

Tell Your Story Walking: Location in Locative Literature

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I'm always disappointed when I see a band play the song the way I heard it in my living room. Whether it's in a pub, a concert hall, or giant-sized festival stage it has to be more than a listening experience. I want something I can raise up and pour over my head. It's not just for my ears. Like a Hobnob in a hot brew, I want to dunk all my other senses in it too. I want to mangle the lyrics of songs I've (partially, sometimes horribly) memorised and hurl them back at the artist. Call me greedy, but I want value for the time and effort taken to nurture that small but necessary bit of love. I want to see the band *play*, feel the bass in my chest, and taste the joy, or sorrow and everything in between. I still have Charlie Burchill's guitar pick from a [Simple Minds concert \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7XZPhgmTaw\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7XZPhgmTaw). I know exactly where I keep it and where and when I got it, but couldn't tell you the last time I listened to one of their songs in earnest (though finding the link did make me nostalgic).

I love reading. Screen, page, cereal box, it matters not. I throw myself at it. If a story expects me to get off my arse and engage with it in its own environment, there better be good reason. Locative literature, the name most commonly given to in-situ story telling, takes the reading experience and lets the reader wallow (or paddle, depending on the story) in the physical dimensions of its setting. Locative literature is, as you would expect, a synthesis of characteristics of oral story telling traditions, city walks, and serialised fiction. These stories aim to take their reader to the place and time and drop them in it.

Regardless of their nature, great stories want for the same basic elements: characters, conflict, premise, plot, and so on, but they all happen some where at some time. Setting is an all-encompassing must-have in storytelling. Well-crafted settings carry the reader to their world, inspire emotional tone, and affect the characters – they can also take a dramatic role. At the very least, even when it doesn't really matter (I'm

looking at you Edgar Allan Poe and your *Tell-Tale Heart*), a story has to happen in a place. If the reader engages with the story in that particular place, there has to be more. And fortunately, in most cases, they usually do.

Locative literature projects can cast long shadows on the pavements tread to get through them, where others will disappear in the space of a frosty breath. I'm going to tell you about some now. It feels sexy to say I'll be taking you to New York, Edinburgh, Oslo and Melbourne, but in doing so I will only highlight the classic premise and fundamental tension in locative literature – it really is one of those things when you have to be there.

Today, the practice of presenting a story in its most relevant physical environment, and augmenting it with digital tools and techniques, has become inordinately sophisticated. Take *[murmur]* (<http://murmurtoronto.ca>), an audio documentary project that collects and presents stories told by residents in specific locations. Launched in Toronto in 2003, the project spread to Vancouver, Montreal, San Jose, Edinburgh (2007), Dublin (2007), and Geelong (2009). Using mobile phones and a website, it captures locals' experiences of a locale. Places you've been or recognise are given pinpoint depth and texture. The project seems (quite unfairly) antiquated alongside contemporaries such as Craig Mod's *Hi* (<https://hi.co/>), with its stylish sophistication and reach (you may also like Jonathon Safran Foer's *Cultivating Thought* (<http://cultivatingthought.com/>), but they do the same thing, bring a very personal view of the world to your doorstep.

In this context *[murmur]* is hardly old. Locative literature has, Jason Farman (<http://jasonfarman.com/>) argues, been around since Christian pilgrims began walking the Stations of the Cross. Before disruptive tech even opened the door to physical/virtual interplay, a plethora of variations were popular. From *Jane Austen's Bath* to *Greenwich Village* (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/art-and-culture/best-of-art-and-culture/content/travel-tips-and-articles/top-10-literary-walking-tours-of-the-world>), Lonely Planet regularly update their literary walking tour guide. Their list does not include the *Secret Edinburgh* (<http://www.rebustours.com/tour-name-changed/>) tour (by Rebustours), which juxtaposes Ian Rankin's hard-drinking detective's best with works of Sir Walter Scott, Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson. Thanks to sneak peaks from forthcoming novels and irregular but frequent appearances by Rankin, the tour was, for a little while at least, the second most popular tourist attraction in Edinburgh, after the Castle. The combination of settings and the added extras proved deliciously attractive to the crime writer's expansive fan base.

Edinburgh is also home to imaginative variations of the form. *Ghost Walks* (<http://www.cityofthedeadtours.com/>), or their thematic relatives, can be found in many cities and tourist destinations – the famous cellblock audio tour of Alcatraz is just one example. Whether literary, religious, historical or supernatural, these walks tend to have a guide (even if its an electronic one) and often draw on elements of physical theatre to imbue dynamic sense of drama to their locative and literary nature, such as actors in Roman costumes; paid performers reading the relevant author's poetry; and dressed up 'ghosts' flitting through shadowy graveyards. These works are most commonly driven by enterprise, celebration (spiritual or otherwise), or entertainment – or all three. Sarah Winter's performance artwork, *Library for the End of the World* (<http://www.sarahwinter.com.au/#!a-library-for-the-end-of-the-world/c19ko>) attempted to catalogue and curate a database of participants memories through a growing library of cassettes in Brisbane's West End. It is a serene example of a work that offered an experience beyond the orthodoxy of enterprise or entertainment.

