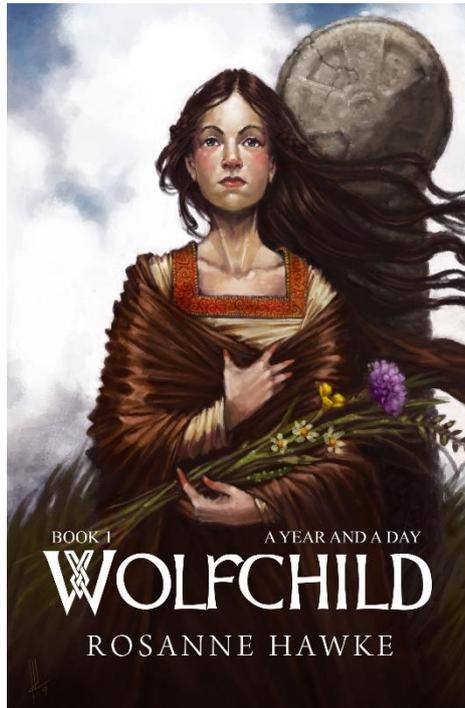


Teacher Notes – Wolfchild 1



Writing 'Wolfchild' – Author's Response

'Wolfchild': What started it?

First of all I wanted to write about a boy who couldn't accept himself, who didn't like himself, and how that made him behave. It made me think of a wolf – a boy acting like a wildchild so people wouldn't come near. Then I thought of putting him in the setting of a Cornish legend – the one about Lord Trevelyan.

For long ago there was a special land that has come to be called Lyonesse by the romantic poets but the Cornish called it Lethowsow – a wonderful land – some said 140 churches, beautiful green paddocks. Some said only women lived there – tall, war-like women, beautiful and brave. Others said Arthur was buried there.

I decided to research medieval times and show this place the way I thought ordinary people would have seen it – to show them living the way they would have in medieval times. I found out that people lived by the seasons; sometimes they got hungry if the harvest failed and in this story it does fail, not by a drought but by too much rain. The Saxon Chronicle says there was a huge tidal flood in 1099 on the 11th November. It flooded a lot of coastal villages in Southern England and some historians think this could be when Lethowsow was flooded too.

Fact to fiction

The legend states that before the land flooded, Lord Trevelyan managed to get his family and cattle to safety in Cornwall. For that to happen, I think there must have been warnings and that's when I thought of Grandmam Eselda, who could read the signs of the times. And of course the strange weather. Uncle Talan, a fisherman, could see the sea was rising too.

In the legend, Lord Trevelyan is the last person to reach Cornwall alive. He was riding his white horse. I imagined how that beautiful horse would have burst up from the sea, nose snorting, his head shaking, spray flying, as if in slow motion. It would have been a glorious sight. To capture that feeling I put Morwenna on the horse with Lord Trevelyan, and she saw all those things as they scrambled up the rocks near St Michael's Mount.

The Trevelyan's family coat of arms today still has the white horse rising from the sea.

I wanted to write a Cornish story because at least 20% of us in South Australia have a Cornish background, and so many don't even know. I also like this legend because my name used to be Trevilyan too.

Background Notes

1 Cornwall & Lethowsow

'Wolfchild' is a historical fantasy, and 'Wolfchild' is my representation of Lethowsow as I imagine it would be before the land submerged in 1099.

2 The land

Cornwall has an atmosphere that has lured many even from across the seas – writers Daphne du Maurier and Denys Val Baker call this the 'Spirit of Cornwall'. Cornwall has a magic of its own – it has always remained a place apart with its myths and legends, a journey towards the land of King Arthur, Tristan and Iseult, the mythical lost land of Lyonesse, another world. D H Lawrence echoes these sentiments:

I like Cornwall very much. It is not England. It is bare and dark and elemental, Tristan's land. I lie looking down at a cove where the waves come white under a low, black headland... It is a cove like Tristan sailed into, from Lyonesse...It belongs to 2000 years back – that pre-Arthurian Celtic flicker of being which disappeared so entirely... It is old, Celtic, pre-Christian.

Cornwall combines romance and reality, myth and matter, fantasy and fact. Val Baker suggests the reason most people are strongly affected by Cornwall is that they can see all the physical evidence for the mystery and magic that at once so enthralls them and troubles them. When I was there I felt this sense of mystery too: cliffs, rocks, sea, caves, woods, moors, granite, ancient cobbled paths, ruggedness, mists, wind, raw weather, starkness – all the elements of a fantasyland.

3 Cornish character

The Cornish people have had certain identifiable characteristics. Daphne Du Maurier sees Cornish character as something 'smouldering beneath the surface, ever ready to ignite, a fiery independence, a stubborn pride', a characteristic that may be as much a product of Celtic forbears from Crete as the geographic isolation ('Vanishing Cornwall' 11). George Henwood makes a statement about Cornish character in 'The Mining Journal' of 1859: 'The Cornish are remarkable for their sanguine temperament, their indomitable perseverance. Their ardent hope in adventure, and their desire for discovery and novelty...' (Payton 'Cornwall Forever' 155). Forms of employment such as mining became another source of identity for the Cornish.

