Six Tips for Writing about Place

1. Remember, ‘place’ is an elastic term: it could mean “Kingston” or “Bear Mountain” or “the back corner of the garden at Springwood where I saw that goldfinch.”

2. When describing a place, you can emphasize features that are typical or focus on those that are unique to that place.

3. There’s no need to describe a place the way your audience expects. Your experience in a place is shaped by your memories, feelings, and perspective.

4. Use location as your starting point: begin with a tight focus on some object or person that’s significant to the story and then pan out, giving a broader and broader description of the location. You could start with an abandoned half-drunk coffee, and then describe the diner, the street, the city. Or start with a panoramic wide screen and zoom in, using larger features to identify the place (whether it’s ‘Albany’, ‘the Catskills’, or ‘the farm’) with tighter and tighter focus on your character or event.

5. Don’t feel you have to explain everything – or anything – for readers who may be unfamiliar with the place you are describing. Name the street or landmark confidently and move on. If a reader doesn’t know what ‘Huguenot Street’ or ‘the old lighthouse’ means, let her or him figure it out.

6. Place can be used as a method of characterization. The way a character feels about a particular place, and the associations they have with it, can show what sort of person s/he is. (If you write from the first person, it may also show the kind of person YOU are.)

Adapted from Top Ten Tips for Writing about Place by Australian writer Kerryn Goldsworthy, 2013, SA Writers Centre.