

As long as I have been writing fiction that is focused on its characters – the past seven years or so – I have been, or tried to be, aware of both the people around me, and of myself within the rush. How we act, react, interact – to our environment; around, to, and with each other; and the circumstances of our lives. If the goal of fiction is to find something true about the human condition through fictional representations, as I believe it is, then the closer to true life these fictions become, the closer to real people the characters can portray, and the closer to humanity the work.

In this pursuit, interacting with and observing other people – friends, family, strangers – is of unparalleled value. Of course, this can be done on city streets, in a neighborhood café, even within an isolated family; many good novels have been written about family dynamics. But to assume that such microcosms fully encapsulate the world in miniature is an oversimplification. Yes, there are certain aspects of civilization that all people share, but knowing which of these are parallels and which are not is not so easily assumed. I am always slightly disoriented when I first arrive in a new city, which used to bother me, but I have found that all cities – though cars may drive on the left or have street signs in an unfamiliar alphabet – have crosswalks and street names and city blocks, and that with a map, I can find my way.

And yet there are details you couldn't possibly know about a certain place without being there yourself, and details about yourself you couldn't possibly know without breaking outside the walls of your comfort zone. The Great Wall is literally covered with

carved graffiti, for example. The strange juxtaposition of having two or three Hong Kong tailors per block try to get you inside their shop, against merchants in a Beijing hudong (market) physically pulling you by the arm toward their stall, against a shop owner in Beijing cheerfully yelling “Hello!” and “Goodbye!” to me out of the excitement of being able to speak a couple words in English to a native speaker. The way swallows fly in whirlwinds, like tornadoes, catching insects; the streets that are lined with ginkgo trees; the smell and feel – the weight – of the humid Hong Kong air, and the green-hued color of its harbor. These are the kinds of details travel guides don’t tell you, and the sorts of things someone else couldn’t necessarily tell you because everyone notices and is affected by different things.

First-person narrative in fiction has to be aware of the self, but in any writing, the author’s self comes through in the voice and style, so the way that you may be changed in another place can be just as important to the experience. The extreme sense of isolation I felt while in China – due in part to the language barrier – was unexpected. While in Beijing, I felt a space between me and all the people of things I couldn’t say. That they couldn’t understand. Many of them do a wonderful job with English, despite their limitations, and I wanted to reciprocate that effort. Still, in any conversation (or at least an exchange of words), we would reach a point of smiles and shrugged shoulders when we arrived at the banks of this river and could go no further, standing on opposite shores. There is a loneliness in this: walking through any public space and knowing that I wasn’t able to communicate with the people around me. An isolation of incommunicable words, an alienation beyond my appearance. The word 'communicate' comes from 'commune' – there, I was as alone as these peoples' understanding of English made me.

Travel of any kind always opens my eyes to the world in ways that can do nothing other than have a positive effect on my writing. For all the reasons noted above – understanding other people, understanding myself, observing the world’s oddities and a place’s uniqueness. And the further from home I go, the stronger the effect; Hong Kong and China were by leaps and bounds the farthest I have gone ... and I had already considered myself a traveler.