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Creating a sense of place in fantasy fiction

Abstract
This paper focuses on the reader's experience of setting or 'place' in fantasy fiction. While in many written genres the setting is considered 'background', in fantasy fiction it often becomes one of the key elements of the narrative. Creating a vivid setting without losing the interest of readers is integral to the success of a fantasy work, and as such it warrants close investigation. The discussion throughout the paper involves a critical analysis of current theories and insights proposed by writers and reader-response critics in relation to the creation of a sense of place. It is argued that existing literature that provides advice, theory, and guidance to writers usually places emphasis on character development and narrative structure, often with a limited or author-focussed consideration of setting. Yet reader-response critics like Wolfgang Iser have examined how readers 'complete' the world of the text, and these critical insights could aid writers of creative fiction in refining their practice. For this reason, the author contends that the development of a set of understandings or principles that balances reader-response theories with writing practice is an important way forward in thinking about the creation of place in fantasy fiction.
Keywords: world-building, setting, writing fantasy fiction.

Introduction

Many writers shy away from the word 'setting' when discussing the craft of writing, or attach long lists of warnings and cautionary notes to the term. Author Jack Bickham commented that setting is 'seldom discussed at length in writers' workshops or addressed in any detail in texts for creators of fiction' (Bickham 1994: 1). This hesitation to consider setting is probably due to both a misinterpretation of the term, and to its association with unnecessary or tedious description. 'Setting' has come to suggest a static background, perhaps due to its association with stage props and painted backdrops in theatres. Yet if fully considered, this term implies more than just the scenery of a novel – it encompasses all the things that create a sense of place in a work. This includes not just the locations and physical scenery of a place, but the culture, the history, the political and social climate, the weather, the language, and the mood of a place. Bickham defined setting in a similar way, stressing the importance of not considering setting as the disposable backdrop of a tale (1994: 1). Yet even when setting is accepted as including all of these elements, the term is still plagued by association with the long scene-setting passages that readers usually skim over. Too much description of setting is often seen as interfering with character and narrative, and representative of dangerous writerly indulgence (Bickham 1994; Harland 2009; Lombardi 2008). During a Queensland Writers Centre workshop titled 'Editing for Writers,' an editor warned participants not to indulge in long flowery passages of setting description, saying that it led to the 'territory of reverie' (Kenigsberg 2010). It is understandable that much advice on writing comes with a cautionary note suggesting that writers avoid delivering large chunks of setting description, instead advocating that this description should be 'interspersed with actions or dialogue' (Grenville 1990: 128). Too much description of the setting in a story can undoubtedly be dull, especially when it is treated as an un-integrated background element. However, this does not mean that the element of setting should be considered unimportant, particularly when examining the genre of fantasy.

The experience of imagined place has been identified as one of the distinctive pleasures that people seek when reading in the fantasy genre (Touponce 1984: xiii). In his famous essay 'On Fairy-Stories', Tolkien states that for him as a reader 'the making or desiring of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie' (Tolkien 1965: 41). Fantasy author Ursula Le Guin anchors her definition of fantasy literature to the notion that the story and its style must remain firmly rooted in Elfland, the land of the grand and the imaginary (Le Guin 1993: 91). The concept of 'secondary worlds' (Tolkien 1965) has been built into many definitions of fantasy and science fiction, and writers' guides that focus on these genres often devote chapters to 'world-building' – the process of devising and constructing an imaginary world. Lisa Tuttle commented that 'world-building, in both SF and fantasy, is more than just background: it plays a role equivalent to that of a major character' (Tuttle 2005: 35).

