



## Setting the Scene

By  
Michael McCollum

*"You may have seen many a quaint craft in your day, for aught I know; - square-toed luggers; mountainous Japanese junks; butter-box galliots, and what not; but take my word for it, you never saw such a rare old craft as this same rare old Pequod. She was a ship of the old school, rather small if anything; with an old-fashioned claw-footed look about her. Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull's complexion was darkened like a French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bows looked bearded. Her masts- cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale- her masts stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne. Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled, like the pilgrim-worshipped flag-stone in Canterbury Cathedral where Becket bled. But to all these her old antiquities, were added new and marvellous features, pertaining to the wild business that for more than half a century she had followed. Old Captain Peleg, many years her chief-mate, before he commanded another vessel of his own, and now a retired seaman, and one of the principal owners of the Pequod, - this old Peleg, during the term of his chief-mateship, had built upon her original grotesqueness, and inlaid it, all over, with a quaintness both of material and device, unmatched by anything except it be Thorkill-Hake's carved buckler or bedstead. She was apparelled like any barbaric Ethiopian emperor, his neck heavy with pendants of polished ivory. She was a thing of trophies. A cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies. All round, her unpanelled, open bulwarks were garnished like one continuous jaw, with the long sharp teeth of the sperm whale, inserted there for pins, to fasten her old hempen thews and tendons to. Those thews ran not through base blocks of land wood, but deftly travelled over sheaves of sea-ivory. Scorning a turnstile wheel at her reverend helm, she sported there a tiller; and that tiller was in one mass, curiously carved from the long narrow lower jaw of her hereditary foe. The helmsman who steered that tiller in a tempest, felt like the Tartar, when he holds back his fiery steed by clutching its jaw. A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy! All noble things are touched with that.*

– Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, 1851.

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The above, overly long description, is from Chapter 16 of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville's immortal classic of morality and the sea. In this excerpt, Melville is describing *Pequod*, the ship that will be the center of the action for the rest of the book. In effect, he is setting a scene to which he will return repeatedly over the next several hundred pages. Like Captain Ahab and the Great White Whale, *Pequod* is one of the major characters in the novel, and a vital element in its climax. By the time the book ends, we have come to know that little whaling ship as well as Ishmael and Queequeg, Starbuck and Stubb. The pivotal role played by the whaling ship in the hunt for Moby Dick more than justifies the expenditure of 406 words of purple prose to describe its physical appearance, history, and character.

Of course, that is not why Melville did it. He engaged in this orgy of description because that was the way 19<sup>th</sup> Century novelists wrote. They were nothing if not verbose. Melville was more verbose than most. In *Moby Dick*, it takes him until Chapter 16 just to introduce the ship, and we don't sight Captain Ahab in the flesh for several more chapters. The pace of Melville's novel is one of the reasons why so many generations of school children have such vivid memories of reading *Moby Dick*. Not pleasant memories, mind you, but vivid!

There are numerous reasons why 19<sup>th</sup> Century readers put up with this slow pace. For one thing, they didn't get out much. Before our own century, most people lived their entire lives without venturing fifty miles from where they were born. Since they lacked automobiles and superhighways to abet their wanderlust, people were hungry for information about faraway places they would never see – such as the small town on the other side of the mountain. They did not require a car chase or a shootout every few dozen pages. They would happily spend three chapters reading the description of the hero's hometown merely because it was different from their own.

The other modern convenience they lacked was television. Consequently, their opportunities for entertainment were limited, especially on the farms. Farmers could listen to the tales of the occasional traveling peddler, see a play every decade or so, or read from the meager stock of books that circulated through the countryside – assuming, of course, that they could read at all. The limited options for diversion led to a number of interesting sociological developments. One of these was the “penny dreadful,” a phenomenon of the latter decades of the century. These were novel-length stories of the Old West. Their name came from the low price and the level of literary standard to which they aspired.

Another result of the lack of entertainment options was the fact that most 19<sup>th</sup> Century readers were in no hurry to finish the book. Reading it was just too much of a diversion from milking the cows. Thus, the readers reveled in the surplus of detail that makes modern audiences squirm, and exulted at the stilted phraseology and formalisms that were such a departure from the crude language of their everyday life. They were also more unselfconsciously religious than modern society; and therefore, more receptive to the heavy-handed moralizing with which Melville's work fairly drips.

