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## Roll Call: Spotlight on Setting from Author/Teachers Kimberly Griffiths Little, April Lurie, and Toni Buzzeo

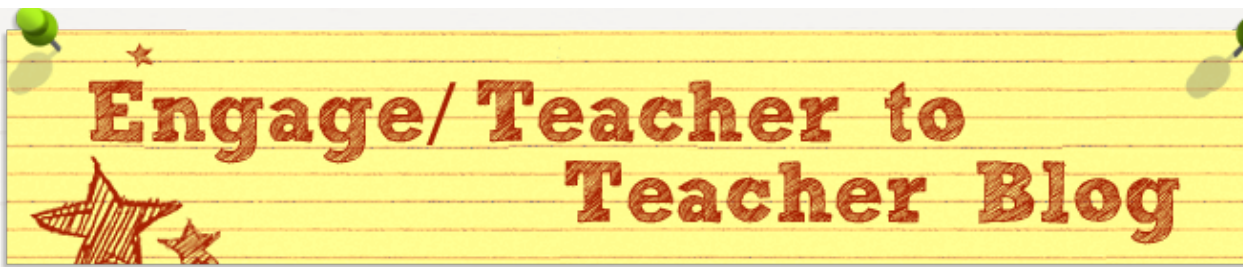
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## Spotlight on Setting

Compiled by Cynthia and Greg Leitich Smith

*Roll Call: Author/Teachers* appears quarterly on the Engage/Teacher to Teacher blog. It's brought to you by fellow author/teachers [Cynthia and Greg Leitich Smith](#). The goal? To take a closer look at the overlap between writing and teaching—from educators who are also authors.

### SETTING

Setting is more than simply a background or a stage on which the characters move. It is an integral part of story, shaping the characters and the plot, and indeed, in some cases, rising to a level of a character itself.

Here, acclaimed children's and YA author/teachers **Kimberley Griffiths Little**, **April Lurie**, and **Toni Buzzeo** share productive, fun approaches to setting they use with regard to their own manuscripts and in instructing their students.



### Deepening Character and Plot with Setting

by Kimberley Griffiths Little

When we talk to students about writing, we tend to focus on character and plot. But a story's setting is also crucial—and, when done right, can function like a character in and of itself.

Think of Harry Potter without Hogwarts. Jane Eyre without Lowood School. Katniss Everdeen without District 12.

Characters simply cannot be floating Anyplace, Someplace, I'm-Not-Sure-Where-Place. A rich setting helps create that wonderful, third-dimensional feeling necessary to transport readers into the world in which a story takes place.

Here's an exercise you can use to help your class learn how to create a setting of their own:

Ask students to think of a favorite place such as their bedroom, a park, a friend's house, a vacation they took, or their own backyard. Have them close their eyes and pretend they're there. Then, ask them these questions:

1. What does this place look like?
2. What does this place sound like?
3. What does this place smell like?
4. Is there anything here you can taste or touch? If so, describe those.

After they've completed the descriptive writing, ask them, "How does this place make you *feel*? What do you think about when you're here? What memories does this place bring to your mind? Is there something you'd love to do here that you've never done before?"

By transporting themselves into the scene, your students will learn how to bring their settings to life—and how to make readers feel as if they're actually there as they read. This automatically adds more layers to characters and conflict, too. It's also a great way to give students a new perspective of analyzing setting in the stories and novels they're reading for class!

**Kimberley Griffiths Little's** novel, *THE HEALING SPELL*, was chosen as a Bank Street College Best Books for 2011 and won The Whitney Award for the Best Youth Novel of 2010. Her new release, *CIRCLE OF SECRETS*, just received a starred review from *School Library Journal*. Download *Teacher's Guides*, view book trailers, and more at [www.kimberleygriffithslittle.com](http://www.kimberleygriffithslittle.com).

## Imagine Your World

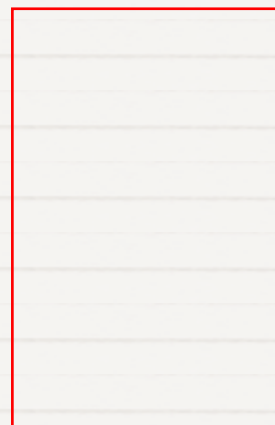
by April Lurie

All writing requires some degree of imagination. But when it comes to creating a truly fictional place—the kind that exists only in sci-fi or fantasy novels—the writer must work twice as hard to make the setting feel real to the reader.

This world-building exercise asks young writers to reach beyond the five senses, and tap into a sixth to see beyond everyday reality.

Explain to your class that their task is to create a fantastical realm where anything is possible. Start by asking them to imagine an aerial view of their world. If they're floating above the world and looking down, what do they see? What's the landscape like? What colors stand out? Are there buildings, trees, fields, houses, schools? What season is it? Is the sun casting shadows or is the sky steely gray? Are there people buzzing about or are the streets empty?

