

I HAVEN'T IMMERSSED MYSELF in a Hudson-method mediation session yet... but I think I get the idea of the telling detail, deftly placed. I also appreciate that it is the duty of writers to be intensely aware of the world they inhabit, in all its textures and shapes and sizes and sounds and colours and smells, hoovering up experience, filtering, cataloguing, storing.

But it's what you do with it that counts, I suspect... and Session 8 is making me question some fundamental assumptions. Having read all the extracts, including the sensory ones, and absorbed the podcast and video, I initially felt a sense of frustration. Coming into this session, I was looking to the answers to lots of questions... and I began to feel that they weren't going to be addressed.

Questions like this: does each scene in a novel need the equivalent of an establishing shot in a film? For instance, a word-portrait of a place, or a topology or a cityscape or a crowd scene or a lively interior or even something as numinous as a sense of atmosphere.

And, once you've done that, do you switch to a second-order of descriptive technique? To pursue the film analogy, do you then concentrate on cut-away shots and close-ups and direction notes amplifying nuances of dialogue?

In that context, I was hoping we might get some sort of guidance as to the stylistic options we might consider when choosing our descriptive palette.

So I was perplexed when I'd read to the end of the *Manhattan Beach* extract, because there's no objective, detached scene-setting here. This is description, I thought, merely in the sense that it's text without dialogue. I assumed description was primarily about painting word pictures; but here we have the description principally of *activity*, a breathless (almost literally) psychological drama described from the inside looking out... and while there's lots of vivid language on show, lots of brilliant detail, lots of specificity in terms of the kit involved and how it looks and feels and sounds, the sense of jeopardy engendered here vastly outweighs any ambient evocation.

I suppose I had a preconceived notion of description as something objective and detached; or, if not entirely detached, then subtly coloured (the pathetic fallacy for instance) by suggestive narrative techniques. I suppose I also had a notion that the description of action, for a number of reasons, should be used sparingly and that it was the framework within

which the story sits. Too much description of action, I assumed, pushed you towards a *summarising* style – what the cat did next after it had sat on the mat.



THEN A PENNY DROPPED – prolonged description of activity works if it is relentlessly observed in all its most intimate detail and if we successfully convey the extent to which characters are absorbed in it. So the main lesson I'll take from this extract is that I should think of description in more integrated and organic terms. (While also being mindful of the notion that in most of our opening chapters we could have worked harder in anchoring events in a sense of place.)

I should perhaps be less formulaic, more broad-minded, I should think beyond inflexible notions of cinematic establishing shots; and also perhaps realise that if people are busy, their busy-ness creates and defines the space around them.

I also take on board, in reading the *Exit West* extract, the notion that there's an argument to be made for times when descriptive effects should be dialled down. Less really can be more.

I'll be honest – the first time I read this, I thought it was wholly unremarkable, bland in conception and, here and there, clumsily phrased, while also tending towards some of the stylistic faults we're so often warned against. There isn't much colour here and what there is – a jugular notch, a tawny oval, a subsonic vibration, a controlled rumble – tends to be applied in shades of unexciting pastel.

And then I began warming to it – what I initially saw as dullness I now appreciate as restraint. Now and then we're offered extracts that are, to say the least, meretricious, devised (you begin to suspect) for a readership with a tiny attention span – and I don't always find them entirely to my liking.

It would, then, be rank hypocrisy if I now turned around and decried Hamid for the subtlety of his effects.