



MABEL MEETS HER CHARACTERS. THEY HAVE OTHER PLANS.

Article Series 3 of 10

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Iris Penhallow was supposed to be sweet.

Mabel had pictured her clearly: a soft cardigan, a pair of good secateurs and a habit of offering people sprigs of lavender for their nerves.

In the first scene Mabel wrote, Iris walked into St Agnes's, looked at the altar flowers for several seconds, and rearranged them without asking. When the churchwarden protested, she told him his carnations were a cry for help.

Mabel put her pen down and looked at the page as if it had been written by somebody else.

"Well," she said to Pudding. "That's not very nice."

Pudding, who was not very nice either, said nothing.

What "they have other plans" really means

Writers often talk about characters taking over. It can sound mystical, but it usually means something practical. Once you know a character well enough, part of your mind starts objecting when you ask them to do something they wouldn't do.

Sweet Iris had been a costume. The woman who couldn't leave the altar flowers alone was someone Mabel actually recognised, from forty years of village life and at least one supervisor at Hollis's.

That instinct is worth listening to. It isn't always right, but it is usually pointing at something.

Give them something to want

Every important character needs a reason to act. In a mystery, that applies to the suspects as much as the detective.

Iris wants to find the thief. Underneath that is something she wouldn't say aloud: she wants to be needed again. Writers sometimes call this the difference between a want and a need. The want drives the plot. The need is what the character must learn or accept by the end, and it often works against the want.

Iris thinks solving the theft will prove she still matters. The story may teach her that she mattered all along, including on the days she left things alone.

Let the flaw cause trouble

A flaw is most useful when it makes things happen.

Iris's flaw is that she can't leave anything alone: flower arrangements, other people's decisions, a closed door. It makes her a good detective. It also means she will ask one question too many, offend someone who was about to help her, and turn up in places she has no business being.

A flaw that never costs the character anything is really a decoration. Let it get her into at least as much trouble as it gets her out of.

Build the people around her from history

Relationships give a cast depth quickly, because they come with a past.

Mabel had planned Dot Hargreaves as the thief: a bitter runner-up who finally snapped. But when she wrote Dot's first conversation with Iris, something else arrived. The two women had been friends since school. Iris had done the flowers at Dot's wedding, and Dot had never quite forgiven the chrysanthemums. They bickered like people who would turn up at each other's door the moment either was ill.

Then Mabel asked why Dot always came second, and discovered that Dot baked from her late husband Frank's recipe and refused to change a single gram of it, even though everyone knew it was slightly too dense.

Mabel now liked Dot very much, which was inconvenient in a suspect.

She decided Dot could be sympathetic and guilty at the same time. This was true, after all, of several people she had worked with.

Rescue the stock characters

Mabel's first PC Mott was a bumbling village policeman who existed so that Iris could be cleverer than him. On the page, he felt thin, and making fun of him felt cheap.

So she gave him a want. Daniel Mott was young, ambitious and hoping for a transfer to the city, where crimes were proper crimes. A missing lemon drizzle was an insult to his career plan.

Nothing else about him changed, but suddenly his dismissiveness made sense. He was no longer an obstacle that happened to wear a uniform. He was a person with his own story, standing in Iris's way for his own reasons.

Ask the useful questions

Long questionnaires about a character's favourite colour can be fun, but they rarely help a plot. These questions tend to do more:

What does this person want in this scene?

What would they never do, and what might push them to do it anyway?

What are they afraid other people will find out?

Who do they love, resent or owe?

In a cosy mystery, the last two are especially helpful. A village full of small secrets gives you a village full of suspects, each with a reason to lie that has nothing to do with the crime.

Check that behaviour fits motive

Readers accept surprising behaviour if they can trace it back to who the character is. They resist behaviour that exists only because the plot needs it.

If a character does something unexpected, ask whether a reader would say "of course she did" on reflection. If the honest answer is "only because I needed a scene in the church," the character needs a better reason, or the plot needs a different route.

The one who wouldn't explain herself

By the end of March, everyone in Much Marrowby had a want, a fear and at least one secret. Everyone except Constance Albright, the seven-time champion whose cake had gone missing.

Mabel wrote her arriving at the marquee on show morning, setting down her cake tin, and gripping the edge of the table a little too tightly. Her hands, Mabel wrote, were shaking.

Mabel didn't know why. She left it in. Constance seemed to have her own plans, and so far she wasn't sharing them.

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