

## Reality and the Waking Nightmare: Setting and Character in Horror Fiction

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Undoubtedly, you have had the experience of picking up a novel at the end of the day, telling yourself you'll read a chapter before going to sleep, and then ...

A surprised glance at the clock. It's five in the morning! Huh? What happened? You had taken no notice of time passing, not here in the real world. Instead, your time became the time of the novel, with perhaps a day depicted in 13 pages, or 11 months flashing by in three tightly constricted paragraphs. Nor while time passed on Earth were you thinking about such -here-and-now concerns as the cluster of mosquito bites on your forearm, that difficult choice between paying the car-repair bill or the pediatrician's child-repair bill, or your chances of winning the lottery.

As you read, your body occupied space in RealityLand--but you, the thinking, feeling, imagining, real you, were literally somewhere else. You were walking the suburban streets or city alleys, the forest paths or sandy beaches of a fictional world, as you shared the adventures and thoughts and emotions of that world's people, people you had come to know and to care about. The late John Gardner, a fine writer and teacher of writing, called fiction a "waking dream." When you sleep and dream, you experience the dream as real. And when you enter the waking dream of a well-written short story or novel, it is just as real.

Of course, you're reading this because you are interested in creating not waking dreams but waking nightmares. (Daymares is a term commonly used by some horror fans and a few writers, but I don't care for it: too cute!) You want to set spines a-shivering and souls -a-shaking--and sometimes stomachs a-spasming.

How do you do that?

Perhaps you expect me to answer my rhetorical question by saying something like, "Use your imagination. Dredge up the dreads in the corners and basement of the brain. Set free the imagination to go on a scythe-swinging, chain-saw slashing, Roto-Rooter rooting rampage--and you've got a horror story." Sorry. Imagination will give you an idea for a horror story, but you're a long way from having the waking nightmare that will envelop and encompass readers. It's reality's "What Is," not imagination's "What If?" that can transform horror premise into horror story. It takes reality, heaps of it, to create and populate a story realm that gives readers the frights royale. It takes settings that have the reality of Lincoln, Nebraska; Tucson, Arizona; or Grenada, Mississippi. It takes breathing, thinking, feeling, story folks who are as real as your Uncle Albert, who always gets drunk and sentimental at family reunions; as real as Mr. Schlechter, your high school English teacher who nearly flunked you for not handing in your term paper on "Washington Irving's Use of the Comma in Rip Van Winkle"; as real as your first puppy-love paramour or your last meaningful-relationship partner.

Good fiction, by definition, is credible. It is a lie that can be believed. Readers should be able to say of a contemporary or mainstream work of fiction, "Yes, given these circumstances, this could really happen." Readers should be able to say that of a western, romance, mystery, suspense, you-name-it work of fiction.

And readers must be able to say of a story of the supernatural, the paranormal, the occult, the horrific, the weird, the wild, and the off-the-wall, "Given these circumstances, this could really happen"--if they are to enter into and be held by a waking nightmare. The key to credibility in fright-fantasy fiction is setting and character. Your readers, after all, are already meeting you more than halfway, as they implicitly agree, "I want to be scared--and so I choose to willingly suspend disbelief in order to accept your imaginative premise. A manacle-rattling, saber-waving, or ice-cream cone licking ghost, a werewolf, were-panther, were-bear, -were-whatever, a 200-year-old transvestite vampire who needs root canal work on his fangs, okay, I'll go with that. I'll stretch my credulity that far. . . "

But that's it! With one such leap of imagination/acceptance of the incredible, readers have given you all you have a right to expect. That means everything else in your waking nightmare must be true to life so that readers are never saying, "Uh-uh, I'm being lied to."

What's "everything else"?

Everything else = setting and characters. (Okay, fiction has setting, characters, and plot! Correct. But if your principal characters respond to their problem/conflict situations in credible ways, plot happens almost automatically. Besides, I wasn't asked to do a chapter on plotting!)

How do you make settings real? Bring out the old chestnut: Write about what you know.

It's hardly a surprise that Robert McCammon's evocative and frightening-as-hell novel, *Mystery Walk*, is set in Dixie.

A graduate of the University of Alabama, living in Birmingham, Alabama, McCammon knows the territory.

J.N. Williamson often chooses Indianapolis, Indiana, as the setting for his fictive frights. Indianapolis born,

-Indianapolis-dwelling, sure to get all worked up over the Indy 500, Williamson knows Indianapolis and depicts it so you know it, too.

A Maine native, Stephen King has lived in Castle Rock and 'Salem's Lot—even if those towns have other names on the Auto Club map.

