

THE SKULL IN THE WOOD BY SANDRA GREAVES

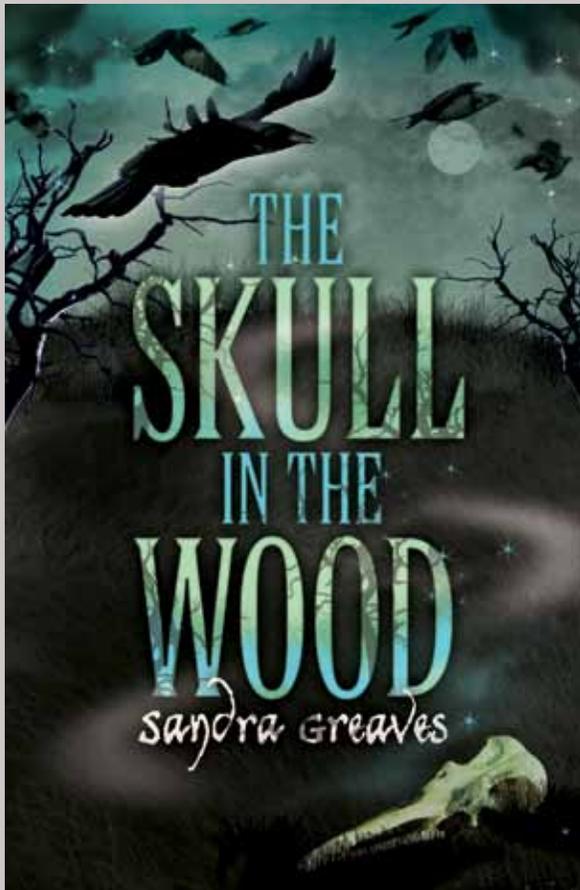
SYNOPSIS

The Skull in the Wood is the exciting debut novel from SCBWI Undiscovered Voices Competition 2012 winner Sandra Greaves.

Desperate to get away from his mum and her boyfriend, Paul, 'the four-eyed pillock', Matt arranges to leave London and spend half term with his Uncle Jack, and his cousins Tilda and Kitty on their farm in the wilds of Dartmoor. However, he quickly realises that he might have made a very bad decision. Apart from Kitty, who is only five years old, he receives a very frosty reception from his relatives – especially Tilda – but he can't understand why.

Instructed by her dad to show Matt around, Tilda does so begrudgingly. Her family has been forced to sell off some of their farmland, which Tilda believes is all Matt's mum's fault (a situation that coincided with Tilda's own mother's death), so she's not in the mood to be a helpful tour guide! Despite mutterings about omens from the mysterious old farmhand, Gabe, and flocks of raucous geese filling the night sky, the pair make their way to Old Scratch Wood, accompanied by Tilda's dog Jez.

Although the twisted and eerie appearance of the wood is unsettling, it does not dissuade Tilda and Matt from entering, and as a result of their attempts to seriously scare one another, they unearth a peculiar curlew skull and take it back to the farm. However, it is not long before the pair happen upon some unusual sights, with animals behaving particularly strangely. Fed up with these weird events, and tired of the feelings of animosity growing between him and Tilda, Matt decides to head to Dartmouth – where his dad's boat is moored. He steals the curlew skull



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from Tilda's room to teach her a lesson, but before he can leave, Gabe warns him of the curse of the 'gabblerratchet', and tells him that it will bring him back to the farm.

Undeterred, Matt sets out on his dad's boat. But it is not long before he regrets his actions. Conditions are rough, and on top of that he is attacked by flocks of curlew-like birds! After calling for assistance, he finally makes it back to the harbour, and ashamedly accepts a lift back to the farm with Uncle Jack.

Things at the farm deteriorate further when Matt's mum and Paul arrive. After his mum explains how her relationship with Tilda's mum became sour when she lived on Dartmoor, Matt asserts he will never accept his mum's new boyfriend. Later on, Jez begins to act more aggressively than ever, and Kitty becomes seriously ill.

Persuaded by Gabe, and his wife Alba, that the 'bad blood' that has plagued the family is a direct result of the curlew skull (something, it transpires, that their quarrelling mothers had previously owned), Tilda and Matt attempt to bury it at the site in Old Scratch Wood where they discovered it. With a growing sense of being hunted, the pair manage to put the skull back in the ground, but end up being chased all the way back to the farmhouse by a pack of baying hounds! In a tense climax to the chase, which ends back at the farm, the two just manage to evade being mauled by the dogs; but it is at the expense of Jez, who falls to her death.

