A Place You Can Really Go

Some characters are alive. They have a voice, a way of standing, they have things that only they would say or do, they have blood and guts and a heart and specific teeth. Those are the best ones. It isn't the specificity that makes them alive, it's the fact that they're alive that makes you want to get specific.

Some *places* in a fictional world are alive, too. Those are also the best ones.

In some ways making comic books gives me an edge over prose writing when it comes to a living world. I don't have to tell you about a place the characters are visiting in words; I can turn the page into an I Spy game. By the way, I Spy is one of the best examples of aliveness. The worlds in I Spy aren't *reality,* but they are *alive* because they slurp your mind into them like a salmon going through one of those tubes. This is one of the advantages of the static visual page and it's an advantage that picture books and graphic novels share with any illustrated or illuminated text. Animation and film can do it too, but they have to worry about *time.* You can't linger on a visual forever in a movie, but on the graphic novel page the reader's eye isn't on a completely set path; it crawls around the page looking for text to read, then looking at the pictures. During that journey you can show absolutely anything to the eye and it's up to the eye to catch it and notice it.

Beyond worldbuilding being good for the reader, I enjoy filling up a page because it's fun for me, which is the main reason to do anything. The idea of filling up an entire project's worth of sets is still daunting, though, especially if you're only just starting to make comics. So, as I'm explaining how to do this we'll begin with a microcosm: the bedroom. Most people have one of these, and yours is a good launching-off point for how to fill the space. That's reference. Every time you visit someone else's bedroom that's also reference.

A bedroom has high character potential because every decision about the room reflects something of the character of its inhabitant, even a *lack* of decisions about the room. The bedroom of a 40-year-old single female doctor who is obsessed with painting the sun but can't spend enough time away from work to justify renting studio space is going to be very different from a college dorm shared by two roommates who are secretly dating one another.

The doctor who loves the sun has a large, open room with big windows; she would have had the money to pay for it. She probably has a skylight. She runs a tight ship, but everything needs to be arranged for her mania to take hold at any moment, so the room is full of canvases sitting upright and paint water cups full of carmine and ochre water. The water catches the afternoon light that pours into this room. Maybe she sometimes gets into bed spotty with paint and she leaves the sheets streaky with it. Maybe her wood floors are ruined. Maybe she loves old stained glass, but her house is new, so she's got a bunch of reclaimed stained-glass panels sitting in her windows to catch the sunlight.

When you add a level of fantasy to your story you just add something on *top* of the existing level of character: if that dorm room we talked about earlier is in wizard city, where every window is made of blue glass because it's the only kind that repels magic, then the roommates who are secretly dating are not only going to be sharing a single crock pot; they're also going to have a big cage with a phoenix in it that they stole from the pyromancy lab because one of them wants to release it and the other wants to use it for dark magic.

At this point I think I've revealed my hand. It's exactly the same as writing a character. If you're not making an environment that's as important and revealing as the main character's bedroom you can use the same tricks to imbue it with a sense of aliveness. You can do this with the windows of an apartment building or houses on a street; the person who lives in this house in the background loves violets. The person who lives in *that* house doesn't love anything. What are the details that follow from that? What does the person who lives in that house *hate?* We're in a classroom. The teacher hates one of his students. What does that student's desk look like? Moreover, what does the person who uses this room or lives in this house *need?* Does the house need to have one floor so you can roll a wheelchair in there? Does it need to be clean? Is the space actually *working* for the person using it? If it doesn't, is that person just trying to get along without altering the space to fit them, overextending themselves, or do they insist on making an impression on it, making it work for them? Do they have the money to do that? Do they have the time? Questions like this also depend on the tone of your project but seeing them pop up regardless of tone is one of the things that brings color to the cheeks of a world.

It's not difficult to do this with characters we've never seen, either. Our main character is visiting a building and the building needs to be *interesting.* The person who designed it loved fish. Now the building has a lot of ways to be interesting. When we're talking about nature or the way nature acts upon a human-made area, this way of thinking switches modes away from humans and their desires. We're thinking about character as history and circumstance now: this wooded area became swampy fairly recently. A lot of the trees either can't hold onto the loose ground, or they rot from the roots and fall. Because of that, there are a lot of bugs and frogs here. Because of *that*, in the spring you can hear them singing. If a city is on the waterfront and you want to have a secret underground city beneath it, you'd better think about how they're keeping the water out (or failing to keep the water out). This isn't because it's *required,* it's because thinking about that is *fun!*

Once we have an idea and a direction, your job becomes filling your mind with references, which has never been easier now that we're all online. It's easy to find a microscopic photo of a butterfly egg to create a building on another planet, but, blessedly, it's also easy to fill a normal world with things because looking at a world full of things has never been more possible. Becoming a collector of references is almost the easy part.

People and nature are both complicated, so it's important to add something unexpected to the scenes you're showing to your viewer or your reader. That's why this essay ends with ✂