# Landing: Writing About Place in our Flyover State

*Emily Brisse*

When I went off to college, I knew about Toni Morrison and Ernest Hemingway and Harper Lee. I loved literature so much that I wanted to both teach it and write it for the rest of my life. But it wasn't until I took a regionally focused Ethnic American lit course two years later that I realized I'd never heard of Robert Bly and Louise Erdrich, Patricia Hampl and Joyce Sutphen, Sinclair Lewis and Paul Gruchow and Bill Holm—writers, every one, some more established, all talented and passionate, who wrote about the place I came from: Minnesota.

It was later still that I understood why: the Midwest was considered "flyover country," a producer of literature too localized to be of much interest to those on the coasts, the locations where, I realized, the makers of literary canons and national textbooks most often reside.

When I consider my high school students now, I feel a deep need for them to not only know of these writers and be familiar with their work, but to understand the importance of place—their place, in particular. One of the best ways to stress this lesson is by studying the work of these writers, certainly. But we should also lead students to pay attention to their own backyards and then render them with their words. As writing teachers, we are consistently asking students to be more specific. So what a perfect, accessible, and potentially challenging thing it is then for us to insist, "Here. Right here. Tell me why this place matters."

Eudora Welty, one of the great southern regional writers, said in her 1954 essay "Place in Fiction," "Place…is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in novels...Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else" (786-787). She focuses on fiction, but Welty's points apply to most genres of writing. She argues that place has three essential functions in a work of literature. One, it offers validity by establishing the specific, telling details that prove the tale could happen precisely as it did nowhere else. Two, through its necessary exactness, it makes the writer, and thus the writing, better. And three, there is an inherent worth, she says, in speaking from our homeplaces.

I will examine the three arguments listed above through the lens of Minnesota writers, specifically through their use of natural landscape. To me, this seems the most inclusive. Some of our students come from different states or different countries, and many of them will not think of *homeplace* as the space within a border on our maps. Landscape, however, is universal. In our writing lessons, we explain to students that a tree is not just a tree (it's a pine, a birch, a maple), but it is still a tree, recognizable in its simplest form to anyone. In this way, the natural landscape serves as a sturdy platform to build upon.

The following Minnesota writers—Bly, Gruchow, Lewis, and Hampl—are a few among many who elevate place in their work to more than just background. They make their details, their sentences, and their familiar landscapes count. Perhaps by introducing our students to their stories, essays, and poems, we might show them first how to render a place, and second, how to appreciate it.

**Structuring Validity**

When encouraging students to write about place, it can be helpful to ask them to remember how they felt after a trip to somewhere far away, be that a new country or a new lake in the neighboring county. Most of us, when we come back from such experiences, especially

those where we were removed from our comfort zones, are brimming with stories and details, which essentially are about ordinary people doing ordinary things. To create a nuanced sense of their homeplaces, then, it follows that we should challenge students to look at their local worlds with fresh eyes and the capacity for wonder. They need to move beyond their descriptions of blue lakes, green fields, and chirping birds; instead, they must, as Welty says, create a world that is "steadily visible from its outside, presenting a continuous, shapely, pleasing and finished surface " (784).

Creating place in writing that is visibly particular is no more difficult than doing a bit of exploring. We spend so much time in chairs behind desks or screens in classrooms. A study of place in regional literature is best begun by getting into the world. If possible, take students outside. Require them to really look at a dandelion, to touch the undersides of leaves, to find the plant they've seen their whole lives but don't know the name of. Field books need not exist in science classrooms alone. "Make a list of accurate, specific local details," I tell my students; using particulars in a piece of writing is the first step toward developing the feeling that they are authentic to both the land and one's story, poem, or essay.

When I want to illustrate this point, I refer my students to poet Robert Bly. Throughout his poetry collection *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, he repeatedly references the specifics of his Minnesota homeland: cornstalks, Catholic churches, box-elder bugs, Norwegian immigrants, telephone poles, crickets, and dust. In "Poem in Three Parts" he exalts in the earth, waking up to believe he "shall live forever! / . . . The strong leaves of the box-elder tree, / Plunging in the wind, call us to disappear / Into the wilds of the universe" (Bly 21). My students and I talk about the specificity of "box-elder," and always we agree that it heightens the reader's experience. Why? Because even if we are unfamiliar with box-elder leaves, the speaker of the poem knows them well enough to call them by name, and that hints at his reliability. It allows us to "buy in" to the sincerity of the poem, and it also makes the text more visual and unique. This technique is one that students adopt with little reluctance, for not only are they strengthening their text with precise details, but they're also learning about their own world, their "real world," so the lesson's relevancy is clear.