The term 'world-building' is most often used when referring to the fantasy sub-genre of high fantasy or epic fantasy. This is one of the most popular and widely known sub-genres of fantasy, and is most

famously demonstrated in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, and Robert Jordan. These narratives take place in secondary worlds with no link to the real world, and usually involve epic quests and battles, use archaic language, are inspired by the medieval era, and draw on Norse and Celtic mythology ('High Fantasy' 2010: np; Burcher et al 2009: 227). Lin Carter confines his definition of fantasy to these works, calling them 'imaginary world' stories (Carter 1973: 7). However the term fantasy encompasses a much broader spectrum of works, and setting often plays as important a role in defining these sub-genres as it does in clarifying what constitutes high fantasy. The common division of fantasy into the sub-genres of high and low fantasy revolves around the secondary world in the fantasy novel, and whether or not it maintains a link to the primary world – or the real world as we know it. Low fantasy 'is set in the real ('primary') world, or a rational and familiar fictional world, with the inclusion of magical elements' ('Low Fantasy' 2010: np) [1]. Some other sub-genres of fantasy that rely on setting for definition include urban fantasy and contemporary fantasy. Contemporary fantasy (also known as paranormal fantasy) takes place in the context of a contemporary real world setting and the fantastic elements arise from secret supernatural phenomena, paranormal characters, or a secret connection with linked fantasy worlds ('Contemporary Fantasy' 2010; Burcher et al 2009: 228). Urban fantasy is fantasy that takes place primarily in an urban setting ('Urban Fantasy' 2010; Wilkins 2011: np). Writers of high fantasy building entirely fictional worlds would undoubtedly stand to benefit from a more in-depth consideration of the effective communication of setting to readers. However, a study of setting is also relevant to other sub-genres of fantasy. This study should not be confined to high fantasy, but should also include works that create new settings or micro-worlds that exist within or are linked to the world as we know it, or that augment contemporary real-world settings with magical elements. As such, in this article 'fantasy' refers to 'a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility'– a definition offered by WR Irwin (1976: 4) [2]. While this definition has at times been criticised for being too broad, it successfully encompasses the essence of the fantasy genre as a whole and is not counterproductively reductive or restrictive.

Writers' guidebooks: what do readers want?

'How to Write' books that discuss the fantasy genre suggest a variety of methods for getting ideas for fictional worlds and offer advice on how to deal with setting. Some examine the technique of communicating setting, often focussing on the untrue and fantastical nature of the fantasy world. Brian Stableford's discussion of the fantasy setting focuses on plausibility and probability and the moral coherency of the fantasy world (Stableford 1998). Lisa Tuttle (2005) and Fraser Sherman (1994) pay special attention to the internal consistency of fantasy worlds, stating that they 'must have rules' (Tuttle 2005: 48). Other fantasy writers' guidebooks focus more closely on the process of world-building that the author undertakes before writing a fantasy novel. Orson Scott Card provides a step-by-step discussion of how he constructs imaginary worlds, describing how he moves from the germinating idea or principle through to populating the world, mapping it, and devising its history and rules (Card 1990). Poul Anderson's essay, 'The Creation of Imaginary Worlds' (1991) is essentially a step-by-step guide detailing how a writer might build his or her own planet.

While it is clear that fantasy writers' guidebooks usually focus on how to *devise* a setting, guidebooks that examine other genres tend to focus more on how a writer should *communicate* a setting to an audience. When examining the broader field of writers' guidebooks, certain core principles and techniques with regard to setting and description repeatedly emerge. The concept of appealing to the five senses by describing setting through touch, smell, sight, taste, and sound is advocated by many authors (Bickham 1994; Disher 1983; Harland 2009; Lombardi 2008; Lowry 2008; Marsden 1993; Noble 1994) and the need to use strong verbs and nouns, focus on specific details, and avoid the overuse of adjectives and adverbs is almost always a key piece of advice (Bickham 1994; Bird 1996; Disher 1983; Grenville 1990; Gussoff 2008; Harland 2009; Lombardi 2008; Marsden 1993; Noble 1994; Tuttle 2005).

