

Literacy Time

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Author Profile

Were you interested in writing when you were at school? What was your favourite subject?

I can't remember a time when I *didn't* like writing stories: when I was five, I wrote one called "*Ebany the Mouse Goddess*" on my mother's typewriter. English was one of my favourite subjects, and this was mostly due to a wonderful, inspirational teacher who used to read aloud abridged versions of the classics. By the time I was ten, she'd read us (among other things) *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *The Woman in White*, and children's versions of the Greek myths. I also had amazing history and biology teachers. I remember peering through a microscope at colonies of bacteria we'd grown on petri dishes by pressing our fingertips to the agar; this sparked a lifelong love of biochemistry. And there was an unforgettable history assignment in which I had to write as if I were one of the Pilgrim settlers in America; this opened my eyes to the imaginative reality of history.

Author of the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, Michelle Paver, talks to Rebecca Wallis about the inspiration behind Torak's story.

A close-up portrait of Michelle Paver, a woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling and resting her chin on her hand. She is wearing a brown top and a pearl earring.

MICHELLE PAVER

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The Chronicles of Ancient Darkness stories are set in the Stone Age. What is it about this period that intrigues you?

Even before I could read, I loved the Stone Age, because my parents had a big, beautiful book (which I still have) of archaeologically plausible paintings of how people lived then. I used to lie on my tummy and lose myself in the pictures. As I grew older, I read more about the Stone Age, and when I was ten, I tried to live the life myself. I got rid of my bed and slept on the floor. I grew wild herbs to make Stone Age medicines. And I bought a (dead) rabbit with my pocket money and skinned it. I think what fascinated (and still fascinates) me is the fact that hunter-gatherers managed to survive by finding or making everything they needed – food, weapons, shelter and clothes – simply from what was around them: that is, from rocks, plants, trees and animals. Imagine trying to do that in February in the Arctic, and you'll get some idea of how immensely skilled and resourceful Torak's people were.

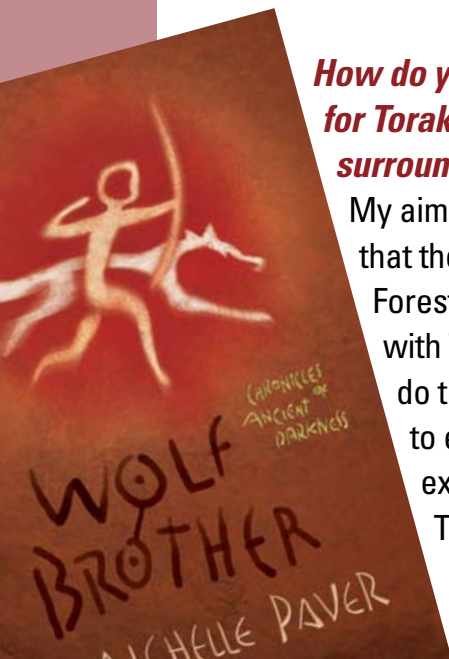
How do you research your ideas for Torak, Renn and Wolf's surroundings and adventures?

My aim is to make the reader feel that they're right there in the Forest, having the adventure with Torak, Renn and Wolf. To do that, I try as far as possible to experience what Torak experiences in the stories.

Thus for *Wolf Brother*, I rode

three hundred miles through a Finnish forest and talked to Sami hunters to pick up tips on hunting, carrying fire, and tracking animals. I slept on reindeer skins in a traditional open-fronted Finnish shelter, which gave me the idea for the Raven Clan's shelters; and I ate forest berries, spruce resin (which Torak's people used for medicinal chewing gum), reindeer moss, and elk (ie, moose).

