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A VIEW FROM THE ROOF

Caroline S. McKinney

All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay.
So with my eyes I traced the line
Of the horizon, thin and fine,
Straight around till I was come
Back to where I'd started from;
And all I saw from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood.
Over these I could not see:
These were the things that bounded me; And I could
touch them with my hand, Almost, I thought, from
where I stand.

From "Renaissance" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

When I was a child growing up in Texas, I would daily seek high places from which to observe the miles of open space that surrounded our isolated country home. Mimosa and oak trees dotted our land, but only one of them made for good climbing, and even it was too small to serve my purposes. So, I began to sneak to the barn where a series of strategically nailed pieces of wood allowed me to quickly climb to the roof. There, flattened against the rough steamy shingles, I would stare out to space and wait for something to happen. Nothing did. I found myself filling the empty spaces with imaginary events and people. I didn't know it then, but realized many years later that I was seeking perspective by changing my setting, believing that the

higher I could go, the more I could see and understand.

Young children seek out changing perspective all the time. They jump up and down on the bed, enjoying the changing view from short to tall. They stand on their heads, dangle by their knees upside down from tree limbs, leap in the air to touch something out of reach, sit on a parent's shoulders to see above the crowd. Children climb garden walls, seek out bridges, make their way up rocks and boulders and teeter precariously, embracing the new perspective.

One of the Newbery Honor books this year, *Getting Near to Baby* by Audrey Couloubis, features that most unusual of settings, a roof. The characters, Willa Jo and Little Sister, spend the entire novel on the roof while the story of their journey from their emotionally exhausted mother's home to Aunt Patty's and Uncle Hob's unfolds. The roof is a refuge for the almost thirteen-year-old Willa Jo, who feels abandoned and unloved, and it becomes a place for seeking solace through watching the dependable sunrise.

In the first few pages, Willa Jo waits for the sun: "A thin rim of orange-red, so deep and strong my heart almost breaks with the fierceness of that color. Moment by moment, there is more of it to see. So hot and bright, I cannot look but at the edges. Even when I look away, look clear away to the waning edge of darkness, I can see that color in my mind's eye, feel it beating in my very blood. I breathe color" (2).

The roof provides a remote setting that gives Willa Jo a kind of power that she has never known in her childhood. From the roof she can challenge Aunt Patty and Uncle Hob. If they want to reconnect with her, understand her, have a conversation with her, they must find a way to come onto the roof. She won't come to them. On the roof she is able to embrace the hopeful colors of the sunrise. On the roof, she can see the comings and goings of the much gossiped about neighbors and wish for her real family.

She can get away from the well-intentioned perfectionism and bossiness of her aunt. Most of all, perched above the earth, she can remember what it was like before she came to live in this house with plastic runners on the floors. She can long for her mother, grieve the loss of her baby sister, and gradually build perspective.

"I look out over the countryside, like I am enjoying the view. Aunt Patty has been thinking things over for three or four minutes. For three or four minutes it has been nearly peaceful out here once more" (24).

Although Willa Jo isn't able to provide a reason for being on the roof top, she senses that there is something to find there. She's correct. It is up on that somewhat dangerous place that she tackles her anger, creates some personal power, allows remembrance, confronts her aunt and uncle, finds illumination, and, ultimately, finds acceptance and resolution.

My experience with this book has allowed me to look at setting in different ways. When teaching children's literature (in elementary classrooms or at the university) I have spent relatively little time on setting as a literary element. The various textbooks have provided adequate definitions, sturdy ones that are concrete and useful. For example, David Russell (1997) explains: "The setting refers to the time, the geographical place, the general environment and circumstances that prevail in a narrative. Every story must happen some time and in some place. The setting helps to establish the mood of a work of fiction" (59).

Zena Sutherland (1997) describes setting as

"the time and place of the action" and further explains that "books for younger children are most comprehensible when their settings are familiar and within the child's limited experience" (27).

Thus, armed with basic definitions, students have been able to dutifully note where and when the action takes place within a story. Some discussion time is spent on how setting impacts character, influences plot, serves as a backdrop or becomes integral to a story. Students often note the word choices found in descriptions of setting, and frequently discover that children's literature provides beautiful and memorable language to create vivid images of settings.

... there is a sense of discovery that setting is not always fixed, but rather, becomes fluid, as the characters change their views of themselves within the setting.

