NORA DRAWS A MIND MAP AND FINDS A GHOST IN THE CORNER

Using mind maps to explore a story before you plan it

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Nora Quill wrote the words THE DROWNED CHOIR in the middle of a sheet of wallpaper lining paper and drew a circle round them.

She had read that this was how mind maps began. You put the central idea in the middle, and then you let everything else grow outwards, like a spider plant that had been given ambitions.

For ten minutes, nothing grew at all.

Nora worked on reception at a dental practice and was used to blank appointment books filling up by lunchtime. A blank sheet of lining paper was a different matter. It just lay on the dining table, very wide and very white, waiting for her to be interesting.

Then she wrote "church," and drew a line to it. Then "flood." Then "1953," because she had a vague memory of a great flood on the east coast that year, and made a note to check it. Then "who drowned?" and "why do they still sing?" and, after a pause, "the organist knew."

By half past nine the lining paper had grown branches in every direction, and one of them had wandered off the edge and onto the tablecloth.

What a mind map is for

A mind map is a way of thinking on paper without forcing your thoughts into a straight line.

Lists are tidy, but they encourage you to think in order: first this, then that. Ideas rarely arrive like that. They come in clusters and tangents, and one thought often sparks three others that have nothing to do with the thing before it.

A mind map lets each idea sit next to the ideas it belongs with. The page fills up the way your thinking does, which makes it especially useful at the very beginning of a novel, when you have a feeling, an image or a title and not much else.

How to start

Put your central idea in the middle of the largest sheet of paper you can find. It might be a title, a character, a place or a single question.

Draw main branches outwards for the big areas you want to explore. For a novel, these might be characters, setting, the central mystery or conflict, themes and possible scenes. Keep the labels short. One or two words per branch is usually enough.

Then let smaller branches grow from those. Don't judge anything yet. A mind map is for generating, not deciding. Silly ideas often lead to useful ones, as long as you write them down instead of politely ignoring them.

Nora's "organist" branch grew from a single word into an old man with a secret, a locked music cabinet and a hymn nobody was allowed to play.

Check the facts you scribble

Mind maps are full of half-remembered facts, which is fine at this stage, as long as you mark them.

Nora's note about 1953 was worth checking, and it held up: a severe North Sea flood struck the east coast of England, and the Netherlands, at the end of January that year, with a heavy loss of life. That was useful, and also sobering. A real disaster belongs to real people, and Nora wrote "handle with care" next to it.

A question mark next to anything uncertain saves you from building a plot on a fact that turns out to be wrong.

Look for the lines between branches

The most valuable moment in a mind map often comes when you notice that two distant branches are connected.

Nora had a branch for "characters" on the left of the sheet and a branch for "the church" on the right. Under characters, she had written "the vicar's daughter, missing since the flood." Under the church, she had written "the choir stalls were never cleaned out."

She drew a long dotted line across the whole sheet, between the two.

That line was the story. Not the flood, not the singing, but the link between a missing girl and a part of the church nobody had dared to touch.

Connections like this are the reason to keep everything on one page. In a notebook, those two thoughts would have been forty pages apart.

Use colour and size

Some writers use different colours for different branches, or circle the ideas that excite them most. Others draw tiny pictures beside the words.

You don't need to be an artist. The point is to make important things easy to see at a glance. When Nora stood back from the table, the three ideas she had circled in red were obvious, even from the kitchen door.

Know when to stop

A mind map can grow forever, and that can become a pleasant way of not starting the book.

A good time to stop is when you notice the same few ideas pulling at you, or when you find yourself adding branches that don't excite you. At that point, the map has done its job. It has shown you what you are interested in.

Nora photographed the sheet on her phone, then rolled it up and put a rubber band round it.

Next to the circle in the middle, very small, she had written one last word in pencil: "Edith."

She didn't know yet who Edith was. But Edith was in the corner of every branch now, like someone standing at the back of a church who hasn't quite decided whether to come in.

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