While the techniques cited above are advocated for all types of fiction, it is also important to consider their specific application to the construction of fantasy settings. The unreal settings of fantasy fiction demand suspension of disbelief and the acceptance of a false reality, yet this reality must be constructed in a way that it is credible, vivid, and apparently 'new'. The history, countries and cultures of the real world cannot be taken for granted as the context of the narrative, as fantasy authors often invent other worlds. The reader must discover new political climates, new cultures, new countries, and new histories. Often physical elements of the setting, such as climate and landscape, are in some way imbued with magic or supernatural properties. Author Kim Wilkins argues that 'in fantastic fiction, it is important to emphasise the fantastic elements of setting and to spend time on fantastic detail to create the sense of wonder that readers expect from the genre' (Wilkins 2011: np). Fantasy settings must be more than just a background – they must provide the vicarious experience of a different world, and suggest the exotic and the magical. A more specific application of the techniques offered by the writers' guides cited to fantasy fiction would be beneficial to fantasy authors. Furthermore, while these guides suggest useful techniques for the description of setting, the authors of these books generally provide a very author-focused and text-focussed discussion of setting that is often quite anecdotal.

While we are occasionally told what a reader wants, we often are not told *why* they want it, and the reader's cognitive contribution to the building of the imaginary setting is not a central focus. This is neither unusual nor unreasonable, given that authors who are drawing from their own creative practice write the majority of these guides. The author is, however, only part of the picture. A more in-depth analysis of the way readers interpret texts may provide further understandings of how writers can best communicate a setting and inspire 'a loosing or launching of the imagination' (Touponce 1984: xvi). I argue that this kind of in-depth analysis can be found in the work of reader-response critics. What follows is an explanation of how a phenomenological perspective within reader-response criticism brings the focus back to the reader and recognises the collaborative role that readers of fantasy fiction may play in building a sense of place.

Reader-response criticism and the world of the text

The 1970s and 80s brought a wave of critics that embraced the study of the reader's response to literature. This was inaugurated by Roland Barthes' essay *The Death of the Author* (1977), in which he argues that criticism had too long focused on the author and the author's intentions as the locus of meaning in the text. Barthes cried out for the 'the birth of the reader' and the 'death of the author' (1977: 148). It was an open rejection of the author-focused and text-focused formalist methods of New Criticism, a rejection that was taken up by many critics who set out to study how the readerinterprets texts.

Despite their common preoccupation with reader-response, the theories and methods of reader-response critics differ greatly. Some, such as Gerald Prince, Michael Riffaterre, and Jonathan Culler take a structuralist approach that examines the effect of textual structure, signs, and signifiers on the reader (Tompkins 1980: ix-xiv); while others like Norman Holland and David Bleich use psychoanalytical theory to explore how the reader's sense of identity influences their experience of texts (Tompkins 1980: xviii-xxi). Stanley Fish presents yet another approach, his controversial post-structuralist theory claiming that a text and its meaning *only* exist within the mind of a reader (Fish 1980b). Fish approaches texts by asking what they do, not what they mean, and his method involves 'an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words as they succeed one another in time' (Fish 1980b: 73). While the ideas and approaches of these psychoanalytical, structuralist, and post-structuralist reader-response critics offer valuable insights into the nature of the reader's experience, the most relevant to the study of setting in fantasy appear to be the ideas of phenomenological reader-response critics.

The theories of phenomenological reader-response critics, such as Roman Ingarden, Georges Poulet, and Wolfgang Iser, focus on the role the reader plays in imagining and experiencing the *world* of the literary work, including how the reader experiences imaginary place. Fantasy and science fiction critic William Touponce (1984: xii) argues that 'only the phenomenological account is capable of treating adequately the irreducible nature of fantastic worlds by describing precisely how such worlds are built up in the reading process'. The work of this particular group of reader-response theorists is arguably most relevant to the study of setting in fantasy. Wolfgang Iser believes that the world provided by the author is, in fact, incomplete, and that the reading process 'brings the literary work into existence' (Iser 1974: 275). His theory, which draws heavily on the ideas of German philosopher Roman Ingarden, centres on the concept that the unwritten elements of the work must be 'concretized' by the reader (Iser 1974: 274). Iser is also inspired by Georges Poulet, who, like Iser, believes that the literary text is actualised by the reader and says that a book 'lives its own life within me [the reader] and gives itself a meaning within me' (Poulet 1980: 47). However in Poulet's analysis of the reading process the reader is trapped in the consciousness of the author and acts out a passive role, whereas Iser sees the reader as cognitively active and creative. Iser's theory is the most developed and widely recognised in the phenomenological field, and his methods for determining how literary works successfully engage the reader could prove useful to writers, and more specifically to writers of fantasy fiction. How Iser's theories might be successfully applied to writing practice will be outlined later in this paper.

