

The Witch's Boy

by KELLY BARNHILL



SEPTEMBER

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

Ages 10 and up, Grades 5 and up

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BOOK TALK

When Ned and his identical twin brother tumble from their raft into a raging, bewitched river, only Ned survives. Villagers are convinced the wrong boy lived. But when the Bandit King comes to steal the magic Ned's mother, a witch, is meant to protect, it's Ned who safeguards the magic and summons the strength to protect his family and community.

Meanwhile, across the enchanted forest that borders Ned's village lives Áine, the resourceful and pragmatic daughter of the Bandit King, who is haunted by her mother's last words to her: "The wrong boy will save your life and you will save his." When Áine's and Ned's paths cross, can they trust each other long enough to stop the war about to boil over between their two kingdoms?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Barnhill lives in Minnesota with her husband, three children, and very old dog. Her debut novel, *The Mostly True Story of Jack*, received four starred reviews. Her second book, *Iron Hearted Violet*, was a Parents' Choice Gold Award Winner and an Andre Norton Award finalist. *The Witch's Boy* is her third novel.



PRAISE FOR *The Witch's Boy*

"A story with many alluring elements . . . Barnhill creates an absorbing world of kingdoms and prophecies in which transformation comes through language, and through courage and self-awareness as well . . . [*The Witch's Boy*] should open young readers' eyes to something that is all around them in the very world we live in: the magic of words."

—*The New York Times*

"The classic fantasy elements are all there, richly reimagined, with a vivid setting, a page-turning adventure of a plot, and compelling, timeless themes."

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"A classic origin-quest tale . . . brimming with a well-drawn, colorful supporting cast, a strong sense of place, and an enchanted forest with a personality to rival some of the best depictions of magical woods."

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

"In a story of an unexpected hero, a thief's daughter, and some very tricky magic, Barnhill weaves a powerful narrative."

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

The Witch's Boy

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ned is always compared with his brother and referred to as “the wrong boy” by everyone around him. Even Áine’s mother, who never meets Ned, calls him that on her deathbed. Have you ever felt unfairly compared with another person? Have you ever compared one person and another, perhaps unfairly?
2. At the end of chapter 2, Tam’s soul is stitched to Ned’s body. What did you think the consequences would be for Ned? Were you surprised by what happened to him?
3. Many characters, such as Sister Witch, the Queen, and the Bandit King, are never called by their actual names. Why do you think Kelly Barnhill chose to name her characters this way? Can you think of people in your life or in other stories that aren’t often referred to by their given names?
4. While Áine is a very pragmatic girl, Ned is timid and clumsy. How do their personalities complement one another on their journey? Did you identify with either Áine or Ned as you were reading?
5. When Áine first meets Ned and the wolf, she’s mistrustful of both. But by the end, all three are friends. At what point do you think her opinion of Ned, and her opinion of the wolf, changed? Have you ever changed your mind about someone the more you got to know him or her?
6. Why do you think the Queen and King Ott behave so differently? In the beginning of chapter 6, it’s mentioned that even when the Queen took the throne at the young age of seventeen, she displayed her famous sardonic humor. Do you think that an older King Ott would also act as he had in youth?
7. Consider the pros and cons of Sister Witch’s small portion of magic. Would you ever want to possess this kind of magic in your day-to-day life? Why or why not?
8. Ned’s and Áine’s parents feature heavily in *The Witch’s Boy*. How are Ned’s parents similar to Áine’s? How are they different? Where do you see each parent’s influences in Ned and Áine’s adventure?
9. At the end of *The Witch’s Boy*, the Bandit King frees himself from his obsessive greed and makes the ultimate sacrifice for his daughter. Do you think the Bandit King was a villain or a hero—or both? Are there other characters in the novel that seemed either good or evil when you began reading but changed as the novel progressed?
10. In the beginning and end of *The Witch’s Boy*, Ned longs to go out to the sea. Why do you think that is?
11. Kelly Barnhill used many elements from classic fairy tales in *The Witch’s Boy*, such as beginning with “Once upon a time.” What else makes this book similar to a fairy tale? What makes it different? In the end, would you consider *The Witch’s Boy* a fairy tale?

