



Michelle Paver

Chronicles of Ancient Darkness #1: Wolf Brother
ISBN13: 9780060728274

Michelle Paver, author of the upcoming book *Wolf Brother*, Book #1 in The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness series, tells us of her experiences researching pre-historic clans, her love of wolves, and her close encounter with a bear!

Why do so many children love the idea of being snowed in or shipwrecked; of having to survive on one's own? When I was a child, I was no exception. I wanted to hunt with a bow and arrow like the Stone Age people; to skin deer and build my own shelter. And I desperately wanted a wolf. As we lived in London, my options were limited. I bought a rabbit from the butcher's "with the fur still on", and skinned it and cured its hide with salt. I got rid of my bed, and slept on the floor. I dug up the lawn to grow obscure medicinal herbs. But although my parents tolerated the herbs and the sleeping on the floor, they drew the line at a wolf, and got me a spaniel instead.

Then I grew up, and it seemed as if all that Stone Age stuff had gone for good. But of course it hadn't. It was just simmering away in my subconscious, waiting to re-surface.

It did so briefly when I was an undergraduate at Oxford, trying (as yet unsuccessfully) to write novels. I had a stab at a story about a boy and a wolf cub, but although I loved writing it, I knew that it didn't really work, partly because I was still learning to write, and partly because I'd chosen too complex a historical setting. So I shelved it, and moved on.

Then, fifteen years later, I had an encounter with a bear which once again nudged the old childhood passions back to the surface.

I was hiking alone in a remote part of King's Canyon National Park, California, when suddenly, on the opposite side of the stream I was following, a female black bear and her two cubs appeared out of nowhere - as bears do. My heart began to pound. Now what do I do?

A rancher in Wyoming had warned me that a bear with cubs is at her most dangerous. He'd also said that as bears can't see too well and hate surprises, it's vital to make a noise to let them know you're there: his tip was to sing. These bears were only thirty feet away from me on the other side of the stream, but I could see that the mother hadn't spotted me yet; and my way home led right past her. I couldn't hope to creep by unnoticed. I had to tell her I was there. So I took a deep breath and launched into 'Danny Boy'.

To my horror, instead of watching me go, the mother bear pricked her ears and started purposefully across the stream— *towards* me. That's when the terror really kicked in. I had no defences. I couldn't run faster or climb higher than she could. All I could do was try to persuade her that I wasn't a threat - or prey.

I stood very still. She stopped in mid-stream. We looked at each other. She rocked from side to side, as if considering whether to rear on her hind legs. For what seemed like a lifetime, I side-stepped slowly past her, and she watched me all the way. Then - finally - my path dipped out of sight, and I ran like crazy.

It was the most terrifying, exhilarating experience of my life, but it also felt oddly as if I'd been back in time. In those moments when I'd faced the bear, thousands of years of civilisation had become irrelevant. I'd known what it was to be prey.

If this had been a novel, I would have gone straight back to my cabin and started writing *Wolf Brother*. But it didn't happen like that. In fact, it took six years for that encounter to work its way through into my writing. By then I'd lost my father, thrown in my career as a lawyer to pursue my dream of writing, and published a clutch of historical novels for grown-ups.

Then last year I was taking a break between novels, and leafing through a pile of old notes, when I came upon that long-discarded story about the boy and the wolf. I really, *really* wanted to write it; but the historical setting still didn't work. Then the memory of the bear floated to the surface - and I knew what was wrong. This wasn't a story about history. It was about *prehistory*. As soon as I realized that, all the old childhood obsessions came roaring back. Wolves. The Stone Age. *Wolf Brother* was born.

To set the scene, we need to go back six thousand years, to when the land was one vast Forest. Its people have no writing, no metals, no wheel. They don't need them. They're superb survivors. They know every plant and animal in the Forest - and they respect them, because without them they wouldn't survive.

At least, that's the grown-ups. The hero, Torak, is only twelve when his father is killed by a demon-haunted bear, leaving Torak to fend for himself. Somehow, he must survive and defeat the bear, aided only by an orphaned wolf cub...