When Matt Blackwood (<http://mattblackwood.com/>), an artist, writer and innovator (and personal professional crush), says he uses his work to connect to the reader, he is referring specifically to the level of physical immersion locative literature can offer. Graffitied walls and stale odours take on new significance

when a short story is read to you in one of Melbourne city's famed laneways and alleys. In Blackwood's 2011 project, *MyStory* (<http://mattblackwood.com/portfolio/mystory/>), listeners were led to the setting of a short work by author Tony Birch where they listened to a 5 minute reading. When the story was complete, the small crowd stayed in the alley to talk, touch the bricks, and experience the space with a new perspective. In 2012, for *2Stories* (<http://mattblackwood.com/portfolio/2stories/>), Blackwood linked two three-minute audio stories to bold and beautiful QR codes (see below), decorated with elements of their stories, and hung them next to a studio that used to be a restaurant – he connected a story set in each through two characters.

It's a strange and wondrous feeling standing in the street listening to a story set in a building you can lean against. In Rita Raley's (<http://english.ucsb.edu/people/rale-y-rita>) discussion of mobile narratives, she notes a story's engagement with the physical, the material, and the lived space in functional terms and the inherent risks in those same stories denying, or worse, losing sight of the social or political aspects. This is an aspect Blackwood works hard to overcome in these and other works.

While locative literature can be ephemeral and that its impermanence is also part of the attraction of the form. There are long-term works, which take a particular location and build on it, and others which encourage readers to stay longer. Ben Russell's 1999 *Headmap Manifesto* (<http://technocult.net/technocult-library/headmap/>) highlighted incredible prescience in its encouragement to readers to think about space and location as opportunities for gathering and placing information through interaction with personalised tech (he went as far as suggested use of a proto-*Google Glass*). Designed to reveal 'hidden' stories of the city of Oslo, Anders Sundnes Løvlie's *Textopia* (<http://www.ansatt.hig.no/anders/>) was an experiment in facilitating public contributions to an experimental story system. This approach drew in collaborative writing, turned found texts into literary compositions, and sought exploration of place through the act of writing. The resulting work was positioned to read as a form of situated, poetic documentary on an urban textual environment. It required substantial time in its place to engage with the work. No discussion of locative literature can close without mention of Eli Horowitz. The writer followed his collaboration (written under the pseudonym Gus Twintig) on *The Clock without a Face* (<https://store.mcsweeneys.net/products/the-clock-without-a-facework>) with *The Silent History* (<http://www.thesilenthistory.com>). The story of the emergence of a generation of children who would never read or write stands foremost in the canon. Where *The Clock without a Face* sent readers scurrying across the continent on a real-life treasure hunt for hand-made jewel-encrusted numbers, *The Silent History* was developed as an iOS app filled with uploaded testimony of its characters and GPS-responsive segments that are switched on where the reader lands in specific locations, such as Chicago's O'Hare airport or a neighbourhood in lower Manhattan. It has since been cemented in hard copy, which while capturing the whole story for convenience and removing the frustration of never being able to get to New York to try it for yourself, removes the work's primary purpose.

The *Story City* (<http://www.storycity.com.au/>) project delivers Choose Your Own Adventures through an iOS app, which overlays real environments with fictional tales (full disclosure: I've worked on two separate projects). Stories are currently located in Brisbane, Adelaide and the Gold Coast, Australia, where the project partners with local councils. Stories are often purposed as a form of cultural tourism, highlighting specific places such as newly (re)developed parks and laneways, the project encourages the reader to think about familiar spaces in different ways and challenges them to play more active roles such as solver and explorer to follower and leader (Mike Jones (<http://www.mikejones.tv/about/>) highlights even more when he discusses interactive storytelling). *Story City* stories are serialised or chaptered, have a designated start and finishing point and are often in second person to achieve an immediacy that is much rarer in hard copy fiction. In terms of setting, the narrative moves quickly across interspersed short bursts of text that contain explicit direction to the next point, puzzle or narrative event – a map is often provided too. While a dark,

atmospheric short fiction can easily lose its impact in the bright Queensland sun, or turn into a rain soaked unintended nightmare – mobile phones and water don't mix well – the literal race across an urban park moves the story from the individual reading in a comfy chair to a energetic social exercise.

Locative literature offers those rare elements to reading that the book (I am a little loathe to say) cannot, the possibility of, for example, continuing exploration in a landscape like *Textopia*, where the specific terrain of the text grows and changes with each contribution. The form occupies the liminal space between reader engagement and play. Some works, those created by Horowitz and curated through *Story City*, look to facilitate the participants' travel through the landscape of their works, offering a physical experience, which can change with each read. Others are anchored, but still question the readers' experience, their engagement with the text and its physical place. The writers noted here use setting as the key element of great storytelling and their augmentation of their work through the possibilities offered by the physical environment and available tech, underline the value in enriching the reading experience. Good locative literature should give you more, it should at the very least, give you the dunk and let you take the pick home for your efforts.

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