

It is often best for children to start with someone they know. They can take a mental snapshot of a real person and this can be a springboard for their ideas. If children run out of ideas, remind them that writers often base their characters on a real person but also bring in character traits from others along the way. Characters in books are mostly 'composites'. Remind children that they are writers too and that they can use their imaginations to make their characters more entertaining.

My Neighbour

by Alex

My neighbour imposes more security measures on her plants than Fort Knox! Her husband only comes out of his shed once a week because he's so busy building new weapons like heat-seeking machetes, bullet-firing sprinklers and – his latest project – robot assassins! Any fox that slinks in doesn't slink out. Their house is a fortress. All because of a £12 bamboo sapling off eBay.

Aunt Lisa

by Harry

Is Aunt Lisa just a strange girl or is she a ghost in disguise?
The mystic ball inside her room, a bowling ball of glass,
The souls trapped inside who ask to go free,
But Aunt Lisa won't let them go from her grasp.
She hides the monster inside, in a cocoon of skin.
The carefree state she's in is just a disguise
For the strange woman within.
She crafts in wood an ancient script.
You can see the evil dripping out like cobra's venom.
She talks on the phone for years at a time.
Who's on the other end?
Maybe a werewolf on a skateboard drinking monkey blood
through a straw,
Or maybe a vampire riding in Van Helsing's car.
No one knows her true identity. I think she's the queen of demons.

Phantom figures

The Ghost of the Forest

by Josie
(Extract)

Lonely old spirit, sad old spook, lies in his oak
for hours on end, waiting, waiting for the moon to ride in.
His shabby clothes cover his scaly body
giving him a look of horrible longing.
His mocking look of sadness stays forever on his face
as he moans to the wind and cries to the stars.

Children find scary things stimulating. Begin by talking about ancient people and their beliefs in gods and goddesses that were linked to aspects of nature – the sun god, moon goddess, gods of the sea and the storm and so on.

Many beliefs were also founded on the idea that spirits, phantom figures, were linked to specific places. Tree worshippers would offer prayers to the spirit of a tree, asking the tree spirit to make it rain if their crops were failing through drought, or to make the sun shine if there had been too much rain. Spirits might also be linked to lakes, streams, valleys, forests, glades. Ancient people must have had some idea in their heads of what such spirits might look like.

• *On ghosts and spirits*

Ask children to think of places they have been, places that they can conjure up in their minds:

- *a wood near to where they live;*
- *a stretch of beach;*
- *a mountain stream;*
- *a dense forest;*
- *a lake;*
- *a glacier;*
- *a derelict factory;*
- *a canal through a city;*
- *a volcano.*

Next, ask the children to try to create in words the form and shape of the spirit who might inhabit their chosen place, making sure that there is a sense as to why their phantom figure is linked to the place where it belongs.

Alternatively, if they have problems with finding a place, encourage them to think about what a fire spirit might look like, or the spirit of ice, sun, moon, stars, storm.

When helping your children to read through their first drafts, consider again the five points mentioned in the previous section, *People and situations*, page 31.

The Fire Spirit

by Harley

The spirit of fire is a burning colossus
making scorched footprints wherever he goes.
His hair is a mass of coiling, writhing fire worms
snapping and biting at everything.
His eyes are just holes in his orange face
staring at everything with keen interest.
His mouth is a cavernous tomb
lined with razor-sharp teeth.
His breath can melt steel,
making an inferno of flames appear and disappear,
reducing everything to embers and ashes.
The torso of the fire spirit is a man's down to the waist
but the rest is flames
making the air shimmer around him.
He floats as quick as light, touching things as he goes.
He causes forest fires and building fires,
punishing the gods for trapping him in fire.

In commenting on this piece of work it would be worth mentioning how Harley has made excellent use of the vocabulary of fire. His first line pulls us into the poem and makes us want to read more, while the last line really makes the reader think about the fire spirit who is so keen to get his own back on the gods. There are still one or two places where the writing is weak – razor-sharp teeth is a cliché, while ‘touching things as he goes’ is far too vague, and the rhythm needs working on – but for a first effort it is excellent.

In the next piece, Grace puts in a powerful plea on behalf of Mother Earth.

Earth Song

by Grace

She is the ground, the soil in which we plant our hopes, our lives, our dreams. She is the back that bends under selfish feet, with no support to hold her there, withstanding all the threats and cruelty and pain she is forever to endure. She appears to us in good food, material to hold our houses and build our machinery, flowers to brighten and sweeten a bitter world. Yet how do we repay her? How do we return what is given? Machinery is used to rake and scar her good earth, poison her and make waste of her food. Her surface is used as a battlefield to be trampled with blood and bodies till she aches and groans with sadness and fatigue. And the creatures her maker created, that ruin her surface, are shunned, wrecked with hunger and illness because of their race or disabilities. Yet, through all of this devastation, all this weeping and grinding of teeth, she is still able to pull herself up, break the surface of sadness and mend the wounds. She makes light on dark times, she is a voice calling out in the wilderness, calling, calling her children home. Her name is Mother Earth.