Yet, despite the idiosyncrasies of his writing style, Herman Melville was doing something important when he wrote the description of *Pequod* that begins this article. He

was erecting the stage on which his actors would perform their parts for the remainder of his tale. He was setting the scene.

### The Importance of Setting the Scene

So what precisely is a scene? A scene is the smallest unit that actually carries the story. There are smaller units (letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs), but these are merely building blocks that go into constructing the scene. The scene itself is the basic unit of plot. A scene typically involves viewing the action from a single point, say through the eyes of a particular character (viewpoint character approach) or from a location somewhere outside the action (author omniscient approach). Scenes are usually set off from other scenes by a blank line or one that has a typographical symbol to indicate a break. I often use a pound symbol (#) centered on a blank line to denote a break in the action. In this way, if a scene breaks at the bottom of a page, the readers will not be confused when they begin reading the following scene at the top of the next page. Individual scenes are often assembled in packets of two, three, or four to form a chapter, and of course, chapters are assembled into books.

I like to think of a scene as a mini-story. It has a beginning, middle, and an end. Within a scene, I attempt to move the story forward such that at the end I get to a mini-climax. These are not like the major climax that is the pinnacle of the plot, the thing toward which the entire book is aimed. Rather, they are places in the text where I turn up the persuasion a few degrees in order to interest the reader to come back to that particular plot thread later. I do this by establishing a small mystery, or achieving a particular tone, or hinting at things to come.

What does it mean to “set the scene?” Setting the scene involves orienting the reader to the characters’ surroundings, situation, and mood in order that they (the readers, not the characters) can follow the subsequent twists and turns of the plot. Because you have to reorient the reader whenever you transition from one scene to another, a typical book is a recurring series of scene-setting exercises. Typically, you use the first few sentences of any scene to perform this necessary chore. This is not to say that you cannot continue adding descriptive elements throughout. However, unless you take the time to orient the readers each time you change your focus, they are likely to become disoriented and irritated with you (more on that later).

It is usual to set the scene at the beginning, but exceptions to this rule are not uncommon. For instance, in Chapter 16 of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville puts the description of *Pequod* in the middle of the chapter. Melville can get away with this because he has set the scene dozens (if not hundreds) of times by the time we get to *Pequod*. In the quoted passage, Ishmael is going aboard the whaler to sign on as a member of the crew. Melville is not so much using the occasion to set the scene for that particular chapter as he is for the rest of the book. Nor is he merely giving readers a physical description of the ship. He is also imparting something of its history and ambience. That is because scene setting involves more than mere description. You can also use scene setting to tell the reader how the character feels or recount the events that have taken place since the previous scene ended. When you set the scene, you put the reader in the appropriate mood for what is to come next. In effect, setting the scene is

often the necessary precursor for breaking into the reader's skull and taking over his or her thought processes.

We discussed have discussed this aspect of writing previously in "Anchors in Reality". Writers – especially writers of fiction – are in the business of "brainwashing" their readers. They strive to take remote control of a reader's central nervous system and use it for their own nefarious purposes. In effect, writers try to switch off a reader's eyes and ears and replace the normal sensory inputs with imaginary images. The fact that these apparitions exist only in the confines of the reader's brain is not as big an obstacle as one might imagine. For if you think about it, all senses are merely nerve impulses inside our brains, and a "false" input is processed in essentially the same way as one that has entered via the optic or aural nerves.

This is not to say that the sensory inputs produced by reading are the same intensity as those generated by actually seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or smelling. It is a powerful writer who can generate sensations within readers that are more than pale imitations of a real life. That is because the information we writers put into our books (Herman Melville notwithstanding) is but a tiny fraction of the information that flows each second through the natural sensory pathways. Even so, if we are sufficiently skilled in our craft, we can have a surprisingly strong effect on our victims... er, readers. Anyone who has found tears welling up in their eyes or their adrenaline pumping after reading a particularly effective passage knows what I mean.

However, to generate this emotional response, we writers must provide the readers' brains with the raw material with which to work. We have at least to *suggest* the thoughts we want the reader to be thinking. Like the Western hero who wedges a tree limb beneath a boulder on a mountainside and then pushes down with all of his weight, we are attempting to start an avalanche by dislodging a single stone. To get the rockslide started in our readers' imaginations, we have to hit the entire unstable mass at just the right place. However, once we have accomplished this difficult feat – once we have set the thought processes in motion – imagination will do the rest. For human beings can no more stop their imaginations from working than they can fly without mechanical aid. The tiniest touch in the right spot will result in a fully realized vision appearing as if by magic inside the reader's head.

