

Story Model 5

“The Face in the Mirror” by Blossom Beeby: *Born in Korea in 1984, Blossom was adopted by white Australian parents. She lives in a white neighbourhood and finds that it is “quite easy to forget I was Asian when everyone around me was white”. However, this is not without consequences.*

When I was a child, my mother would amuse herself with stories of how I’d come into the world. Perhaps I had arrived on the front lawn in a spaceship, or had been sent to do the cleaning. In the late eighties, people were not accustomed to seeing white parents with a smiley Asian kid in tow. Curious ones would ask my parents why they had a ‘Chinese daughter’ and I think my mother liked the idea of shocking them with unexpected responses. It was kind of a secret joke between us.

Parents who acquired ‘Made in Korea’ babies in the 1980s received scant care instructions. Don’t treat delicately. Allow to integrate. Take special care not to acknowledge Asian-ness. My parents heeded the tag, I think. Asian adoptees often talk about their experiences with mirrors. To many of us they have a sad significance. Inside we identified with the Caucasian people who made up our families. If we closed our eyes and imagined ourselves, we would see rosy white kids. When we looked at our faces in the mirror, though, foreigners would appear. I internalised my Asian face, but it didn’t mean that I liked it. I just accepted it.

My mother had bought a large coffee-table book with beautiful images of Korea inside. There were tranquil countryside landscapes and serene images of cherry blossoms falling on courtyards. In one of these, there was an elderly woman hunched over and gazing at the camera. I was repulsed by her brown wrinkledness. I thought about becoming like this in my old age. I genuinely believed that with the progression of time in Australia, I would eventually evolve into a fully-fledged Caucasian and would never have to face the possibility of being a shrivelled-up old Asian woman.

For much of my childhood, my Asian-ness was pushed to a crevice in the back of my mind. My friends were white, my family was white, my world was white (...) We lived in tolerant, white neighbourhoods. In both my primary and high schools, I was the only Asian kid in my year.” (324) The characters I read about in books and watched on television and in movies were white. All my conceptions of beauty were white, and I wondered if boys would ever find me attractive. To me, Asian people were not attractive and were in no way sexual beings.

It was quite easy to forget I was Asian when everyone around me was white, but there were occasions when the facade wasn’t entirely effective. Asian people scared me silly. When I was a kid, South East Asian guys with long, centre-parted hair used to squat, cigarettes in hand, in Adelaide’s Rundle Mall. They would look around listlessly and talk amongst themselves.

.... In the latter years of high school, I began a rebellion of sorts. I started going to nightclubs with my best friend, who was half Ghanaian and had grown up mostly with a white English mother. We were both a little culturally confused and suddenly found places where there were a lot of people who looked like us ... It was a cultural hodge-podge and a comfort zone I’d never known before. I felt at ease asserting my ethnicity among the throngs of other black-haired people who gathered in those dark, smoky venues. It was the first time I’d felt comfortable being an Asian, around other Asians. It may have been a very seedy way of achieving it and not one to be advocated in adoptive parenting handbooks, but I was finally kind of glad to be Asian.

I had fully acknowledged my Asian-ness and was proud of it. I met more Asians and felt comfortable around them. I would ask their nationality and they would ask mine. As with the facts about my birth, the response ‘Korean’ became automated. but if you’d asked, I could have told you one thing about Korea. I didn’t feel I needed to delve any deeper.

(Until Beeby decides to take a trip to Korea to investigate the circumstances of her birth and her name. Acknowledgements: Blossom Beeby, “The Face in the Mirror”, *Growing Up Asian in Australia*, edited by Alice Pung, Melbourne Black Ink, 2008.)



Your Story: identity and difference

Numerous stories focus on the plight of people struggling with difference. Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is imprisoned in his home owing to a mental disability. Christopher Boone (*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*) has Asperger's Syndrome.

Social, ethnic or racial differences can lead to a lonely sense of exclusion as well as to uncomfortable insights about trying to fit into dominant social groups.

- » Depict an incident and its fall-out within a family context. For example you may be asked to care for your sibling who is physically or mentally challenged, or you may be shopping with your family, and there is an "incident" that leads to conflict.
- » You explore the consequences of difference (loyalty and betrayal) and your conflicted emotions relating to families and friends.
- » Sometimes difference leads to harassment and isolation. Other times, it poses dilemmas for characters who must make difficult choices. Follow the Model Plan and the tips for writing relatable characters and dialogue.

Your story:

write a story based on a sense of loneliness and difference.

1. The beginning:

Choose a setting that enables you to foreground a point of conflict between yourself and a family member who has a (minor) disability: the shops or the school.

You feel a sense of shame at the fact that you, or your brother, are not the "same"; you struggle to fulfil your parents' expectations.

In the dramatic recount, include some dialogue and a brief description of your tone of voice, attitude and demeanour. Be clear from the outset who is talking to whom and why.

2. The middle (development):

Flashback and a time change: place your behaviour in a narrative context. Relate an earlier experience(s) that provides some background and shows a pattern of behaviour.

Describe Jake and his "disability" which attracts mockery. It also leads to a dilemma. What do you do? Do you defend or betray Jake? Do you resist or succumb to peer group pressure? Or, do you try to adapt and change your behaviour, and how?

3. The end

On this occasion, you try to change your behaviour, thus foreshadowing a different outcome. You gain a rare insight into your own or your sibling's strengths. What do you do that is different?

- » You learn to accept, rather than hide, your discomfort. You make yourself vulnerable and confront your attackers. You recognise the importance of being true to self and that dealing with adversity can be character-building.
- » The message (from a respected role model): people should not be defined by their disability but by (.....)

In her book, Fiona Scott Normal interviews people who have had experiences with persecution. The moral of their stories is that all conquered their fears and went on to have successful lives. In other words, when the going got tough, they got going. "Being bullied shaped these people," writes Scott-Norman. "There are advantages to being unpopular at school, because you are forced to fall back on your own resources."

*In one of her letters, Christopher Boone's mother recounts a troubling incident. They were buying a Christmas present for grandma. "You were frightened because of all the people in the shop. It was the middle of Christmas shopping when everyone was in town... You shouted and you knocked those mixers off the shelf and there was a big crash. And everyone turned round to see what was going on.... You just lay on the floor and screamed and banged your hands and feet on the floor." (*Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Mark Haddon)*