



Authorgraph No.185: Michelle Paver

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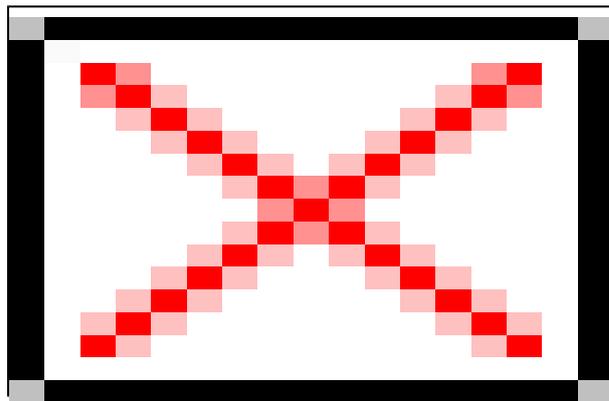
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Michelle Paver is interviewed by **Nick Tucker**.



Michelle Paver interviewed by **Nicholas Tucker**

?And suddenly, there in front of me five feet away was a black bear with two cubs. I was so frightened that just for a moment I saw nothing but white. But I remembered that bears react more positively at close quarters to being spoken to rather than silence. So I sidled around her, singing Danny Boy all the while, and lived to tell the tale.?

I am listening not to some grizzled big game hunter but to Michelle Paver, a slim, elegantly dressed lady just turned fifty, very much at home in the posh London hotel where I am interviewing her. Author of a number of novels, she is best known for the six stories that make up the ?Chronicles of Ancient Darkness?. For these she received an over £2 million advance from her canny publishers, who have gone on to sell well over two million of her books in addition to the movie and foreign rights. The novels centre on Torak, who starts out as a 12-year-old boy living in North Europe during the ice age. He is aided throughout by Renn, a girl companion from another hunter-gatherer clan, and by Wolf, whom he adopts as a cub and who sticks by him ever after. These stories have also been a critical success, with the final volume **Ghost Hunter** winning the Guardian Children?s Fiction Prize for 2010. So how has Michelle, an Oxford graduate with a first in biochemistry and then a solicitor specialising in high profile scientific litigation cases, come to be a best-selling children?s author?

?I have always wanted to write and this feeling never left me, even after I was made a partner in a city law firm. I finally asked for a year?s sabbatical and travelled to Peru, Ecuador, South Africa and America. During that time I wrote my first novel, **Without Clarity**. When it was accepted this gave me the confidence to give up legal work in order to become a full time writer.?

So why pre-history, and a wolf? ?Ever since I was a child I have always dreamed of running with wolves in ancient times. And then I thought of this plot where an orphaned boy has to learn to survive with only a wolf for a companion. I also particularly loved Roger Lancelyn Green?s retellings of tales from the Norsemen and the Ancient Egyptians, which drew me to the past in other ways. And once I had formed a plan for all six books, there was plenty of research I could read up about wolves. I also did some volunteer work in the Calapathian Mountains, studying wildlife in its natural habitat.?

Was that where she had her encounter with the black bear? ?Oh, I've had more dramatic encounters than that! More recently in Canada I came across a polar bear. That really scared me, because those animals eat people. Luckily he was down wind and never noticed me. But despite moments like those, I have always enjoyed my research, particularly when it comes to re-experiencing the sort of conditions my pre-historic characters would have been familiar with. This gives me a fund of ideas which I can then draw on in my writing. Even if I use only one percent of what I have learned, it is still more than worth it when it comes to making my stories really live for me.?

This yearning for first-hand knowledge explains the sense of veracity running through the Chronicles. For the writing of these, this conventionally dressed, outwardly demure woman has ridden across Lapland on horseback, gone seal hunting in Greenland, swum with killer whales off the coast of Norway and with the aid of snow shoes followed reindeer in Finland at a temperature of minus 18. She has eaten reindeer heart and seal's liver and slept on animal skins. So when she describes a particularly unappetising meal taken by the often hungry Torak, this could well be taken from personal experience. ?It was a thin broth made from boiled elk hooves and a few slivers of dried deer heart, bulked up with rowanberries and the tough, tasteless tree-mushroom that the clans call auroch's ears. With it, they had a single flatcake of roasted cornmeal; very bitter, but not too bad once it was broken up and mashed into the broth.?

