

ELEMENTS OF THE WRITING CRAFT

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ROOMS

READING

Matthias's apartment had the same amount of space as my mother's studio, but it was divided into three cramped rooms. Most of his living room was taken up by his piano, which he played for me, his long fingers gliding through Mozart's piano concertos and Schumann's etudes. He collected books of photographs from countries all over the world. In his apartment I saw the fjords of Norway, the great wall of China, the beaches of Bermuda, and the glaciers of the Italian Alps. On his walls he had Japanese charcoal drawings of birds and flowers. He talked about wanting to take a train south through Austria and into Italy, about flying to Japan or Africa.

"I can't imagine staying in Burgdorf forever," he said and ran his hands across the globe he'd set on top of the piano.

FROM THE NOVEL *FLOATING IN MY MOTHER'S PALM*, BY URSULA HEGI

LESSON

In Hegi's novel, the main character's parents rent rooms in their house to boarders. Matthias has just recently moved in. Hegi tells us his three rooms are cramped and taken up by his piano. But see how she also opens the walls wide: Matthias plays classical piano, collects books of photographs and charcoal drawings, wishes to travel. In just three sentences, Hegi mentions Norway, China, Bermuda, Italy, Japan, Austria and Africa. She makes these three rooms large enough to contain most corners of the earth. The main character says *in his apartment I saw the fjords of Norway*. Hegi emphasizes her point with Matthias' casual touching of the globe on his piano. The details of this room are so fine and particular—no lists of furniture or wall coverings or colors of draperies. Everything counts in the opening up of this setting.

WRITING POSSIBILITIES

1. Imagine a small setting for a character that also might contain as much evoked space as Hegi's setting. What might these settings be? A carriage house? A basement apartment? A sleeping room? List five more.

2. Matthias' apartment contains music, literature, photography and drawings. What other arts could open up a setting so small? Videos of foreign films? Pottery? Sculpture? Tapestries? List five more.

3. Now select a setting from exercise one and imagine a character in that setting. Name this character and fill up his space with big things of art from your list in exercise two. Find your frame in the Hegi passage. For example: Most of _____'s living room was taken up by her drum set, which she played for me, her fast hands . . .

Or start again with:

He collected books of _____ from all over the world. In his _____ I saw _____, _____, _____, and _____. On his walls he had _____ drawings of _____. He talked about wanting to _____, about _____.

"_____" he said and ran his hands across the cover of the worn atlas on top of the coffee table.