Cornish historian Elliott-Binns suggests the Cornish never lost their identity; they were a strong and hardy folk with a Celtic temperament. This temperament was more controlled by the heart than the head. The people were emotional, imaginative, with startling contrasts of mood and action: kindness and ferocity, gaiety and melancholy, courteousness and brutality. They were detached

and independent, distrustful of strangers, haunted by memories and the past, had an intense love of soil, and a love of music.

4 Houses

The house would have been like a hut – one storey, sometimes a loft and a ladder. The walls made of cob, a combination of clay and straw. If timber was available split logs were used. The roof was thatched with straw. Window openings were small and covered by a shutter in bad weather. Inside it would be dark and smoky. The floor was earthen, trodden down, but became mud in the wet. The hut would be near a stream. A small enclosed piece of ground for veges, a cherry tree, apple and pear tree. The pig sty would be beyond. A cow would be kept in the byre close to the hut or be part of it. Furniture would consist of a few rough chests to keep clothes and woolens in. Benches and wooden stools, pots and pans of earthenware, bowls and basins of wood. On the walls were kept the scythe, rake and other implements. There was no chimney – the smoke came out through a hole in the roof. (Notes from Lacey 43)

A manor house had benches and trestles, a few massive chairs and tin plates and silver spoons. Beds had flock or straw on them, no sheets. No table cloths.

5 Customs & Festivals

- May Day
- Mid-summer
- Good Friday
- Easter
- End of Harvest
- Marriages and funerals
- Miracle plays – drama.
- November 1st bonfires for All Hallows. This was renamed All Saints Day.
- November 11th – St Martin's Day, feast of the plowman

6 Religion

In 'Wolfchild' the people believe in Christianity. This includes believing in the saints. They also had a few traces of the pagan religion that was in Cornwall before the Christians eg St Piran came. So the people still had some of the old superstitions.

Saint Warna was the patroness of wrecks. She came from Ireland, crossing the sea in a coracle (little boat made of skins). She had power over boats and sailors. Sometimes a calamity would occur. Sometimes a friendly light would bring a ship in on the rocks from which no human hand could help them. St Warna was given the blame. Her shrine stands by a well. Once 5 families drowned when crossing homeward after a wedding.

The 11th of November is St Martin's Day. This is the day that it is thought that a flood came to submerge the land of Lethowsow.

7 Food

- Veges: onions, garlic, leeks, radish, carrot, shallots, parsnips, cabbage, parsley, dill, chervil, marigold, coriander, poppy and lettuce.

- There was no spinach, broccoli, cauliflower, runner beans, Brussels sprouts, potatoes or tomatoes. No tea, coffee or chocolate.
- Honey was used a lot.
- Pottage was a cross between soup and stew served with thick slabs of bread. Meat was a luxury and was only eaten at feasts.
- Ale and mead was drunk.
- A cauldron was used to cook in.
- In the evening the people had broth, chopped fish, mackerel, or shellfish.
- Staple diet was bread.
- Only a knife was used for cutlery.
- The food was blessed and the sign of the cross made over it.
- Eating together implied faith in those with whom you ate.

8 Animals

- wolves, stags, badgers, wild boars, foxes, horses, bear, crane.
- Rabbits didn't come to England until after 1066. They didn't arrive in Cornwall until later. No snakes.

9 Sicknesses

- smokiness in the cottages led to eye trouble.
- Saltiness of the winter meat led to scurvy and other skin diseases.
- Farm workers often got rheumatism. No change of clothing in wet weather did this too.
- People had trouble with their teeth.
- People often visited holy wells and shrines to pray for help.
- They had a belief in charms and white magic.

10 Clothes

The people wore tunics, leggings, shoes of leather, or of felt and cloth. Long cloaks and caps in cold weather. Women's tunics were longer. A mantle was a garment with a hood worn over the tunic.

11 Games and activities

- Naughts and crosses
- Backgammon
- Blindman's Buff
- Minstrels sang, acrobats, storytellers, pipes drums and harp
- Performing bears
- Jugglers – apples or balls
- Wrestling,
- Hurling
- Cock fighting
- Football
- poaching
- The Cornish made their own music

The Legend of The Lost Land of Lyonesse

Lyonesse

was the name given to the fertile stretch of land between Western Cornwall and the present-day Scilly Isles by romantic poets. It was previously called Lethowsow in Cornish. Legend has it that the land was fertile, with beautiful people and 140 churches. Some say they have heard the bells toll below the sea.