With the curlew skull re-interred, and the dogs silenced by Jez's death, peacefulness descends on the farm. In the days that follow, Kitty gets better, Matt's mum and Uncle Jack reach an amicable agreement about the future of the family farm, Matt and Tilda become friends, and Gabe declares the curse broken once and for all.

WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

Ghosts are a bit like lost stories – trying to catch you by surprise, looking for a way to finish. Sandra Greaves unleashes a terrible tale, which will keep you guessing deep into the night. But don't worry, that skull is probably perfectly harmless. Like the dog.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE



AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Born in Edinburgh, Sandra Greaves worked in journalism, TV and communications before becoming a copywriter (and also a prize-winning poet). She and her husband keep several badly-behaved chickens on a smallholding midway between the moor and the sea in Devon.

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Taken from 'Eyes like saucers: A guide to the gabbleratchet and other folklore' by Sandra Greaves.

The Skull in the Wood is based on a real myth – if myths can be said to be real, and I think they can. At the heart of the book is a piece of folklore that has been chilling people's blood ever since the Middle Ages – the legend of the wild hunt. This spectral chase through woods, moors and skies is often led by the devil himself – and it spells disaster for anyone who crosses its path.

The legend of the wild hunt is told in many different forms all over the world, but most versions agree on a handful of points. The hunt rides out on stormy nights. It's made up of horsemen – or more often a single huntsman – and huge black hounds with fiery red eyes that are often compared to saucers. There may be other devilish animals with them too. People hear the noise of the pack, though they may not have the misfortune to see it. If they do, catastrophe almost always follows.

In The Skull in the Wood, the legend is known as the 'gabbleratchet', and for a long time, Matt and Tilda don't know exactly what it is. Gradually they piece the story together. They realise that although the gabbleratchet may start out with ordinary geese flying through the air, if things get bad enough, it becomes a terrifying pack of hellhounds that hunt on the moor on stormy nights. If you see the gabbleratchet, you are cursed – someone's going to die. The trouble is, Matt and Tilda work this out far too late.

Why the gabbleratchet? It's a word that was used in many parts of England – mainly in the north – for the



noise of geese flying at night. Only it meant more than just geese. The eerie clamour of the birds suggested something much more scary: the baying of phantom hounds in the skies above. In some of the folk tales, geese are omens of the wild hunt – or they actually turn into hounds themselves.

From the moment I came across it, I loved the word ‘gabbleratchet’ – it sent shivers down my spine. The ‘ratchet’ bit comes from Middle English rache, meaning a dog that hunts by scent and ‘gives tongue’ – it bays when it scents its prey. There are various suggestions for the origin of ‘gabble’. It could imitate the honking of geese. It could be a corruption of ‘Gabriel hounds’ – another of the many names for the wild hunt. Or it could come from an ancient word, gabbara, which means corpse. In other words, the gabbleratchet is a pack of corpse hounds – and you really don’t want to meet them.

The Skull in the Wood brings in other bits of folklore too. There are several creepy animals that act as harbingers for the gabbleratchet, like the hare that watches Matt when he tries to run away from the moor. Hares used to be viewed as witches’ familiars, so people feared and avoided them. Today they’ve become quite rare – though they’re still around. In fact on a recent walk I nearly stumbled over one and just about jumped out of my skin.

Tilda sees a strange stag with huge antlers, perhaps a fleeting suggestion of Herne the Hunter, the horned spirit that heads the wild hunt in some versions of the story. And in the fog she thinks she might have seen a black goat – one of the favourite disguises of the devil.

And of course there’s the curlew skull. I chose the skull of a curlew partly because of the shape – the amazing long curved bill – but also because curlews are seen as malignant birds and are the subject of many superstitions. Their haunting cry used to be feared by sailors and by miners, and they were one of the ominous birds identified with the legend of ‘the Seven Whistlers’ – six birds, perhaps the spirits of unbaptised children, searching for another bird that was lost. If the six birds found their lost companion, disaster would follow. Often the Seven Whistlers legend merged into the legend of the gabbleratchet, with the whistler birds being seen as hounds in another form.