Effectively, we sketch the outlines of a picture with our words and the reader fills in the details. Interestingly, these details are different for every reader. This is one of the strengths of writing over other techniques of communication. In fact, sensations triggered by written language are often stronger than those delivered via the flickering images projected in the darkened auditoriums of movie theaters. That is because movie viewing is a passive activity. We sit there and watch the screen, soaking up the visual and auditory input that emanates from the film. Everything we need to know comes to us from outside our bodies. In writing, the scene is merely suggested by the words, and the readers fill in the gaps.

As noted above, setting the scene involves far more than merely describing the appearance of the hero's surroundings. It involves establishing a mood, an expectation, and an empathic feeling for the characters in the story. Scene setting has another, more utilitarian purpose. Since it orients the reader to the new and unknown surroundings into which the writer is about to thrust them, scene setting is essential if we are to prevent disorientation and irritation on the part of readers. One of the most basic human drives is

the desire to keep one's bearings. Just as inadequate information can cause us to lose our way in a strange city, lack of adequate preparation in a piece of fiction can cause readers to become lost.

As we all know, everyone hates being lost!

### The Fear of Becoming Lost

I remember the moment as though it were yesterday. It happened around noon on what I believe was a Saturday in the summer of 1950. I was approaching my fourth birthday, and as far as I can remember, life had been pretty good up until that point. I remember that I was happy that morning. I was shopping with my mother in downtown Phoenix. We had just left a store and were walking along a bustling sidewalk near 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue and Washington, about where the old Woolworth's and Korrick's once stood. Feeling especially grownup because I was downtown, I surged ahead of my mother as I skipped among the moving knots of giant people. I remember approaching an intersection just as the light turned red.

I knew enough to stop, of course. My father had made sure of that, reinforcing the knowledge more than once with his open palm against my bottom. I reached the intersection, stopped with the others, and then looked around for my mother. *She was nowhere to be seen!* It was as though a giant pin had pricked the bubble of my universe. In that instant, my euphoria turned to panic. The Rock of Gibraltar of my existence had suddenly vanished without a trace, and I was lost forever!

"Forever" probably only lasted about 60 seconds. I remember bursting into tears, causing a man to stoop down and ask me, "Are you lost, little boy?" Before I could answer, a redheaded woman came out of the crowd and grabbed me by my hand. Somehow, my mother had found me in all that vast emptiness. Suddenly, the universe was right again. Or rather, it was almost right. It never really returned to normal because I never lost the memory of that moment of terror. Even five decades later, I still occasionally wake at night in a cold sweat with that same fear in my throat.

Before anyone thinks to call a psychiatrist, let me assure you that I am normal in most respects (other than the compulsion that causes me to pursue a career as a writer). No, that first taste of real fear is a memorable moment in each of our lives. We have all experienced similar events, and that fear is stamped indelibly on our souls. I am willing to bet that you can tell me where you were when the same thing happened to you.

So why do human beings react so violently to being lost? I maintain that the culprit is our innate human longing for predictability. We are happy when we can predict with fair certainty what will happen next. In fact, studies of prisoners-of-war and others have proven that it is not the treatment by their captors that is important. Rather, it is the predictability of that treatment that sustains them. I believe it is Admiral James Stockdale who tells the story of being beaten every day in a North Vietnamese prison. He got used to it, even to the point where he anticipated it. It was a constant in his life. The only day he was truly afraid was the one when his jailers failed to show up on time for his beating.

It is the sudden lack of a predictable future that so frightens the prisoner. So it was with me that summer day just before my fourth birthday. Deep in my subconscious there still lives that pre-school Michael McCollum, and he still wants his mommy to be



there when he turns around to look. My mother is 79 this year, and I suppose I know intellectually that she will not always be there (she certainly tells me that enough!). Even so, I am no more ready emotionally to face the prospect of her loss than I was in 1950. None of us is ever prepared *emotionally* for the loss of a loved one.

