



## Elizabeth Laird

**We asked best-selling children's author, Elizabeth Laird, to tell us where she finds her ideas and inspiration for her stories. Read what Elizabeth wrote and then enter our short story competition below.**

### **Where I get my ideas**

'You're a writer, are you?' people sometimes say to me. 'Where do you get your ideas from?' This is a difficult question to answer. 'Where do you get your dreams from?' I usually reply. 'My dreams are like my ideas. They're a mixture of experiences, memories, fantasies and feelings.'

When I wake up from a dream, I have usually forgotten the strange events and people and places that gripped me while I was asleep. They have all flown away. But the feeling of the dream stays. Sometimes, dreams are happy, and I wake up peacefully. Sometimes they're violent and intense, and I wake angry. The worst ones – the nightmares – are frightening, and I lie awake, too scared to go back to sleep.

### **Stories are like dreams**

Good stories, like dreams, make us experience emotions. As we read the story, we enter the lives of the characters, see the world through their eyes, and feel what they are feeling. It is this empathy with the people in the story which keeps us interested. If we don't feel empathy with the characters, the story is nothing more than a dull list of events, and we put the book away.

### **Start with your feelings**

So if you want to write a story, the best place to start is with a strong feeling of your own.

- Have you ever lost someone or something that you love? What did you do to help yourself recover?
- Have you ever been very frightened? What did your fear make you do?
- Is there a conflict that you have tried to solve?
- Have you ever had to make a difficult choice to do something right, when the wrong action seems much easier?

- Have you ever had a problem with your friends – problems which made you feel hurt, or sad, or lonely?
- What makes you feel angry?
- What makes you cry?
- What makes you laugh?

You must understand yourself and your own emotions, before you can communicate those feelings to your readers. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that a writer should only write about real events in his or her life. I'm simply suggesting that your own experience is a good starting point, on which your imagination can build.

### **Character, plot and settings**

The three basic elements of a story are the characters, the plot and the setting.

- Who are the people in your story? These are the characters.
- What happens to them, and what actions do they take? This is the plot.
- Where and when do these events take place? This is the setting.

Sometimes, an author starts by thinking of a plot. He or she begins with the action, then creates the setting and the characters. Most adventure stories are like this, especially where the same characters appear in many different stories. Examples are the James Bond stories by Ian Fleming, or the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle.

The setting is very important in some stories, and can be the author's main inspiration. Fantasy and science fiction stories seem to begin with the author's creation of a different world, from which the characters emerge. *1984* by George Orwell is an example of this, as well as *The Lord of the Rings*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.

Many of the most powerful stories grow out of the characters which the author has created. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, and *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier are stories driven by their characters.

For me, a story sometimes begins with a set of characters, sometimes with a plot, and sometimes with a setting. As I write each story, I try to make all the elements grow and develop and stitch themselves together.

### **How do you create characters?**

The characters are the bricks from which I build my stories. I try not to hurry their creation. I try to let them form slowly in my mind, to walk towards me out of the shadows. These are the questions I must ask myself as I get to know each one:

- What is each character's personality? Are they easily influenced by other people, or are they strong-willed and independent? Are they jealous? Timid? Filled with confidence? Cheerful or depressed? Careless and generous, or careful and mean with money? Do they talk a lot, or say nothing? Do the characters think before they act, or act before they think? How do they behave when there is a crisis? Do they panic, or stay calm, work to solve the problem, or run away?
- What do the characters look like? Their faces and hair are only a part of their appearance. Do they move quickly or slowly? Do they have loud, soft, ugly or musical voices? Are their clothes fashionable? Are they tall, short, fat or thin? Are they athletic? Graceful? Charming? Awkward?
- How does each character relate to all the other people in the story?

### How do you create a plot?

- Get the story off to a good start. Introduce one or two characters, and begin the action.
- As the story develops, your main character must make decisions, act and change. New characters might appear.
- A good ending brings the story to a satisfying conclusion, not always in a way which the reader expects.

### How do you create a setting?

Settings are more important in some stories than in others. In a historical story, for example, you must think of many details: different types of clothes and houses, means of transport and methods of communication. War stories may need you to imagine different landscapes and buildings. In endurance stories you might have to describe mountains, or deserts, or the sea.

### Some final tips

In the best stories, the good characters are not entirely good and the bad characters are not entirely bad. Everyone has light and shade. Even the worst people have some good qualities. Sometimes we don't like the bad characters in a story, but it's good if we can understand them, and feel empathy with them as well as with the 'good' characters.

- It's easy to fall into the trap of stereotypes, to make your 'good' characters beautiful, and your 'bad' characters ugly, for example. Remember too that people with disabilities can be just as good, clever and attractive as everyone else.
- There's no 'golden rule' for writing methods. Use a pencil and paper, a computer, or any other method you like. Write first thing in the morning, last thing at night, or any time that suits you. Write in bed, on a train, sitting at a desk, or lying on a sofa.
- Read what you have written again and again, and don't be afraid to make changes. You may have to cut out big parts of your story and rewrite them. It's not easy, but sometimes it has to be done.
- Most important of all – don't try to copy other books and writers which you admire. Write from your own experience. Draw on your own feelings. Write from your heart.

*Elizabeth Laird was born in New Zealand in 1943, where her Scottish father worked as a ship's surgeon. In 1945, the family moved back to Britain and Elizabeth grew up in South London. Elizabeth studied English and German at university, and then went on to travel widely. She has lived in Ethiopia, Iraq, the Lebanon and Austria.*

*Elizabeth's novels include Red Sky in the Morning (1988); Kiss the Dust (1991); Secret Friends (1996); Jay (1997) and Jake's Tower (2001). Her most recent works are Oranges in No Man's Land (2006), and Crusade (2007). She has had two graded readers published by Macmillan, Anna and the Fighter and The House on the Hill, both at Beginner level.*

For more information about Elizabeth Laird, visit her website at <http://www.elizabethlaird.co.uk>

### Short story competition

Write a short story and send it to us. The winning story will be the one which best shows an understanding of Elizabeth's suggestions. It should demonstrate:

- Strong characterisation (good description of looks, attitude, movement, mood, reactions to other characters, morals).
- Plot – your story should start strongly, introducing main characters quickly and making them do things or make decisions. It should have a satisfying conclusion.