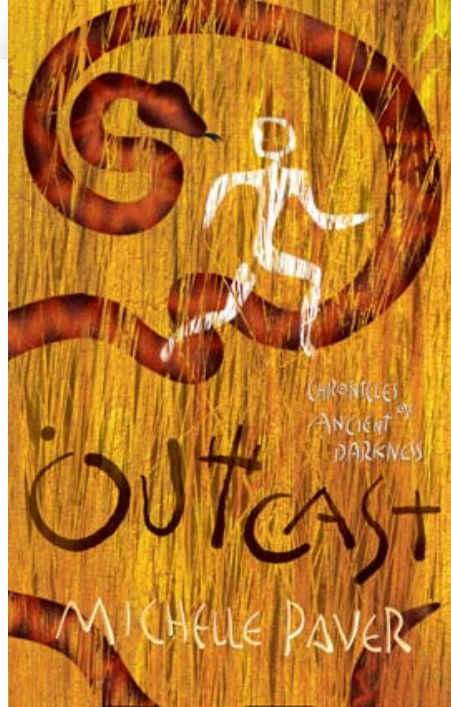
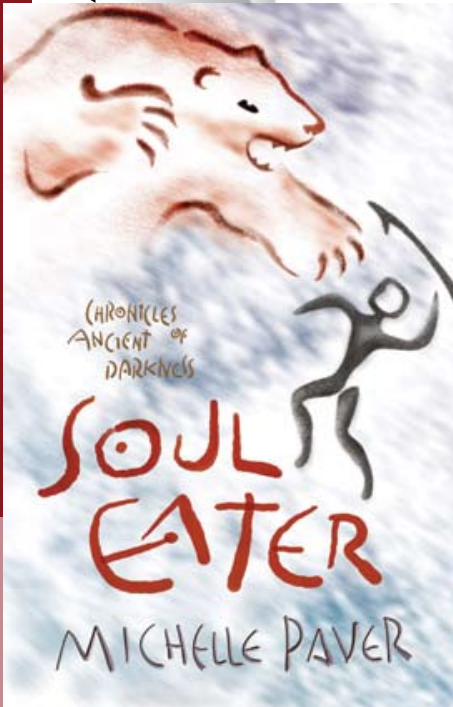
For *Spirit Walker*, I went to the Lofoten islands off the coast of north Norway at the time of the midnight sun, to get ideas for the Seal Islands. I also went to Greenland to learn how the Inuit traditionally built kayaks, hunted seals and made their hide clothes; and I tried some of their food (whale, seal, seaweed etc), because that's what Torak eats when he's with the Seal Clan. Probably the best bit, though, was when I swam with some wild killer whales. Floating in that deep green water and hearing the whales whistling and clicking to each other, then seeing a big male killer whale swimming directly beneath me, was one of the most unforgettable experiences in all my research.



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For *Soul Eater*, I went back to Greenland, this time in winter, to do some husky-sledding, and to study traditional Inuit methods of survival in extreme cold. I also did some tracking in the snow in the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania (Romania), and went to Churchill, Manitoba, to observe wild polar bears up close. To research *Outcast*, I went to northern Sweden, where I encountered elk and beaver in the lake country, and saw some wonderful rock carvings made by people who lived about six thousand years ago. I also got to know some wolf cubs, which was probably the most fun part of my research: getting chewed, nosed and generally pawed by three boisterous and impossibly cute bundles of fluff!

For *Oath Breaker* I went to an ancient forest in Poland, where I encountered bison and a species of wild horse. For *Ghost Hunter* I went

back to Lapland in the winter, and snow-shoed through the silent forest, following the tracks of a female elk. I also spend time wandering the mountains of Dovrefjell National Park in Norway, where I tried (and sometimes failed) to avoid the musk-oxen, and spent hours gathering their amazingly light, warm wool, which had got snagged on bushes. I also climbed most of the way to the summit of Mount Snøhetta, which gave me inspiration for the Mountain of Ghosts. On the way down, I fell and bashed my cheekbone on the rocks, which told me just how Torak feels when he falls down the stone waterfall in the story.



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With the exception of the odd mountain mishap, going on research trips is one of the best things about writing these books. However, it's crucial not to include *too* much of the research in the stories. You may be surprised to learn that I only include a tiny part of what I've learned: maybe about one per cent. The challenge is to put in just enough to make the reader feel they're there, without clogging up the story.

