CLEMENTINE PINS SIX HUNDRED PICTURES

Mood boards that feed the writing instead of replacing it

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Clementine Ward's novel was set in a crumbling Victorian hotel on a windswept stretch of the Northumberland coast. She had spent three months collecting pictures for it.

She had saved photographs of grand staircases, peeling wallpaper, storm clouds over grey water and lighthouses in fog. She had cut images from magazines of velvet armchairs, chandeliers with missing crystals and a woman in a long coat walking along a beach at dawn. She had gathered paint samples, scraps of fabric and a dried sea-holly from a holiday in Bamburgh.

Her online board had six hundred and twelve pictures. Her physical board, propped against the bookcase, was so thickly layered with images that the cork had disappeared entirely.

Her novel had four thousand words.

What a mood board is for

A mood board is a collection of images, colours, textures and objects that captures the feeling of a project. Designers, photographers and film-makers use them routinely. Many novelists find them helpful too, especially at the beginning of a book or before writing a particular setting.

Used well, a mood board helps you see your story's world more vividly. It can settle the atmosphere you're trying to create, give you concrete details to draw on and remind you, on difficult days, of what drew you to the book in the first place.

Used less well, it becomes a very beautiful way of not writing.

Collect, then choose

The early stage of gathering images is generative. Save anything that catches your eye and feels connected to your story. Don't edit too much.

But at some point, a mood board needs to be curated. Six hundred pictures don't create a mood. They create a crowd.

Clementine went through her collection with a single question: does this belong to my hotel, or to a hotel I'd like to visit? Most of the grand staircases went, because the Gull's Rest Hotel was smaller and shabbier than that. The chandeliers went. The lighthouse stayed. The woman in the long coat stayed. So did a close-up photograph of rust on a cast-iron railing, which she'd almost deleted.

She ended up with twenty-eight images and a much clearer idea of what her book looked like.

Find the palette

Looking at the twenty-eight images together, Clementine noticed something. Almost everything was grey, blue-green or a faded, salty brown, with occasional flashes of deep red: a velvet chair, a woman's scarf, the rust.

That was useful in a way she hadn't expected. It told her the colours of the setting, and it gave her a visual motif. When something red appeared in her story, it would stand out. She decided that red would follow the hotel's owner, a woman with a past, through the whole novel.

A limited palette, chosen from your board, can quietly give a book a consistent atmosphere, even though the reader never sees the pictures.

Go beyond sight

Pictures show what a place looks like. A novel can do more.

Next to each image, Clementine began writing notes about the other senses. The rust: salt on the tongue, a cold metal handrail. The velvet chair: dust, a faint smell of old perfume, a broken spring. The beach at dawn: wind loud enough to drown out speech, the cry of gulls, wet sand cold through thin shoes.

These notes became more useful to her than the pictures themselves. When she sat down to write a scene, she could glance at the board and find three or four precise sensory details waiting for her.

Characters on the board

Many writers include images of people who suggest their characters: an expression, a way of standing, a style of dress. These can help you keep a character's appearance consistent and imagine how they move.

Clementine found one photograph, of an older woman laughing with her head thrown back, that captured exactly the person her hotel owner was before the story began. She wrote "before" underneath it, and used it to understand what her character had lost.

A word about images you don't own

Collecting images for your own private reference is common practice among writers and artists. But be careful about sharing or publishing them, on a blog, social media or a book's promotional material, unless you have permission or a suitable licence. The person who took a photograph usually owns the copyright in it. Many online mood board tools make sharing very easy, so it's worth checking your privacy settings.

If you want to share your inspiration publicly, consider photographs you've taken yourself, or images clearly licensed for that kind of use.

Write from the board, not about it

The most common trap is to describe the pictures instead of the story. A beautiful paragraph about a staircase isn't the same as a scene in which a character climbs it, afraid of what's at the top.

Use the board to supply details, then let those details serve the scene. One well-chosen image from your board, given to the reader at the right moment, is worth more than a page of description.

Clementine took down her overflowing physical board and put up a smaller one with just her twenty-eight images and their notes. She kept it beside her desk for the rest of the draft.

She did keep the online board, with all six hundred and twelve pictures, as well. But she renamed it "Holiday Ideas," and only allowed herself to look at it once the day's words were done.

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