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Stone Age Harry Potter

Michelle Paver is the latest author to turn children's novelist. Her £1.5 million deal puts her in the same bracket as JK Rowling, but her six-book saga has more in common with JRR Tolkien



Fiona Maddocks

THE live-or-die tribal rites of the book trade take place in Frankfurt each October. Trials of strength and elaborate mating rituals between agents and publishers involve the cutting of throats and halving of margins, yet, amid the beating down and puffing up, the real thing still stands out as a focus of celebration and envy.

The trophy born aloft this year, unsurprisingly in the wake of boy wizards and epics of Middle Earth, was a £1.5 million deal for a six-book saga; *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, snatched from the scrum by Orion. Michelle Paver, a respected but still obscure novelist, is the latest in a growing band of writers who have turned to children's literature. The deal was forged on the basis of her opening seven chapters of the first part, *Wolf Brother*, with brief synopses of the subsequent five. The UK, US, Japan and nine other territories have signed up. Film deals are on the horizon.

Meticulous and clear-headed in all other respects, Paver remains appealingly vague about the details. "I've asked my agent only to tell me what I need to know," she says. "Otherwise it's like static interference which messes up the radar and gets in the way of the business of writing. My mother wonders why I'm not swinging from a big chandelier and swigging gallons of champagne. Well I have, but only a small chandelier and a little champagne. When I'm in a book, I'm happy. When I'm not, I'm not."

The books are set a mere 6,000 years ago in the Mesolithic period — after the Ice Age, before farming — when primeval forest covered northern Europe and wolves, bears and aurochs roamed free. Twelve-year-old Torak, a member of a small clan of hunter-gatherers, is orphaned by a demon-haunted bear, separated from his clan and befriended by a wolf cub. Together they tackle the forces of darkness that threaten the forest. Paver shows proper modesty about being mentioned in the same breath



Writing from experience: Michelle Paver trekked 300 miles on horseback and slept in a Lapland forest in order to recreate accurately life in the Mesolithic period

as Tolkien but acknowledges their shared love of myth and a respect for the natural world. She resists, however, the inevitable comparison with JK Rowling, who has given the publishing world a new hunger for potentially lucrative children's literature. "I love all the Harry Potter books — except perhaps the fifth — and I've read them all several times. But it's like comparing apples with pears. There are no magic wands to make everything right in Torak's world."

There is no sense of opportunism in her switch to writing for children — she first had the idea for the story more than 20 years ago — nor has it required any conscious change of style. "It's simply an adventure," she says. "I'm writing for myself when I was a 10-year-old, reading all the old legends and Tolkien. I wanted to have a wolf as a pet. Since we lived in Wimbledon, my parents, not unnaturally, dissuaded me. I still dug up their garden to plant strange herbs with magic properties, or pretended I was shooting reindeer on Wimbledon Common."

Now she has the excuse, and the funds, to live out these childhood fantasies. She recently returned from Lapland, where she trekked 300 miles on horseback and slept on reindeer skins in a tent in the forest. "I'm not

particularly intrepid. I had a guide, a hunter, who understood the sort of things I wanted to know: what fried reindeer heart tastes like; the smell of birchwood; the taste of spruce resin — which was important for medicinal purposes and also used as a sort of Stone Age chewing gum."

After many hours spent in the British Library and the British Museum reading up on archaeology and anthropology she is now something of an expert on the lifestyles of the Inuit, Native Americans, the Sami of Lapland, the African Kwaio and the Ainu of Japan. One of her favourite books — an enthusiasm shared by TS Eliot and DH Lawrence — has long been James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), the influential study of the beliefs of mankind, fertility rites, sacrificial killings of kings, dying gods and so forth. Her aim is to bring the world she has created alive by basing it on facts — what food was eaten, what weapons used, what dwellings lived in, what clothes worn.

She has already published three adult books classed as "romantic fiction", though their terms of reference are more eclectic, their plots more tightly woven, their characters less stereotypical than such an overworked term might imply. Her first

book, *Without Charity*, was included in WH Smith's Fresh Talent 2000. Her second, *A Place in the Hills*, set in ancient Rome at the time of the poet Catullus, was shortlisted for last year's Parker Pen Romantic Novel of the Year award. *The Eden Trilogy*, set in the Caribbean, is nearly complete, with the first book (*The Shadow Catcher*) already published and the second (*Fever Hill*) due for publication in March.

AT 43, Paver — who describes herself with legalistic care and a sharp sense of fun as "neither married nor divorced" — has landed the kind of dream deal over which all writers drool, but the journey has been arduous. She has wanted to be a novelist since childhood. Her mother is a writer, as was her grandfather. At Oxford she managed — remarkably — to skip all her biochemistry lectures, spending the free time completing a couple of novels (never published, and with good reason, she says). She also read voraciously — Norse sagas and Victorian novels — which, she admits, was regarded as "faintly odd and geekish" by her fellow science undergraduates. She still managed to get a first-class degree.

Abandoning science, she trained as a lawyer and by the age of 33 had become a partner in a high-ranking City firm, working round the clock and under extreme pressure. Despite earning, as she puts it, "silly money", she was unhappy, still full of stories, getting up at 4.30am to satisfy her fiction bug. Eventually, she first took a year's sabbatical to write *Without Charity*, then, immediately on return to work, handed in her notice. She had saved just enough to live on, and had no dependents who would suffer if she failed. It was time to jump.

Today she speaks with fervour about the pleasure of sitting alone in her Wimbledon house, writing, on average, for seven hours a day. She has the air of someone who has abandoned the world and chosen instead the rigours and self-denial of an enclosed life. Forced to change her expensive lifestyle after leaving the law, she lives simply, does not have a car or email and only last week, persuaded by her agent — presumably so he could respond to all the offers pouring in — did she buy a mobile phone. She has no plans to change her ways even though, once again, she has money. Her solitude is a source of pleasure to her, her books a demonstrably rewarding alternative to marriage and children. "Every day I feel like a refugee, counting my blessings that I don't have to commute, that I can walk into the garden and watch the bees. Quite simply, I can be in Torak's world."

'I wanted to have a wolf as a pet. Since we lived in Wimbledon, my parents, not unnaturally, dissuaded me'