This then brings us back to the reason why setting the scene is so important in a story or novel. The readers, too, want things to be predictable, and the first requirement for predicting where you are going is knowing your current location! Remember that you are never lost in a physical sense – after all, you are always somewhere called “here.” You become lost when you cannot place yourself mentally with respect to where you want to be. So it is with readers. If you have not adequately set the scene for them, then they become disoriented. They get lost somewhere in your prose and all they really know is that they want their mommy. Unfortunately, you (the writer) are not she!

### A Typical Scene

*Imagine that it is 65 million years ago. You are standing on a low hill covered with lush green ferns on what will someday be the coast of Yucatan. The sun is just rising out of the sea, casting a broad golden band across the azure water. At the base of the hill is a small lake where a Brontosaurus feeds. It raises its head to look around, its jaws dripping seaweed and ochre lake-bottom mud. The mist is rising from the lake, its translucent tendrils portending yet another humid day in a decidedly tropical era. From somewhere behind you, there comes the distant roar of a Tyrannosaurus Rex as it hunts for its breakfast. A soft wind brings the smell of the yellow blossoms that dot the dark-green ground cover, and a whiff of animal several days dead.*

*In other words, it is a typical day in the 160-million-year-long era of the dinosaurs. Except it isn't a typical day at all.*

*It is the last day —*

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I use the foregoing paragraphs as the introduction to a lecture I give on asteroids and comets. The talk, “*The Sky is Falling! – Asteroids, Comets and The Total Extinction of Life on Earth*” is popular with audiences. In it, I discuss the 6-mile diameter rock that once fell from the sky and killed all the dinosaurs. The violence of that impact was literally unimaginable. Estimated at anywhere between 500 million and 1 billion megatons, the asteroid strike splashed magma into orbit, set fire to every forest in the Western Hemisphere, and blackened the skies for years. When it was all over, the dinosaurs were all dead – leaving their ecological niche open for the small rat-like mammals that survived.

When setting the scene for my talk, I attempt to give my listeners a visual image of the moments just before impact. By appealing to their various senses, I let them imagine the scene. I show them the glittering band of golden light that washes across the azure water of the early morning sea. I introduce them to the green, fern-covered hills and the white mist that rises slowly from the waters of the lake. I let them experience the heavy humidity of the air and the hunting call of a two-legged eating machine called *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.

My purpose in reciting this fictional description is to get my listeners into a receptive mood for the rest of my lecture. If I do my job properly, by the end of the passage (and a subsequent one that describes the destruction), they have a picture behind their eyeballs of the fireball as it buries itself fifty kilometers deep in the sea bed. They see it explode skyward again and watch the mile-high tidal wave as it washes ashore to submerge the blackened stumps and carcasses that moments before had been living plants and animals.

I transport my listeners back in time some 65 million years and leave them with the impression that truly momentous events are about to take place before their eyes (“... it was the last day!”). By getting them to visualize the scene, and then going on to describe the destruction that occurred when the asteroid struck, I have them involved on a completely different level than if I were merely to state, “An asteroid struck Yucatan 65 million years ago and killed all of the dinosaurs.” Suddenly, they can see the blinding flash, hear the sonic boom, smell the charred flesh and burning vegetation. They can see the mile-high wave as it grows ominously from a dark line on the horizon. They watch it blossom into a moving wall of water that washes over them. They watch it again as it recedes hours later, dragging the burned remains of entire forests out to sea.

To merely state that an asteroid killed the dinosaurs would have them suppressing yawns and possibly thinking, “So what?” By describing the events in words that trigger their imagination, I transform a tepid response into a sharp gasp, and an exclamation of, “Oh, my God! How terrible!”

### Paying Attention to the Senses while Setting A Scene

Because of the way the human brain is put together, a writer is more effective appealing to the readers’ senses and emotions than by attempting to influence the more logical portions of the brain. That is because the senses and emotions are hardwired into the brain’s most primitive part, while logical thought is a late addition to our cognitive repertoire. Because of this primitive/modern dichotomy, hijacking a human mind from its rightful owner is relatively easy if you just supply the proper stimulus. All you need do to put the readers into a trance-like state is to provide their five physical senses with false data in the form of an evocative bit of prose. If you are able to provoke a strong enough emotional response with your words, then the reader’s mind will do the rest. It cannot help itself. That is the way it is built.

