

## Why Are Place Names So Universally Known in Fantasy Fiction?

My ever-thinkish buddy [Charles Moore](#) recently brought up something in a G+ discussion thread: In fantasy fiction, why does everyone have the same name for places? Different languages would lead toward proliferation of names, and even local usage varies from place to place (what is "Dead Man's Butte" locally is called "Sander's Mesa" on official maps, etc). Why, then, does so much fantasy fiction assume accurate maps, distinct boundaries, and have names in common use, universally shared by all?

Good questions. Here's my take on it.

I think this observation about place-name variance (or lack thereof) is indisputably correct across the body of fantasy fiction. Authors tend to focus on consistency of name use for the purposes of advancing a story and keeping the reader focused on the main thread. Also, it is easily possible to create a linguistically confusing mass of trivia if one builds name disparities indiscriminately into the narrative.

However, I don't think the discerning author is doomed to do so: if alternate ways of naming are indeed relevant, or can add a unique flavor to a setting, it is certainly possible to weave such things into a story with a light hand so that they add a layer of depth without becoming TMI or useless trivia.

I think we see this less often than we might mainly because so many authors don't even bother to consider geographic and naming issues of this ilk. In many cases this is because the world itself is relatively one-dimensional or shallow, the product of equally shallow world building. In other cases it's a considered decision (for instance, in choosing a narrative voice that concentrates on a singular cultural perspective).

Personally I prefer to at least have this larger scope of lexical variety in my conscious hind-brain, because then it is there to draw on if/as appropriate. I do this in an incidental way in my novel *Mainline*, where planetary locals call their world R'debh (the native name), while the globe is known to imperial authorities as Selmun III (named after the star, in turn named after an explorer from earlier times). Which name is used is a function of who is speaking and how they label the world in their mental landscape.

A more substantive use would be along these lines: have legend or folklore talk about a fabled location, which our protagonists are surprised to learn (after research or discovery) is an ancient alternate name for a Local Landmark. Adventure, here we go....

Like I said, there are a lot of appropriate and not-overwhelming ways to interweave place-name variance into a story. But one has to have that layer of complexity developed and present in the first place, with sound historical backstory attached, in order to tap into it where needed.

How do you handle "different names for same place" in your world/s?