

# **Building a Story**

**Some general ideas for teaching writing to young people**

**by Ian Bone**

## 1. Story Idea

Where does a story come from? An idea that pops into your head? Authors are often asked where their story ideas come from and there are as many different answers to this as there are authors and stories. Ideas can come from many places. Lots of authors will tell you they have ideas all the time, it's making the ideas into a book or a story that's the hard part. Some places where ideas come from:

- an overheard conversation
- a 'what if?' question
- a newspaper article
- something strange you see or hear about
- a family tale
- a desire to try out a style
- a daydream

Wherever the idea comes from, there's a lot of work to be done to build a story around it, so it's very important that the idea is something that *really* interests you. When an author writes a novel or a longer story, it can take one, two or even three years, so the idea has to be one they want to stick with for a long time.

Every good story idea is nothing without the character or characters who will make it live in the story.

## 2. Characters

Good characters take a bit of work to create and to make interesting for the reader. They don't just happen. Think about who your character will be to inhabit this story idea you've had. Will they be someone like you? or will they be someone different to you?

The most important question to ask is: Who is the most interesting character to make this story come to life?

If your idea was about a quest, about someone having to battle a dragon, then you might think of a heroic character to fill that story. That would be fair enough, but what about a

character who doesn't fit into the usual type for a heroic quest story? Think of the movie, 'Shrek'. Neither Shrek nor Donkey were stereotypical heroes. That's what made the movie so interesting and funny. And the princess was not your normal princess, either.

The character that you place into your story will shape what sort of story you are writing.

Some thoughts about character

- try writing a character that's nothing like you
- try a character who make the story interesting
- think about whether the character will change your idea too much
- try a character who will generate lots of story ideas

### **3. Plot**

What is plot? It's what a lot of people call the 'story', but it's much more than that. The plot is *what* happens, and *why* it happens. To write a good plot you have to be part psychologist. You have to know your character and why they do what they do in the story you are writing around them.

Your plot will start to take shape when you put a character and a story idea together. Let's look at the heroic quest story idea. If your character is very confident, very talented, then the plot might be more about how he or she outwits the bad guys in the story. If your character is nervous or bumbling, then your plot will be more about how he or she overcomes her own problems, or wins despite herself, to beat the bad guys.

We don't call them characters for nothing. They have a character, they have to live and breath on the paper. Whatever character you go for, get to know them, think about how they would act or react in your story idea, then think about how to make that really interesting for the reader. Some things to think about for your character:

- Don't make it too easy for your character in the plot
- Make your character want something badly
- Make sure your character changes over the story
- Make sure there is something about your character that the reader will like

#### **4. Style**

Once you have the idea and you've thrown in your character and built your plot, you will start to create a style. A heroic character on a quest to slay a dragon might lend itself to the style of Action or Adventure, with lots of thrilling moments. Or, it might be just as good if it was Comedy, with the Adventure thrown in.

Whatever style you go for, make sure it is the same all the way through the story. Don't change half way to suit yourself.

#### **5. Structure**

This is all about building a story, much the same way as a house is built. You wouldn't build a house without a frame, and the same goes for a story. The more you write stories, the more you can play around with the structure of your stories. A story can start anywhere, can end anywhere, can go in any order. It's ALL your choice.

However, a story usually has the following four parts to it.

- Set up – this is where you draw the reader in to the story, to the world of the character and to the character
- Spark – this is the moment that will change the character's life or set them off on the story.
- Struggle – this is the main part of the plot. I call it struggle to remind you that it should never be easy for the character to get what they want.
- Finishing off – This is the climax of the story and the rounding off part, where the character shows how they've changed or what they've learned. It's very important to show this.