To make sure that we all understand what it is that I am talking about when I refer to the five physical senses, let’s review them:

#### 1 - Sight

Sight is the dominant sense in human beings. Our eyes scan imperceptibly back and forth, recording the changes in light intensity falling on the light sensors in our retinas. We have two types of such sensors. One, the rods, perceive in black-and-white, while the other type, the cones, are sensitive to color. The rods and cones convert light energy to electrical impulses that are sent to the brain, where they are unscrambled into a meaningful picture of our surroundings.

## 2 – Sound

Sound is the second most dominant sense in human beings. Variations in air pressure reach us and are focused by those oddly shaped flaps of skin we call ears. The sound waves enter the small hole in the ears, where they bounce off a taut membrane called the eardrum. The eardrum vibrates, causing four oddly shaped bones to vibrate, which in turn transmits pressure impulses into a small spiral-shaped tube in which grow thousands of tiny hairs of differing lengths. The hairs resonate at particular frequencies, “tickling” the attached nerves, sending electrical impulses to the brain.

## 3 – Smell

Smell is the sense produced when chemicals in the air interact with sensors in our nasal cavities, which in turn cause electrical impulses to be sent to the brain. The pattern of these impulses determines what an object “smells” like. Our human sense of smell is very weak compared to that of dogs and cats, or just about any other animal on Earth. Even so, we manage to get along with our handicap.

## 4 – Taste

Taste involves only four different types of sensors in the tongue: sour, sweet, salt and bitter. When various chemicals touch our tongues, they trigger impulses to the brain. The degree to which these four kinds of sensors are affected determines what the substance ‘tastes’ like. The sense of taste works closely with the sense of smell. The sensors for both are located in the interconnected mouth and nasal cavities. In fact, 80-90% of taste is actually smell.

## 5 – Touch

Touch involves receptors in the skin that react when something brushes across them. The sensors trigger electrical impulses that are sent to the brain. The small hairs that cover our bodies act as extensions of the underlying sensors, allowing us to sense even the weakest puff of breeze.

Though we can describe the mechanisms by which the five senses operate, most writers tend to forget about the three lesser senses – smell, taste, and touch. That is because we tend to ignore them in real life, too, favoring instead the major senses of sight and hearing. It is small wonder that many writers (myself included) tend to shortchange smell, taste, and touch. Moreover, while we will usually make a passing reference to noises and sounds in our scenes, the overwhelming attention is to the sense of sight. That is because reading is strictly a visual activity. Since the reader views the story through the eyes of a viewpoint character, the first act in setting most scenes is to describe what the viewpoint character is seeing. Take for example the following passage from “Man of the Renaissance,” one of the short stories in *Gridlock and Other Stories*:

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*Darol Beckwith guided his steed over rocky ground, carefully threading his way among scrubby Palo Verde trees and yellow stands of cholla cactus until he gained the summit of the small hill that had been his goal for the previous quarter-hour. Once on top, he reined in his horse. Behind him, two heavily laden pack mules stopped in their tracks, each taking quick advantage of the opportunity to crop at the few patches of wiry, yellow grass that poked through the carpet of fist-sized stones.*

Beckwith removed his salt-stained hat and wiped perspiration from his forehead onto the sleeve of his threadbare, cotton shirt. Around him, the yellows, greens, and browns of the Great Sonoran Desert stretched as far as the eye could see. Replacing his hat, he rummaged in his saddlebags for his pipe, lighter, and tobacco pouch. He soon had the pipe alight and the other implements repacked. Only then did he lean forward to retrieve a pair of 'tronic binoculars from their case. He pointed them at the brown pillar of dust that rose lazily into the cloudless blue sky halfway to the horizon. The dust cloud leaped forward at the press of a control, resolving itself into a column of mounted men. He studied the image for several minutes before restoring the glasses to their protective sheath.

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Although I have the viewpoint character in the foregoing example “wiping the perspiration from his forehead” and lighting a pipe, the only sense really engaged is what Beckwith sees. Think of how much more effective it might have been if I had Beckwith “smell the slightly acrid odor of mesquite,” feel the “hot sun beating down on the crown of his head as he removed his hat,” or feel “clammy beneath the threadbare cotton shirt.” What if I had talked about the “cool beneath the perspiration stain at each armpit” or had him feel “the bitter bite of tobacco as he exhaled a blue cloud of smoke from his mouth.” I think you get the idea. By telling the reader the viewpoint character’s physical sensations as well as what he sees in front of him, I would have provided the reader’s subconscious with more physical clues and thereby transported him more easily into the story.

