



SHE WOLF

BY DAN SMITH

SYNOPSIS


It's 866 AD: the Viking Age. Thirteen-year-old Dane Ylva is in Northumbria – a long way from home – in a part of the kingdom still controlled by the opposing Saxons. When she finds her mother killed by a Viking raider – a sinister man with three fingers – she vows to avenge her death.

Whilst deciding a plan with her dog, Geri – to whom she gives a voice – Ylva meets two people: a trader named Cathryn and a quiet, dark-skinned boy named Bron, who mostly communicates through hand-speak. Ylva feels it's her duty – expected by the gods – to avenge her mother's death and kill the three-fingered man, but Cathryn tries to talk her out of it, claiming that vengeance won't bring her peace. Ylva leaves anyway with Geri in tow.

Out on her own, Ylva comes across three hunters. She asks them to help her find her mother's killers in exchange for payment. However, when she describes the killer's appearance – a three-fingered man, wearing a scarf with a wolf skull on it – the hunters claim he's a friend of theirs. A fight breaks out, and the three hunters are killed by a saviour in the shadows – Bron, helped by Cathryn. They convince Ylva and Geri to travel north, to the village to Seatun – to safety – with them. Along the way, they are separated from Bron.

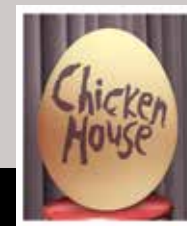
Cathryn and Ylva continue north, and it's revealed that Geri died along with Ylva's mother – his presence is a figment of her imagination. The journey is treacherous; they face cold, hunger and wolves – and Ylva realises the three-fingered man is tracking her. Ylva adopts a wolf pup she finds along the way, whom she names Freki.

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Cathryn is gravely injured after falling on her own knife. She tells Ylva to carry on without her, before succumbing to her wounds. Ylva continues on with Freki, facing wolves and icy conditions – only to find Seatun abandoned. Devastated that the gods didn't warn her, Ylva goes to leave – but Bron appears. After hearing of Cathryn's death they scuffle, which reveals an iron slave collar hidden under Ylva's scarf. Bron helps her remove it, and reveals he's known all along that Ylva was an escaped slave.

The wolves return, led by an enormous wolf unlike any Ylva has ever seen before. The wolves surround the hut Ylva and Bron are taking shelter in, and pound and thump at the walls. Ylva and Bron realise they are here for Freki, but Ylva refuses to give him up. In defence, she throws an oil lamp at the giant wolf and the hut goes up in flames. Ylva, Bron and Freki barely escape, but succeed in driving the wolves away.

Ylva and Bron are ambushed and taken hostage by the three-fingered man and his companion. Ylva learns he wasn't hunting her at all: he was tracking Cathryn and Bron, who had stolen slaves from him. Cathryn and Bron are slavers, and were likely going to sell Ylva too. Ylva and Bron manage to overpower the two Vikings, wounding the three-fingered man and killing his companion. Ylva learns the three-fingered man wasn't the one who killed her mother – in fact, he avenged her by killing her murderer.

Bron is seriously injured so, the three-fingered man in tow, Ylva and Bron travel to get help from a 'witch' that Bron knows of. On the way, they're visited again by the wolves. It's clear they want Freki – so Ylva makes the decision to release him into the wild, and he joins the pack. Soon after, the three-fingered man dies from his injuries.

Ylva and Bron reach an island fortress. It's a village of Saxons, mostly women, where Bron – and, before her death, Cathryn – lived. The 'witch' turns out to be Cathryn's sister, who helps Bron. Cathryn's mother reveals that the island is home to several ex-slave boys and girls, and reveals that, far from stealing slaves to sell them, Cathryn was stealing slaves to free them. She'd done the same for Ylva. Finally, Ylva is safe.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

'Set in Viking times, this exciting novel follows tough and resourceful Ylva on her quest to avenge her mother's death. Her journey is one of survival, spirit and pure drive – but it's also a story about learning to trust again, in



spite of the wolves and raiders that fate sends against you . . . something that we all have to prepare for!

Danr Smior is the incredible Dan Smith's name in Old Norse, so I've decided call him that from now on. Bravo, Danr - more thrilling stories like this, please! **BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**

AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Growing up, Dan Smith lived three lives: the day-to-day humdrum of boarding school, finding adventure in the padi fields of Asia and the jungles of Brazil, and in a world of his own, making up stories.

Dan's Chicken House novels include *My Friend the Enemy*, *My Brother's Secret* and *Big Game*, the latter of which is now a major movie starring Samuel L. Jackson. His fourth novel for Chicken House, *Boy X*, published in 2016, followed by *Below Zero* in 2018.

Dan lives in Newcastle with his wife and two children.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'It can be difficult to know exactly where the inspiration for a story comes from. It might be born from tiny fragments of ideas drawn together as if attracted by a magnet. Or it might just pop into my head out of nowhere. But sometimes, as with *She Wolf*, I know *exactly* where a story first took hold in my imagination.

A few years ago I watched a film about a young man travelling across the Old West in the USA. About halfway through the story, he enters an isolated and dilapidated trading post in the middle of nowhere. While he's in there, a man and a woman come in and try to rob the trading post, so the owner kills them. Shaken, our hero leaves the ramshackle hut and sees two young children - a brother and sister - standing at the side of the track. In that moment we realise that the dead man and woman were their parents, and that the two children are now alone in a dangerous and unforgiving world. But our hero rides away, leaving them standing by the track. He has other things to do.

