

Michelle Paver

How did a successful lawyer from Wimbledon come to write two acclaimed children's books set in the Stone Age? Elizabeth McFarlane met Michelle Paver at The Polka Theatre to find out.

interview

When she was ten years old Michelle Paver ordered a rabbit from the butcher. When it arrived she was disappointed to

find the head had already been cut off. Undeterred, she took it to the garage, removed the paws and skinned it. She wanted the fur to make clothes but found that there wasn't nearly enough, so she used it to fashion a more comfortable sleeping arrangement on the floor of her bedroom instead. Clearly Michelle was an unusual child.

She told me this story at The Polka Theatre just before her appearance in front of an audience of eager fans. If you have read either of Michelle's acclaimed books for children, *Wolf Brother* or its sequel, *Spirit Walker*, from the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, this rather gruesome tale will come as no surprise. In *Wolf Brother* our hero, twelve-year-old Torak, must kill, gut and skin an animal. It is the attention to detail in a sequence such as this, gained from first-hand experience, which makes it work so well.

Wolves and the Stone Age

"As a child I was interested in two things," explains Michelle, "wolves and the Stone Age... I never imagined then, that I would be standing here in front of an audience talking about my six children's books set in the Stone Age.

"I was captivated by the idea of living in a forest and making my own clothes and weapons. I made medicines and when my Dad was away I dug up the garden and grew herbs. I thought that when I grew up I would have to forget all about it and do grown up things and I probably would have done if I hadn't met a bear."

It was while on holiday in California that Michelle, now a lawyer living in Wimbledon, encountered a black bear. She was walking alone in a forest when she stumbled upon a very large mother bear and her two cubs.

With her young, the bear was especially dangerous. Michelle knew she would have no chance if she tried to fight, run away or climb a tree. Bears can do all this with far greater success than humans.

"I was as scared as I've ever been in my life, which is very useful for a writer. It was white terror. I couldn't see or hear anything."

She began to walk away, sideways, slowly, talking very quietly all the while, until, finally out of sight, she ran like crazy.

"Afterwards I was strangely exhilarated. It made me feel as if I had gone back in time. The bear did not care that I was a lawyer from Wimbledon. It was like being a person from the Stone-Age."

Michelle used this experience, and the memory of that fear, in the dramatic opening passage of *Wolf Brother*,

"...All night he'd guarded the wreck of the spruce bough shelter, and watched his father bleed. How could this be happening?"

Ian McKellen has written, "Like other great children's books which also entrance adults, *Wolf Brother* conjures up an utterly believable yet original world." It is a world thousands of years ago, when most of Europe was forest. Having been attacked by some terrible, half-seen malevolent creature (a dark spirit in the form of a bear), Torak, now alone for the first time in his life, must survive using only what nature can provide. His only companion is a wolf cub whom, strangely, he seems to understand better than any human.

It was back in January 1999 that Michelle resigned, after thirteen years, from her law firm to be a full-time author. In 2003, when Michelle was looking through some old material, she came across *Jagged Land*, the draft of a story about a boy and a wolf, and the incident with the bear came to mind.

"The setting wasn't right. I had to make the landscape real." So, Michelle decided to set



off on horseback to find it and rode over 300 miles. She travelled to Greenland, slept on hide and ate reindeer. Her fascination with wolves led to further research and more encounters with wild animals at a wolf sanctuary near Reading.

"You must never stare directly into the eyes of a wolf and it's quite hard not to. Their eyes are beautiful amber. Instead you need to use a grazing look...and keep your voice soft because their ears are several thousand times more sensitive than ours."

Extraordinarily focussed, Michelle says she works "...between seven and eight hours a day, seven days a week." It takes her about six months to write a book: two months of research and planning; two months writing the first draft and then two months rewriting.

"I don't like looking at a blank page," she explains. With such prolific talent, and a film of *Wolf Brother* in the offing, Michelle has come a long way since sleeping on rabbit fur on her bedroom floor. Look out for *Soul Eater*, the third in the series, *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, to be published in September.

Look up Michelle at www.orionbooks.co.uk. For Torak, and information about 'the Clan' go to www.torak.info