Balancing the creative role of the reader and writer

Reader-response theory and the practice of the writer may seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum, but the reader and the writer (represented in the text) work together to generate experience and meaning – to make a shared world. If the satisfaction of the reader is reliant on how a text engages their consciousness and creativity, then an understanding of the ways in which readers interpret texts is vital to writers in their practice.

When writing, a writer will (usually) know what is going to happen next and will have a clear view of how their imaginary world looks and feels. However, this state of being removes them from the unknowing and alien perspective of the reader, and writers are engaged in the constant game of trying

to imagine and re-read their work from the perspective of a potential readership. When writing they envision not only the journey and world of their plot, but the emotional and imaginative journey they wish to take the reader on. Alternatively, the function of a critic is not only to offer readers a way to view or interpret a text, but also to place a value on texts. Reader-response critics centre this valuing of the text on how the reader engages with it. Although they are generally concerned with picking apart a reader's experience of a text after the fact, they create understandings of what makes a text engaging to a reader, and these insights may be useful to the creative writer. Fish, for example, commented that students who study his reader-response theory 'become incapable of writing uncontrolled prose, since so much of their time is spent discovering how much the prose of other writers controls them, and in how many ways' (Fish 1980b: 99).

Of course, not all readers will respond in exactly the same way to a text. However, Fish argues that a reader has 'competences,' and that 'if the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform' (Fish 1980b: 84-5). In a later essay he introduces the theory of interpretive communities, arguing that readers and critics who fall within certain groups tend to interpret texts in similar ways (Fish 1980a: 182). When examining how a reader engages with fantasy settings and what they want from a writer, the most appropriate interpretive community would be one that is familiar with the conventions of the fantasy genre as it circulates in contemporary western writing in English. An understanding of this reader could be gleaned from studies of the expectations and desires associated with the fantasy genre.

To some degree writers are already guided by an understanding of the reader's experience. Many writers of both fantasy and literary fiction have stressed the importance of the reader in filling in the unwritten elements in their work. In her study of Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf describes how Austen 'stimulates us to supply what is not there' (qtd in Iser 1974: 275). Umberto Eco, both a novelist and a theorist, believes that the text hints at the world within it 'and then asks the reader to fill in a whole series of gaps. Every text […] is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work' (Eco 1994: 3).There are 'how to write' books that discuss how to create suspense for the potential reader and how to create a narrative arc that will produce the satisfactory experience of climactic rhythms. However, the element of setting has not been extensively examined from this perspective, and the critical methods to assess value that have been painstakingly considered by reader-response theorists have not been directly linked to the creation of setting in fantasy fiction. Their application to writing practice would provide benefits to the fantasy writer.

Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory

There are many reader-response critics with different theories about the way readers respond to texts, and many of these theories could potentially offer insights for the fantasy writer. However, Iser's theory is arguably the most likely of these to provide a comprehensive conceptual framework for the practice of communicating fantasy worlds, one that could potentially be built upon and adapted in future. This is because his theory, as a phenomenological one, focuses on the reader's *experience* of the text and the *world* of the text, and views the reader as actively cognitively engaged in the world creation process. Iser's methods of analysis look at every text as a dormant temporal experience that is brought to life in the reader's mind, examining reader-response not only on a sentence by sentence level, but also by looking at the effect of the work in its entirety and the overall world of the text.

Two key areas of Iser's theory stand out when considering the creation of setting and these can be broadly categorised under the following titles: the repertoire and the horizon. These concepts could be used to develop techniques, guidelines, and understandings to aid writers in the creation of engaging fantasy settings. What follows is a general discussion of how these concepts might be applied to writing practice and the benefits such an approach would offer. It is not intended to be a comprehensive exploration of the techniques and principles that would arise from this application, rather an introductory discussion that highlights the need for further research in this area.