The most recent piece of short fiction I have written is “Lysenko’s Legacy,” for which I have drawn impressions from seven trips to Russia. In this short story, I go out of my way to set the scene with sensory descriptions other than visual.

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*“The days are too short in December,” thought Vladimir Ivanovich Petrov as he hurried downhill along Tverskaya Street past Pushkin Square. As he did so, he breathed in the cold winter air of Moscow, which was characteristically heavy with the smell of automobile exhaust fumes and impending snow. His fur shapka was jammed tightly onto his bald head, but with the ear covers still tied up such that his naked earlobes were exposed to the frigid atmosphere. He did not need to see the twin flaps of flesh to know that they were the same bright shade of pink as his cheeks and nose; the needles pricking at his features from the inside told him that. As last night’s covering of snow crunched beneath his winter*

*boots, he burrowed more deeply into the warmth of the mink-lined collar of his coat and lengthened his stride to speed his progress toward the glowing red stars that were just coming into view down the street.*

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The beginning of “Lysenko’s Legacy” doesn’t exactly ignore the sense of sight, but it relegates it to a secondary position in the pantheon of senses. The passage concentrates instead on the other senses such as smell, hearing, and touch. The message is “It’s cold, people!” The cold is portrayed by the “smell of impending snow,” the “needles pricking at his features from the inside,” the “snow crunched beneath his winter boots,” and the “burrowed more deeply into the warmth of the mink-lined collar.”

By peppering the story with reminders of the Russian winter, I hope to eventually make you (the reader) feel cold, whatever the temperature of your surroundings. The reason I can give you a chill, even while you are sweating, is because your mind is tricked into responding to the mental images of a cold morning in Moscow rather than the actual signals your brain is receiving from the various temperature receptors around your body. The effect is not as strong as the real thing, but it is nonetheless real. I learned this when I went to see *Dr. Zhivago* in Florida at the beginning of a typically humid summer in the early 1970s. The theater was comfortable, but not cold, yet I found myself shivering during the Moscow snow scenes and in the countryside when Zhivago and Lara finally get together at the *dacha*, or country house. I was even a little cold after leaving the theater.

Talk about mind over matter!

### Don’t Forget the Sixth Sense!

Even when a writer trains himself or herself to exercise the readers’ full panoply of senses while setting the scene, there is one sense that is invaluable to setting mood that is often overlooked. In addition to the five physical senses, human beings have one non-physical sense. That is our “sixth sense,” or intuition. Often intuition plays us false, such as when an airline passenger feels foreboding before a flight that turns out uneventful. However, whether a real sense or merely a false feeling, intuition is a “sense” that can be put to good use by the writer who needs to keep the plot moving. Of course, one needs to be careful not to descend into false tension – “Little did Johnnie know what terrors awaited within...” – when using this technique. However, highlighting the heroine’s uneasiness at having to enter a darkened office building at midnight is a good way to get the reader in the mood for something bad to happen. The technical term for this is “foretelling,” where you subtly alert the reader to the fact that something important is imminent.

### Conclusion

By appealing to the senses, you can make a reader forget that he or she is sitting in a favorite easy chair, reading a book. First, you orient them to the upcoming scene, placing the various elements of your story into the proper perspective. Then, slowly, imperceptibly, you crawl into the reader’s brain and take over. As they get deeper into

the story, they lose perception of their surroundings and are transferred to the fictional world you have created. Having transported them to your own Never-Never Land, you must then strive to keep them there. Whenever you change scenes, you must orient them to the new circumstances, and do it in a way that will not disturb their state of trance. If you fail to set the scene or do so in a clumsy manner, then they will awaken and you will have lost them, possibly forever.

Although it is one of the more “mechanical” aspects of writing, scene setting should never be handled mechanically. It is not sufficient merely to describe the jungle in your latest *Tarzan* pastiche. If you are going to affect the reader to the point where they will be interested in your story, you have to make them *experience* the jungle. You have to make them *feel* the humid heat, *hear* the roar of the nearby lion, get a *whiff* of the fetid odor of decay and corruption. You have to impart to them the feel of sharp thorns against bare feet, and make them feel the maddening itch that comes from having beads of sweat roll down a naked back. You have to encourage them to recoil at the sudden touch of a gossamer spider web against their face, and shiver in fear at the long, sinister shape of the python as it slithers into view.

