Setting and description in the romance novel

Setting is an important element of any novel. In a romance novel, the setting may serve to establish the mood of the story, as in a Gothic, or simply to establish the time and place, as in an historical. Many writers choose to think of their setting as another character and use the techniques of characterization—narrative description, dialogue, and characters in action—to reveal the details of the setting. While your setting deserves as much attention as any other aspect of your novel, be careful that it doesn't overwhelm the story. Always remember that the romance is of primary importance and should never be sidetracked for a travelogue.

In addition to providing an "anchor" for the time and place of your story, setting can be creatively exploited to advance your plot or illustrate a theme of your story. Here are just a few ways setting can be used to enhance your story, with some examples from published romance novels:

As metaphor for the story's theme or the characters' moods and feelings.

For example, a cold wintry setting can reflect the bleakness of the hero or heroine's life. Weather conditions can be used to reflect moods and the changes in them—rain, for instance, can be stormy and sudden; incessant, depressing and mind-numbing; or gentle, refreshing and life-giving. In the following excerpt from *Pure Delights* by Stella Cameron (Zebra Romance), the heroine, Paris, faces a morning of confrontation after having had a bitter disagreement with the hero the night before:

A stiff breeze gusted up from Elliott Bay, drove gutter grit in eddies along the early morning streets. Discarded paper debris from the previous night swirled and slapped into railings and walls—rolled into doorways where sleepers still lay shrouded in bedrolls. The early morning rain had cooled the city, but more heat was promised before the day was out.

Paris hasn't slept much and is feeling a little "gritty" herself. She's calmed down a bit from the fight the night before, but she has an agenda for this morning, and she knows her actions will stir up some "heat." This setting description subliminally sets up the expectation of the conflict to follow.

As a plot device.

A snowstorm strands the hero and heroine together; an accident in a remote area brings out the heroine's survival instincts; one or the other is a 'fish out of water" in an unfamiliar setting (a plot device frequently used in romantic comedies). Marion Chesney used the setting of a particular London town house for an entire series of regency romances: each Season the house is rented by its absentee owner to a different set of aristocratic tenants who come to London to enjoy the balls and parties. The house, and its staff, provide a familiar backdrop to each new story in
the series (*A House for the Season*, St. Martin's Press). In *The Adventuress*, the fifth book in the series, the romantic conflict is set up when two individuals both want to take up residence in the house for the Season. The hero, the Earl of Fleetwood, has already passed the house up once, declaring it "too poky by half. . . not at all suitable," but he has not been able to find other accommodations.

But it was a tight-lipped Emily who stood in the front parlour at 67 Clarges Street an hour later. The fire had not been lit, and the holland covers still lay in a pile in the corner where Rainbird had thrown them that morning.

She rang the bell and waited. And waited. After ten minutes, she gave it a savage pull. Rainbird sauntered in and stood looking at her, eyes bright with insolence. . . .

"When I have finished tea," said Emily evenly, "I want you and the rest of the staff to assemble here. Such impertinence must cease immediately."

"Impertinence?" demanded Rainbird, folding his arms and leaning against the door jamb. "I-"

He broke off as a resounding volley of knocks sounded on the street door. He sprang to answer it.

The Earl of Fleetwood stood on the doorstep.

"I am come for another look at this place," he said, strolling past Rainbird.

"The house is already taken," cried Rainbird, but Lord Fleetwood had already entered the front parlour.

He stopped short before the vision that was Emily. . . "My apologies, ma'am," said the earl. "Am I to understand the house is let?"

"Yes," said Emily breathlessly. "To me." . . .

"And are you satisfied with it?"

"Not quite," said Emily with a baleful look at Rainbird, who was staring at the cakes in a most peculiar way. "I find the staff lacking in respect. Pray be seated, my lord."
Lord Fleetwood sat down. "I confess I do not like the servant class, Miss Goodenough," he said. "I find them all prone to gossip and insolence."

In this exchange, and the scene that follows in the novel, we not only get a general impression of the state of the house and the attitude of the staff (who are determined to drive Emily from the house in favor of a more "desirable" tenant), but we also see the hero's dislike for the servant class. This will become the central conflict of this story because Emily is a chambermaid masquerading as aristocracy; she believes, based on this early conversation, that a man like Fleetwood could never love someone of her station.

