

Wolfsister

Michelle Paver will snorkel with killer whales, eat raw seal blubber and ride 300 miles on horseback to research her books.

So befriending wolves – the central characters in her work for children – was no effort. By **Sally Williams.**

Photographs by **Poppy de Villeneuve**

Michelle Paver at the UK Wolf Conservation
Trust in Berkshire



Michelle Paver, who last year won a record advance of £1.8 million to write a six-book fictional series for children, is snuggling up to a wolf as if it were a puppy dog. We are at the UK Wolf Conservation Trust near Reading and 44-year-old Paver is having her photograph taken in preparation for next month's publication of *Spirit Walker*, the second in the series, titled *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*. The book follows on from the international success of *Wolf Brother*, which had previously lain gathering dust in Paver's cupboard for 22 years.

Wolves are Paver's territory: 'I just love them,' she says. Who can blame her? Wolves are more than just her friends – they've helped to make her a millionaire and a global publishing phenomenon. It is no surprise, then, that she is a familiar face – and smell – here. Two wolves are sitting under a tree, and when they catch a whiff of Paver, they come trotting over. We are in the wolf enclosure – a sprawling area of wild grass and trees, with a 15ft-high perimeter fence. The keepers open the gate and Paver goes in. It is odd to watch your subject almost turn into a wolf, but suddenly Paver is on the ground nuzzling them and fondling their fur. One of them nearly killed a cow recently, I'm told matter-of-factly. Their jaw pressure is around 1,500lb psi – four times that of an Alsatian. Paver, however, is blissfully unbothered.

Although *Wolf Brother* was published last year, Paver wrote it while she was a student at Oxford University. Set 6,000 years ago in the Mesolithic period – after the Ice Age, when primeval forest covered northern Europe and wolves and bears roamed free – it tells the story of the relationship between 12-year-old Torak and a wolf cub (Wolf). Both are orphaned. Torak's father is killed by a demon-haunted bear; Wolf's family are washed away by a roaring river. Boy and wolf discover a mutual rapport, and aided by Renn, a girl from a hostile tribe, they tackle the forces of darkness that threaten the forest. 'I wanted a simple story: boy; girl; wolf; bear; forest – I like

the fairytale aspect of it,' Paver explains.

She left the manuscript in a file and forgot about it for years, becoming a lawyer and then, much later, turning her attention instead to writing romantic novels. But a couple of years ago she rediscovered the story during a clear-out. She started re-writing it, but thought no one would be interested. The original version had been rejected but she had had encouraging letters. She wrote only a few chapters because she couldn't afford to write any more, but saw *Wolf Brother* as the first in a series of six, and so roughed out the other plots.

Paver was at home in Wimbledon, south London, when her agent phoned with the good news. 'It was unalloyed euphoria,' she says. Not that Paver swigged gallons of champagne. 'My mother wondered why I didn't swing from the chandelier, but for me, more than anything, it was a green light to write the six books that would take me to the most amazing places inside my head and otherwise.' *Wolf Brother* is now with 33 foreign publishers and film deals are on the horizon.

The concept of *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* has inevitably led to comparisons with JK Rowling. But Paver's literary agent, Peter Cox, is indignant. 'Michelle composes universes,' he has said. 'The magic is not of the Harry Potter kind, where he points a magic wand and everything's better. This is closer to natural magic, the magic ancient peoples practised and the magic inside your head. This is more terrifying and sophisticated.'

In *Spirit Walker* Torak travels to the remote islands of the Sea Clan to find a cure for the forest sickness. It provides yet more proof of how Paver criss-crosses the globe in the pursuit of authenticity. 'Everything in the book is factually possible,' she explains. Her purpose is to make readers feel that they are in the ancient forests. Thus, when Torak makes a shelter, he makes it in the proper way, by bending saplings. Renn is able to announce, 'I'm going to plait myself a hood,' only because her creator has done some heavy factual spadework. And, when Torak eats some

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seal meat, we are taken aside and told that seals were used for everything: clothes, shelters, skin-boats, food, harpoons and lamps. Even for parkas, which were made from gutskin. 'You take the guts,' Paver explains, 'then you clean it and sew it together. It is very light and also waterproof.'

