



The Strange World of ASBOs: Where do writers find their characters?

This is a writing exercise I have used in workshops and with students at the University of Chichester. The exercise uses a brief 'spark' as a possible starting point for the exploration of a character's motivation, from which a story may then grow.

What motivates me to write is not so much an interest in how a character behaves, as to why? I am drawn to these ASBO stories by that question. Why would a man howl and dance naked with a Christmas tree? What has driven him to this behaviour?

In a similar way, a few years ago I read an extract from Ovid as a prompt for writing. The extract was

about the minotaur's mother who, in 'a cow of wood/did seduce a wild bull'. What might drive a woman to have sex with a bull? This question prompted me to write a contemporary re-imagining of the story of the minotaur's mother. My story, 'Angus', can be read at:

www.janerusbridge.co.uk/writing/angus/.

For this writing exercise, pick one of the ASBOS, the one that grabs you. Focus on it for a while, before writing answers to the questions below, quickly, without thinking too hard.

Jot down words, or phrases, whatever comes into your head. At this stage we are aiming to get the mental tension and energy going, not think about 'plot'.

1. WHO? Do NOT use the real name but copy down the details of the action. (Use HE/SHE/I) This is your starting point. Next begin to describe the character in more detail. Anything that you see in your mind's eye: height, skin texture, facial expression, shoes.

2. WHERE? Janet Burroway says: *A scene that happens nowhere often seems not to have happened at all*, so focus on WHERE. Describe the surroundings. Jot down some notes. Use the senses. Concrete detail.

3. WHAT? Begin to describe the action. What are the thoughts running through the character's head? Is this a good person contemplating doing a bad thing perhaps? Put the action into your setting. Jot down some more details. Add to the bare bones already here. (Don't use the real name)

4. WHY? Dig deeper. What in the past has prompted this action? Jot down some ideas/possibilities. Get right inside your character's head. Remember it's essential we, as the writer, empathise with our characters.