

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 walling us in, and in the east the Okefenokee Swamp pinpointing us on the United States map. No industry, save for timber and farming. Approximately 3000 people 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 production 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 western 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 woman's pratfalls and privileges, what locks her into the flatwoods and what lets her go. I knew the setting, could feel the story whole inside me, long before I began; what I didn't know was, that roomy old house would actually serve as pivot for the plot, rather than mere background.

In the opening paragraph of DARK OF THE MOON, Merdie is standing in the open hall with the orange light of the setting sun tunneling through. She is waiting for her boys to come back from the sawdust pile in the woods where they are loading bootleg whiskey into their souped-up Chrysler. Her eldest son will drive them to Valdosta, the nearest largest town to Swannoochee County, where they will sing at a charity benefit. Come Friday night, they habitually slip off to sing at one of the local nightspots, and they habitually hide the adventure from Hamp, Merdie's volatile husband, who believes she and the boys are off to make a delivery for him. Singing is a sin, in Hamp's book, but bootlegging is sacred. Tonight will be Merdie's biggest gig, her big chance. She will nab a manager, who she is suspicious of but hopes will get her and her boys to Nashville, Tennessee--heaven on earth for Merdie. But her lucky night turns unlucky when an undercover agent spots the car loaded with bootleg whiskey and follows them home.

My initial intent had been to have Hamp or one of his stepsons kill the man assumed to be a whiskey revenuer, but when I started on the second chapter, I decided to let Hamp capture "the revenuer" instead (a wrong plot turn can later be rerouted), which turned the story from comic suspense into a comic love story. And I believe till this day, that the house was what turned that story.

Hamp, an honorable scamp, in his own way, can't bring himself to let J.B., his eldest son and Merdie's stepson, shoot the revenuer, and the revenuer ends up hogtied in the "side room," a small windowless room across the hall from the kitchen, Merdie's domain. As soon as Hamp and the boys grow numb to the revenuer's presence in the house, they turn him over to Merdie to feed, guard and escort to the outhouse. And this is where the layout of the house becomes the primary mover of the plot in DARK OF THE MOON. After Merdie comes to grips with the added burden--she milks cows, midwives with her mama, cooks, cleans and referees fights--she falls in love with the burden. At night, she slips from her and Hamp's room on the right side of the hall at the front of the house. The "boys' room"--all rooms are named, just as fields and corners of homeplaces are named--is situated across the hall from Hamp's and Merdie's room, with a "middle room" between the boys' room and the revenuer's. A good space between to offset the lovers from the rest of the sleeping household. But there is forever that threat of the lovers getting caught--the tension of squeaky floor boards in the hall, the boys peeing off the backporch, next to the side room. And at one point when the lovers are doing what lovers do, the head standard of the revenuer's cot collapses while Merdie's middle son is up for a

midnight leak. Merdie dashes into the middle room, where she used to sleep when Hamp's snoring would keep her awake, leaving the revenuer with his head down and his feet up--untied, naked and haggling in the dark with Bo Dink. The revenuer, on to the ways of the Hamp and the boys by now, seems to be trying to make Bo Dink, who can't be made to do even the dishes, repair his bed. Bo Dink sasses him a couple of times, while Merdie in the middle room scrunches and sweats--what is the revenuer doing? Soon Bo Dink ambles through the middle room, shortcut to the boys' room, and Merdie, hidden among the clutter of inherited junk, waits till she feels he is sleeping, then tips back to the revenuer's collapsed cot and helps him get dressed and ties him up, scoots under the bed and supports it until he settles in--everything must be as Bo Dink has last seen it, even the door to the hall has to be left open. The rooster crows, Hamp stomps into his brogans, then tramps along the hall--morning, noon and night he follows the same routine, curse and blessing. Merdie manages to scoot into the middle room again just before Hamp passes the open door of the side room on his way to the kitchen for his morning coffee.

If not for that house, I wouldn't have had that scene, I wouldn't have had that tension. If not for that setting in the flatwoods, I wouldn't have had that embodiment of nature that created the world of DARK OF THE MOON.

NECESSARY LIES, my second published novel, likewise: a similar house, but different characters, different circumstances. Different personalities and plot turns. Set nearer my main town of Cornerville, a settlement quartered by a crossing, these characters play out their roles in a house much like Merdie's. But it is Aunt

Teat's house in the flatwoods, same area as DARK OF THE MOON, where the climax of the story takes place. A small ramshackle house, two-rooms wide and two-rooms deep. A remote place where two sisters and their lover meet and a fire is started and the main character, Cliffie, is accused of burning the three children inside. It is the house and its remoteness that make possible the plot. But as with DARK OF THE MOON, the place came first. And as with DARK OF THE MOON, I believe without the choice of setting a different story would have been told.

But in none of my twenty-three novels has plot been quite so manipulated by place as in PAWPAW PATCH (Spring '96, HarperCollins). Chanell's cottage beauty shop, former hub of social gatherings, is located mid-center of Cornerville along a crescent of houses on Troublesome Creek (pun intended), next door to the renovated old jailhouse (metaphor for the entrapment of womanhood) that is later revealed as the site of a rape scene involving Chanell's childhood friend Beth. Same friend who has helped start the rumor about Chanell that ostracizes her from the town. Chanell's dual beauty shop and house is in close proximity to her church where she first learns that there is a rumor, to the home of her unlikely confidant and final friend, Archie Wall--only lawyer in Swanoochee County--, to the school house where she learns what the rumor is about, and to the courthouse where she confronts Beth, whose reputation Chanell has guarded from the small-town gossip mill for three decades.

But I didn't realize how significant was setting till my story collection, GOING THROUGH THE CHANGE, after I'd written the title story (a hitchhiker passing through Swanoochee County on his way to Florida is abducted by a crazy couple). My place is going through a

change, and not just my characters. People are moving, getting out, or coming back. Mothers are going to Valdosta to work ("Looking to Miss Sara"), leaving their children for somebody else to raise. Women are taking on the lax moral standards of men ("You're No Angel Yourself"). Men are getting weaker ("Dogs in a Pack") and stronger ("Nightshade"). Children are caught in the crossfire ("The Day Mae Died"). Political and social change comes to Swanoochee County in all fourteen stories.

Setting is a character; setting can manipulate plot. And like human characters, physical setting has to change. Though no further industry has invaded Swanoochee County and only a scattering of new buildings are cropping up, my characters and place are changing and will keep changing.