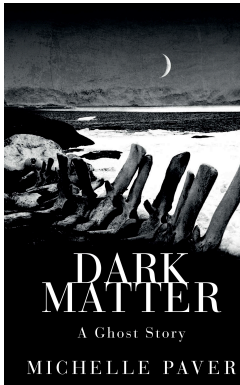


**Title:** *Dark Matter*

**Author:** Michelle Paver

**Publisher:** Orion



**Michelle Paver** was born in Nyasaland (now Malawi), where her South African father ran the tiny Nyasaland Times and her Belgian mother wrote a weekly gossip column but the family moved to England in 1963. After gaining a First Class degree in biochemistry from Oxford University, Michelle Paver practised law, becoming a Partner in a City Law firm five years after qualification. But after 13 years as a litigator, she gave up her a high pressure career in 1998 to write full time.

She is the author of the internationally bestselling *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* series for children which is published in 36 territories. *Dark Matter* is her first adult ghost story. It arises from her lifelong love of the Arctic, which has taken her to northern Canada, Greenland, Scandinavia and Spitsbergen.

*Dark Matter* is an utterly gripping ghost story. Set in the Norwegian Arctic, it follows a group of idealistic young Englishmen who leave pre-War London with high hopes of scientific discovery – only to find out how long the Arctic night is when they realise something is out there in the snow...

*January 1937. Clouds of war are gathering over a fogbound London. Twenty-eight year old Jack is poor, lonely and desperate to change his life. So when he's offered the chance to be the wireless operator on an Arctic expedition, he jumps at it. Spirits are high as the ship leaves for Norway: five men and eight huskies, crossing the Barents Sea by the light of the midnight sun. At last they reach the remote, uninhabited bay where they will camp for the next year. Gruhuken.*

*But the Arctic summer is brief. As night returns to claim the land, Jack feels a creeping unease. One by one, his companions are forced to leave. He faces a stark choice. Stay or go. Soon he will see the last of the sun, as the polar night engulfs the camp in months of darkness. Soon he will reach the point of no return - when the sea will freeze, making escape impossible. And Gruhuken is not uninhabited. Jack is not alone. Something walks there in the dark.*

Cyprus Well is very grateful to Helen Richardson at Orion Books for arranging an interview with Michelle, about the brilliant *Dark Matter*, and writing in general...

**Was there a conscious decision to echo the traditional ghost stories of MR James & Le Fanu in *Dark Matter*?**

My sole aim in writing *Dark Matter* was to scare the hell out of people. That, of course, is what MR James does so well; and I did re-read him before beginning to write *Dark Matter*, to see how he achieves his effects. For instance, he uses suggestion rather than horror; and he often draws on traditional beliefs about ghosts, because by using such beliefs he creates a sense of verisimilitude. I've done the same. For example, the idea that you shouldn't talk to an apparition is a very ancient one, and it's a rule which Jack unwittingly breaks when he calls out to the figure he sees by the bear post at first dark. However I didn't try in any way to echo James' subject matter or his style. Writing about a wireless operator on a 1930s Arctic expedition calls for a very different treatment from a story about an Edwardian antiquarian, as so often found in MR James.

**Did you find it difficult to achieve the patient build up of tension and not be tempted to have more shocks and scares?**

I was never tempted to have too many shocks and scares, because I've always believed that suggestion is far more terrifying than explicit horror. But yes, I did find it extremely hard in the beginning to achieve a sense of dread. My early drafts were distinctly underwhelming: dry, accurate accounts of an Arctic expedition, with a few scary bits stuck in at intervals! Then I realised that the dread had to be all-pervasive. It had to be there from the very start, even when Jack himself isn't aware of it. It had to be built into the language. For instance, it's there even in the supposedly innocent description of his cabin on the ship, which he says is no bigger than a coffin. Once I realised this, things became much easier.

**Were there different aspects of the far north that inspired a ghost story direction for your novel?**

I've visited Spitsbergen in summer and winter, and I've seen some incredibly remote ruins of trappers' huts and abandoned mines. I was forcibly struck by the desolation and the loneliness those men must have experienced - and also by the lawlessness, because until the 1920s, Spitsbergen was a no-man's-land, which literally belonged to nobody.