The action of The Skull in the Wood takes place on Dartmoor, near where I live. Dartmoor’s a pretty spooky place at the best of times – it’s one of the last genuinely wild places in England, and you can very quickly get



hopelessly lost there. And it's rich in creepy superstitions and demonic folklore, with devil's hoofprints all over the place. Tales of enormous black dogs loom large here. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle chose Dartmoor for his Sherlock Holmes story, 'The Hound of the Baskervilles', and in it, the hound's terrifying howls echo across the moor for miles around. I remember watching a film of it as a child and frightening myself silly.

Not surprisingly, Dartmoor has a strong wild hunt myth of its own. The hunt rides out from an ancient wood in the heart of the moor, headed by the devil on a black horse and accompanied by a pack of enormous hounds. On Dartmoor, these hounds are often called the Wish or Wisht hounds – but I far prefer the gabblerratchet. Whatever their name, they are deadly. As late as the nineteenth century, a coroner's jury decided that a man found dead on the banks of the River Yealm, which has its source in Dartmoor, had been 'struck down by the phantom hunt'.

Wherever you live, there's likely to be a version of the wild hunt myth. So if you happen to hear the gabblerratchet – or, worse still, see it – you'd better know what to do. There are Christian ways to save yourself and outwit the hunt – but they sometimes have unintended consequences.

You can stay in the middle of the road. (I'm not sure this would work in most versions of the wild hunt, and woods don't have roads, so it's not the most useful of suggestions).

You can throw yourself face down on the ground so that you don't see the hunt go by.

You can try throwing pieces of bread to the hounds (though I can't imagine it would divert them for long).

You can recite the Lord's Prayer to ward off evil – which Gabe does when he goes to Old Scratch Wood to bury the curlew skull.

If the huntsman offers you a piece of meat from a stag that has been slain by the hunt, you're in trouble. It's usually cursed, and may even turn out to be human. But you can wiggle out of this gruesome gift and trick him by asking for salt. The huntsman can't provide this, so is obliged to take the leg back.

You can try striking a bargain with the huntsman to make him leave you alone. But as Matt finds out, bargains



can be twisted in surprising ways.

There's one final possibility. You can appease the huntsman by joining the wild hunt yourself.

Only you might discover you've just lost your soul. **SANDRA GREAVES, AUTHOR**

THEMES

- Superstitions
- Family
- Country life
- Trust
- Vengeance
- Forgiveness

WRITING STYLE

The Skull In The Wood is a chilling, nail-biting ghost story, set against the wild landscape of Dartmoor. The writing is richly descriptive and thrillingly blends elements of the supernatural with contemporary children's voices. There is a strong emphasis on ideas of trust, family and belonging, and the majority of the action plays out between two cousins from different home backgrounds. The story is based on a Devonshire myth: a phantom wild hunt known as the 'gabbleratchet', and some of the scenes depict frightening, perilous situations. 32 chapters, 257 pages, age 10+.

PUPIL ACTIVITIES

1: Perspectives

Stylistically, the most striking thing about *The Skull In The Wood* is the fact that the story is told through three



different characters: Matt, Tilda and Kitty. This offers three perspectives on the events that unfold. Pupils could be encouraged to think about how this affects the way the reader interprets the story, which in turn could lead to further work surrounding first and third-person narratives (subjectivity and objectivity). Pupils could begin to explore the narrative style Sandra Greaves employs through some drama exercises, in which pupils improvise a multi-character scenario. For instance (and in keeping with the plotline of the novel), pupils could be given character roles in a scene where a household is thrown into chaos after a particular person comes to stay. His or her visit could meet with a range of reactions from the rest of the household, with some of the residents being extremely welcoming, others hostile. The important thing is that each pupil adopts an initial character 'stance', being able to justify why they feel the way they do about the situation – although the activity might be more fruitful if pupils keep these thoughts to themselves at this point. They should then be allowed to work through this scene in character, allowing their feelings about the situation to be articulated and developed as they interact with the other characters in the scene. It may be necessary to decide on a goal or end point for this activity, such as 'the goal is to arrive at a situation where all the characters are satisfied that they can spend a week living harmoniously in the same house,' or 'you have five minutes to work out where each character will sleep that night,' (who gets to sleep in the biggest bed, who gets the sofa and so on). Alternatively, it might be interesting to allow the pupils to find a resolution to this scenario themselves. In either case, pupils should be encouraged to think about their character's perspective regarding the events that took place in the scene: what they saw happen from where they were positioned, what they understood about how the other characters felt about each other, how their own feelings about certain characters may have altered as the scene developed. Pupils could then be tasked with putting their version of events (both the physical and emotional events their character experienced) into words. Pupils should be asked to write from their character's perspective, producing a first-person narrative. It would then be an interesting exercise for pupils to share their work with the others in their scene. A discussion could follow allowing pupils to consider whether the other character's views were what they expected, and whether their own point of view might be challenged. This may also lead to some questioning about the possibility of recording the same events in an objective third-person narrative.



