

The Mythical Nature of Real Places

Exhausted, I drove alone late one night, heading north on Connecticut's Interstate 95. I had already driven from western New York to Queens for a job interview, then endured, once I left the city at rush-hour, the nastiest traffic jam of my life. But that was behind me as I cruised toward Massachusetts, where I would spend the night. The passing lights and dashed lines of the highway became hypnotic, and my brain shut down. As I passed through Providence, Rhode Island, vivid memories flooded my mind. I was transported back in time, the interstate sweeping me past not just buildings, streets and lights, but parts of my own life. I had lived there several years ago—a place that was perhaps more special than realized, a place that had in fact become mythical.

The mythical nature of real places lies inside us. Like all dualities, they vibrate back and forth—the concrete with the imagined, the earth with the spirit—their boundaries impossible to separate.

These places can be where we once lived or had something significant happen to us, or they can be areas we come upon for the first time. The important aspect is the connection that's created within us. For me, as a fiction writer, the nature of setting is sacred

ground. In my novel, *The Sins of Maggie Black*, it cannot be divided from character or plot. It is not a static backdrop, but a force or energy that vibrates through everything:

She rolls her case onto the through street, looks up and stops, awestruck—the western sky is ablaze. As if pitched from a bucket of molten paint, scarlet clouds fan outward from the horizon, expand overhead, then curl into wispy fingers—grasping even as they fade to nothing. She takes a deep breath and sighs, wishing there was some kind of sign, some way to know she’s on the right path. Mourning doves call softly, “Who ARE you, you—who ARE you, you,” and she stands for another moment, listening.

As mentioned in my last blog, I needed a place where Maggie, my protagonist, would become detained on her journey toward Deadwood, South Dakota—her planned destination. Being cash challenged, a campground would be a logical option for her. From my travels I knew some towns and cities out west had municipal campgrounds, and I immediately thought of Scottsbluff, a small city located in western Nebraska. My wife and I have camped there several times. Their campground is attached to a park situated along the North Platte, with the bluff rising like a fortress across the river. Though some cities employ park rangers, Scottsbluff does not, so I used artistic license to create Jim—who along with Maggie and Lena constitute my three main characters. I now had the perfect

setting for my novel. Isolated on the prairie like an island, Scottsbluff has a small-town feel, with an ideal number of streets, parks, schools, and other establishments. Working backward, I chose Saint Joseph, Missouri as Maggie's hometown—where her journey, and the novel, would begin.

Throughout the novel, motifs of the outer world echo, foreshadow, and reinforce the attitudes, emotions, and actions of the characters. We all must contend with the concrete realities of our world—the heat or cold or wind, the punishing hardness of pavement, the cramped quarters of a van, the need for food, sleep, beauty—love. Add to this the limitations of time and energy, the vagaries of chance, and it becomes apparent our minds and bodies are shaped by these forces. So in a very real way, the setting—our environment—cannot be divorced from our character.

In my next blog I'll dive into the crucible and the messy, murky world of human nature.

Follow Maggie's quest: **THE SINS OF MAGGIE BLACK** is now available!

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