Which of your characters in the Chronicles do you most identify with?

I identify a lot with Torak, who's a loner, like me; and also with Renn, as she can be rather sharp and critical (also like me). Really, though, I identify with *all* my characters when I'm writing about them, even the Soul-Eaters. However, I find the sections written from Wolf's point of view easiest to write, so maybe I identify with him the most. Why should that be? Perhaps it's partly because, when I was a baby in central Africa, my parents had a large, wolf-like Alsation dog called Sheba, who kind of adopted me as her cub. Sheba was very protective, to the extent that my parents could leave me quite safely with Sheba in their overgrown, jungle-like garden, knowing that no snake could get near me.

“ I pestered my parents for a wolf, but as we lived in London, they gave me a spaniel instead ”

As I grew a bit older and read more about wolves, I came to love them for themselves. (I even pestered my parents for one, but as we lived in London, they gave me a spaniel instead.) For the Torak books, I've made friends with the wolves at the UK Wolf Conservation Trust in Berkshire. These wolves aren't wild, but they're not tame either, as you can't really tame a wolf, so when you meet them, you need to obey wolf good manners. Over the years, I've got to know some of these wolves, and they know me, so we give each other a real wolf greeting when I visit. When I was writing *Outcast*, the Trust acquired some cubs whom I got to know from when they were tiny. The Trust named the male cub Torak, and he's my favourite. Best of all, though, was the day I spent introducing Ian McKellen to the wolves. Ian has performed the magnificent recordings of all six books in the series, and he seems to have an instinctive understanding of wolves, so I knew he would get on with them just fine. And so he did.

Can you tell us a little about your interest in archaeology?

I've been interested in the past since before I could read, and have always loved ancient myths and legends. For the Torak books, I did a lot of library research about the people

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of Torak's time, the Mesolithic, finding out what we know about their clothes, shelters, weapons and food. But of course, we don't really know what they *believed*. For example, what did they think about life and death, and their fellow creatures? For that, I've studied anthropology, particularly the ways of more recent hunter-gatherers, such as some American Indian tribes (particularly those of the Pacific Northwest), the Inuit, the Ainu of Japan, the San and Eboe of Africa, the Aborigines of Australia, and many others. I've woven their beliefs into those of the clans, occasionally altering them slightly to fit the story.

To explain what I mean, I'll take the Soul-Eaters as an example. In most hunter-gatherer cultures, there's one member of the clan who is in touch with the spirit world, and who goes into a trance to visit it, to cure sickness, foretell the future, and so on. Such people are often called shamans or witch-doctors, and mostly they do good. Obviously, they're very powerful people. My idea was this: what if they banded together to do evil? That's where the idea of the Soul-Eaters came from. And the really pernicious thing about them, I think, is that they don't believe that they're doing evil. They just think they're right. That's what I find truly frightening.

“ The more you write, the more you'll learn: about what works and what doesn't; about the kinds of things you like to write, and those you don't. ”

What did you like to read as a child, and what do you enjoy reading now?

As a child, I read all the time. Every week I would visit Wimbledon Library and take home an armful of books (in fact, I still do). When I was very small, I loved the Moomin books by Tove Jansson and the *Adventure* books by Willard Price (*Lion Adventure* and *Volcano*

Adventure were particular favourites). I also adored books in which fantasy was mixed with reality, such as *Elidor* by Alan Garner, and *The Giant Under the Snow* by John Gordon; and I read and reread the luminous retellings of myths and legends from all over the world by Roger Lancelyn Green.

What advice would you give to children (or teachers) who want to be writers?

First, a practical one. If you get an idea, however weird, *write it down immediately*. If you don't, you may forget it. Maybe carry a small notebook with you, so that you can scribble it quickly. It may be for a piece of dialogue, or a character, or a whole story; it doesn't matter. When your notebook's full, sling it in a drawer, and then occasionally look through it. You may find an idea that triggers a story.

