

2004/Sept MICHELLE PAVER - Publishing News

Referred to in an interview last year as a ‘respected but still obscure novelist’, Michelle Paver remains the former but is in no way the latter any more. Her much-hyped Orion deal for the six-part *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* has seen to that. In 2000, two years after she’d resigned from her position as a patent lawyer and partner in a firm of City solicitors, her first adult title, *Without Charity*, was published “...but the first book I wrote was at university in 1981,” says Paver, “and that didn’t get published for obvious reasons, because it was awful. I was pretty arrogant at that stage, I’d read a lot of books and I thought ‘how hard can it be to write one?’; I had a rude shock...but I got bitten by the bug.”

Paver also wrote a couple of children’s books while at university, one of which ended up becoming *Wolf Brother* [the first volume of the *Chronicles*], but in a very different form from the original. “The only thing they really have in common is that they each have a boy and a wolf in them, and a couple of the scenes are similar,” comments Paver, who says she still has everything she’s ever written, right back to *Ebony the Mouse Goddess*, a mythical tale tapped out on her mother’s typewriter when she was just five years old.

Paver kept writing, through law college and while working, and says she realised she must be getting better “as the rejections letters started getting nicer”. But it took her a long time to admit to herself that she wasn’t happy with her day job and that it was worth taking a risk to attempt to become what she had always wanted to be - a full-time writer. “I knew I had to at least try to be a writer, so in the end I made the decision to give up law and luckily I got a publishing contract a few months later.”

It was Paver’s agent, Peter Cox of International Literary Representation & Management, who suggested she try writing for children, in addition to the book a year she was writing for the adult market. “He kept saying that if I had any other ideas - film, other kinds of books, non-fiction - to let him know. In a break between books, this was January last year, I was looking through my dusty old box files and found this children’s book I’d written and

some of it really wasn't bad. The basic relationship between the boy and the wolf was there and I thought, god, I'd *really* like to write that because it kind of tapped into everything that I've always been keen on but had forgotten or lost and got away from - animal behaviour, the distant past, the natural world and the high adventure, actually. Writing something really adventurous, with a lot of action, really appealed to me."

Originally set in 9th century Norway, the story, says Paver, became simplified - a boy, a wolf, a girl, a forest and, of course, a scary bear - and was relocated in the Stone Age. While the story might have become simplified it isn't simple; there are big concerns, in terms of what was crucial, in a life-or-death way, to the people of that time, who are living in an era on the edge of collapse, where a living, breathing WMD stalks their world. "The real light bulb moment was when I looked at this idea, which I'd had 20 years ago, and I realised going further back made it a much blanker canvas for me - I could make up my own religions and creation myths and how the world was seen. This was everything I'd always wanted to write about."

Paver has a huge enthusiasm for the story behind her story, aware, like a renaissance painter, that the detail must be there in the background - should you care to look for it - but that it shouldn't overpower her characters and what they're doing. You get the feeling she, like her hero Torak, could hunt, kill and skin a deer, if the need arose. "You've got to care about the characters, therefore they've got to be real, this has got to be a totally real world. You could call it fantasy, but to me it's utterly real, a world where everything's seen through the eyes of the clans and to them the bear is inhabited by a demon; this is part of the overarching storyline that will go right the way through the six books."

One idea, the boy and the wolf, became six books after Paver had completed the original synopsis and her agent had asked her to take the idea a bit further, which she did. "At that stage you couldn't have stopped me anyway because I really wanted to write the book and two weeks later I'd finished the first seven chapters, by which time I knew there was more to this bear than met the eye. I was thinking in terms of three books, but

somewhere during the writing of those first chapters I realised I had to think bigger and we went from three to six books. It's quite an exhausting thought, six books, and you've really, really got to want to write them before you tell anyone because you don't want to be stuck in a contract for books you don't want to write. But the six-book structure just unfolded...and I know what happens on the last page of the last book.”

Paver says she was completely astounded by the extraordinary reception her idea received: the big Orion deal, the pre-emptive strike by HarperCollins US, and not to mention the global rights response which means the series has already earned upwards of £12 million, before publication of the first book. Amazing what you can do with seven chapters, set in the Stone Age, from an author who'd never written for children before. “I was flabbergasted,” admits Paver, “but it was fantastic and it's been an interesting year. I've finished an adult novel, as well as looking after the editorial side of *Wolf Brother*, researching the second book, *Spirit Walker*, and getting ready to write it. So, a bit tight, but I did bring it on myself!”