

Process Vs
Product.



S e t D e s i g n

Sometimes you may find it useful to let your characters huddle in the wings without you, preparing for their roles, improvising dialogue, while you set the stage for their appearance. Imagine yourself as the set designer for a play or for the movie version of the story you are working on. It may help you to know what the room (or the ship or the office or the meadow) looks like where the action will be taking place. You want to know its feel, its temperature, its colors. Just as everyone is a walking advertisement for who he or she is, so every room is a little showcase of its occupants' values and personalities. Every room is about memory. Every room gives us layers of information about our past and present and who we are, our shrines and quirks and hopes and sorrows, our attempts to prove that we exist and are more or less Okay. You can see, in our rooms, how much light we need—how many light bulbs, candles,

skylights we have—and in how we keep things lit you can see how we try to comfort ourselves. The mix in our rooms is so touching: the clutter and the cracks in the wall belie a bleakness or brokenness in our lives, while photos and a few rare objects show our pride, our rare shining moments.

As the photographer Catherine Wagner has pointed out, these rooms are future ruins.

So you sit there at your desk trying to see what the set looks like that your characters will be entering in a moment. Perhaps they have money and you don't—not, of course, that you're bitter about this. You may need to call one of your friends or relatives who has or had a great deal of money, and ask them as tactfully as possible to help you design a house where some old gentry lived. By tactfully, I mean that you're going to get the best possible information if you do not mention life's unfairness and that your own house looks more like *God's Little Acre* with every passing day and that you may have to put the dog to sleep because you can't afford to feed her. You just say, "I'm working on a section of my book where we first meet a family of great wealth and breeding, and I was wondering if I could pick your brain about what sort of carpets and rugs and lighting and antiques they might have. For instance, let's start with the living room. Can you describe a really lovely living room in as much detail as possible?" And then you can ask what smells your friend remembers, in the living room and kitchen, and what the light was like, and what various rooms sounded like or what their silences felt like. Or

by the same token, you can ask someone who grew up in poverty to give you an exact description of his or her house, the kitchen, the bedrooms, the couch in the backyard.

Years ago I was working on a novel that involved a woman who gardened, who in fact loved to garden. I do not love to garden. I love other people's gardens, and I like cut flowers. I have Astro turf and a whole lot of high-quality plastic flowers stuck in the dirt of our front yard. These are quite a lovely sight and bring to mind many e. e. cummings poems.

People used to give me potted plants and trees, and what happened to them is really too horrible to go into here. They'd end up looking like I watered them with Agent Orange. I'd tell people that I didn't do well with potted plants, and they'd decide that I'd just never met the right one and that they were going to be the person to free me and cause God to restore my glorious gift of sight and all that, and they'd bring me some little training plant, and I'd try really hard to water it and keep it in or out of sunlight, whatever its little card of introduction said it preferred, and to take it for little walks around the house, and within about a month you could almost hear chlorophyllous breakdown, a *Panic in Needle Park* sort of thing. Then you'd see it clutching its little throat, staring at you with its little Keane eyes, gasping and accusing—and I mean, who needs it? Believe me, I have enough problems as it is.

I actually kept this one horrible plant alive for months, this huge potted thing. I don't even know what it was, but it was about three feet tall, before its decline, and green in a sort of

fake jolly way. I watered it, I cut off its dead leaves, and how did it repay me? By becoming Howard Hughes in his last days. It lost all this weight, it stopped going out. I came to believe that it would be requesting latex gloves soon, boxes of them, and boxes of Kleenex with which to cover its food between bites. I gave it water, sunlight, expensive plant food—what was I supposed to do, get it a psychiatrist? So I finally came to my senses, took it outside, and put it against the side of the house where I wouldn't have to look at it. You are probably thinking that it immediately began to flourish, but it didn't. It died.

So, needless to say, when it came time to design a garden for my main character, I wasn't going to be able to plumb the depths of my own gardening experience. But I just knew somehow, without being able to explain the process to you, that this main character gardened. I love to see people in gardens, I love the meditation of sitting alone in gardens, I love all the metaphors that gardens are.

The garden is one of the two great metaphors for humanity. The other, of course, is the river. Metaphors are a great language tool, because they explain the unknown in terms of the known. But they only work if they resonate in the heart of the writer. So I felt a little understaffed here, loving the metaphor when I came upon it, wanting to work with it, and yet not loving to garden.

I didn't know where to start, but I did know that the garden did not start out as metaphor. It started out as paradise. Then, as now, the garden is about life and beauty and the

impermanence of all living things. The garden is about feeding your children, providing food for the tribe. It's part of an urgent territorial drive that we can probably trace back to animals storing food. It's a competitive display mechanism, like having a prize bull, this greed for the best tomatoes and English tea roses; it's about winning, about providing society with superior things, and about proving that you have taste and good values and you work hard. And what a wonderful relief every so often to know who the enemy is—because in the garden, the enemy is everything: the aphids, the weather, time. And so you pour yourself into it, care so much, and see up close so much birth and growth and beauty and danger and triumph—and then everything dies anyway, right? But you just keep doing it. What a great metaphor! I love this so much! I wanted a garden in my book so badly! Finally, finally, it occurred to me to call a nursery.

I reached a very nice man to whom I explained what I was doing, and I asked if he could help me design a fictional garden for someone living in the North Bay with a large backyard.

We decided to begin by showing the garden as it would look in the summer, and then he would help me through the months as the seasons changed.

"Do you want some fruit trees?" he asked.

And then for the next half hour, we designed a garden full of trees and flowers of every kind. I said I saw in my mind's eye a white latticework screen somewhere in the garden, and asked what kinds of vines might go well with that. He suggested snow peas. Then we added some vegetables, and a patch of

wild strawberries, and I had my garden. I got into the habit of calling him every few months to check in. "What would the apple tree be doing?" I'd ask. "Would there be fruit, or even leaves? And what would I do to take care of the flower beds now?"

I also started going to people's gardens, asking them what this or that plant was and how they take care of it, and they'd say funny or brilliant things and I'd steal their lines. I picked up a book on gardens, so I could study flowers and trees and vines in that way, and honest to God, people who read my novel believed that I loved to garden. Sometimes in fact they would start talking shop with me, thinking we could jam away, as gardeners are wont to do, until I'd let them know that I had only been winging it, with a lot of help from people around me, people who knew a lot more about gardens than I, friends who would cover for me, just like in real life.

"You don't love to garden?" they'd ask incredulously, and I'd shake my head and not mention that what I love are cut flowers, because this sounds so violent and decadent, like when Salvador Dalí said his favorite animal was fillet of sole.

And in the years since, I have asked all sorts of people to help me design sets. I've asked them to describe what the world looked like in certain American cities or African villages, inside a particular car in the rain, or down by the water when hoboes still came to town on the train. Then I try to imagine the movie set of this scene in as much detail as possible. Sometimes I can see it most clearly if I close my eyes. Other times I stare off into the middle distance, like a cat.