

Sun in the morning and the moon at night

In Whitehorse, Yukon, on the shortest day of the year, the sun rises at 9:10 AM and sets at 2:47 PM. I know this because I was there one December 21. However, on the longest day of the year, the sun rises at 2:27 AM and sets at 9:37 PM except . . .

It never really sets. At 9:37 PM the sun, which has been traveling down in arc—like the swing of a pendulum—reaches the tops of the trees. It skims the trees for approximately 4 hours, then begins the pendulum swing back up into the sky. I know this because I was also there one year on June 21.

Obviously, it helps if we've actually been to the places we're writing about, but sometimes that just isn't practical. That's why the U. S. Naval Oceanography Portal web site is so helpful. Address is <http://www.usno.navy.mil/USNO/astronomical-applications>.

The data is in two parts, one for places in the United States, and one for places outside the United States. By entering the date desired, the name of a city, its longitude and latitude, and its time zone, you will get a list times related to the sun and moon on a given day. I don't know how far back they go, but I've used dates in the 1970s with no problem at all.

Don't know the longitude, latitude, and time zone? There are linked screens that will provide this information for you. Whitehorse, incidentally is Latitude 60 degrees, 43 minutes, no seconds North and Longitude 135 degrees, 3 minutes, no minutes West. It's time zone is 9 hours different from Greenwich, England.

How about the weather? At one time the National Climatic Data Centre <<http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/ncdc.html>> had for sale weather information about almost any place in the U.S. They may still be selling weather data, but I've had trouble figuring out their site, and I haven't purchased any from them lately.

Another method you can use is to contact the library in the city about which you're writing. Ask them to make a copy of the weather forecast in the local paper for the period of time that you're writing about. Many libraries charge a fee for this, but it's tax deductible as as research expense.

If the out-of-doors is important in your book—check out Julia Spenser-Fleming's books as examples of where topography becomes vital—try the U.S. Geological Survey Topographic Maps Home Page <<http://topomaps.usgs.gov/>>. They have an on-line store for customers in the U. S. and will take mail, phone or fax orders from people living outside the U.S. Topo maps are wonderful things. They show you physical features, how much the altitude is changing and how fast, and, in sufficient high enough scale, will show you individual buildings. That deserted cabin at the head of the cove might be just the place for your heroine to be held captive.

So why does all of this matter? Can't we just make up sunrise times, and weather, and what the place looks like? To a certain extent we can, and do all the time. But having really spot-on data is helpful in three ways.

First, you might get lucky. You might discover that that there is a solar, lunar, weather, or topographical anomaly you can use to your advantage. Last week, I wanted two of my characters to walk through a moon garden. That's not a garden on the moon, but rather a garden of white flowers and plants, all of which reflect light and give this beautiful, somewhat spooky atmosphere. Guess what, by happenstance, the date where this chapter fell turned out to be a full moon. I got lucky.

The second reason is knowing what the real conditions were is to give the author a choice. Anyone who wants to set a mystery in Calgary, Alberta in June, 2005 really needs to know that there were torrential

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rains that month and that all the rivers in southern Alberta—including the Bow and the Elbow, which both flow through Calgary—were out of their banks. People were being evacuated, homes were flooded and a young woman taking a short cut home after working an evening shift attempted to cross a pedestrian bridges over the Bow River and was never seen again. Now, the author may not want to use any of this, and if she doesn't, self-preservation dictates to at least mention it in the introduction, as in "Anyone in Calgary in June, 2005 will know that the city was in the middle of a flood that month. However, for the purposes of this book . . ." and so on.

Which leads to reason number three for checking out sun, moon, weather, and landscape data. Readers know. Readers remember. Some of them get highly ticked off if they know that the author hasn't gotten it right. If you ever run into either woman who collectively write under the name of P.J. Parrish, ask her about loons. The authors have a wonderful story about why it's important to do research, proof-read carefully, and, if the worst happens, turn it into a funny story.