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My second tip is a comforting one. *Never be afraid to change what you've written.* Nobody gets it right first time (not even Shakespeare). If you don't like your story, *don't* be downhearted. You can change anything! Cut out boring bits, invent or remove characters, set the whole thing on another planet. You're in charge. It's often said that good stories aren't written, they're *re-written*. I believe that's very true. I rewrite many, many times until I get it right.

Thirdly: *just keep writing.* The more you write, the more you'll learn: about what works and what doesn't; about the kinds of things you like to write, and those you don't. Gradually, your writing will get better. Finally, if you're too tired to write, it helps hugely to read a book. Seeing how different authors tell stories can really open your mind to what's possible. (And it's a lot less tiring than writing.)

People often ask me how I get my ideas, and the answer is, they come in bits and pieces, sometimes over several years. Take *Wolf Brother*. While I was at University, I had an idea for a story about a boy, a wolf, and a large bear. I didn't realise it at the time, but that idea actually had its roots back when I was about ten, and mad keen on wolves and the Stone

Age. Then, years later, I had an extremely scary encounter with a bear in southern California, and that reminded me what it must have been like to be in the Stone Age. A few

years after that, I came across my old story about the boy and the wolf that I'd written at University, and *Wolf Brother* was born. Shortly after that, I realized that Torak's story doesn't end with *Wolf Brother*, and the entire six-book sequence of the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* was created. So as you can see, it's all quite bitty and mysterious.

“ I've got to work very hard to create characters about whom the reader cares passionately, and I've got to keep the story exciting and never stodgy. ”

You also write books for adults. How does the process of writing for children differ from that of writing for adults?

I don't consciously alter my style if I'm writing for children; I alter my style because of the kind of story I'm writing and the point of view of the character. However, what I love about having children as my majority readership is that they are *extremely* critical. If a child is bored by a story, she won't keep reading, she'll go off and do something else. This means I've got to work very hard to create characters about whom the reader cares passionately, and I've got to keep the story exciting and never stodgy. That's a challenge, but it's one I like.



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In the book, the clans are in tune with their forest environment. Do you think that humankind today has lost that connection with nature?

There are, of course, a few hunter-gatherers still living in the old way but, sadly, they're increasingly under threat, because their habitat is being taken away. I think part of my interest is that hunter-gatherers have such a close connection to the natural world. That's so different from how we live in the West. I don't want to idealise Torak's world, but I do think the notion of using every single bit of the animal you've killed is admirable. And I love the simplicity of moving on from one campsite to another, which means that you don't want or need many possessions. I also like the idea of not owning land, and therefore not placing importance on inherited wealth. Of course, we can't go back to that way of life now, there are simply too many of us. But it's intriguing to think about what we've lost.

Do you enjoy travelling and exploring other countries and cultures? Which country have you most enjoyed visiting?

As you'll have seen from my previous answers, I have tended to go to northern Scandinavia and Finland for much of my research, partly because that's where the story is set (although I've moved mountains

and rivers around, so you won't be able to locate Torak's world in an atlas). However it's also because I'm just drawn to the north. For one thing, it's a place of extremes. In summer it's light all the time, in winter it's dark all the time, and the forests are *huge*, unlike the UK, which is one of the least-forested countries in Europe. For another thing, the people are wonderfully friendly and welcoming, and I've particularly loved spending time with Sami and Inuit people, and getting an insight into very different ways of life. And finally, I've always loved the Norse myths and legends. As a child, I adored stories about the mysterious god Odin, with his wolf and raven attendants.

Are there future children's stories that you're planning to write? Can you tell us anything about them?

In 2007 I began getting ideas for another series. These ideas are still taking shape, and I'm *really* keen on them. However, like many writers, I'm superstitious about talking about my stories until I've written them, so I'm afraid I can't tell you very much. What I can say is that the stories will still be set in prehistory, albeit a slightly later time from Torak's, and in a different part of the world. As and when the new series develops, see my websites: www.torak.info and www.michellepaver.com.