2: Omens

Much of *The Skull In The Wood* is concerned with superstitions and omens, particularly the ‘gabbleratchet’, which is described in detail by Sandra Greaves in the ‘author motivation’ section of these notes. It might be useful, for pupils who have not previously come across the term ‘omen’, for this section to be read to the class. It would certainly serve as a useful starting point for some project work about omens and superstitions. Pupils could be tasked with researching superstitious beliefs from around the world, focusing specifically on omens. This could be a class project, in which groups of pupils are given a particular area of the world to research. They then have to find out as much as they can about superstitions and omens in this area and share their findings with the other groups. It would also be interesting, after presenting these findings to the class, to divide up the omens into two categories: ‘bad’ omens and ‘good’ omens. The class could then discuss if there are noticeable differences between those omens commonly thought ‘good’, and those thought ‘bad’. Are bad omens easily identifiable? Are good omens obviously ‘good’? This would encourage pupils to think about how omens can be used in fiction, and how they might affect the reader’s impressions about what he or she is reading. Pupils could be asked to re-read the opening chapter of *The Skull In The Wood* – particularly the section in which the bird flies into Uncle Jack’s car – and decide what could be taken as an omen. The important thing here is for pupils to understand how the inclusion of ‘omens’ (in the broadest sense of the word) is an effective literary technique that can enhance a piece of writing. Following on from this, pupils could start to devise a story of their own – one that begins with an omen. This omen should ideally give the reader some sort of an idea as to the nature of the story that will follow. Once the opening is written, pupils could swap stories and try to guess what might happen next by questioning, ‘What is the omen, and what could it mean?’

3: Cliffhangers

In *The Skull In The Wood*, as the action moves from chapter to chapter, we shift from one narrator to the next (usually from Matt to Tilda, and back again). What we also find is that the chapters often end with the narrator posing the reader with a question that needs answering; in some cases these are out-and-out ‘cliffhangers’. Of



course, the exciting thing about a cliffhanger is that it is a pivotal moment in the narrative, from which point the story could feasibly continue in a number of different ways. Perhaps the most salient example of a cliffhanger comes at the end of chapter 28 (page 232), when Matt and Tilda return to the house to find the skull dangling from the porch roof. When Tilda announces at the end of the chapter, 'it wasn't a bird anymore', we are compelled to read on. It would be interesting to ask pupils, once they have read to the end of chapter 28, to discuss what they think will happen next. This could even take the form of a written piece of work, where pupils are tasked with writing their own chapter 29. Ultimately however, the aim would be for pupils to be able to recognise what makes a good cliffhanger, and how they could introduce this device in their own writing. Pupils could go on to write a two-chapter story, with a cliffhanger being used at the end of the first chapter. It might help to emphasise the pivotal nature of the cliffhanger if pupils also draw up a list of three or four plausible resolutions. The rest of the class could then be tasked with discussing which they think is the most likely before reading the second chapter and discovering if they were right!

4: All on my own ...?