Next, ask them to get a little closer by placing their feet on the ground and taking a stroll. What's the first thing they





Tell them to run their hand along any objects they encounter on their walk. Are the hedges round and perfectly manicured, or are they wild and thorny? An animal appears at their feet. Ask them to bend down and pet it. Is its fur soft or coarse and wiry? Can you feel each bone on its rib cage, or is it a plump little thing?

Ask them to take in a deep breath, paying close attention to smells. Are there burning leaves? Wet earth? An abundance of garbage? Is the air wet and heavy with the scent of honeysuckle, or is it dry and apple-crisp?

It's time to eavesdrop on some people passing by. Are their voices hushed, guarded? Are they loud and threatening? What are they talking about? How do their voices sound?

At this point, ask your students to pay attention to their emotions. How do they feel in this world that they've created? Are they relaxed, or is their hair standing on end? Are the people welcoming or threatening?

The goal, of course, is for your young writers to capture their invented space through images, sensory perceptions, and emotions. An exercise like this gives them a palpable sense of a story's setting. They'll begin to feel the world.

For older and more experienced writers, have them do this exercise through the eyes of a specific character. Slipping on someone else's skin asks them to tackle character and point of view in addition to setting. The more detailed and descriptive, the more likely a reader can fully enter their imagined world.

*April Lurie is the author of four novels: THE LESS DEAD; THE LATENT POWERS OF DYLAN FONTAINE; BROTHERS, BOYFRIENDS, AND OTHER CRIMINAL MINDS; and DANCING IN THE STREETS OF BROOKLYN. A long-time member of the faculty of the Institute of Children's Literature, she will be joining the faculty of the Vermont College of Fine Arts in January 2012. Originally from Brooklyn, she now lives in Round Rock, Texas. Her web site is [www.aprillurie.com](http://www.aprillurie.com).*



## Walk in a Sensory World: Teaching Students to Write Setting

by Toni Buzzeo

As both a writer and a reader, I am devoted to setting. I want to see, smell, hear, taste, and touch everything about the place where a story takes place. I want to feel as if I am walking around the woods, the fields, the streets, the buildings, the universe in which the story is unfolding. At the same time, I don't want the information about setting to clobber me over the head like a fallen limb from a tree in those woods. I want to gather my impressions of the place through more subtly delivered means.

Therein lies the challenge as we teach young writers to develop settings. We are all familiar with exercises in which we ask students to describe the room they are sitting in or the world just outside the window. We may conduct this activity

as a group brainstorming session or invite individual students to create their own list of details. Either way, it's a useful place to begin.

If you haven't introduced a sensory approach to that basic activity, then you will want to refine your lesson by listing the five senses and asking the group or individual student to brainstorm by category. Ask a series of five questions, all of which begin with "What can I \_\_\_\_\_?" and end with one of the sense words.

See	Smell	Hear	Taste	Touch

If you're in the habit of analyzing literature for the skill you are teaching in your writing classroom, I'm confident that you and your students have already discovered that most fiction delivers heavily in the sight category and often less robustly in the other categories. If you find that your students share this tendency to rely on sight with published authors, revamp the exercise by using a four-column chart, deleting the sight column.

The real challenge, though, for writers comes in not delivering this sensory information as a series of statements, but rather weaving them into the text in subtle ways.

Don't stop your exploration of setting too soon! Be certain to take your students beyond those lists of words and phrases that describe the sensory details of setting. Invite them to create a few characters who move around in the sensory world of the story's setting and who experience that world as they process emotion and interact with each other. Setting described in isolation is a paint-by-number landscape. But the addition of real people whose drama unfolds in that setting gives it depth and meaning.

**Toni Buzzeo** is the award-winning author of fourteen picture books with five more forthcoming. She is also a certified school librarian and a former writing teacher who has taught writing to students in grades three through college and continues to do so as a visiting author. Her newest release is *LIGHTHOUSE CHRISTMAS*, illustrated by Nancy Carpenter. She looks forward to the January 2012 release of *ONE COOL FRIEND*, illustrated by David Small. Her web site is [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com).

**Cynthia Leitich Smith** is the acclaimed author of several books for young readers, most recently *HOLLER LOUDLY* for children and *TANTALIZE: KIEREN'S STORY* for teens. Her *Cynsations blog* is widely considered one of the best in children's/YA literature. You can also visit Cynthia at [www.cynthialeitichsmith.com](http://www.cynthialeitichsmith.com). **Greg Leitich Smith** is the award-winning author of two tween novels and a picture book. He looks forward to the release of *CHRONAL ENGINE* in March 2012. Visit Greg at [www.gregleitichsmith.com](http://www.gregleitichsmith.com).

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