Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Location, location, location: where do writers write?

Do writers differ from estate agents when it comes to where they work? Very probably. For estate agents, location is just one factor in the pursuit of their aims, albeit a key one, but I am prepared to stick my neck out and say writers are not their primary professional target constituency.

Of all the W's that govern the behaviour and techniques of writers, journalists, story tellers and generally those who write (who, what ,why, when, where), possibly "where" is paid least attention.

Or is the sense of "place" actually a crucial factor in a good narrative and a crucial part of the writer's journey?

The American "Black Mountain" poet Robert Creeley said that "the necessary environment is that which secures the artist in the way that lets him be in the world in a most fruitful manner".

Creeley personally preferred "secure quiet". But writers have diverse and varied preferences about where they find their comfort zone.

A range of chosen venues

The poet Robert Graves only worked in a room that contained objects made by hand. Benjamin Franklin somehow wrote in his bathtub.

Honoré de Balzac ate an enormous dinner at 5pm, slept until midnight, then wrote in a seamless robe for 16 hours straight.

Marcel Proust spent his formative years as a flaneur ("stroller") around the chicer parts of early 20th century Paris until his failing health - occasional bouts of asthma and a hefty dose of hypochondria - drove him to the bowels of his bed, where he wrote his masterpiece, "A la recherche du temps perdu" in isolation from external events and the extraordinary characters he drew from French upper class society he satirised and mocked relentlessly.

He did this hilariously for a sickly young repressed homosexual in my view, but some might disagree with me.

The poet WB Yeats acknowledged that although he was largely brought up in London, his inspiration was Ireland, with its scenery and folklore.

He eventually bought a ruined castle in Galway, Ireland, where he had the only robust remaining part - a tower - renovated to rotate to follow the sun, where he wrote much of his poetry.

Virginia Woolf followed her own dictum and found a "Room of One?s Own", where she allegedly preferred to write standing up.

Legend has it that she did it as a campaign of sibling rivalry with her sister, who was a sculptor and probably for her, standing up was a requirement rather than a choice. Woolf must have been fiercely competitive.

JK Rowling famously wrote the Harry Potter series in a café in Edinburgh, which had panoramic views of the city's gothic horrors or romantic beauty, depending on your attitudes towards that city's architecture and atmosphere.

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A friend prefers writing on a train. She likes the "limbo" of the train's atmosphere, but also finds inspiration from the presence of others; snippets of conversation and the endless supply of imagined destinations and purposes.

Some would argue that when the writer becomes fully engaged with their work, the relevance of location becomes irrelevant.

Or in fact, they could be subconsciously tuning in to external factors, such as music, uncontrollably noisy animals or other factors that affect the senses.

Or a car backfiring. Or a passing estate agent wondering whether the writer wants to sell their possibly intriguing property.

American author Richard Russo went further, and concluded that writers needed "a psychic place where you need to be to do your best work".

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When the writer Joan Didion neared completion of one of her works, she slept with her manuscript, because she considered that "the book doesn?t leave you when you're asleep right next to it".

It was also within reach if she awoke in the night and wanted to make any changes. That's assiduous and dedicated, but she clearly slept badly.

The variety of examples of writers preferred environments suggest the eternal variety of human preferences, and leaves me with no informed conclusions.

There are several blogs on line authored by people who tend to recommend above all, "tidiness" and "comfort", Which leads me to think, "I'm not reading anything you write".

Some of the examples I've offered suggest that people and places are inseparable, even if you write standing up. I'll just end with an axiom: place is not an object. It's a subject. It all depends on how you treat it.