Iser and the concept of 'The Repertoire'

> Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently "new". (Jackson 1981: 51)

While fantasy writers create unfamiliar settings, characters, and narratives, they always make use of the reader's knowledge of the real world in doing so. If they did not their novels would be incomprehensible. It is the unusual combinations of familiar ideas that make the worlds of fantasy novels seem new. Iser dubbed this bank of contextual knowledge that the reader draws on 'the repertoire':

> The repertoire consists of all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged – in brief, to what the Prague structuralists have called the "extra textual" reality. (Iser 1978: 69) [3]

The use of the repertoire is particularly important when interpreting place in fiction, because a reader's mental generation of images is different to their optical reception of them. The substance of imagined place is as much emotion, mood, and meaning as it is accurate visual and spatial picturing. Thus aspects of setting often take on symbolic significance and meaning, and while a reader will likely not be able to picture a fantasy setting in full visual and spatial detail, if the setting is successfully evoked they will have a strong sense of the feeling and mood of the place … perhaps stronger than they would have if they watched a filmic adaptation of the same setting [4].

An investigation of the concept of the repertoire as it relates to world creation would examine the importance of drawing on the repertoire in the description of setting and determine the best methods and techniques for doing this. This could be particularly useful for fantasy writers that are self-editing their work. As previously discussed, much writing advice suggests writers cut down the number of adjectives and adverbs used, and cut down on the amount of setting description altogether. Yet if there is too little description of setting it creates a problem known as white space, where 'action and dialogue are happening, but they seem detached from the surroundings. The reader can't visualise the scene and so it loses its impact and invites skimming' (Wilkins 2011: np). Thus many writers simultaneously warn against indulging in too much description of setting, yet stress the importance of setting in creating engaging literature. Wolfgang Iser acknowledges this fine line, saying that successful texts lie between the boundaries of 'boredom and overstrain' (1974: 275). Yet these boundaries are rarely defined, and it is difficult for writers (and particularly novice writers) to know what to leave out without jeopardising the evocative depiction of their setting. Approaching the editing process from the perspective of the repertoire would help isolate words that may be already evoked by the common associations of other words in the sentence or paragraph, or by contextual associations within the work. A very basic example of this would be in the description of Ollivander's Wand Shop in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (Rowling 1997: 63). Rowling does not use the adjective 'wooden' at any point in her description of the shop, because it is unnecessary. Readers naturally presume that most of the shop and the furniture in it are made from wood, due to repertoire associations. Wood is implied in the use of adjectives such as 'spindly' (which is used to describe a chair) (Rowling 1997: 63), and by the familiar image of the 'the old English shop' that has already been evoked in this passage. In fact this evocation of a setting archetype, achieved by the use of a few brief details such as the 'faded purple cushion in the dusty window', the 'peeling gold letters over the door,' and the 'tinkling bell', does most of the work in this brief one-paragraph description to create a sense of place in the mind of the reader. Rowling also likens the shop to a 'strict library' (Rowling 1997: 63) bringing further associations of silence, cold, towering shelves, dust, and the sense of the history and secret magic of ancient books. Tapping into key images or ideas in the repertoire of a reader can be a powerful way to evoke setting in a few simple words.

While using the repertoire to generate associations is an effective way to trigger a more vivid creation of setting in the mind of the reader, it is important to note that if it is used in the wrong way, settings can become cliché, uninteresting, and formulaic. One of the ways the repertoire can be used ineffectively is illustrated by the common phrase 'show, don't tell'. This phrase is often used when giving advice on writing (Cleaver 2002; Kenigsberg 2010; Marsden 1993), though the way this advice is to be implemented can often be confusing and abstract. However, it can be related to Iser's notion that texts must allow the reader space to fill out the work and interpret it:

> The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure: boredom and overstrain represent the two poles of tolerance, and in either case the reader is likely to opt out of the game. (Iser 1978: 108)