The second lesson involves selection. "Avoid clichés," I say, just like every other writing teacher, and "reconsider the necessity of including generally known facts." We also discuss excess. An enthusiastic young writer could have one hundred beautifully specific details plucked directly from the hills and valleys of her homeland; however, including each of them would drown her reader, and writing "there was no shade on the plains" does little work. Further, these examples would likely obscure the meaning the writer was trying to create. Welty says that we must "disentangle the significant…from the random and meaningless and irrelevant that in real life surround and beset it" (785). In other words, each detail must drive on to a dominant impression and serve a purpose, and that purpose had better not be the writer's love of his own cleverness.

To determine which details are best, it's necessary for students to understand their subject. Are they writing about a well-known place or a remote one? The place in and of itself, or the place as the stage where the action occurs? The Minnesota essayist Paul Gruchow advises that "place is…not a location, but a session"; therefore, we must guide our students to be attuned to the interplay between what is going on in a place, who it is happening around, and the place itself (*Travels in Canoe Country* 121). If they do so, the details that will leave their readers with the clearest images should emerge.

I use Gruchow's work as an example of this. In *Worlds within a World*, his collection of essays on Scientific and Natural Areas in Minnesota, Gruchow has over 177,000 designated acres of plants and animals to choose from, and yet, though the natural world is his clear passion, he is able to show restraint. Because he knows that many people look at a prairie and see only dull grass—lots of it—he decides that here is where he must focus. He must depict its magnificence. So, he avoids the mice scuttling about, the hue of the sky, even the wind, and instead selects only the "pewter-gray leaves of lead plants, the forest-green needles of junipers, and the wine-colored and tan foliage of last summer's grasses," which all together have "the effect…of an immense oriental carpet, mellowed with great age, spread opulently across the hills" (Gruchow, *Worlds within a World* 39-41). He is speaking not only with his eyes, but with his intellect, too. He knows what needs to be shown. It's a pleasing example of an author discovering the fine balance between the right details in the right amount, which together create an image full of resonance. This in turn helps students create place.

**The Achieved World of the Appearance**

Once students have become familiar with the physical details of a place and have identified which of these details are significant, they must knit these into their larger essays, stories, or poems. I could select most any well-regarded story, and upon inspection of its structure, my students and I would find that very little of the prose would be dedicated to straight description. In good writing, description must serve a twofold purpose: to provide a recognizable image (of a character or plot impetus or thing) and to convince the reader that this image comes from some place real. It's the goal of most professional writers to achieve such conviction in their audience. Welty insists that the "world of appearance in the novel has got to *seem* actuality," and that "place being brought to life in the round before the reader's eye" is the best way to do this (785). It's also a test of skill, for if our students do not create convincing worlds in their writing, they will find that their peers—that most significant of audiences—are uninterested in inhabiting them.

In reading literature set in the Middle West, students discover that the most successfully created worlds are often those populated by characters who are influenced by place. I highlight how this is a wise authorial decision, for description then works double duty—the reader is given both a clear image of place and a sense that these characters are all the more real for being impacted by it. An example is Carol Kennicott, the protagonist from Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*. Carol, who moves to the small village of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota, has expectations of place (she wants to, for instance, instigate stimulating conversation, play outdoor games in winter, and organize an intellectual drama); when her efforts disappoint her, she worries and sulks; but eventually she rises again, determined that the depressing nature of the town will not subdue her will. In many ways, Carol is a perfect match for the prairie in terms of deeper meaning, because her experiences and attitude-shifts rival the ups and downs of Minnesota weather. As much as she detests the location, it complements the telling of her tale. Welty says "place…has the most delicate control over character…by confining character, it defines it" (786). Such is true for Carol Kennicott. Had she never boarded the train for Gopher Prairie, readers would never have known the lengths to which her spirit could be tested and still survive. This kind of thinking is an effective way for students to enter into their own reflections. How have their encounters with the natural world affected them? How would they be different if they grew up experiencing, say, a lack of distinct seasons?