On the other hand, Torak and Renn chat to each other in the tones and language of contemporary children. While the Wolf is given his own language, naming Torak to himself as ?Tall Tailless? and fire as ?Bright Beast-that-Bites-Hot?, the two adolescents bicker, joke and pass comments often as if they were on a tough day out with the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme. But Michelle is unrepentant. ?If I had tried to represent anything like pre-historic speech it would only be guesswork as well as torture for my readers. So I had the teenagers talk as freely as they might have done at the time but using our own language now. ? Only a pedant could quarrel with this; the rest of us must surely have heaved a sigh of relief not to find a profusion of ?ughs? on every page. But Wolf is still addressed in non-human language, with ?Uff! Uff! Uff! ? standing in for ?Take it to the mountain. ? Wolf, as nearly always, understands perfectly what is needed of him, whether spoken to in wolf-talk or in ordinary speech.

So what about Wolf? Why is it that he and the wolf characters in Kipling's **The Jungle Book** and Jack London's **White Fang** have appealed so strongly to readers of all ages over the years? ?Well, in some ways humans and wolves are very similar. Wolves have a structured society, they mate for life ? which is more than you can say for some humans ? and they care for their young. And as Jack London's other great novel, **The Call of the Wild** suggests, they embody a sense of rugged independence. You can't tame a wolf, though some have tried.?

But as far as child readers are concerned, could it also be that stories about animals that think like humans take them back to a time in their own infancy when they genuinely believed that animals spoke and understood our own language, and enjoyed events like birthdays and Christmas? ?Oh yes, I think so. And primitive man may well have had similar beliefs about animals too and their capacity to experience human thoughts and feelings.?

Could there also be a touch of human vanity in the fantasy that, given the chance, wild animals would be all too ready to look after humans if they found them abandoned as infants, just as Torak was for a period in his young life? And that this bond might last the rest of an animal's life? Some non-fiction books written by those who claim to have made life-long friends with wild animals have ended on a tragic note. Is it only in fiction or day dreaming that we can find this fantasy perfectly realised? ?Possibly. I once had a dog, who was my pretend wolf, when I was a child. We used to roam Wimbledon Common together, getting up to all sorts of imaginary adventures. I would love to have another one day, but I can't ? I am away too much. It just wouldn't be fair.?

One of the joys of Michelle's books is the way she melds adventure with close observation. So while chapters often end on a bugle call of alarm, there is time before that to go into the way that a pre-historic hunter goes about his task, including apologising to the spirit of the dead animal once he has made a kill. When Torak is looking for his next meal, every single detail of the terrain surrounding him has relevance ? even if it's only tiny items, such as bitten off twigs, cloven prints, or some unexpected bird song. Once the kill has been made, Torak then puts every part of it to some practical use ? another part of the age-old pact made between hunter-gatherers and their prey. So a stomach is turned into a water skin and a bladder converted into a spare tinder pouch. He even extracts needles and thread from tough long

back sinews once they are dried out. In this sense, Michelle believes that both Torak and hunter-gatherers in general have a powerful message to pass on to the rest of us about contemporary human wastefulness. It would be hard to disagree.

Some have seen a resemblance to Tolkien in these books, given that a young male hero has to make a perilous journey to the mountains in order to deliver his society from destruction. But while Michelle has Tolkien-like maps at the start of each book, she writes more directly and also includes an important female character. By book six, when Torak is aged 15, it seems very likely that he and Renn will make it together as a couple, following the ancient pattern of so many adventure stories where by the end of a story the hero has also found his way towards full maturity. Michelle herself won't be drawn on this, and there will be no sequels to take the plot any further. But judging by her smiles at this point, I think readers can take it that as far as their author is concerned Torak and Renn will be facing the future together.

So what will she be writing now? You will have to wait and see. But just for a taster, there will be five books this time and the setting will be further South. It's still pre-history, but now a little later. And there will be volcanoes!?

I wonder what sort of research Michelle is thinking of here, other than going down an active volcano herself, which on past form could not be impossible. But it is now time for her to return to the peace and quiet of her house in Wimbledon. The 'Chronicles of Ancient Darkness' took her six years to write, at the rate of one book per year. On this reckoning, her world-wide fans won't have long to wait before another fascinating novel appears from this charming and talented author.

Nicholas Tucker is honorary senior lecturer in Cultural and Community Studies at Sussex University.

The Books

(published in Orion paperback at £6.99, unless otherwise indicated)

The 'Chronicles of Ancient Darkness':

Wolf Brother, 978 1 84255 131 8

Spirit Walker, 978 1 84255 113 4

Soul Eater, 978 1 84255 114 1

Outcast, 978 1 84255 115 8

Oath Breaker, 978 1 84255 174 5

Ghost Hunter, 978 1 84255 117 2

Dark Matter (adult), 978 1 4091 2378 1, £12.99 hbk

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