When a writer *tells* something, what they are doing is allowing little or no space for the reader to make repertoire associations. Take for example a writer trying to create a sense of an insular, suspicious, and hostile community in a small village. The writer could simply say 'the people in the village were suspicious and hostile. It was an insular community wary of strangers.' While this might be acceptable, a more evocative way of doing this would be to *show* the nature of the setting through the behaviour of the inhabitants, the detail in the physical environment, or symbolically through the description of the light, sounds, colours, or weather in the village. This allows the reader to perceive signals or clues as to the nature of the setting, and deduce meaning from them through their knowledge of the way places and people work in the real world. While this concept of 'show, don't tell' is nothing new, Iser's concept of the repertoire offers a new way of looking at it – namely as illustrative of how the writer must allow the reader to actively participate in the creation of setting.

Another way in which the repertoire can be ineffectively used in the creation of setting is through the constant use of broad details, which can result in the feeling that the work is vague, unspecific, and false. As such, a common piece of advice given to writers is that they should include 'telling detail' in descriptions of setting and characters (Bickham 1994; Carter 1973; Lombardi 2008; Marsden 1993; Tuttle 2005). But what exactly is 'telling detail'? In the context of the repertoire and reader experience, it is probably best described by Norman Kreitman, who draws on George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory in his discussion of the importance of 'vivacity' in fiction (Kreitman 2006: 614). He argues that generalised allusions in fiction are not sufficient to inspire emotion in the reader, because the reader needs to feel that characters in a novel are specific and real in order to empathise [5]. Thus he stresses the importance of 'telling detail', which he describes as 'an attribute that differentiates between two or more taxa but has low or zero correlation with other attributes' (Kreitman 2006: 614). In other words, 'telling detail' is specific, and narrows down the number of repertoire associations the reader experiences. It gives the reader solid details to anchor on and use to produce meaning, enabling them to bring all the elements of the surrounding setting into sharper relief. Thus while more generic details in the description of Ollivander's wand shop load on all the common emotional and imagistic associations of old dusty shops and libraries, this setting may be made to feel more concrete and specific by the selection of details like the wand on the cushion or the spindly chair (Rowling 1997: 63).

On a broader level, a reader's knowledge that they are reading a fantasy novel already brings with it a repertoire of genre associations which will usually suggest medieval or magical settings to the reader, which can either be used or worked against by the writer in their description of setting. Often these genre associations are useful, as they can imbue setting with a sense of magic, secrecy, or wonder without the writer necessarily having to explicitly evoke any of these. Tuttle advocates the use of fantasy setting archetypes like dark woods and endless seas, saying that 'there is something both comforting and deeply powerful in the best symbolic landscapes' (Tuttle 2005: 49). At other times, however, these genre associations and archetypes can be subverted or contrasted with different or opposing ones to create something that is apparently new and unusual. In his fantasy novel *Sabriel* (2003), author Garth Nix creates a world where a place similar to England in the early 20th century borders a medieval land were modern technology is rendered useless by magic. At the point where these two lands meet – The Wall – words that evoke imagery of modern war (including associations with the Berlin wall and WWI) are used in the same passages as words that load the literary repertoire of the fantastic and the Gothic, to great effect:

> The Perimeter was much more successful at keeping people from Ancelstierre out of the Old Kingdom than it was at preventing things from the Old Kingdom going the other way. Anything powerful enough to cross the Wall usually retained enough magic to assume the shape of a soldier; or to become invisible and simply go where it willed, regardless of barbed wire, bullets, hand grenades and mortar bombs – which often didn't work at all, particularly when the wind was blowing from the north, out of the Old Kingdom. (Nix 2003: 26)

Yet even in fantasy that adheres to the typical medieval settings can present these in ways that avoid clichés and predictability. Tolkien emphasises the importance of 'Recovery' in fantasy, a term which he uses to signify the presentation of old imagery and ideas in new fresh ways (Tolkien 1965: 58). Advice as to how this 'recovery' could be achieved could be gleaned further exploration of the various techniques for use of the repertoire discussed above.