Only then can they know what it is like to chop their way through a tangle of underbrush and thorn encrusted vines, a tangle that exists nowhere but inside their imagination. That is the reason why it is so important to take care in setting your scenes. You do not want the readers to wake up until they reach those magic words, “THE END.”

If you can hold their attention until then, you deserve to call yourself a writer.

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The End

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Three hundred years after humanity made its deal with the Life Probe to search out the secret of faster-than-light travel, the descendants of the original expedition return to Earth in a starship. They find a world that has forgotten the ancient contract. No matter. The colonists have overcome far greater obstacles in their single-minded drive to redeem a promise made before any of them were born...

### **3. Antares Dawn - US\$5.00**

When the super giant star Antares exploded in 2512, the human colony on Alta found their pathway to the stars gone, isolating them from the rest of human space for more than a century. Then one day, a powerful warship materialized in the system without warning. Alarmed by the sudden appearance of such a behemoth, the commanders of the Altan Space Navy dispatched one of their most powerful ships to investigate. What ASNS Discovery finds when they finally catch the intruder is a battered hulk manned by a dead crew.

That is disturbing news for the Altans. For the dead battleship could easily have defeated the whole of the Altan navy. If it could find Alta, then so could whomever it was that beat it. Something must be done...

### **4. Antares Passage - US\$5.00**

After more than a century of isolation, the paths between stars are again open and the people of Alta in contact with their sister colony on Sandar. The opening of the foldlines has not been the unmixed blessing the Altans had supposed, however.

For the reestablishment of interstellar travel has brought with it news of the Ryall, an alien race whose goal is the extermination of humanity. If they are to avoid defeat at the hands of the aliens, Alta must seek out the military might of Earth. However, to reach Earth requires them to dive into the heart of a supernova.

### **5. Antares Victory – First Time in Print – US\$7.00**

After a century of warfare, humanity finally discovered the Achilles heel of the Ryall, their xenophobic reptilian foe. Spica – Alpha Virginis – is the key star system in enemy space. It is the hub through which all Ryall starships must pass, and if humanity can only capture and hold it, they will strangle the Ryall war machine and end their threat to humankind forever.

It all seemed so simple in the computer simulations: Advance by stealth, attack without warning, strike swiftly with overwhelming power. Unfortunately, conquering the Ryall proves the easy part. With the key to victory in hand, Richard and Bethany Drake discover that they must also conquer human nature if they are to bring down the alien foe ...

### **6. Thunderstrike! - US\$6.00**

The new comet found near Jupiter was an incredible treasure trove of water ice and rock. Immediately, the water-starved Luna Republic and the Sierra Corporation, a leader in asteroid mining, were squabbling over rights to the new resource. However, all thoughts of profit and fame were abandoned when a scientific expedition discovered that the comet's trajectory placed it on a collision course with Earth!

As scientists struggled to find a way to alter the comet's course, world leaders tried desperately to restrain mass panic, and two lovers quarreled over the direction the comet was to take, all Earth waited to see if humanity had any future at all...



## 7. The Clouds of Saturn - US\$5.00

When the sun flared out of control and boiled Earth's oceans, humanity took refuge in a place that few would have predicted. In the greatest migration in history, the entire human race took up residence among the towering clouds and deep clear-air canyons of Saturn's upper atmosphere. Having survived the traitor star, they returned to the all-too-human tradition of internecine strife. The new city-states of Saturn began to resemble those of ancient Greece, with one group of cities taking on the role of militaristic Sparta...

## 8. The Sails of Tau Ceti – US\$5.00

*Starhopper* was humanity's first interstellar probe. It was designed to search for intelligent life beyond the solar system. Before it could be launched, however, intelligent life found Earth. The discovery of an alien light sail inbound at the edge of the solar system generated considerable excitement in scientific circles. With the interstellar probe nearing completion, it gave scientists the opportunity to launch an expedition to meet the aliens while they were still in space. The second surprise came when *Starhopper's* crew boarded the alien craft. They found beings that, despite their alien physiques, were surprisingly compatible with humans. That two species so similar could have evolved a mere twelve light years from one another seemed too coincidental to be true.

One human being soon discovered that coincidence had nothing to do with it...