meet the cast of **THE WITCH'S BOY**

KELLY BARNHILL

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NED

The wrong boy. He knows it. Everyone knows it. After a tragic accident that resulted in the death of his twin brother (and best friend in all the world), Ned has always seen himself as weak, broken, and useless. A waste of space. However, when his family and village are threatened, it is Ned who bravely puts himself at risk and journeys into a dangerous, cursed forest in order to protect the people he loves. Even the wrong boy can save the day.

ÁINE

As the only daughter of the feared Bandit King, Áine learned years ago that it didn't do her any good to question her situation. She lives in a tiny cottage in the middle of a mountainous forest and dreams of her old life, when she and her mother used to set their boats into the sea and gather fish in their handmade nets. Her father is being poisoned by magic and is on a path toward certain doom. Can she save him from himself?

TAM

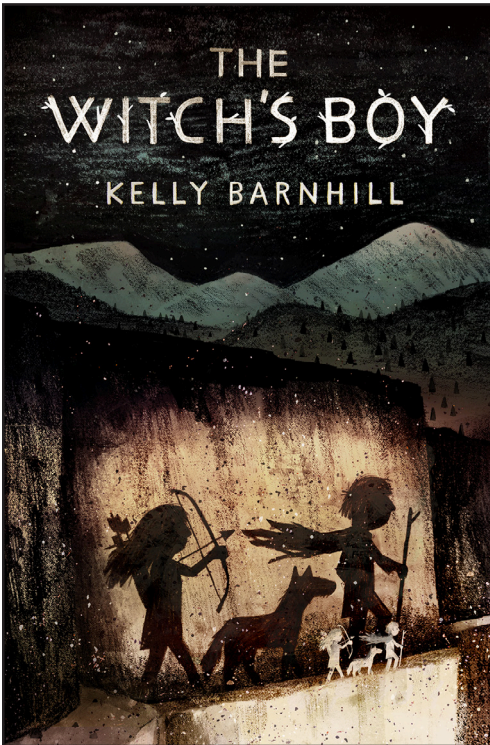
No longer alive, poor fellow, but his soul was stitched to his brother's, which prevented it from doing what souls are supposed to do, which is to say, move on. He is fond of schemes and tricks and mad adventures. He is also terribly fond of his twin brother, Ned. While his construction abilities are somewhat suspect, he is very good at cracking jokes. And he is quite good at scaring the pants off spoiled-rotten boy kings.

SISTER WITCH

A woman of power—one who is listened to, always. For generations, her family has protected and managed a small store of magic, the last in the world. It is her job to keep the magic contained, safe, and good. And she does this—at a terrible cost. She is not permitted to use her magic for personal gain—to do so could invite disaster. And indeed, the one time that she bends the rules, the unexpected consequences cannot easily be undone.

THE BANDIT KING

Once upon a time, when he was a young bandit, he fell in love with the black-eyed daughter of an innkeeper when he was in the middle of stealing their gold. True love made him give up his wicked ways; he gave his heart and built a family and left the gold behind. Alas, his transformation didn't last. When his beloved wife fell ill and died, the grief-stricken man became a bandit once again—one so feared and powerful that he was called king of all the bandits. And his desire for money and power consumed him. The only thing that kept him tethered to his old life was his love for his daughter, Áine—when he remembered her. But slowly, Áine was starting to fade from his mind and his thoughts and his heart. And he was becoming something else.



KELLY BARNHILL

on writing

THE WITCH'S BOY

I began writing *The Witch's Boy* while walking on a quiet trail in the middle of a deep, dark forest.

We were in Shenandoah National Park, hiking from the Skyline Drive—at the tippy-top of the ridge—and heading downhill under a dense canopy to a high, gorgeous waterfall. As hikes go, it was fairly easy going . . . on the way down. The way back was a different story. My son—then five—had no trouble sprinting the two and a half miles to the beautiful cascade in the gorge, but heading back up was a slow, hard slog.

