BERNARD UNTANGLES THE FAMILY

Relationship maps for crowded casts

Published 1 November 2026 · 4 min read

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Bernard Oyelaran's family saga had forty-three named characters, and Bernard could no longer remember which of them were married to each other.

The novel followed three generations of the Adeyemi-Hartley family and their hardware shop in a northern market town. It had weddings, christenings, a feud over a delivery van and an uncle who had gone to Canada in 1982 and never fully explained why.

Bernard had written two hundred pages. His wife had read the first fifty and asked, very gently, whether there might be a family tree at the front.

"There isn't one," said Bernard.

"There might need to be one," she said, "for you."

He took the largest sheet of card from the shop's stockroom and laid it on the kitchen table.

Beyond the family tree

A family tree is a good place to start for any book with related characters. It shows who is descended from whom, who married whom and roughly when everyone was born.

But a family tree only shows one kind of connection. It doesn't show who loves whom, who resents whom, who owes money, who is keeping a secret or who hasn't spoken to their brother since the van.

A relationship map does. It places each character as a point on the page and draws lines between them, with each line saying something about the connection.

For novels with large casts, it can be the clearest way to see what your characters are actually doing to each other.

How to draw one

Write each important character's name on the page, spaced out so there is room between them. Small sticky notes work well, because you can move them around as you go.

Draw a line between any two characters who have a significant relationship. Then label it, briefly: "married," "rivals," "owes £400," "secretly in love," "blames her for the fire."

Some writers use different colours or line styles for different kinds of relationship: solid for family, dashed for friendship, red for conflict. Arrows can show feelings that only run one way, which in a family saga is most of them.

Bernard's map took an evening. By the end, it looked less like a family tree and more like a railway map of a very busy city.

What the map reveals

The first thing Bernard noticed was a cousin called Malcolm.

Malcolm appeared in eleven scenes. On the map, Malcolm had exactly one line: "cousin." He wasn't in love with anyone, didn't owe anyone money and had no opinion about the van.

Characters with very few connections often turn out to be passengers. They're present, but nothing passes through them. That isn't always a problem, since a story needs some background. But if a named character has scenes and no relationships, it's worth asking what they're for.

The second thing Bernard noticed was that Grandma Folake was connected to almost everyone, by thick lines labelled things like "controls the will" and "disapproves." She was the centre of the whole web. Yet she had no viewpoint chapters at all.

That was a much bigger discovery.

Find the hubs and the gaps

Characters with many strong connections are your story's hubs. Decisions they make ripple outwards through the whole cast. They are often worth more attention than you first gave them, sometimes even a point of view.

Gaps are just as interesting. Two important characters with no line between them may be an opportunity. What would happen if they met? What if one of them knew something about the other?

Bernard's map showed that the uncle in Canada and the youngest granddaughter had no connection at all. He drew a dotted line between them and wrote "letters?" A month later, that question had become a subplot.

Merge, cut or strengthen

When a relationship map shows several thin characters, you have three choices.

You can strengthen them by giving them a stake in the central conflict. You can merge two or three into one, which often gives the combined character more depth and the reader fewer names to remember. Or you can cut them, quietly, and give their few useful lines to someone else.

Bernard merged Malcolm with a second cousin called Derek, who also had one line, and with a family friend who appeared at the weddings. The resulting character was called Derek, owed Grandma Folake money and had strong views about the van. He was suddenly one of the most entertaining people in the book.

Update it as you go

Relationships change during a novel. That is often the point of the novel. Some writers keep a map for the beginning and another for the end, so they can see what has changed. A friendship that becomes a rivalry, a feud that heals, a secret that alters every line it touches.

Bernard's two maps, side by side, showed a family that began in a tangle and ended in a slightly different tangle, with Grandma Folake still in the middle.

He decided that was about right for a family. He also decided there would be a family tree at the front. Not for the readers, necessarily. For the next time he forgot who was married to whom.

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