



MABEL REACHES THE ENDING. NOBODY IS MORE SURPRISED THAN SHE IS.

Article Series 8 of 10

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The confession scene was all planned.

Iris would gather everyone in the village hall on the evening before the committee meeting. She would set out the evidence, one piece at a time, the way Mabel had always enjoyed in the books she borrowed from the library. And Dot Hargreaves, cornered at last, would admit that after six years of coming second she had taken Constance's lemon drizzle and thrown it in the pond.

Mabel wrote the first half of the scene on a grey Tuesday in October. Then, to make sure the timings were right, she opened her story bible at the page headed SHOW DAY.

12.00 to 1.00: Tombola on the green, run by Dot Hargreaves, in full view of half the village.

12.15 to 12.40: Gerald leaves the marquee unattended.

Mabel read it twice. Then she read it a third time with her finger under each line, as she used to with a payslip that wouldn't balance.

Dot couldn't have done it. Mabel had given her an alibi back in February, written it down in capital letters and forgotten all about it.

The book knew more than she did

Mabel spent the evening reading her own draft as though somebody else had written it, which in some ways somebody had.

Constance held the only key to the church flower room. Mabel had noted it in February because it seemed interesting. A cake tin had turned up in that flower room's bin in chapter eighteen. Mabel had written that because the plot needed the tin to be found somewhere. Constance's hands had been shaking on show morning. Mabel had written that in March without knowing why. And in chapter six, in a single passing line, Constance mentioned that her sister Marjorie had moved into a care home in the spring.

Marjorie, Mabel remembered, had always been the baker in that family.

It came together in a rush. Constance had never made the seven winning cakes. Her sister had. This year, with Marjorie gone, Constance had baked the lemon drizzle herself. It sank. Rather than be seen to fail in front of the whole village, she slipped back into the marquee while Gerald

was at the raffle, took her own cake and hid it in the flower room. Then she reported a theft.

The anonymous note. LEAVE IT, IRIS. That would have been Constance, too.

Mabel sat back. Pudding, on the arm of the chair, didn't seem surprised in the slightest.

Discovery is allowed. Revision is required.

It is common for a draft to arrive at an ending its writer didn't plan. Details planted on instinct turn out to be clues. A character who seemed minor proves to be the hinge of the whole book.

That is one of the pleasures of drafting. But a surprise ending discovered in October still needs to be prepared in the revision. Mabel's next draft would have to make sure the clues pointing to Constance were present, fair and not too loud, and that the evidence against Dot was strong enough to mislead a reader without cheating them.

Keep the first promise

The ending of a novel answers the question raised at the beginning. For a mystery, that question is plain: who did it, and why?

Readers of the genre generally expect the answer to be surprising and, on reflection, inevitable. They should be able to look back and see that the clues were there. A culprit who appears for the first time in the final chapter, or a solution that depends on information the reader was never given, tends to feel like a broken promise rather than a twist.

Mabel's accidental solution passed that test better than her planned one. Every clue was already on the page.

Let the protagonist solve it

A satisfying resolution usually comes from the protagonist's own choices and abilities, not from luck, coincidence or someone else stepping in.

Iris works it out because she is a florist. She knows the flower rota. She knows what the flower room smells like, and that week it smelled faintly of lemon. And she is the only person in Much Marrowby who would think to look in the bin behind the vestry, because she has spent forty

years clearing up other people's stems.

Resolve the inner story too

Iris's external problem was the theft. Her internal one was the fear that, without her shop, she no longer mattered.

The ending needed to resolve both. In Mabel's new version, Iris doesn't expose Constance in the village hall. She visits her alone, and lets her tell the committee herself. For once, Iris leaves something alone, and discovers that the village doesn't think less of her for it. Dot, who had refused to explain the glaring because one look on show morning had told her the cake had sunk, and who had been keeping her old rival's secret ever since, turns up on Iris's doorstep with a dense and slightly overcooked sponge.

Tie off the threads

Subplots need endings too. Readers notice loose threads, especially in a genre built on noticing things.

The marrow, it turned out, had been withdrawn by Gerald himself, after he admitted it had come from his brother-in-law's allotment rather than his own. It was a small, slightly ridiculous echo of the main mystery: another proud person, unwilling to be seen to fall short.

Know when to stop

After the climax, most books need a short settling: a chance to see the world restored, or changed. Too long, and the energy drains away. Too short, and the reader feels hurried out of the door.

Mabel ended with the following year's show. Iris walks into the marquee and notices that the delphiniums by the door are drooping. She asks the woman who arranged them whether she would like a hand.

Mabel typed THE END at seventy-eight thousand words, on a Sunday afternoon, and sat very still for some time.

She had set out to write a book about Dot. She had written one about Constance instead, and it was better.

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