



THE MAGIC'S IN THE DETAILS

by Sylvie Kurtz

As a writer works, she constantly makes choices. She can't show everything in a scene, but she needs to show enough to trigger the reader's imagination into creating pictures. Why do you want to trigger images? Because images make the reading experience vivid and immediate. They drop your reader into the scene--right where you want her to be.

Let's say I use the word flower. What pops into your mind? The picture is probably going to be something vague, because your mind unconsciously asks the question, "What kind of flower?" Then it runs through all the flowers it's ever encountered--sunflowers, daisies, gardenias. Now, if I say yellow rose, isn't the picture that pops in your mind much more vivid? That's because the brain knew exactly which file picture to retrieve. There's a huge difference between a Pekinese, a poodle, and a Portuguese water dog. It's not just a house; it's a split-level ranch.

"On the left, a Stick-style Victorian with a wraparound porch glared through the murk like some sort of movie set haunted house. Orange fairy lights dripped from the eaves. Giant glow-in-the-dark spiders and webs clung to the decorative trusses. A life-size mummy with arms outstretched seemed poised to lumber out of the six-foot tall black coffin leaning against the oak by the front walk. On the lawn, strobes blasted on and off at intervals, lighting up red-eyed bats, moaning zombies and shrieking gargoyles. There were enough special effects to make a Hollywood techie jealous." From *Pull of the Moon*.

"Perspiring even though the air conditioner was on Max, I took the next exit without even consulting the map on the seat beside me. I drove through a sleepy town of redbrick buildings that seemed oddly familiar. The feeling increased tenfold a quarter mile later when I spied a cluster of ranch buildings perched on top a hill that overlooked acres of white fence." From *Detour*.

As you write, go for strong verbs. Notice how there's a degree of meaning within a verb. Take walk, for example. Walk is a good active verb, but you can make it work harder by choosing a degree of walking to also imbue the sentence with emotion. Someone who ambles implies that he has plenty of time on his hands. He's not rushed. Someone who strides is going somewhere with purpose. He's in a hurry to get where he's going. My absolute favorite reference book is *The Synonym Finder* by J.I. Rodale. It helps me find the precise word I want rather than settling for the next-best word. If I look up walk, I find: step, ambulate, perambulate, stride, pace, tread, stroll, saunter, amble, slog, trudge, plod, shamle, shuffle, lurch, stagger, wobble, waddle, sidle,

slink, mince, tiptoe, advance, proceed, wend. Can you see how each of those words creates a different picture? A different mood? A different sensation? Can you see how much stronger a sentence with *slink* will be than one that uses the plain *is walking* in a suspenseful scene? This precision is what you want to aim for to create "live" stories for your reader.

"Below him water hurtled over rocks and crashed over pilings. Defenseless, hands up at his sides, flash drive and handheld computer cupped in his palm, he took easy steps forward." From *Eye of a Hunter*.

"Before Faith's exhausted body could react, Tara jerked her into the room and slammed the door shut, locking it. The force of Tara's pull launched Faith across the room. She crashed against her father's bed and sprawled on the floor." From *Honor of a Hunter*.

Filter descriptions through your character's viewpoint. A nanny would view a living room differently than a burglar. A nanny would notice the sharp corners, the unprotected plugs, and the poisonous plant. The burglar would home in on the electronics he can carry out and escape routes.

"She stepped into his apartment, expecting a wall of electronics and a roomful of big-boy toys. She placed a hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp. The couch groaned with a pile of stuffed animals, disposable diapers and formula. Instead of the odor of sweaty socks and week-old dishes, the aroma of baby powder wafted through the room." From *Mask of a Hunter*.

"The second floor bathroom of the Constance Gramercy School for Girls was crowded as usual. I elbowed my way to the mirror and puckered up to see if the zit I'd felt growing on my chin in social science had popped up. Wouldn't you know it, the timing sucked. I had a horse show in the morning." From *Ms. Longshot*.

Use the five senses. Characters don't just see and hear; they feel, smell, and taste, too.

"Colin stared at Jakob. The propeller clock, ticking loudly on the wall, stretched each second into minutes. The smell of aviation gas and grease dizzied him. The distant whir of engines buzzed in his mind like lazy drones. As the background blurred, Jakob's face came into sharp focus. And the wild look in his eyes, the desperation etched in every line on the craggy face showed Colin a man who'd lost his hold on reality." From *Broken Wings*.

"The odors were different, too. The crisp air smelled like ironed sheets and the coldness of it shrank her lungs so that she had to open her mouth to breathe. She wrapped both arms around her middle, wishing for the comfort of the four walls of the room she had just left." From *Heart of a Hunter*.

Cut out vagaries and generalization. Vague labels like people need specification. Who are these people? A Marine creates a more vivid picture than soldiers. Mustard means more than condiment. A red wine stain has more impact than a spill. Be as specific as possible to give your reader the clearest picture you can.

"The Special Operations Group was twenty-six hours into a situation with the escaped felon. He'd taken his ex-girlfriend and her four-year-old boy as live body armor to buy his freedom once the deputy marshals tasked with bringing him back to prison had cornered him." From *Pride of a Hunter*.

"Caesar and Brutus, the German shepherd guards, were chowing down on Benadryl-laced hunks of moose. Tommy had spent months priming them to override their training to be fed only by their handler--whose own free lunch had proved soporific. When he woke up, he wouldn't tell. Not if he wanted to keep his job. Tommy smirked. And where else was there to work in this butt-end-of-nowhere town except for the Camdens?" From *Spirit of a Hunter*.

As you revise, pick and choose, seeking the most powerful detail to create a mood, make an impression, paint a picture, and bring life and meaning to your scene. If a character walks down a hall, don't describe the floor unless the holey carpet adds something essential to the scene. Describe what's important to what's happening and leave out the rest.

Too many details numb the brain. Too little makes for boring reading.

Creating a living scene is a matter of balance.

Attention to detail will help transport your reader into your fictional world, making it as real as the chair in which he's sitting.

© 2009