Working on the basis that 'if Torak does, I do, too,' Paver has slept on reindeer skins in Lapland, ridden 300 miles on horseback through forests in Finland, visited Stone Age caves in Norway and spent time with the Inuit tribes in Greenland. She is single, travels alone, and has a palate so fearless that she once dined on elk hoof and raw seal blubber. 'Not very nice, just bland – like eating lard.'

'This is the Mesolithic world in all its gory, quite often brutal, detail,' enthuses the children's writer Anthony Horowitz (who shares with Paver a childhood admiration for the adventure stories of the Canadian writer Willard Price). 'By and large teenage boys do not jump out of helicopters, crash through the roof of the Science Museum and shoot the Prime Minister,' Horowitz says, 'but if I can mention the type of helicopter, the height of it and go on to the roof of the Science Museum, which I did, it helps you buy into the bigger picture.'

Of course, what makes Paver's fictional world so believable is that she turns her months of research into novels, not 200-page fact sheets. The story always comes first, the factual detail after. 'She has such a gift for storytelling and narrative drive, you are almost unaware of the research,' Amanda Craig, the novelist and children's book critic, says. In *Spirit Walker*, for example, Paver wanted to include a plot about Torak bobbing in a sea of killer whales. As a

result she flew to Norway, so she could spend a few hours snorkelling with killer whales in a fjord. 'Of course, you can look things up in the British Library, but actually being in the water with them added verisimilitude to the story. The speed with which they move, the little silver wave curling back from the leading edge of the dorsal fin. Also, you get unexpected things. After they've been hunting – these ate herring – the sea is filled with the glitter of fish scales and I've never read about that. It's just one line in *Spirit Walker*, but it's there.'

Needless to say, Paver can't bear those television reconstructions of Stone Age men with clean fingernails and coats flapping open in the snow – 'I mean, let's not patronise the past' – but accuracy isn't the only motive. Paver adores research. She spent her childhood getting deeply excited about Vikings or bats, stapling pages of hand-written notes into little books. Perhaps she likes the intensity of getting lost in other worlds, with no time to think of her own. Either way, she admits that her way of working would be impossible if she had a family. She is happily childless, she says. Because she is 'an order freak' and 'someone who has to do things thoroughly', she could not cope with the blur and compromise of juggling work and children – like her mother, who didn't go out to work. 'If I had children they would completely take over my life and I don't want my life to be taken over.'

Paver radiates a blend of wryness and precision. Meeting her is like talking to a 19th-century explorer



Paver is slight and neat, the middle daughter of a South African newspaper publisher and a Belgian mother. There is nothing remotely flash about her clothes. Her house is sparsely decorated, apart from an ever-expanding collection of wolves – both in soft-toy form and photographs. A love of wolves is the great theme of her life. She was never attracted to the typically English love of dogs or horses – too safe, too boring, not wild enough. She first fell for wolves aged 10. 'They are beautiful and clever and sociable and all different, which I try to bring out,' she says. She even carries a picture of a wolf in her wallet. Does she see herself as wolf-like? 'I think there is something in that, although I have to be careful, don't I,' she checks herself, 'because I've just said wolves are really clever and cool. But certainly I identify with Torak and Wolf – both are loners, not part of the clan structure, and I am comfortable with that.'

She has had relationships – 'with men', she stresses, a sharp glint of fun in her eyes, 'just in case you're thinking women or goats or something, but they broke up for various reasons.' She is hospitable and attentive, but would, you feel, rather be in the study writing the third book, than talking. She has already plotted out her research trips for books four and five and has written the final scene for book six in her head.