It was a shocking and heart-breaking moment, and I waited to find out what would happen to those two children. But we never *do* find out, and I couldn't stop thinking about that. I wanted to know where they went,



what they did, who they spoke to. But the only way for that to happen was for me to write their story for them. So, *She Wolf* began life as a story about two children left alone in the Old West, but as it progressed and began to change (as stories often do in the telling), I realised the setting wasn't right. Something had to change. And during a meeting, my publisher said to me 'Dan, what do you know about Vikings?' and that was that. It had to be Vikings. They are the stuff of legend. Brave heroes unafraid of death. Fearless adventurers. Ruthless killers. Raiders. Slavers. But they were also farmers, traders, parents, grandparents, husbands, wives, and children. So ... what if those children standing outside that hut had been *Viking* children? What would *they* have done? They would have done what any true Viking would do – they would swear vengeance, and they would stop at nothing to get it.

Oh, and somewhere along the way, out there in the cold wilds of Northumbria, those two children changed. They became just one child, and the most faithful dog you could ever wish for.' **DAN SMITH**

THEMES

- Viking and Norse legend
- Survival and resilience
- Vengeance, honour and duty
- Religion and belief
- Death and the afterlife
- Trust and courage

WRITING STYLE

She Wolf is a historical novel, set in Northumbria in 866. It is written in third person past tense, and clearly evokes a sense of Ylva's manner and character. The writing is immediate, exciting and pacy, and unfolds linearly as we follow Ylva's story. The novel is split into several parts and ends with an author's note and glossary, explaining the historical and specialist terms used in the book. **48 chapters, 287 pages, ages 9+**



PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1. Vikings

She Wolf introduces us to some of the groups which populated England in 866: Vikings, Saxons and Danes. Throughout the novel, Ylva – as a Dane – is terrified the Viking three-fingered man is after her. When she finally meets him face-to-face, she learns something important about Vikings that somewhat changes her view on him.

As a class, discuss what you already know of these groups, especially Vikings. Are there tropes particularly associated with Vikings? What would you imagine when you think of a Viking? Does this match up with Dan Smith's 'Did You Know?' note at the end of the book?

Now, using your new Viking knowledge from Dan's note, work in small groups to create a Viking 'factfile' on A3 paper. Have a go at drawing a Viking based on Dan's description. When did Vikings live? What sort of armour did they wear, and what weapons did they use? What language did they speak? Which gods did they worship? Make a class display out of your work.

2. Dear diary ...

She Wolf is told from third person perspective, but always following Ylva. Dan Smith does a brilliant job of making the reader really feel like you're right there in Ylva's head, and although she's a very guarded character, we get a real sense of her feelings and emotions. Why do you think the author chose to write in third person, and what do you think the effect of this is?

Using your knowledge of Ylva and her characterisation, write a diary entry from her perspective. This could be at any point in the novel, or before or after – you might choose to depict Ylva's journey from Denmark to England, or continue on from the story's end. How much do you think Ylva would choose to share with her diary?



3. Exploring a myth

Ylva places a lot of importance in the stories of the Norse gods and Norse mythology – the novel touches on stories of Thor, Odin and Ragnarok, all names you may be familiar with. As a class, discuss – what do you already know of Norse mythology? Where have you heard about them?

Split into smaller groups – each group should be assigned a different Norse myth to look at. Together, discuss: where did the myth come from? Is there a moral or lesson to it? How would it have been interpreted in the Viking Age? Is there a hero, or a villain? Does the story feature in popular culture at all? Are there different variations – has it evolved over time? If yes, why do you think this is? As a group, share your findings with the rest of the class.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *'Keep Geri in your head, and your mother in your heart. That way, whenever you need them, they will be with you.'*
(Page 141)

Why do you think Ylva continues to see Geri even after he dies? Why does she give him a voice? Do you think she believes he's really there? What effect do you think Geri's presence has on her? Why do you think Geri appears more at the beginning of the novel? Why do you think he appears less in the second half?

2. *'It's my duty. It's what the gods expect of me; my destiny.'* (Page 46)

Ylva believes in honour and vengeance, but Cathryn is more sceptical. Ylva insists the gods would expect her to carry out revenge. Why do you think Ylva is so insistent – is it out of grief, or anger, or fear? Do you think avenging her mother's death is the right thing to do? Why, or why not? Is claiming 'that's the way things work' a good enough reason to kill? Do you think this can ever be justified?

3. The author has split the novel into several parts. Why do you think he has chosen to do this? What do you think the effect of this is? Do you think the parts are named correctly?



4. *Wolves are another matter. There's no hiding from wolves.* (Page 55)

The symbolism of wolves plays a big part in the book. We find out that Ylva's name means 'She Wolf', Ylva and Bron are tracked throughout the novel by a wolf pack, and Ylva has a special bond with Freki. What do you think the overall depiction is of wolves in the novel - is it positive or negative, or is it not that simple? Why do you think there is such a focus on wolves? Why are they so important?

IF YOU LIKED *SHE WOLF*, WHY NOT TRY ANOTHER BOOK BY DAN SMITH ...

