

## Maggie and the Mountain of Light - the journey to the first page...

The idea for my debut Middle Grade fantasy novel began with two core questions:

1

There's a diamond on the Queen Mothers crown, part of the crown jewels of England. It is called the Koh-i-Noor diamond, which is Persian for Mountain of Light. It is said to be cursed, with previous owners suffering all manner of misfortune. **What if** this diamond was actually an artefact from another world, the world of Faerie?

2

Many characters in MG fantasy have hidden magical or supernatural powers which they discover and learn to use. **What if** there was a main character who had no powers, but instead had severe food allergies and anxiety? Could they be the hero of a fantasy story?



And thus the story emerged of Maggie, a 12-year-old female protagonist, who struggles to cope with the world she's currently living in, being tricked by the Fey to return the Mountain of Light to the world of Faerie.

***But where to start the story?*** The first page is vital. The reader needs to have enough context to be able to connect with Maggie, and enough excitement to keep reading.

— you can see my published first page on the last page of this doc —

### Attempt 1 - Ambush in the Woods

My first attempt was set in the woods, with an open doorway to another world, and a creature from that world bursting through the doorway to be met by Maggie and her friends. It was written from the creature's POV, in third-person omniscient, and in past tense. We experience the creature's raving hunger and its triumph at discovering a lush new world. But then we experience its frustration and anger at being prevented from exploring this new world because of the actions of a group of small humans. The creature fights back and seems to be about to break free. We don't know much about these humans yet, just the panic of the only unnamed adult in the scene, who shouts a solitary word – "Maggie!"

I initially thought this was a good place to start. I liked the mystery and intrigue surrounding the creature, and the sense of panic and alarm from the people trying desperately to contain it. However, the POV had to change on page 2, because the creature had been sent back to its home world and it wasn't in the story anymore. And there was also very little context with which young readers could place themselves in the story.

## **Attempt 2 - Ambush in the Woods - Maggie's POV**

My second attempt focused on Maggie's POV, in third-person limited, and in past tense. We were still in the woods, but this time we had no idea what Maggie and her friends were about to encounter. We got insight into Maggie's inner thinking. She was anxious about opening a doorway to another world. Even though it would be her third time that day, for some reason we got the feeling this time would be different. Here, the only adult in the scene, now named as Lady Marie Studfall, sternly instructs Maggie and her friends – "We must stand ready."

I thought this was a better place to start. We immediately enter Maggie's world. And we immediately enter a place of heightened tension, although we are not sure why. There are a few references to other worlds and doorways being opened, so we get some clues, but we don't have any context for these clues. There is a sense that something is about to happen. But was it enough to keep the reader engaged?

## **Attempt 3 - Ambush in the Woods - more detail please**

I thought it was enough. And so, my third attempt was simply to refine the first page by adding some detail. We were still in the woods, still Maggie's POV, still third-person limited, and past tense, but I added a few more clues about Maggie's state of mind. Thus, descriptive details about Maggie's ever-present meds bag, and two physical actions which revealed her anxiety were added. Everything else stayed the same.

## Attempt 4 - Ambush in the Woods - change to 1st person

My next revision focused on the tense and narrative style. I wasn't certain it was right, so I switched it all to first-person and present tense to see how it flowed. We were still in the woods, still Maggie's POV, but now first-person and present tense. I kept the descriptive details that I'd added in the last revision and added one additional physical descriptor for Maggie – her mess of dark curls. I also changed the opening line to a question posed by Maggie. It immediately introduced readers to Maggie's mindset, an advantage of first-person narrative. It seemed to work well, but I wasn't convinced by the question Maggie asked at the start, did it accurately capture her anxiety?

## Attempts 5 & 6 - Ambush in the Woods - go deeper with Maggie

The next two revisions I did focused on getting Maggie's internal dialogue right. We were still in the woods, still Maggie's POV, still first-person, and still present tense, but I was struggling on authentically capturing Maggie's mindset. So we had Maggie posing a question about discovering something and then immediately regretting discovering it – like gluten-free chocolate brownies made with cricket flour, a prelude to Maggie discovering that doors to other worlds exist. The subsequent revision had Maggie admitting the knowledge of other worlds was enough to shut herself in her room and never come out. I also added the detail that Maggie was a Girl Guide (Girl Scout), the first time this detail had been added.

## Um... something doesn't feel right

So, I had finally had it sorted. Or did I? Starting the story with the action in the woods meant that I had now a lot of information to provide to give context to Maggie and her friends. How did they all meet? Why did Maggie, an anxious and food-allergic girl, join an elite group of Girl Guides (Girl Scouts) opening doorways to other worlds? How did Maggie meet Lady Marie Studfall? I found myself interrupting the flow and momentum of the story by going back in time to when the girls first met at a GirlGuiding camp. It just didn't seem right.

## Attempt 7 - Bye Bye Woods - Hello First Day of Camp

The next revision completely changed the setting of the first page. Gone was the woods. Gone was the action of opening a doorway to another world. Instead we were introduced to Maggie and her best friend, Anahira, arriving for the first day of a GirlGuiding camp in London. The only aspects kept from the previous revision was Maggie's POV and the first-person narrative. I returned to the past tense I'd used in the earliest versions. I sought to capture the nervousness that kids might feel when attending their first day of camp.

I liked the change in focus, but I was a bit worried that there was not enough action. Starting a first day of camp is not quite as exciting as opening a doorway to another world. But then I realised that starting camp is an experience that many readers could empathize with, and it would provide a stronger connection to Maggie. It also allowed the pace and momentum of the story to flow better. I just needed to hold the interest and excitement of readers.

## Attempt 8 - First Day of Camp - hello Wayfinder Girls

My final revision added detail and corrected a potential conflict. We were arriving at camp, in Maggie's POV, first-person, and past tense. But Maggie was no longer a Girl Guide. Instead she was a Wayfinder Girl, a completely fictional organisation inspired by GirlGuiding. This change removed any potential difficulty at writing about an actual real-world organisation. There was also some added detail that might pique the interest of young readers, such as a sign which said, "Welcome to the Apocalypse" (as it was a fun, make-believe 'apocalypse' training camp), and also Maggie worrying that the place she was staying might be haunted.

## Lessons learned after 8 attempts to get it right

Looking back at my first page revision journey I can see the many changes I made in trying to get the setting, tone, voice, and pace right. I think I got there in the end, but it is a journey. You can get there. Be open. Seek feedback. And play – try different ways of writing that first page. You never know how your edits will strengthen your overall story!



“Welcome to the apocalypse!” the sign declared in large, cheerful red letters. “Please register here.”

I sucked in a long, deep breath. Surely the best thing to do when *always* fearing the worst was to attend an “apocalypse” training camp. And better yet, a fun camp run by the Wayfinder Girls at Dux Manor, a three-storied hostel and activity center located about a fifteen-minute drive from my home in North London.

Dux Manor seemed more like a place for a royal visit rather than a camp, with the red-brick exterior speaking of age and wealth. The large building, with matching wings on either side of a central entrance, reminded me of the Lego castles I’d built with my younger twin brothers. It was cool that Dux Manor had been converted into a hostel, and it would be a fun place to stay, as long as the rooms weren’t haunted.

But the rooms wouldn’t be haunted. Dux Manor was the Wayfinder World Center.

*Please don’t let the rooms be haunted!*

“Maggie and Anahira, we have to register over here,” my mum declared, doing her best to power walk toward the sign while carrying an oversized blue chilly bin.