**To contribute to the developing romance.**
Sensual details from the setting can enhance the scenes in which your hero and heroine are falling in love, discovering each other.

Through the glass, Steve could see the lights of Atlanta, the skyscrapers lit up for Christmas, the moving cars weaving in and out of the ribbons of highways linking the rest of Georgia to its largest city. From here, he was mesmerized by the way she looked in the moonlight--dressed in her glamorous gown with all of Atlanta at her feet.

*Over the Moon*, Betty Cothran—Zebra Romance

**To trigger flashbacks or character introspection.**
The smell of lilacs, the familiar strains of a favorite waltz, the sound of church bells, can all send a character into his or her memories or trigger internal reflections--these triggers can be used in sequels to action scenes (but use them sparingly so the plot isn't forced to a standstill). From *Over the Moon*, the following scene of reminiscence--triggered by a song--reveals something about the hero's age, the circumstances of his upbringing, and his feelings about his family:

Rebecca left him in the swing and went inside. She turned up the volume on the compact disc player to compensate for the closed window. Strains of "Put Your Head on My Shoulder" wafted out the door with her as she rejoined him on the porch. Rebecca curled both legs under her and sat sideways facing Steve, humming the old, familiar tune.

"There's nothing like a favorite song to make someone romantic," he said, reaching out to smooth the hair around her face. "My older sister used to spoon with her boyfriend on our rickety front porch," he told her, slipping his arm around her shoulder. "I'd spy on them through the bushes. . . . Dad wouldn't let us listen to music when he was home. We only had one radio, and he kept it tuned to the
news and the fights. My sister's boyfriend would sing all these
crazy songs to her when they were dating."

Steve stopped and set the empty mugs on the window ledge. "He
had a lousy voice, but she loved every off-key word."

"What happened? Did he get the girl?"

"They're married with four grown children and nine grandchildren.
My sister says those golden oldies still make her toes tingle and her
heart swoon like a teenager's." He gently rocked the swing back
and forth.

Description
Background details can be incorporated into your story in three ways: through straight
narration, as description from a character's viewpoint, or incorporated into passages of
dialogue. Our examples above have used all three methods, but to illustrate the point
perhaps more clearly, following are three examples from one story, Elizabeth's Gift by
Donna Davidson (a Signet Regency Romance)

Narration
The liveried footman carried the ornate silver tray before him with the air
of perfect confidence, his aristocratic mien equal to any peer of the realm.
White-gloved hands steady, back straight, uniform clean, without a speck
of dust or lint to mar the rich, dark green, he upheld the unequaled

A white linen cloth rested squarely in the middle of the tray with its
corners draping over the sides in precise, equal triangles. Gold-trimmed
plates held sandwiches, crusts removed, stacked in a decorative heap,
filled with meat and cheese, hearty enough for the old man and attractive
enough to tempt the waning appetite of his distracted grandson.

Described by a viewpoint character
If she never saw another Bond Street establishment, she would be happy.
No one could possibly need all the clothes she was forced to consider. She
liked the stringency of the Scottish household and the high-necked,
practical gowns she wore. Evidently one changed clothing here every time
one changed direction. Morning dresses, afternoon dresses, riding habits,
ball gowns—every occasion must needs have a particular dress and
footwear designated especially for it. On and on it went, and the only
saving grace was Lady Mowden's defection from her in a feverish
dedication to shaping Mariane's wardrobe.
Elizabeth was listening in open-mouthed awe as a clerk displayed the wonders of the shocking new silk drawers--and had agreed to ordering several in pink--when she heard a familiar voice.

Character dialogue

Mariane broke into the conversation, exclaiming, "This bouncing around is giving me the headache. Cook should take the cream for a ride on this road, she would have butter in a thrice."

"Eunice turned to Tarr and said, "Do you think we should stop for a while, sir?"

"No, missus," Tarr quickly disagreed, "this is a bad stretch of road. It's the ruts. Our coach's wheels don't match the grooves in the road. No doubt the local wagon builder likes a smaller size, like your own town chariot coming behind us, but the duke's carriage is too big. We're coming on to Leicester where Macadam had a go at the ground and we'll do just fine. Smart man, Macadam, built the roads up high where they'd drain, piled the ground with a ditch full of pounded rocks and gravel. Like driving through a park."