I've lived in Crete, Illinois, one of Chicago's south suburbs, for nearly twenty years. I slide behind the wheel of my Ford Escort, and within twenty minutes, I'm at Lincoln Mall, an under-one-roof shopping center that always smells of caramel corn; or Prairie State College, which in two years can provide you an associate's degree in English or air-conditioning repair; or Suburban Heights Medical Center, a modern facility with a large staff who are rightly termed professional health care workers. I can drive through Park Forest, a long-established middle-class planned community; or Ford Heights, as poverty-stricken and dangerous a ghetto as you shouldn't be able to find in our proverbial land of plenty; or Swiss Valley, where my poor compact car's ego dies as we pass driveways in which are parked Cadillacs, Mercedeses, and Jaguars.

You can understand, then, how I came up with a suburb called Park Estates for the setting of my horror novel, *The Strangers*. You know why my protagonist's wife signed up for a psychology class at Lincoln State College. You now have the inside info on the protagonist's daughter, struck by a car, winding up in the emergency room of the South Suburban Medical Center. Here's a brief passage from *The Strangers*:-

Two Park Estates Police Department officers and the paramedics arrived without sirens, their whirling lights fragmenting the neighborhood into coldly iridescent expressionist objects and angles: a bird-bath, jumping shadows cast by the limb of a tree, an advertising circular blowing across a lawn, the eyes of a prowling cat...

To write that, I employed zero imagination. Instead, I relied on memory and knowledge, and found words to let my readers see what I can see every day.

I hear a protest: "But I live in North Nowhere, Kansas, three churches, four taverns, and a trailer park. Our big cultural event is the annual VFW show when the guys dress up as women.... How's a fictionalized North Nowhere to grab and keep readers' interest?"

Sorry, I maintain that North Nowhere is interesting—if you set out to discover the interest. Maybe I'm not exactly a wild and crazy guy, but I note all sorts of "local color" events in Crete that grab me (and, fictionalized a bit, often wind up in my writing): The eclectic Old Town Restaurant adds something new to a menu that already offers Mexican burritos, Chinese egg rolls, Italian ravioli, and Greek dolmaches; Crete Hardware has a sign, "Thanks for your patronage for the past 30 years," not because the store is going out of business or anything, but just to say, "Thanks"; the high school's cheerleaders slow traffic at the Main-and-Exchange intersection (the town's only stoplight), by holding a "Sucker Day" to raise money for new uniforms.

Granted, reality-based settings are prosaic and commonplace. The very ordinariness of such settings works for you in two ways.

First, readers are familiar with the ordinary; they live there. Readers relate to the ordinary without your having to work at establishing that relationship. And thus readers will find your settings credible, as they must.

Then, if you have an ominous, thickly atmospheric setting, the phosphorescent-fog-shrouded swamp, the torture chamber of a crumbling castle, the burial ground of a Satanic church, you will be hard pressed to spring a surprise on your readers, who anticipate an awful or nasty occurrence in such a foreboding place.

But...

Summer. A few minutes past sunrise. Birchwood Lane, a quiet suburban street. Mailbox on the corner. A parkway torn up to repair a broken sewer file. A squirrel zips up a tree, fleeing a gray tomcat ...

Ho-hum, hum-drum ... until something sinuous, gleaming with slime, slithers from the mailbox's "In" slot ...

Or ...

The squirrel, safe on a limb, chatters defiance at the cat below ... and then, from the thick leaves behind the squirrel, a furry arm shoots out and a knobby-knuckled, four-fingered hand encircles the squirrel's neck ...

When the ordinary is invaded by the terrifying extraordinary, horror happens.

And thus it is the intrusion of the extraordinary, the appalling unusual into the lives of ordinary, credible, for-real characters that makes for compelling shock fiction.

A good horror story character is a fictional someone who is every bit as alive and as much a unique individual as anyone we really know really well out here in RealityLand. He must be for readers to care about him. If readers don't care, they will not give a rap about what the character does or what happens to him.

Your readers can like or dislike, love or hate a character--but you can never allow readers to feel only indifference toward him.

To illustrate this idea: Like you, I read the newspaper obituaries. I note the passing of 82-year-old Lorinda Strudel, for four decades the third-chair viola with the Peoria Semi-Symphonic, or the demise of Andre Shutdehans, inventor of the Pocket Fruit Juicer (no batteries needed)--and then I turn to the horoscope or sports sections.

I don't know these dead people.

They mean nothing to me.

