

In the final of the three previews of the autumn publishing season, Benedicte Page interviews five leading authors for children and young people

# Leader of the pack

**Michelle Paver** *Wolf Brother* (Orion Children's Books, 2nd September, h/b, £8.99, 1842551701)

Michelle Paver, author of five historical novels for adults, including the *Daughters of Eden* trilogy set in Jamaica (Bantam Press), has struck gold with her first book for children. *Wolf Brother*, to be the opening novel of a six-book series called the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, was acquired by Orion after a very big auction; the publisher then sold US rights to HarperCollins for a "significant" sum.

The atmospheric *Wolf Brother* begins the adventures of 12-year-old Torak, who lives in the Stone Age forests of 4,000 BC. After the dramatic killing of his father—by a bear, on page one—Torak is forced to cope in the forest alone, his only companion being Wolf, a little cub whose family has also been slaughtered.

Torak lives at a time when spirits are believed to inhabit every inch of the natural world, and soon he finds himself on a dangerous quest to destroy the bear he thinks is possessed by a demon—a quest which also takes him into conflict with the neighbouring Raven Clan.

"For *Wolf Brother*, I went to Finland and—I'm quite proud of this—rode 300 miles in the Finnish forest and in Lapland. It was a hard trip in terms of taking notes on horseback!

"The aim of it was to experience the forest and some of the traditional huntsman's skills. My guide was a huntsman. We slept on reindeer skins in Finnish open-fronted shelters called laavu, and we were toasty warm even in September. I'm going to Greenland and north Norway next week to research Book Two, hopefully tasting some seal and whale meat and fish eyes. If Torak does it, I have to do it too.

"*Wolf Brother* is the most enjoyable book I have ever written, and I really wrote it for myself when I was 10. At that age, my parents had a



Paver: guided by the principles of adventure

beautifully illustrated book about early peoples and I thought it was terrific. I wanted a wolf and I wanted to hunt. My parents gave me a spaniel, and he became my wolf on Wimbledon Common. I got as far as ordering a rabbit from the butcher, 'with the skin on, please', so I could skin it. I rubbed it with salt and hung this thing up in my parents' garage. They were brilliant about it.

"You think these things go away but they don't. I've just had an interim period of going to university, where I studied plant biochemistry, and 12 years as a patent lawyer in the City. I gave that up to write full-time, and now I've returned to the things I've always been interested in.

"For recreating the life of the clans, I have used archaeology in so far as we know about the Mesolithic

peoples—what tools they used, what clothes they wore and so on—but as we don't know a great deal I've also borrowed quite happily from traditional peoples like the Sami of Lapland.

"When I went up to Lapland I found that they don't all live in reindeer hide shelters—often it's log cabins with TV aerials—but then on the deck by the front door you'll find a bucket of reindeer heads. Fantastic. With a translator, the lady who lived there was able to show me how she prepares the reindeer hides by traditional means. I bought one, and smuggled it back through customs, slightly bleeding still.

"The guiding principles of the book are that you have to be adventurous—above all else it's got to be page-turningly exciting—but then,

it's also got to be real so that you care about the characters. You are seeing the world through the clan's eyes, and the world to them is much more alive than it is to us. In their world, everything has a spirit—the rivers, the trees, the rocks, the hunters, the prey. They can't all speak, but they can all hear and think.

"That's where all the anthropological stuff comes in, and I borrow from native American and other hunter-gatherer belief systems. It's fascinating—hunter gatherers tend to revere the moon rather than the sun, for example, because you need the moon to hunt at night, whereas farmers are more interested in the sun that makes the crops grow.

"Wolf is a character in his own right. I didn't want him to be a kind of Mesolithic Lassie, and I also didn't want him to be a person in wolf's clothing. He's a wolf, so there are certain things he's very like us in, but at other times I hope I have shown that there are ways in which he will always be different. Wolf doesn't know that he will inevitably die, for example, and I find that really poignant.

"I once volunteered on a wildlife project in the Carpathian mountains; wolves are very elusive so I can't say that I have seen any in the wild, but I did hear them, and I've seen fresh tracks. It doesn't sound like much, but my God, it's pretty cool—they're so neat, and their front paws are bigger than my hand.

"Each of the six books is a stand-alone adventure, but there is an overarching story about Torak's quest against the Soul Eaters. The nice thing about having planned the six books already is that there are certain things that Torak's father tells him in chapter one of *Wolf Brother*, the significance of which we aren't going to find out until the last chapter of Book Six. It's great fun for me as a writer to know the outlines of what's coming, because it means I can plant things in advance."

**Benedicte Page**