He wanted to be carried.
 He wanted to live in the forest.
 He wanted teleportation to be real and available.
 He wanted us both to turn into Sasquatches.
 He wanted wings.

There was no way I could carry that child. The trail was too rocky and too steep. And I don't have superpowers. (Well, not yet, anyway.) So, in order to quell the whining and to keep his spirits strong, I started telling him a story.

"You choose," I said. "What do you want in your story?"

"It has to have a wolf in it," my son said. "A real wolf. But not a big one. A wolf like me."

"Okay, buddy," I said. "A story with a wolf in it. A young wolf. And probably a boy. What else?"

"Bandits," he said. "It should have bandits."

"Bandits it is," I said. "What else?"



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“I like the name Ned,” he said.

And so it started. We picked our way over rocks and roots and I told the story about a boy named Ned who stole his mother’s magic in order to protect it from the grasping hands of a wicked bandit horde. How the magic was tricky and sly and partially malicious. How it needed a powerful hand and Ned didn’t think he was a powerful boy. By the time we made it to the road, Ned had ditched the bandits, befriended a young wolf, and was, unbeknownst to him, heading straight for the first friendship of his life.

We sighed and looked at one another.

“Is that the end?” my son asked. “It doesn’t seem like the end.”

“No. It’s not the end, sweetheart,” I said. “I think it’s just the start.”

I had to think about Ned’s story for a long time before I could start scratching the words down in a composition notebook. I still didn’t know—not really—what kind of book it would turn out to be.

I didn’t, for example, intend to write a book about grief. But I did. I didn’t mean to write a book about parents who love their children, but fail their children, nonetheless. But I did that as well. I didn’t mean to write a book about lost brothers or broken daughters or bad kings or insufferable council members or lonely kids. Or brave kids. Or kids who break through their loneliness and sadness and learn how to connect. To stand up and hold hands and walk toward adulthood—that strange, uncharted shore.

Novels, as it turns out, are assertive, and bossy. They have a mind of their own.

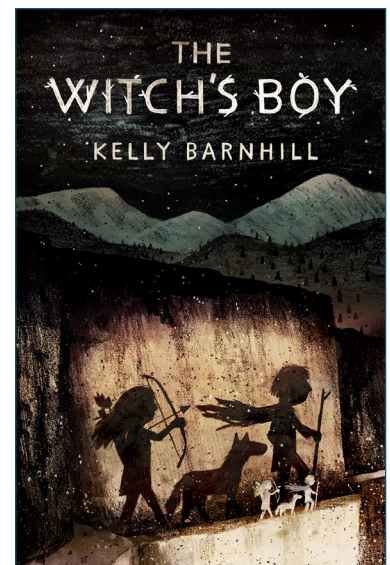
My son, alas, has no memory of the story I told him that day. He believes me that it happened, but the story, the hike, the waterfall and the mountain and the rocks and roots on the trail—they’ve all faded out of his consciousness as he presses forward on his own journey from babyhood to boyhood to manhood. He is only nine, but he is moving on.

And this brings us to a closer understanding of an uncomfortable truth about childhood—that it is fleeting, ephemeral, and easily forgotten. This thing that I’ve worked so hard to create for my son and my daughters—this childhood, this sense of wonder, this protected little world—it will pass away. That is its nature. Being alive requires us to move on. It requires us to change. We were; we are; we become something else. This is the way of things.

Books about childhood acknowledge this coming loss—this coming transformation. Of course they do. Kids know it in their bones. These books hint at the next leg of the journey—its new maps, new tools, new names for the world. There is grief hiding in the pages of these books, yes, but there is hope as well. Hope that just as we love, we are loved in return. Hope that the journey matters. And then, that great, wild Hope that that there is another strange, uncharted shore—our other destination, just out of view. That just as our childhood selves lived, died, and transformed, so do we. That we go on. And that every end isn’t really the end.

It’s just the start.

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