However, setting deserves an even closer scrutiny. *Getting Near to Baby* offers a rare opportunity to follow the development of perspective and growth in a character who *stays literally in one place*. In so doing, there is a sense of discovery that setting is not always fixed, but rather, becomes fluid, as the characters change their views of themselves within the setting. Initially, Willa Jo's setting is a place of withdrawal where she may watch the sunrise and remove herself physically from a relationship over which she seems to have no control. It is within that same setting, on the same day, that her view changes. She discovers the power of connection, of acceptance and healing as she begins to see outward and inward. By the end, she sees the world and her place in it quite differently than before.

This is intriguing for readers and writers to contemplate. With "reader's eyes" we can seek those passages that describe changes in perspective within setting. With "author's eyes" we can examine the craft involved in creating settings that provide perspective. For example, another Newbery Honor Book, Richard Peck's *A Long Way from Chicago* (1998) opens with a prologue in which the narrator explains:

"It was always August when we spent a week with our grandma. I was Joey then, not Joe; Joey Dowdel, and my sister was Mary Alice. In our first visits we were still just kids, so we could hardly see her town because of Grandma. She was so big, and the town was so small."

My students and I will have conversations about that early passage, and we will read again *Tar Beach* (1991) and *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992), relishing how the characters find a different view once they are on a roof or seeing from above. We can take a second look at *Something Beautiful* (1998) and recognize that the young girl's neighborhood can become beautiful, even though she never leaves it. Her story begins: "When I look through my window, I see a brick wall. There is trash in the courtyard and a broken bottle that looks like fallen stars." At the end she has cleaned up the trash and sees her world and herself through new eyes.

We'll pull out an old favorite of mine, *Fanny's Dream* (1996), and marvel that within the 32 pages of this picture book, Fanny doesn't have to leave home to find her Prince. Sitting in her garden, looking down at the mayor's house, she has had her Cinderella dreams, but chooses to stay and marry the faithful Heber. Many years later, back in her garden, she finds her Fairy God Mother, but no longer needs her. She looks out over the valley and realizes she has a different perspective in the form of hard won wisdom.

We will revisit *Amelia's Road* (1993) and marvel that Amelia, the daughter of migrant farm workers, had too many roads to travel:

"Amelia Luisa Martinez hated roads. Straight roads. Curved roads. Dirt roads. Paved roads. Roads leading to all manner of strange places, and roads leading to nowhere at all. Amelia hated roads so much that she cried every time her father took out the map" (1).

Amelia gains perspective and a sense of place when she discovers her own "accidental" road, and creates a sense of peace and acceptance within the lonely world of constant travel and physical labor in fields belonging to someone else.

In writing and talking about setting and personal response to text we will consider questions such as:

- What do you think you will remember about some of the settings of your life (so far)? Connecting with *Getting Near to Baby*: What might Willa Jo remember about her day on the roof many years from now?
- Are there places you have returned to and discovered that, although the place had not changed, you had? When Willa Jo goes to her "real home" again, how might she view it?
- Is there a place where you do your best thinking? Or a place that holds particular meaning for you? When you are there do you find perspective?
- How necessary is it to "go on a journey" or change settings in order to gain new perspectives?
- Do you gain more insights and understandings about yourself in relationship to "the world" by a larger view (such as from a mountain top) or from a smaller, cozy place (in a cabin in the woods etc.)?
- As you read about one of these characters, what perspective do you wish you could give to the main character?

... self knowledge isn't always dependent on a change of setting, but sometimes happens by sitting very still, in one place, and seeing anew what has been there all along.

Weaving discussions of setting into teaching and literary analysis can be much richer when we consider the relationship between setting and gaining perspective. Our classroom libraries already include books that offer "mirrors" of our familiar worlds and "windows" to view the different lives of others. There is also a place for a closer look at those extraordinary books which provide individual perspective; those books that allow a child to look out upon endless horizons and fill the open spaces with understandings about his or her place within smaller

and larger worlds. That kind of self knowledge isn't always dependent on a change of setting, but sometimes happens by sitting very still, in one place, and seeing anew what has been there all along.

Then the view may become what Edna St. Vincent Millay describes in the often quoted lines from the last passages of "Renaissance":

"The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,
No higher than the soul is high."

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About the Author

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