Grounding & Verismilitude

- How much grounding to you need for your genre?
- Grounding is mostly something to do when you revise.
- Details you find to place your story may give ideas for more scenes or plot points.

Verisimilitude and grounding are things I find myself querying in student work a lot. They are not about "realistic" or "natural." Rather, it's whatever it takes to make a reader believe what they are reading and whatever lets us know when and where we are. Verismilitude means "the appearance of reality." Does it seem true? Does the character seem 15 years old? Does she really seem like someone who has been homeless for two years? Grounding has to do with putting the reader's feet on the ground of a particular decade or distant planet. In my science fiction books I have (not terribly originally) made the planet have two suns, one pink and one blue. This makes me conscious of what color the shadows in the desert are, and this in turn helps keep me on that planet in my story and imagery.

Some very quotidian things readers usually need are things like characters' approximate ages; what the characters look like (this can be very minimal–"his greasy red hair"; what century or world we are in. You may be quite general here--"Long ago and far away"-- and you may choose to leave a lot of uncertainty, but you still need to tie things down concretely so the reader doesn't drift.

In a novel I wrote that takes place in part during the second world war, I did a little light research with a box of crumbling newspapers at my mother's house. I found a nineteen forties newspaper and, since I'd given the main character a job in a movie theater, I thought I could find what movies were playing and what movie stars. She was a teen-ager, and the movie stars gave me the idea of comparing the stars to the real men and boys in her life. around her. So my research, slight as it was, helped develop character and story line as well as getting a few facts straight. It gave me more: I found an ad for a brand new floor model radio that I added to the décor of an affluent family's house. I also was reminded that women (and men) in the 1940's wore hats! Not only did people wear hats, but women were indulging that year in a style called a "picture hat" which had a huge round rim that was supposed to show off your pretty face. This gave me a scene in which the main character has trouble getting into a car because of her hat.

This is small stuff, but small stuff is precisely what grounds your reader. The things we touch and eat and sit on and wear are for novelists also what fuels our imaginations. It doesn't matter where the details come from, but if you don't have them, the grandest architectonics and the most gripping plot will feel sketchy and incomplete. The world of your novel will feel like someone's personal fantasy rather than a vivid fantasy world we can all imagine being part of.

Versimilitude and grounding in time: Pacing is one of the trickiest parts of creating verisimilitude. Most of us just depend on our experience as readers to know how long a scene should take or how much to include, but as you revise, try to be thoughtful about your illusions. Sometimes it is enough to say, "Ten years passed...." Or, at the end of a struggle, the hero gets knocked out, there's some white space, and he wakes up and tries to figure out where he is.

More difficult is figuring out how long the struggle should go on to make it seem real but also to give an overview of what is happening. You want it to be very clear what is happening even if the character is drugged or confused! Good luck with that...

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Timeless ~ Contemporary ~ Various amounts of detail for realism ~ Historical ~ Futuristic ~ Science fiction

(Once upon a time...)   (When is now?)   (How much do you need?)   (Regency, 1860, 1929, 2021)   (2030 - 2050?)   (3114?)