What really attracted me, though, is that the High Arctic is such a place of extremes: perpetual sunlight in summer, when the whole place is teeming with life, and perpetual darkness in winter, when it can feel as if everything is dead. Traditionally, ghosts are less threatening by day and more menacing by night. But what if night is four months long?

And when I went back to Spitsbergen during the polar night, I really began to understand the effect of prolonged darkness. I went snowshoeing in the dark - both with and without a headlamp. Like Jack, I became rather paranoid about the moon, and kept watching to see whether any clouds were threatening to obscure it. And I experienced for myself the odd auditory illusion of thinking you could hear someone following close behind you - which I suppose is only the echo of one's own snowshoes, but can be distinctly unsettling. Also, I experienced the claustrophobic chill of entering a dark, freezing cabin. Even when you've got the first lamp safely lit, the place is full of shadows. Again, distinctly unsettling.

**Did you explore other eras for the story?**

Actually, it was the title which decided things for me. To begin with, I simply knew that I didn't want to set *Dark Matter* in the present day, because I wouldn't have been able to make Jack so isolated, as he'd have had access to the Internet, mobile phones, and so on. I also knew that I didn't want to go too far back into the past, because the historical background might distract from the haunting.

Then I hit what I thought was a terrible snag. As far as I knew, the idea of dark matter had only been around since the 1970s - and I definitely did NOT want to set the story then. For one horrible morning it looked as if I'd have to ditch my beloved title. Then I did what I should have done at the start, and actually checked to see when the idea of dark matter originated. Phew. It was first suggested by the astronomer Fritz Zwicky in 1933, but pretty much ignored until the 1970s. So I got to keep my title.

Very shortly afterwards, I discovered that there were several scientific expeditions to Spitsbergen in the 1930s, and the reports of these gave me much of the detail for Jack's expedition: the equipment, meteorology and wirelessness, how they got on with the husky dogs, and so on. Sometimes with research, you get lucky. This was one of those times.

### **Do you find any particular challenges in switching from children's books to adults?**

I began my writing career writing adult historical novels, then switched to children's books with the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness*, so *Dark Matter* was really a return to adult books, rather than a new departure. However it felt like a new departure, because it's my first ghost story. That was what I found challenging. Also, it's written in the first person, as Jack's journal, which I'd never done before.

In fact, *Dark Matter* was one of the hardest books I've ever written. Perhaps that's because a haunting is such an evanescent thing: you don't want to make it too explicit, because so much of the dread is based on suggestion; but if you're TOO subtle, you risk being too obscure, and mystifying the reader. So yes, it was challenging; but it was also one of the most intense and rewarding books I've ever written.

### **Will you be writing more novels for adults, and more ghost stories?**

My next project is another series for children, set in prehistory, but after that - who knows? I would love to write another ghost story, and it would probably be for adults; but I'll have to wait till another really strong idea comes along. And that could take a while.

### **How do you feel ebooks will affect you as a writer and a reader?**

As a writer, I'm pretty apprehensive about ebooks, because I worry about the ease with which digital material can be pirated. That may reflect my background as an intellectual property lawyer, but I've also seen what's happened with the music business; and it doesn't seem to me that many publishers are really alive to the magnitude of the threat.

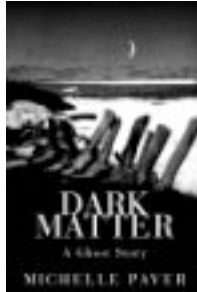
As a reader? I'm sure that for lots of people, ebooks will be a godsend, but for myself, I'm not remotely tempted to go near them. You see, I don't even use the Internet, partly because it doesn't help me with the kind of hands-on research I like to do, but mostly because I loathe the idea of email, which would be a constant distraction when I'm writing. Also, when I read a book, I like to mark bits in the margin and write notes in the flyleaf, and I don't think that'd work as easily with an ebook. Above all, though, I just love the look and feel of a house full of books.

NOVEMBER 2010: Michelle Paver

## Thank you, Michelle!

\*dark matter *n*

*It cannot be seen. Its presence can only be inferred by its effect on the movement of things we can see, such as galaxies. Dark Matter is invisible because it neither emits nor absorbs light. We don't know what it's made of. We only know it's there*



[Dark Matter](#)

Michelle Paver

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