The world I'm trying to depict is strange, unfamiliar, beautiful, exciting - but above all, it's *real*. I want the reader to feel that they're right there in the Forest with Torak and Wolf. And that means research.

First of all, what did the hunter-gatherers eat, and how did they hunt? What kind of shelters did they build? For that I've studied Mesolithic archaeology, as well as borrowing from the more recent past: from the survival strategies of traditional Inuit and Native American peoples, and many others. It's the little details I love. How to fletch your arrows with owl feathers, because owls fly silently, so maybe your arrows will too. How to carry fire in a piece of smouldering fungus wrapped in birchbark. These are the things which help a world come alive.

Much of this research has been library-based, both in the British Library and in my own local library in Wimbledon (which I've been going to since I was eight). But I've also done as much 'location' research as I can. If I want the reader to feel that they're in the Forest, then I think I'd better go there too.

To experience the northern forest in the raw, I went to northern Finland and Lapland, travelling on horseback, and sleeping on reindeer skins in the traditional open-fronted Finnish laavu. I ate elk heart, reindeer and lingonberries, and tried out spruce resin: the chewing gum of the Stone Age. I learnt traditional Sami (Lapp) methods for preparing reindeer hides, and picked up forest beliefs and customs from people who've lived there for generations.

But this 'hands on' research isn't the whole story. How do Torak's people *think*? What do they believe about life and death, and where they came from? For a novelist, the great thing about the Stone Age people is that we know virtually nothing about their beliefs - which means that I get to make it up! But it's still got to be plausible. To create a belief system for the clans, I've studied the beliefs of more recent hunter-gatherers, such as Native American and Inuit cultures, the San of southern Africa, the Ainu of Japan, the Eboe and Kwaio of central Africa, and the Sami of northern Scandinavia.

Again, it's the details that bring it alive. When Torak tracks his first kill, I've adapted how the San track their prey: identifying with it so closely that they *become* the animal. To show how Torak perceives his world, I've used the rather eerie Sami idea that everything - including rocks, rivers and trees - is alive and has a spirit; not all of them can talk, but all can hear and think...

I've been fascinated, too, to find how in different cultures, similarities emerge. For example, because many hunter-gatherers are nomadic, they travel light, and don't value possessions as we do. Instead they value the qualities you need to be a good hunter: patience, resilience, and the ability to listen. And they treat their prey with respect, honouring its spirit when they've brought it down, and taking great care to make use of every part of the carcass, so that the spirits will send more prey.

The more research I did, the more I realized that the term 'hunter-gatherer' can itself be misleading, conjuring up (at least to me) a picture of someone casually spotting a clump of berries and saying, 'Oh, good, I think I'll gather some of those'. In fact, hunter-gatherers have to be *experts* about their world. They have to know precisely when particular plants bear fruit or nuts or flowers; when the bark of different trees is at its best for making rope or baskets, and where those trees can be found; when the salmon swim upstream, and in which particular rivers. The more I found out, the more I perceived how unbelievably skilled these people must have been. It's as far from *The Flintstones* as you could possibly imagine.

It's probably clear by now that in creating Torak's world I've been pretty eclectic, borrowing a belief or a custom here, and then tweaking it to make it my own. I've used the same method to get inside the mind of the wolf cub, who in *Wolf Brother* is very much a character in his own right. Thus I've built on what I've learnt from years of reading about wolf behaviour, and then imagined myself into a wolf's hide. I want the reader to experience the Forest through his eyes - and also, crucially, through his ears and nose. He's cute because he's a cub, but he's also an authentic wolf, and therefore, even to Torak, ultimately unknowable. Children seem particularly to like this aspect of the story, perhaps because it makes them see their own pets with new eyes.

So this is the challenge I'm facing with *Wolf Brother* and with the next five books of the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*. To watch Torak grow as he battles evil and discovers his world: from the Sea to the Far North, from the Deep Forest to the High Mountains. To meet strange new clans: the Seals, the White Foxes, the Aurochs. To learn new skills such as bow-making, flint-knapping and reindeer hunting. And above all, to take us back to the world of the hunter-gatherers: the brave, resourceful, unbelievably skilled people who came before us.