Iser and the concept of 'The Horizon'

Fantasy settings should not be static. Often characters are moving through a world, or discovering it, and the reader of a fantasy novel wants to know how this world works and what it looks like, just as they want to know what will happen to the character and how the narrative will unfold. Wilkins commented that in speculative fiction [6] 'so much of the pleasure of the reading experience is taken where the world-building unfolds' (Wilkins 2011: np). In fact, often knowledge of the setting is vital for the reader's understanding of the narrative. Thus setting in fantasy should be a dynamic and changing space, where the reader is constantly discovering new corners and histories of the imagined world, or changing their attitudes to places that have been previously introduced. Iser's concept of the horizon could provide guidelines for achieving this metamorphosis of setting over the course of a novel.

Iser uses the analogy of the horizon to explain the process of anticipation and retrospection that occurs while reading (1974: 278). The horizon line ahead of the reader represents their foreshadowing of what is to come in the text, and the horizon behind them represents their retrospective re-evaluation of what has come before. He argues that the reader is constantly thinking ahead while reading and guessing at the multiple possible outcomes that *might* eventuate in the narrative. This horizon is constantly changing as new information becomes available and the reader's expectations are subverted, modified, or fulfilled. Similarly the horizon behind the reader (what they have already read) is being

retrospectively modified, as they re-interpret or re-consider past events and information in light of new knowledge. 'Thus, the reader, in establishing these interrelations between past, present and future, actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections' (Iser 1974: 278).

An examination of Iser's concept of the horizon as it relates to setting in fantasy would look at how a writer, rather than aiming to introduce a comprehensive imagined world at the beginning of a narrative, might gradually and strategically introduce information about setting to create a fantasy world that is rich, complex, dynamic, and ever-changing. Setting needs to come with an 'emotional charge by being filtered through the character's perceptions' (Tuttle 2005: 53). A place in a novel may not physically change, but the character's (and thus usually also the reader's) attitude to it or understanding of it may. A reader's expectations and perceptions of place can thus be modified throughout a narrative to give the sense that the world of the text is a character in itself – a multi-dimensional personality with a wealth of undiscovered secrets, histories, and hidden corners to reveal. A prime example of the transformative possibilities of setting is demonstrated in the depiction of the manor of Obernewtyn in Isobelle Carmody's series *The Obernewtyn Chronicles*. In the first book, *Obernewtyn* (1987), the institution of Obernewtyn is a frightening, imposing, and prison-like place, but over the course of the series it becomes a haven and familiar location of safety and community for the characters. This not only creates the feeling that this place is dynamic and complex, but can also aid in instilling a feeling of nostalgia for this place in the reader, as they retrospectively reflect on what this place used to mean, and how its nature has changed throughout the book or series of books. Consider also the final novel in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), where the familiar setting of Hogwarts suddenly becomes a battleground. The very castle seems to rise up against the threat as the suits of armour are brought to life (Rowling 2007: 484) and the magical plants from the herbology greenhouses are prepared for the battle against the Death Eaters (Rowling 2007: 483). Part of the emotional impact of this sequence comes from the strong associations with Hogwarts that the reader has built up, and how this familiar place now transforms in a last stand against the threats that have lurked outside – and even inside – its walls throughout the entire series. Reading is, as Iser pointed out, a temporal experience that can be likened to the way we experience reality (Iser 1978: 68) and just as our understanding and perception of a place can change in real life through our experience of it, so can that of the imaginary places of fantasy novels. An examination of how this changing perception of place can be effectively achieved and used to strengthen a narrative would be beneficial to fantasy writers.

Iser also discussed the importance of subverting or constantly changing the reader's horizon of expectation, saying that if this was not done texts would become predictable and un-engaging (Iser 1978). He argues that 'the potential text is infinitely richer than any of its individual realizations' (Iser 1974: 280) because it has infinite possible interpretations reined in only by the written aspects of the text. As such, he believes that texts should be rife with twists and turns and unfulfilled expectations, and that the reader's expectations should be modified throughout the text. While I would argue that Iser places too much stress on this, not acknowledging that many expectations need to be fulfilled in order to offer a satisfying reading experience (particularly in genre fiction, which was not a focus of Iser's study), to some extent this 'modification of expectation' principle is important when considering fantasy settings. If the places shown in a novel are always what the reader expects (because of the various repertoire associations they have made from previous passages in the book, and from knowing the genre of the book) the world of the work risks becoming cliché and offering nothing new or unexpected for the reader to discover. Iser's concept of the subversion of expectation could be applied in the consideration of place, and lead to a clearer understanding of how perceptions and expectations of place can be both fulfilled and modified in fantasy works.

