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~~Place as Character and Plot Pivot~~

The first character I ever created, the most important and lasting character I ever created, was the setting for all my short stories and novels--Swanoochee County, Georgia. That was twelve years and twenty-three novels ago. At a time when I believed in myself as a writer, but hardly anybody else did. I knew my place was just as rich as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and I knew I was imitating him by giving my home county a fictional name. But I had to start somewhere, and I had to start with what I know, where I know.

Of course, most writers are wise to the rule of writing about what you know. But where you know, a specific place, is equally as important. My place, Echols County--fictional Swanoochee County--is located in Southeast Georgia, as far south as you can go without tripping over the Georgia/Florida line. Pine woods wall us in, and in the east the Okefenokee Swamp pinpoints us on the United States map. No industry, save for timber and farming. Approximately 3000 people are scattered over 272,000 acres of flatwoods, fields and swamps. Lots of room for a writer. If I run out of material, it's not God's fault.

I was born and reared and will doubtless die here. Statenville--fictional Cornerville--was named for my family. I know these fields and streams and woods like my own face with all its changes over fifty years. I'm keen to the teasing of mock springs and falls, to the timbre of the Alapaha River on the rise. I know these people and their houses and the graveyards where they move to when they die, and though I seldom write about my neighbors--I write instead about their types--I pack up my characters and all their troubles and plant them in my neighbors' houses. Now that DARK OF THE MOON is in development as a Hallmark film, I'm trying to wheedle the company into filming at the actual site where my imaginings took root. Once I've written about a place, it is mine, which makes me, the creator of twenty-three novels and more than fifty short stories, one of the largest land owners in my area.

I discover my stories as I go, like reading a book from beginning to end, and have only a general idea of where I'm bound for. But I know my story starts with place, a specific place, where my characters can carry out their action. For example, in DARK OF THE MOON, my first published novel, I knew from the onset only that Merdie, my protagonist, was an isolated country-music singer with a older bootlegger husband and three grown sons ("grown" in flatwoods terminology means a boy has started growing a beard). That she was hellbent on breaking out of that prison of home and using her talent as a pass to freedom. I could picture her in my mind's eye in a roomy old house with an open hall, set on the fringes of the Okefenokee Swamp, in east Echols County--I always start with the strongest image, and I always have a title, which works as theme. DARK OF THE MOON would be a story about nature, about a passionate