Generating a concept for your writing

Novel writing is not a task to be scoffed at or taken lightly. It is a massive undertaking! Having a robust concept can help you keep a strong focus while taking plot deviations, encountering numerous characters and creating multiple twists and turns.

"I hold the world but as the world…
A stage where every man must play a part,"   Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

You might think of a concept as the stage for a play – it is not the characters, costume, audience, set, backdrop, etc., but it is the place where the story is enacted.

"A story about discrimination and loneliness." Does not make a compelling concept, so what exactly is a concept and how to you write an absorbing one?

What is a concept?

Simply put, a concept is the general idea of a story. A good concept creates questions from which the story can unfold.

A robust, strong concept contains what the whole story is about and is written, concisely, in one to three (maximum) sentences.

What a concept is NOT:

A concept is not the theme(s) within your novel, it is not a moral statement, it is not the details of the story itself, it is not the elements of a story, it is not a description of the setting in which the story takes place, it is not the plot points of the story, it is not the conflict or problems within the story, it is not the climax and resolution of the story, and it does not have to focus on character. These things will come from a strong concept, but they are NOT the concept.

How to generate your concept:

You can begin working on your concept by writing a one line synopsis using questions. Consider what / where / why / when / who / how questions. These questions will get you started in thinking about a concept for your novel, but will not be strong enough on their own to form the concept itself.

A compelling question, naturally leads you in the direction of an answer.

Task – generate a story concept:

List the following in relation to your novel:

- Genre
- Protagonist: person
- Antagonist: person
- Main setting: place
- Background: history

Then, write a series of 'what if' questions that will develop the above points.

Try writing three lines that indicates a character's motivation which will lead to a series of conflicts, a plot twist and final resolution. Include: who the protagonist is and one or two adjectives to describe them, what the protagonist's motivation is (what they want), who the antagonist is and what their motivation is, two or three words to state each conflict point, briefly mention any subplots and plot twists, indicate the story climax and final resolution.

Three lines for my first novel might look something like this: Abandoned child seeking somewhere to belong is sent to castle to work for eccentric princess. Child makes three good friends and finds love but is persecuted by villagers out to burn her as a witch. Child escapes village with help of friends.

This is certainly conveys the core story without the themes of loneliness and discrimination, but the details are not quite right and it doesn't convey the genre.

Now go into more detail, asking more specific and probing questions, specific to your story, characters, genre, plot, setting, etc.

Then revise/rewrite your three lines above into a comprehensive concept.

Here's my attempt:

A fantasy historical fiction in which an abandoned child seeking somewhere to belong is sent to a village to work in the castle for eccentric princess who is suspected of vampirism. Child makes three good friends, finds love and discovers the secrets of her past but is persecuted by villagers. Villagers try to burn her as a witch, but child escapes village with help of friends and a little magic.

This is spot on. The core story is there, the genre is clear, and the details are succinct. I might choose to reword it slightly as I begin writing, but as a platform from which to develop my novel, it's pretty good.

How did you go?