

When the Story Starts with No Words

By Holly Lisle

Here's a step-by-step of this project's idea generation that's starting with no words – *with* illustrations, because using Ecto it takes about ten seconds and no messing with HTML to *get* images into the weblog.

First, I grabbed random images from the Inspiration character set that comes with the software. The point of these images is that for the most part (excluding the ambulance and the palm tree) they have no links in my mind to the story. They are not meaningful to me when I pull them.

✘ I connect them randomly. When I use the software to draw a line from the alligator to the window, for example, I have no clue why the alligator might be linked to the window. I do not yet have any idea what the alligator means, or what the window means.

At several points in the line-drawing process, I ✘ switch over to outline view to see how the lines I've connected relate to each other. I do not yet pay any real attention to these connections – they don't mean anything, but it is interesting to see how the hierarchies form.

Once I have a bunch of random lines drawn, I open up a little note for each image and write random impressions of that image. This is essentially free-writing, and it would no doubt be a psychoanalyst's picnic (and we won't think about that),

✘ but it's also a way of opening up the image. In spite of the illustration, where I show three notes at the same time so you can see them, I close each one after I'm done with it, so it won't unduly influence what I write in the next one. And I

write the notes in no particular order. I do **not** attempt to follow the arrows from image to image, or make sense of their relationships to each other. What I'm doing, instead, is trying to surprise myself.

When I'm done with the note phase, I switch into outline mode again, turn on all notes, and end up with the following:



From there, I start using my impressions to actually plot out the book, discover characters, and visualize scenes I might not have otherwise come up with.

For instance, I learned something really interesting about the villain of this particular story that I hadn't even begun to imagine before I did this. I'll pull more useful surprises out of this tool as I go.

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