Character development is perhaps less essential in poetry, as a poem can be a collection of images or observations where it's the intention that the speaker is not referenced once. However, the role of the narrator-character propels some poems; this is the case in Patricia Hampl's "Resort," where the persona of the narrator is created through close emotional associations with place. In it, the reader is led to understand that the speaker has experienced a loss, and that she has fled to the shores of Lake Superior to seek solace and isolation in the lake's broad expanse. She does not say that she is sad, but the reader understands she is when she describes "a day of breakers, hard throws of water fizzed with spray, / hour after hour" (Hampl 42). She does not say that she is trying to forget everything so she can live in the present, but she does insist that "each wave [must be] pronounced distinctly / like a foreign name, over and over—all this / so that one new sentence will emerge / out of the formal light of language, / the morning sun fresh on the nicked silver of a wave" (Hampl 56-57). This is one of the powers of place—the ability to link what is human with the earth that we came from and will one day return to. When students come across writing that uses such description, they recognize it. And it feels real.

The same can be said for plot that shoots up from a particular locale. Instead of selecting the "point A to point B" story line and plunking it upon some generic city or countryside, we should encourage students writing short stories and essays to allow a narrative to grow out naturally—in both an instinctive and organic way—from some*where.* Some writers who do not are, perhaps, striving for the "anywhere" quality, the idea that an incident is so common to the human race that it could occur in any corner. But for me such stories lack authenticity. If the setting is merely staging, then a critical aspect of the story has lost its power. If, as Welty believes, particular feelings are attached to particular places, and if associations are naturally drawn by the human mind between where something happens and why, then this is authentic plot (782-783). It's also authentic analysis and evaluation. When promoted and practiced in our classrooms, critical thinking skills like these create stronger writers, better writing, and more thoughtful students.

**The Inherent Worth in Home**

As writing teachers, we often use the phrase "write what you know," and in a discussion of place, this clearly points homeward. There are many established writers who follow this advice to the letter: if they grew up on a Stearns County farm, their subject is farm life in Stearns County; if they were a middle child, their main character is too. While some stay on that farm or in the town of which they write, other writers need to venture off in order to see the wealth of images their homeplace offers. Still others have revolted against this entire idea, and either flee their homes for more inspired locales or write about anything other than the drab borders of their early or present existence. Students will relate to this. Some will love a focused place study, while others will lament the fact that "there is nothing to do" or "nothing new" or certainly "nothing worth writing about" in the place where they come from.

This is what I say to them: "Try. Write about *why* that cornfield is boring. *Why* there is trash clogging up the gutters. What *specifically* about where you find yourself fails to inspire you?" Welty says that "it is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are," and it is often the least inspired students that end up creating an essay so specific and surprising that even they are made to question their earlier claims (792).

It has been my observation that if a student writes from his experience, his text will not necessarily be better than the student who does not, but these lived references will enrich his writing. And, in the best moments of education, this kind of writing might enrich his life.

In the September/October 2011 edition of *Orion,* Erik Reece, a Freshman Composition instructor in Kentucky, addresses some of the issues plaguing the modern high school classroom and our nation of young writers in his essay "The Schools We Need." One of his conclusions is that in order for youth to be motivated, educated students—that is motivated, democratic citizens—we need to foster in our classrooms a sense of pride for the local. To do this, we need to bring in the work of local artists, teach about the broad subjects by studying regional examples, show students that in the scope of the world their homeplace matters. Reece quotes Kentucky novelist Lee Smith as saying, "When I was growing up in these mountains, I was always taught that culture was someplace else, and that when the time came, I'd be sent off to get some. Now everybody here realizes that we don't have to go anyplace else to 'get culture'—we've got our own, and we've had it all along" (34).

Certainly the same can be said for the students growing up on our prairies, in our woods, and beside our thousands of lakes. As English educators, it is our duty to teach them to read and write, to think critically, to reason their way through a variety of complex texts, to communicate their arguments and conclusions. But it is also our charge to help the students in our classrooms see themselves in literature, to believe in the relevancy of their own voices. It is this that leads to engagement. It is this that inspires individuals to not only receive knowledge but seek after it. "Beneath the waters, since I was a boy," Robert Bly writes, "I have dreamt of strange and dark treasures, / Not of gold, or strange stones, but the true / Gift, beneath the pale lakes of Minnesota" (56). What that gift might be, I believe, is for each of our students to discover.

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