

Incorporating the Senses

Recently, I was watching an episode of “Breaking Bad,” the Netflix series about a high school chemistry teacher who becomes a drug dealer. At one point, Walter White, the principal character, describes the death of his own father to his son. He talks about the antiseptic smell in the hospital room as his father lay in bed. That smell was one of the most intense memories he had of his father.

I was struck by how evocative the sense of smell is. It seems to be a subtle, almost subversive, trigger to feelings. And so I realized that to bring some scenes in my book more to life, I needed to include some of the smells, at least those that contributed to the experience of a place.

Early in the novel one of my novels, we have my characters in a strip club. It is a tacky, gaudy environment, which I try to show by talking about the lighting, the furniture, the people, etc. But what does it smell like? I had to think about that and it came to me. It smells of cigarettes, stale smoke actually, and beer. I think that information adds to the reader’s sense of the place. Almost sub-consciously, it feels more immediate, more real to the reader, I believe.

All the senses matter in making a description effective. It seems easy to focus on the appearance, on what you see, but harder for me as a writer to think of and then describe what you hear and smell and taste. So I will strive to incorporate all the senses more. I don’t want to “over-describe.” That can get tedious, but the judicious inclusion of different sense experiences is important.