Paver also radiates a peculiar blend of wryness and precision, and meeting her is a bit like talking to a 19th-century explorer – her speech is marked by a steady flow of obscure-sounding tribal names, which she offers to spell, because she would rather no words than misspelt words. It is typical that the picture book she found most absorbing as a four-year-old was not Richard

Scarry, but a linen-bound copy of *Prehistoric Man*, by J Augusta and Z Burian, belonging to her parents. 'It was very dramatic, obviously, with pictures of burial rights and encampments,' she remembers. 'And the people looked so different and yet they looked like real people – they had personalities.' The potent mix of being a tomboy, bookish and imaginative resulted in the young Paver becoming fascinated with the idea of living close to nature, which she sought to do, despite the lack of wilderness in Wimbledon. She made nettle soup from her copy of *Culpeper's Herbal* (bought from pocket money for £5), built a kiln in the garden, skinned and salted a rabbit, and for three years slept on the floor even though she had a bed. 'I think my friends thought I was a bit weird, but I was quite bright, so that allowed me to be weird.' Not that Paver was ever gregarious. Even as a child, there is a sense of a spirit set apart.

She went from Wimbledon High School, a top-flight girls' school, to Oxford, where she studied biochemistry. Here, contrary to the tradition of rousing hedonism typically enjoyed by undergraduates, Paver cut a solitary figure. She skipped lectures, kept up with course-work in the library, and spent the rest of the time reading – mostly Norse sagas, anthropology and Victorian novels – and writing, including the manuscript of what would be *Wolf Brother*. 'Since the age of five, I'd written plays and little stories and then at university, pretty arrogant, I remember thinking, I've read an awful lot, how hard can it be to write?'

Three years later, it was a short move into law. 'I was getting so many rejection letters, I didn't seriously think I could make a living as a writer. After Oxford, I thought I'm quite good at passing

exams, it will buy me some time.' For 12 years, Paver worked for a prestigious law firm, becoming a partner, aged 31. With her six-figure salary, Paver was now living in luxury in a penthouse, overlooking the Wimbledon All England Tennis Club. 'It had two bedrooms and a dining-room I never used. At one stage I even had aspirations towards glass-fronted antique book shelves, and heavy curtains, because this was the 1980s.'

But she was still full of stories, getting up at 4.30am to write them down. The turning point was her father's death from cancer, in 1996. He was diagnosed six months after he retired. 'So, all the things he'd been going to do, he couldn't do.

She is richer than ever before, yet has no interest in changing. The only luxury money has brought is travel

But he was incredibly good about it. He said, "I haven't any regrets." I thought, if I died next year, I'd have nothing but regrets because I wanted to write and it hadn't happened. That was starting to get to me. I was getting more and more tired. I looked more and more grey, and my health wasn't very good because I wasn't eating very well, just crisps and white wine. I think I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.'

So, she took a year's sabbatical to write *Without Charity*, a historical romance for adults, published in 2000. Then, she returned to work. 'There were 3,000 e-mails on my computer, because nobody had cleared them and I was given a case that involved lung cancer, so I knew

going back was a mistake and I should get out.'

Paver was a respected author of three historical romances before she found fame in children's fiction. *Without Charity* was included in WH Smith's Fresh Talent 2000. Her second, *A Place in the Hills*, was shortlisted for the 2002 Parker Pen Romantic Novel of the Year Award. But with *Wolf Brother* her life changed for ever. Yet the odd thing about Paver is she has stayed the same. She is richer than ever before, yet has no interest in changing her lifestyle or her tastes. She still lives in the economy 1960s prefab into which she downshifted after leaving her job, and talks of her relief at shedding her Armani clothes – 'I love the fact that I can just buy five T-shirts from Marks & Sparks.' She does yoga once a week, walks to the local Sainsbury's, because she doesn't have a car, gardens, cleans the house, and re-reads Trollope, Dickens and Austen – 'they are such good storytellers, I think I've learnt a lot of my technique from them.' The only luxury that money has brought is travel. 'I can now nip up to north Norway to do research and that is the big change that money has made to me,' she observes. 'Going to Greenland cost £6,000 – that would have been impossible before.'

But Paver believes the end is in sight. The world of the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, especially the wolves, is destined to come to an end with the sixth book. 'I'm hoping that I will have an idea that will allow me to stay in this world,' she adds. 'I just don't like the thought of leaving them.' *'Spirit Walker' (Orion) by Michelle Paver, published on September 7, is available for £8.99 plus £2.25p&p from Telegraph Books Direct (0870-155 7222)*