Conclusion

These two key concepts of Iser's theory – the repertoire and the horizon – appear to offer the beginnings of a valuable conceptual framework to fantasy writers who are aiming to create settings that are appealing and engaging. These settings can provide the 'specific intangible glamour' (Touponce 1984: xii) that invites immersion in the fantasy setting. This is not to say that there should be one type of fantasy world every writer should create – this would very quickly become tedious for both the reader and the writer, as many theorists argue that a large part of what makes a work stimulating for a reader is its 'newness'. However, Iser's theory could provide a set of principles and understandings to aid writers in making the unique worlds of their invention more accessible and stimulating for readers.

Writing is, of course, not an exact science. It is a creative act that can't be achieved solely by following a list of dos and don'ts, and every author has his or her own unique writing style. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of consensus among authors and critics as to what constitutes successful and engaging writing, evidenced by the multitude of writers' guidebooks and tip websites that prescribe similar lists of advice. Many critics have analysed plot, discerning an ideal structure for stories and creating diagrams showing satisfying narrative arcs. Others have listed the traits that make up interesting and appealing characters, and given advice on how to reveal these characters to a readership. In the

presence of this large body of study, the scant advice on setting and world creation that is available usually comes with more warnings than encouragements. In a culture where fast-paced action and gripping characters are paramount, the communication of setting is often associated with old-fashioned tedious writing. It is that boring 'setting of the scene' in a book – something that a film can achieve in a matter of seconds. Yet as previously stated, a strong sense of place is vital in engaging the reader, particularly within the genre of fantasy. Writers should not shy away from creating vivid imagined places and marvellous fantastic worlds, or be afraid to communicate these for fear of boring the reader. There is a need for a framework for the communication setting; one that can be developed, contested, and adapted as have those relating to plot and character. This would provide writers, and particularly novice writers, with confidence and guidance in writing fantasy worlds. Analysis of the reader's experience of imagined place – derived from Iser's reader-response theory – would bring principles already present in advice about setting construction (such as the ideas of 'show, don't tell' and 'telling detail' discussed in this article) as well as new concepts and understandings that arise from the study (such as how to effectively achieve the dynamic transformation of setting throughout a novel and the strategic use of repertoire associations) together into a conceptual framework. This could then be used and improved to provide guidance for the writing of fantasy settings.

Notes

1. However this definition of low fantasy is contentious as there is debate over whether portal fantasy (where a character travels from a real world into a fantasy world, for example in C.S. Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles*) constitutes low or high fantasy. return to text

2. For a more in depth discussion of the most prominent critical definitions of fantasy, see Fredericks (1978) (who also favours Irwin's definition of fantasy) or Petzold (1986). return to text

3. I should stress that although I am engaging Iser's basic concept of the repertoire, I am using it to different ends than those he originally intended. Iser was primarily concerned with the use of the repertoire to subvert or challenge social norms and to understand the concepts and comments on society made by literary works, rather than its use in constructing imagined place. return to text

4. For further information on the nature of imagined objects and how our mental picturing of them differs from our optical perception of real objects, see Iser's discussion of the experience of watching the filmic adaptation of a book after having read it: *The Act of Reading*, pages 136-139. return to text

5. Although Norman Kreitman used the term 'vivacity' in the discussion of character in novels, it is equally applicable to setting. return to text

6. Speculative fiction is a broad genre generally accepted as including the sub-genres of fantasy, science fiction, and Gothic texts (Wilkins 2011: np). return to text

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TEXT
Vol 15 No 1 April 2011
http://www.textjournal.com.au
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Kevin Brophy
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