FERGUS MAPS A KINGDOM WHERE THE RIVERS RUN UPHILL

Drawing a story map that helps the plot travel

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Fergus Pell's map of the Kingdom of Aldmere took him eleven evenings and a full set of coloured pencils.

It had mountains, forests, a desert called the Sallow Waste and a great inland sea. It had seventeen rivers, each with a name in a language he was still inventing. It had a compass rose so ornate that his daughter asked whether it was a dinner plate.

He pinned it to the wall of the spare room and stood back, pleased.

His daughter, who was studying geography, stood back too. After a while she pointed to the River Ennet.

"That starts in the sea," she said, "and goes up the mountain."

Fergus looked. It did.

Why draw a map at all?

Maps are most often associated with fantasy, where a folded map inside the cover has become a familiar sight. But a map can help in any novel where characters move around: a city thriller, a road-trip romance, a village mystery, a war story.

A map answers practical questions before they turn into plot holes. How far is it from here to there? What lies in between? Which way would a sensible person go, and which way would someone go if they were being followed?

It also gives you ideas. A pass through the mountains suggests an ambush. A river suggests a crossing, a bridge, a toll, a ferryman with opinions.

Let the land make sense

Readers won't usually check your geography. But some of them will notice when it feels wrong, and a few basic principles help a map feel real.

Water flows downhill. Rivers generally begin in high ground and run down towards the sea or a lake, and as they go they tend to join together rather than split apart. A river that divides into several channels is most familiar near the coast, where it forms a delta.

Mountains affect weather. Wet winds often drop their rain on one side of a range, leaving the other side drier. That is one plausible reason for a desert, and much more interesting than "it's a desert because I wanted one."

Towns grow where there is a reason for them: a river crossing, a harbour, fertile land, a road junction, a source of something worth selling.

Fergus redrew the River Ennet so that it began high in the Greywater Hills and ran down into the inland sea. It took him about ten minutes. His daughter said it looked much happier.

Work out the distances

The greatest gift a map gives a novelist is a sense of scale.

Fergus's heroine, Wren, crosses the kingdom on foot. In his first draft, she left the capital on Monday and reached the northern border by Wednesday afternoon. When he measured the map, the journey was the length of Great Britain.

Exact speeds depend on terrain, weather, the walker and what she's carrying. As a rough guide, many writers work on the idea that a fit traveller on foot covers something in the region of twenty miles on a good day, less in mountains or bad weather, more on horseback over short stretches. A horse cannot gallop all day, whatever the films suggest.

Once Fergus did the arithmetic, Wren's journey took weeks. That was a problem for his plot, which needed her at the border before the winter fair. It was also an opportunity. Weeks on the road meant weather, supplies, money running out, and the chance for her pursuers to catch up.

The plot didn't just survive the map. It improved because of it.

Draw only what you need

It's easy to map a whole continent when your story takes place in three towns and a forest.

Start with the places your characters actually go. Add the land around them when it affects the story: what they can see, what blocks their way, where they might hide. Leave the rest blank, or very sketchy, until you need it. Old maps often left unexplored regions empty, and there is no

shame in a novelist doing the same.

Keep the map and the manuscript in step

Once the map exists, keep it beside you while you write. If a character looks east from the castle walls, check what's actually there. If you move a town in chapter twelve, move it on the map too, or the town will quietly return to its old position in chapter twenty.

A simple key helps: travel times between important places, written in the margin, saves you measuring the same journey again and again.

Fergus framed the final version for the spare room. The compass rose was still the size of a dinner plate. He had decided that was allowed.

Every river ran downhill. Wren's journey took five weeks. And somewhere in the Greywater Hills, where the River Ennet now began, Fergus had drawn a small ruined tower that he hadn't planned at all.

He wasn't sure what was in it yet. But Wren would walk right past it, and he had a feeling she wouldn't be able to resist.

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