It is recorded in the Saxon Chronicle that in the year 1099 there was a very high tide and drowned many towns. Many believe a tidal wave covered Lethowsow at this time with only its peaks remaining visible. These became the Scilly Islands. Lord Trevelyan on his white steed was the last man to reach the coast of Cornwall alive and the Trevelyan family still have on their coat of arms a white horse emerging from the sea.

'Wolfchild' is based on this legend of the drowned land of Lyonesse (Lethowsow), where Lord Trevelyan on his white horse was the last man to reach Cornish soil alive.

The stories:

Tristan and Iseult

is a famous Cornish love story. King Mark was a Cornish king in the 6th century. His palace was at Castle Dor near Fowey. He sent his nephew Tristan to Ireland to bring back his bride, Isolde. A love potion intended for King Mark and Isolde on their wedding day was drunk by Tristan and Isolde on the ship and they fell in love. They escaped and lived in the forest of Moresk. But their story had a tragic ending. See the story in 'Tristan and Isolde' by Joy Wilson, Cornwall, 1999. Also see Rosemary Sutcliff's version: 'Tristan and Iseult'. Great Britain: Puffin Books, 1971.

Wolf story

– Romulus and his twin brother Remus, the legendary founders of Rome. They were the sons of Mars and Rhea Sylvia. Because she was a vestal virgin, she was condemned to death and the boys exposed. But they were suckled by a she-wolf. They eventually founded the city but argued about the plans. Romulus killed Remus in anger.

Another wolf story is about Bisclavret, one of Marie de France's stories (translated by Naomi Lewis in 'Proud Knight, Fair Lady'). It is about a baron who for 3 days of the week turned into a wolf. His wife found out that if he could not find his human clothes he would remain a wolf. So she betrayed him - a certain knight who loved the lady stole Bisclavret's clothes and he remained a wolf. Once the king was hunting in the forest and Bisclavret bounded up to the king and kissed his feet. The king ordered the wolf to be spared. But one day he saw the knight and his former wife and he attacked them. He ripped off the lady's nose. He had never attacked anyone before so they asked the lady what she knew. She finally told the story of how she had betrayed her husband, so the King ordered her to bring back his clothes. And so Bisclavret was restored to human life and his lands returned to him. His former wife and the knight had many children but none of the girls had noses.

Kelpies – these are spirits of the water in the form of a horse in Scottish folklore. A kelpie was supposed to like drowning travelers, but sometimes helped millers by keeping the mill-wheel going at night.

Lyonesse – see 'The legend' above

King Arthur – the primary source of the historical Arthur was Geoffrey Monmouth's 'History of the Kings of Britain' written in 1135. Some scholars say Arthur was probably a warrior, and an illegitimate son of King Uther, who became the overlord of a territory in the southwest of Britain. He fought successfully against the Scots, the Picts, and the Saxons. He led a victory at Badon in 516 AD.

He was a mighty war leader and had a dog called Cabal. Some say he was a Christian and bore the image of Mary into battle. In 537 was the battle of Camlann, after which the people in my story believe he was buried in Lethowsow in one of the carns and will return.

St Michael's Mount – The mountain in the sea is dedicated to St Michael. According to a Cornish legend, St Michael appeared in the year 495 to some Cornish fishermen who saw him standing on a ledge of rock high up above the sea on the western side of the mount. This is 'The Great Vision of the Guarded Mount' in Milton's poem 'Lycidas'. The old Cornish name for the mount meant 'the grey rock in the forest'. It is thought that the mount was once in a forest. A story about St Michael's Mount is 'Jack and the Giant Killer'. See that story in the Cornish folder on this website.

Cornish Language in 'Wolfchild'

In writing my own novels I have chosen not to spell out each and every word of dialect but rather to catch the rhythm of the language, and its cadence in sentence structure. I use some words from the language to add colour.

In 'Wolfchild', I include Kernewek language (Cornish). Cornwall is called Kernow and Raw's name means 'wolf' in Kernewek. Morwenna means white sea, though her uncle calls her his white sea bird. The cat is called Du because he is black. The text uses a few contractions such as 'tis' for 'it is' but over all does not use dialect as in 'ee' for 'you', as written broad dialect does in novels such as 'Not Only in Stone' (Somerville 1984). The language in 'Wolfchild' evokes more a sense of a different language being spoken, using the rhythm of Kernewek, where the most important information in the sentence comes first: 'Is Talan coming then? Is it fish he is bringing?' (Hawke WC). I felt a broad dialect makes a book too difficult for younger readers to access and the different rhythm in this text evokes sufficient Cornish atmosphere.

- See 'The Story of the Cornish Language' on this website for more information.
- Some other fiction
- Kevin Crossley-Holland, 'The Seeing Stone'.

Some Sources

- Any book on living in medieval times.
- Elliott-Binns, 'Medieval Cornwall'. London: Methuen, 1955.
- Lacey & Danziger, D. 'The Year 1000'. UK: Abacus, 2000.
- Thomas C. 'Explorations of a Drowned Landscape'. London: BT Batsford, 1985.