevine, but I was the official word. I allowed myself a long sigh.

There were field swallows swooping near the Bullet. I was probably disturbing their family, too. Seemed to be my day for it.

*Cold Dish* by Craig Johnson

### **Remember to throw these ingredients into your caldron:**

- Locale
- Historical Era
- Time (weather, season, natural light)
- A character in conflict with the setting
- A "Third Element"

And you will harness the **power of place** to fully flesh out believable characters.

### **Writing suggestion:** Create a Fish-Out-of-Water Character

In what specific situation would your character (or you) feel uncomfortable? Write a brief scene set in this place.

- Use sensory details—what things do they notice that make them uneasy?
- Let one of the senses evoke an unpleasant memory given in the briefest of flashbacks (one or two sentences).
- Include your character's physical reaction to this discomfort. What is his or her body doing?
- Can you add a Third Element?

### **Partial bibliography**

*Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway

*Between the Lines: Master the Subtle Elements of Fiction Writing* by Jessica Page Morrell