



MABEL BUILDS A WORLD AND FORGETS THE STORY

Article Series 2 of 10

Published 31 October 2026 · 5 min read

Read online: fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-builds-a-world-and-forgets-the-story-8c84ee07/



By the third week of February, the village of Much Marrowby had a map.

It had a church, a pub, a green and a High Street with eleven named shops. It had a parish history beginning with an entirely invented entry in the Domesday Book. It had a bus that came twice a day, except on Wednesdays, when it came once and looked apologetic about it.

It also had drains. Mabel had become quite interested in the drains. She had traced the old culvert under the green and worked out why the Plough's cellar flooded every winter.

What Much Marrowby did not have, after three weeks of careful work, was a single scene in which Iris Penhallow did anything at all.

Every world needs a reason

Worldbuilding is often discussed as a fantasy writer's job, all mountain ranges and invented alphabets. But every story has a world. In a cosy mystery, the world is usually a village, a bookshop or a small community where everybody knows everybody's business. Readers of the genre often come back for the setting as much as the puzzle.

So Mabel's instinct wasn't wrong. Her method simply had no brakes.

The difference between useful worldbuilding and pleasant procrastination is whether it produces story. A detail earns its place when it creates a possibility: something a character could want, fear, fight over, hide or discover.

The drains, so far, had produced nothing but a theory about the pub cellar.

Ask who holds power

Mabel turned to a fresh page and began asking different questions.

Who is in charge here? The Summer Show committee, chaired for nineteen years by Gerald Finch, retired dentist and judge of the cake classes. Who would like to be in charge? Almost everyone who had ever lost to one of Gerald's decisions.

Power, even on a very small scale, creates friction. A parish council, a flower rota or a seat at the judging table can produce as much resentment as a throne, and usually with better refreshments.

Look for what people compete over

The show itself was the obvious answer. Constance Albright had won the cake class seven years running with her lemon drizzle. Dot Hargreaves had come second for six of them.

But Mabel kept going. People in Much Marrowby also competed over the best stall at the Christmas fair, the most admired front garden and the right to do the church flowers at Easter.

That last one stopped her pen. The flower rota at St Agnes's was led by Constance, who held the only key to the small flower room behind the vestry. Mabel didn't yet know why that might matter. She wrote it down anyway.

Give the world rules and routines

Rules are generous to a storyteller. Every rule creates an opportunity for someone to break it, bend it or use it as cover.

Mabel wrote out the show day as carefully as any payroll schedule. Entries delivered between nine and half past ten. The marquee closed and its flap tied. The tombola on the green from twelve until one, run by Dot Hargreaves in full view of half the village. Gerald stepping out of the marquee between a quarter past twelve and twenty to one to draw the raffle and eat a sausage roll. Judging at two. Results at three.

She was pleased with it. It was tidy, specific and exactly the kind of thing a mystery runs on: who could have been where, and when.

She did not notice what she had done to Dot. That would come later.

Notice what is changing

A world in perfect balance gives a story very little to push against. Change creates tension.

In Much Marrowby, a newcomer called Sam Okafor had opened a café on the green, and some of the older residents were still deciding whether to forgive him for the oat milk. Iris's old shop had been sold and now sold succulents in small concrete pots. Young families were arriving; old ones were leaving.

Each change was a source of quiet conflict, and quiet conflict is where a cosy mystery finds its suspects. When something goes missing in a community that is already uneasy, people tend to look first at whoever is new.

Know more than you show

Not everything Mabel invented would reach the page, and that was fine. Writers often know far more about their world than the reader ever sees. That knowledge shows itself indirectly, in the confidence with which a character crosses the green or avoids a particular pew.

The trouble begins when the research stops feeding the story and starts replacing it. A useful test is to ask, of any new detail, "Who does this matter to?" If the honest answer is "nobody yet," make a note and move on.

Keep a story bible

Mabel gathered her useful details in a separate notebook, labelled STORY BIBLE in capital letters. Names, ages, addresses, who was related to whom, and the show day timings, exactly as written.

A story bible saves you from giving a character blue eyes in chapter two and brown ones in chapter twenty. In a mystery, it also protects you from a more serious problem: an alibi you forget you've given.

Mabel closed the map and opened the first notebook.

She left the drains in, on a back page, in case they ever wanted to flood something important. Then she wrote "Iris" at the top of a clean sheet and, for the first time in three weeks, thought about a person instead of the plumbing.

From Fogbottom: practical writing guidance and free creative software for independent authors. The original article, with any updates, is at fogbottom.com/learn/mabel-builds-a-world-and-forgets-the-story-8c84ee07/.