## 9. Gibraltar Earth – First Time in Print — \$6.00

It is the 24th Century and humanity is just gaining a toehold out among the stars. Stellar Survey Starship *Magellan* is exploring the New Eden system when they encounter two alien spacecraft. When the encounter is over, the score is one human scout ship and one alien aggressor destroyed. In exploring the wreck of the second alien ship, spacers discover a survivor with a fantastic story.

The alien comes from a million-star Galactic Empire ruled over by a mysterious race known as the Broa. These overlords are the masters of this region of the galaxy and they allow no competitors. This news presents Earth's rulers with a problem. As yet, the Broa are ignorant of humanity's existence. Does the human race retreat to its one small world, quaking in fear that the Broa will eventually discover Earth? Or do they take a more aggressive approach?

Whatever they do, they must do it quickly! Time is running out for the human race...

## 10. Gibraltar Sun – First Time in Print — \$7.00

The expedition to the Crab Nebula has returned to Earth and the news is not good. Out among the stars, a million systems have fallen under Broan domination, the fate awaiting Earth should the Broa ever learn of its existence. The problem would seem to allow but three responses: submit meekly to slavery, fight and risk extermination, or hide and pray the Broa remain ignorant of humankind for at least a few more generations. Are the hairless apes of Sol III finally faced with a problem for which there is no acceptable solution?

While politicians argue, Mark Rykand and Lisa Arden risk everything to spy on the all-powerful enemy that is beginning to wonder at the appearance of mysterious bipeds in their midst...

### **11. Gibraltar Stars – First Time in Print — <sup>US</sup>\$7.50**

The great debate is over. The human race has rejected the idea of pulling back from the stars and hiding on Earth in the hope the Broa will overlook us for a few more generations. Instead, the World Parliament, by a vote of 60-40, has decided to throw the dice and go for a win. Parliament Hall resounds with brave words as members declare victory inevitable.

With the balance of forces a million to one against *Homo sapiens Terra*, those who must turn patriotic speeches into hard-won reality have their work cut out for them. They must expand humanity's foothold in Broan space while contending with a supply line that is 7000 light-years long.

If the sheer magnitude of the task isn't enough, Mark and Lisa Rykand discover they are in a race against two very different antagonists. The Broa are beginning to wonder at the strange two-legged interlopers in their domain; while back on Earth, those who lost the great debate are eager to try again.

Whoever wins the race will determine the future of the human species... or, indeed, whether it has one.

### **12. Gridlock and Other Stories - US\$5.00**

Where would you visit if you invented a time machine, but could not steer it? What if you went out for a six-pack of beer and never came back? If you think nuclear power is dangerous, you should try black holes as an energy source — or even scarier, solar energy! Visit the many worlds of Michael McCollum. I guarantee that you will be surprised!

## Non-Fiction Books

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### **13. The Art of Writing, Volume I - US\$10.00**

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Writing Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 72,000 words. Now you can learn about character, conflict, plot, pacing, dialogue, and the business of writing, all in one document.

### **14. The Art of Writing, Volume II - US\$10.00**

This collection covers the Art of Writing articles published during 1998. The book is 62,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

### **15. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume I - US\$10.00**

Have you missed any of the articles in the Art of Science Fiction Series? No problem. The first sixteen articles (October, 1996-December, 1997) have been collected into a book-length work of more than 70,000 words. Learn about science fiction techniques and technologies, including starships, time machines, and rocket propulsion. Tour the Solar System and learn astronomy from the science fiction writer's viewpoint. We don't care where the stars appear in the terrestrial sky. We want to know their true positions in space. If you are planning to write an interstellar romance, brushing up on your astronomy may be just what you need.

### **16. The Art of Science Fiction, Volume II - US\$10.00**

This collection covers the *Art of Science Fiction* articles published during 1998. The book is 67,000 words in length and builds on the foundation of knowledge provided by Volume I of this popular series.

### **17. The Astrogator's Handbook – Expanded Edition and Deluxe Editions**

The Astrogator's Handbook has been very popular on Sci Fi – Arizona. The handbook has star maps that show science fiction writers where the stars are located in space rather than where they are located in Earth's sky. Because of the popularity, we are expanding the handbook to show nine times as much space and more than ten times as many stars. The expanded handbook includes the positions of 3500 stars as viewed from Polaris on 63 maps. This handbook is a useful resource for every science fiction writer and will appeal to anyone with an interest in astronomy.