

Writing character

Louise Doughty, author of *A Novel in a Year*, encourages writers to “...to build up a body of material-anecdotes, notes, stories.”

Writing activity:

Any writing you do can be applied to your potential character(s), to build depth of character, to help you understand their motivations, their thoughts, how they act, what they sound like, how they respond to their environment. 1) Take a previous piece of writing that you have done and give it to one of your characters. Re-write the piece. 2) Try sitting in a café and jotting down overheard conversations, then giving some of this to your potential characters. Re-write the conversation with your characters as the speakers. 3) Write a diary entry of a day in your life, then give this day to one of your characters. Re-write the entry as though it was a day in the life of your character. 4) Take an incident from a novel you are reading and give this to your potential character(s). Rewrite the incident.

Time for you to have a go...

Reflection:

How does the piece, conversation, diary entry or incident change when given to your character(s)? How does your character respond to these new situations? What surprised you most from this writing? Could this new writing form part of your novel?

Following is my attempt with a previous piece of writing.

The original piece of writing:

When I was a kid, driving home from some dinner out with my parents, we came across the most horrific accident. I was sitting slumped down in the backseat of the car. It was quite late and I was tired and full from dinner. We had a long drive and I was planning on falling asleep, but right then I was glancing over the top of the door through the window into the darkness beyond.

My dad was driving; mum was in the passenger seat. Something caught his eye – a light in the ditch beside the road. I hadn't even seen it, but he pulled the car over onto the gravel beside the road and reversed up. I couldn't see anything other than the glimmer of light coming from the ditch. Dad went out into the darkness alone and left mum and I peering after him. After a brief few moments, dad returned, ashen faced and turned the car so the headlights were pointing to the light in the ditch. He muttered something about an accident to mum, told me to stay in the car and took mum out into the night with him. I could see them moving around but couldn't see what or who was involved in the accident. I remember being cold and frightened, like

my parents and I were somehow in danger. I could sense the seriousness of the situation.

There were no mobile phones back then, but finally another car came along and mum flagged them down and had them drive to a public phone box to call the ambulance. I remember seeing mum rush out of the ditch and back to the road with her jacket in her hand, her lips tight with horror and cold. She ran out into the road and waved her jacket around like a flag. I thought for a moment that the car would hit her, and then I thought they would just pass her by but the car stopped and after a frantic discussion that I couldn't hear, that involved my gesturing to the ditch, pointing to her leg and gesturing like she was taking a hat off, the other car drove off in search of the phone box.

It was not long afterwards that the ambulance arrived. Dad came back briefly to move the car out of the way and then was back to the ditch, leaving me alone in the darkness pondering all kinds of horrors. In hardly no time at all though, mum and dad were back. They were no longer needed now the ambulance was there and they didn't want to get in the way. We continued home.

Perhaps they thought I was asleep, perhaps they thought I couldn't hear them, perhaps they had forgotten I was there, but they talked about the accident in the ditch on the way home and from what I heard there had been a motorbike accident. A young guy was driving and his girlfriend was on the back. The young guy had his thigh bone sticking up out of his leg – he was in a pretty bad way. Dad didn't see the girlfriend and thought this was a lone rider, but the boy muttered urgently, "My girlfriend's here." It was mum who found the girlfriend, she had been thrown some distance away and was unconscious. Mum undid the strap on her helmet and the girl's head gurgled.

Mum and dad did the best they could to make the boy comfortable and to stop his bleeding. They left the girl where she was, afraid to try to move her.

I went to bed with grizzly images that night.

Later, we found out that the boy had had his leg amputated, but his girlfriend had died.

Here is my rewritten piece: It was an interesting process given my novel will take place in the 1700s – you will easily note the obvious changes in technology (no phones or cars!)

When I was a child, I was walking home with my grandmother after a trip into the forest to collect night flowering herbs and we came across the most horrific accident. Grandmother had brought along a small hand cart and I was sitting slumped down against the side beneath a blanket while she pushed me home. It was quite late and I was tired and full from the picnic dinner we had eaten by candlelight amongst the great forest. We had a long way to get home and I was planning on falling asleep, but right then I was glancing over the top of the cart railing into the illuminated darkness beyond.

Something caught my grandmother's eye – a hint of movement in the ditch beside the road. I hadn't even seen it, but she stopped the cart at the side of the lane. I couldn't see anything other than the treetops and the moonlight. My grandmother went out into the darkness alone and me peering after her. After a brief few moments, she returned, ashen faced and gathered up her candle and tinderbox. She muttered something about an accident and told me to stay in the cart, then she went back into the night. I could almost make her out moving around but couldn't see what or who

was involved in the accident. I remember being cold and frightened, like my grandmother and I were somehow in danger. I could sense the seriousness of the situation.

At this time of night, we knew there would be no other travelers on the road. Grandmother sent me down the lane to the Barton's farm, the nearest house. The cobbler had been thrown from his horse and was in a terrible state. My grandmother wasn't sure he would survive. I was to ask them to fetch the doctor and rouse the cobbler's wife.

I was not afraid of the dark, but I was unnerved by the accident. I kept to the centre of the lane, my ears straining against the night noises, my eyes catching sight of all kinds of things my imagination dreamt up for the seeing, the cold biting my fingers and the tips of my ears. The Barton's dogs woke the household before I knocked on the door and Mr Barton was pulling his boots on as he made his way to the stables. His wife suggested I wait at the house, but I was wary of company and wanted only to get back to my grandmother as soon as I could.

On the way back along the lane, I heard the hooves of the doctor's horse thundering behind me. My lips were tight with horror and cold. I ran off the side of the laneway and waved my shawl around like a flag. I thought for a moment that the horse would hit me, and then I thought they would just pass me by but the horse stopped and after a frantic discussion the doctor pulled me up behind him and we continued, at a pace, to the site of the accident.

My grandmother came back briefly to tie the doctor's horse and direct him to where the cobbler lay, then was back to the ditch, leaving me alone in the darkness pondering all kinds of horrors. In hardly no time at all, the cobbler's wife arrived with a horse and cart borrowed from the baker. The cobbler's wife, her face taut and grey, lifted the cobbler onto the cart with the help of my grandmother, the doctor and then turned back homeward with the doctor in tow. We continued home.

Perhaps they thought she was asleep, perhaps they thought she couldn't hear her muttering to herself, perhaps she had forgotten I was there, but she talked aloud about the accident in the ditch on the way home and from what I heard a stag had suddenly jumped across the path of the cobbler's horse. He had been unconscious when my grandmother found him and he had been thrown quite a distance. His horse has long bolted. His thigh bone sticking up out of his leg – he was in a pretty bad way. When my grandmother moved him into a more comfortable position his head gurgled and only then did my grandmother realise the extent of his injuries.

My grandmother had done the best she could to make the cobbler comfortable and to stop his bleeding. She didn't sit him up, afraid to try to move him further.

I went to bed with grizzly images that night.

Later, we found out that the doctor had amputated the cobbler's leg, but he died the following day.