



MABEL'S PLOT TAKES AN UNEXPECTED HOLIDAY

Article Series 4 of 10

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Mabel outlined her novel the only way she knew how. She ruled columns.

Thirty-one years in a wages office leave their mark on a person. Her outline ran across four sheets of squared paper taped together on the kitchen table: chapter number, what happens, who is there, clues revealed. Every row was neatly filled. It looked, she thought, like a book that

had been properly audited.

Then she read it from top to bottom, and found that in chapter nine, Iris Penhallow went on a coach trip to a garden show three counties away.

She stayed there for chapters ten and eleven. She admired some dahlias, had a disagreement about hanging baskets and bought a fridge magnet. In chapter twelve she came home and carried on investigating as though nothing had happened.

Nothing had.

Mabel's plot had gone on holiday, and it hadn't even sent a postcard.

How a plot wanders off

Mabel knew exactly why the coach trip was there. By chapter eight she had run out of things for Iris to do, and the garden show was something she could describe with confidence.

This is common. When a writer isn't sure what happens next, the story tends to fill the gap with something pleasant and unconnected: a meal, a journey, a conversation about the weather. The chapter may be lovely. But if you could remove it and nothing later would change, it isn't part of the plot. It's a day out.

Shape: beginning, middle and end

There are many named structures for stories, from three acts to more detailed beat sheets. They differ in their details, but most agree on a few broad movements.

The beginning introduces the character and their world, then disrupts it. Something happens that the character can't ignore. In Mabel's book, that is the moment the lemon drizzle is found to be missing.

The middle is where the character pursues their goal and meets increasing resistance. Partway through, something usually shifts: a discovery, a reversal or a decision that changes the direction of the story.

The end brings the central conflict to a head and resolves it, then shows what has changed.

These aren't rules a book must obey. They are patterns that readers have absorbed from a lifetime of stories, which is why stories that ignore them entirely often feel as if something is missing, even when readers can't say what.

Replace "and then" with "because" and "but"

The most useful test Mabel applied to her outline was also the simplest. She read the "what happens" column aloud and listened to the words joining each row to the next.

Where the rows were joined by "and then," the story was a list of events. Iris talks to Gerald, and then she talks to Sam, and then she goes on a coach trip.

Where they were joined by "because," "so" or "but," the story had momentum. Iris talks to Gerald, who lets slip that he left the marquee unattended, so she asks who was nearby, but the only witness is Sam, who has a reason to lie.

Cause and effect is what makes a reader feel that a plot is going somewhere. Each scene should change the situation enough to make the next one necessary.

A mystery has two plots

Crime stories have a particular structural trick worth knowing. There are really two timelines: what actually happened, and the order in which the detective uncovers it.

Many mystery writers work out the first before drafting the second. If you know exactly where the culprit was, what they did and what they left behind, you can decide where to hide each clue and when your detective finds it.

Mabel wrote her hidden timeline on a separate sheet. Dot Hargreaves slips into the marquee, takes the cake and disposes of it.

When she reached the question of exactly when Dot did this, she wrote "sometime around lunch" and moved on. It seemed a minor detail.

Planning and discovering

Some writers outline every scene before they begin. Others start with a situation and discover the story as they draft. Many do something in between: a rough map, with room for detours.

None of these methods is correct. Writers who plan in detail still revise when the draft surprises them. Writers who discover as they go still need to look at the finished draft and check that one thing leads to another. The outline is a map, not a contract, and the cause-and-effect test applies whichever way you work.

What mattered for Mabel was that her outline made the coach trip visible before she spent three chapters writing it.

Sending the plot back to work

She tried to rescue the trip. Perhaps Iris could meet a suspect among the dahlias, or find a clue in a nursery catalogue. Every version felt like a postcard with a sentence of plot written in the corner.

So she cut it. In its place, Iris stayed in Much Marrowby and did the thing she had been avoiding: she asked Dot outright why she had been glaring at Constance's cake on show morning. Dot refused to answer, which was far more interesting than a hanging basket.

The new chapter nine was joined to chapter eight by "because" and to chapter ten by "but". Mabel ruled a firm line under it.

Pudding had been asleep on the outline for most of the afternoon, covering chapters fourteen to seventeen. Mabel decided not to read those until tomorrow. She had a feeling they had been somewhere nice as well.

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