But I can still remember, remember so well, how I felt when I learned Jack Benny had died. Jack Benny, the fictional comic persona, whose money vault inspired Scrooge McDuck, who drove that sputtering Maxwell, who could turn, "Well!" into a bust-your-gut laugh line, who was immortally 39 forever. Jack Benny, the man, the philanthropist, the concert violinist. Jack Benny, who visited my living room once a week on CBS, channel two, when the TV world was black and white and owned by very few networks.

And so, Jack Benny died, and there was that scraped-out feeling within me, that gone-forever, hurting emptiness that is personal loss. Jack Benny. I knew him better than I knew a number of my relatives: he was a nice man and a good man and he made me laugh.

The real world of your waking nightmare must be inhabited by characters your readers know.

And that means you had better know those characters. How well?

You've not only fathered and mothered these characters, you've been their closest confidant and their psychiatrist. There is nothing they've kept hidden from you, including things they might have been able to keep hidden from themselves.

That's how well you know them.

That's how well I know my important characters, anyway. My readers might never need to know if my protagonist prefers real mayo to Miracle Whip, if his first car was a cherry-red '67 Ford Mustang, if he likes Willie Nelson's songs but can't stand looking at the singer, if he had a pet collie named Lizzie when he was five, etc., but I have to know if I am to present this character as a three-dimensional, well-rounded human being, as I must.

In "And of Gideon," my novelette in the John MacLay-edited collection, *Nukes: Four Horror Writers on the Ultimate Horror*, my protagonist, Gideon, is a murderous psychopath. I wanted my readers to fear Gideon, to realize anew that such human aberrations do exist. I wanted my readers to pity him as well, this loser who'd been "programmed for pathology."

But more than that, I wanted readers to see Gideon as a credible human being, one who would elicit the wide range of emotional response that only real people can evoke.

Here is some of what I knew about Gideon and what I wanted readers to know:

...my father a drunk, had no love for my mother, another drunk, she none for him, and neither for me. (From) my early years, I cannot recall a single hug ... My father would beat me, not with the flat of his hand or a belt but with his fists. In kindergarten, I could not color within the lines, could not catch a basketball thrown to me from a distance of two feet, nor hang by my knees from the monkey bars ... I was always in trouble: for not coming to school on time, for not even trying on tests, for not doing this, for not doing that, always in trouble with the teachers, those despairing head-shakers, "Gideon, don't you want to learn? Don't you want to amount to anything? Don't you want to grow up and be somebody?"

Because your characters must have their own distinct personalities just as you are the One and Only You and Nobody Else, you cannot people your story with stereotypes. Your credible fiction is based on reality, and if you've ever been friends with a truck driver in RealityLand, you realize there's so much more to him than can be described

by "Truck Driver Type," more to the wife-beating drunk than "Wife-Beating Drunk Type"-more to you than "Writer Type." Stereotypes aren't permitted to have unique personalities as do real people; they are limited in thought, emotion, and action by the terribly confining mold which created them.

In an earlier era, we had such stereotypes, offensive generalizations thinly disguised as human beings, as the Irish cop with the whiskey nose and the "Faith and begorra" accent, and the shuffling African-American who, eyes-rolling, yelled, "Feets, do yo' stuff!" when confronted by "them haints." You can think of many others, I'm sure. I'm afraid horror fiction these days has its own stereotypes: The Ugly Duckling with the Paranormal Wild Talent; The Dedicated Psychic Researcher, so icily intellectual that he continues to take copious notes as Satan's personal imps disembowel him; The Catholic Priest Suffering Doubt; The Twins, One Good--the Other, Evil; The Yokel Preacher, who speaks in tongues and would quote more frequently from the Bible if it didn't have so many multi syllabic words; The Helpless Female, who, although she is the vice-president of a New York advertising agency (a nod to women's lib!), nonetheless is totally incapable of dealing with a supernatural menace. (That's a job for Our Hero, who looks exactly like Harrison Ford.)

Don't use any of them! (Not that I'm being dogmatic ...) Instead, apply that previously mentioned writing rule, Write about what you know. You know people. You have been a "practicing people" ever since you were born. That makes you a people expert!

You know what you think/how you feel when someone you counted on lets you down, so you know what your story character thinks/feels when someone he's counted on lets him down. You have experienced disappointment, joy, hate, love, and so you can create credible characters who experience disappointment, joy, hate, love. You've been embarrassed, you've felt pride, you have felt everything a human being can feel.

Your characters, animated by your knowledge of self, others, and the world, given your breath of reality as vital force, placed in authenticity-imbued settings, will come to life on the page.

They will hold out a welcoming hand ... and yank readers into your waking nightmare ... and keep them there!