The episode in which Matt takes his father's boat, Dreamcatcher, out to sea (chapters 13 and 15), is one in which we get to assess how capable he is at looking after himself. In these chapters, Matt removes himself from all human contact and instead pits himself against the forces of nature. Although he seems to be quite adept at piloting the boat, the changing weather conditions prove tricky, and this situation is not helped when he comes under attack from a flock of birds! What is perhaps most interesting about this section of the novel is that we discover a great deal about Matt, despite there being no other characters directly involved here. Up to this point, we have learned a lot about the characters through their interactions with each other (or at least their recollections of these interactions). But here, Matt is very definitely alone, and rather than being defined by his interactions with other characters, Matt becomes defined by his interactions with his surroundings. This provides an opportunity for pupils to explore how writing can be captivating and detailed even when only one human character is involved. Pupils could be encouraged to re-read these chapters, but this time paying special attention to the role that nature performs



here. The question could then be asked, 'is nature a character in this part of the story?' It might be worthwhile for pupils to highlight any specific parts in these chapters that suggest nature is a 'character'. Pupils could be prompted with further questions, such as, 'what sort of mood might nature be in here?', and 'what clues are there that nature is happy/sad/calm/restless/mischievous/angry?' This work could even be broadened out to include a role-play activity, where one pupil represents Matt and another represents nature. The pupils could be asked to physically represent the changing relationship between the two throughout the course of chapters 13 and 15. In doing this, pupils may better comprehend the dynamics of the writing in this section. Finally, as a result of this work, it would be interesting for pupils to have a go at writing their own short story in which only one, human, character is present. The task would be for pupils to represent some sort of 'relationship' between the character and his or her environment. More able pupils might be encouraged to show some sort of shift in this relationship - perhaps they start off on good terms, but gradually things become more fraught!

5: Country vs. city

At the beginning of the novel at least, Tilda and Matt undoubtedly hold very different opinions about what it is like to live in the country and what it is like to live in the city. Matt seems to think country life is boring and that Dartmoor is desolate and depressing, while Tilda seems to regard the city as a noisy and polluted place full of 'fashion victims'. Meanwhile, they each appear to hold the view that their own home environment is a much superior place to live. Pupils could be tasked with finding references to the country and city in *The Skull In The Wood* and putting together an illustration based on the descriptions they find. This could be carried out in a few different ways. Pupils could choose to illustrate Matt's remarks about the country (preferably including relevant quotes from the book on the illustration), and also complete a picture of his thoughts on the city. Likewise, pupils could look at Tilda's views on both country and city life and make a couple of illustrations that represented her outlook on the two places (again labelling the work using quotes from the novel where possible). What might also be interesting is if some pupils, rather than choosing to focus on what Matt thinks or what Tilda thinks, choose to concentrate on



views about the country, or about the city. Those choosing the country could base their illustration on both Matt's and Tilda's comments about Dartmoor. A picture would then emerge that likely accentuated both the positive and negative elements of country life. The same exercise might be completed in regard to the city. Ideally, what would result from all this would be a gallery of images depicting the country and the city in many different ways. Once the class has completed their work, the pictures could be displayed and the pupils encouraged to discuss which of the representations of the country and the city they most identify with (perhaps they could be asked to stand next to the illustration that most closely reflects their opinion). This work could easily lead into a discussion about why opinions on country and city life vary so greatly, and how, and why, these ideas may be reinforced.

6: That's awkward

One of the most comical episodes in the novel occurs when Matt's mum and Paul turn up at the farm in chapter 17. Matt describes how 'Mum and Uncle Jack were sort of awkward with each other' (page 148). What follows is a scene in which a number of people, with few interests in common and some complicated family history to deal with, attempt to be civil with one another. This scene could act as a prompt for a drama-based activity initially, with pupils being asked to role-play one of the characters in this section (from page 147 to page 150). Each pupil would need to think about what their character is feeling at this point, and how they react to the other characters in the scene. This is a particularly good scenario to work through, as the characters involved all seem to have different points of view and objectives as they deal with the awkward situation they find themselves in. Following this, pupils could work in small groups to develop a new scene, with different characters altogether. The group could spend some time working on their character backgrounds and forming the basis of their 'awkward situation'; perhaps the characters could be sitting in a waiting room when it emerges they are all waiting to be interviewed for the same job, or perhaps the characters find themselves stuck in a lift (elevator) with a group of people they would normally do anything to avoid! However these scenes play out, attention should be paid to how the awkward feeling of the situation manifests itself. How is it suggested in language choices, in tone of voice, in proximity and body movements?



It would be beneficial for pupils to observe each of the role-plays in order that these elements can be thought about from an objective point of view as well. As a follow-up, pupils could be tasked with creating a written piece of work that focuses on an awkward situation such as the ones they have seen acted out; one that is both funny and realistic, and draws on their experience as someone who has been in these awkward situations, and one that knows what they look like from an observer's point of view.

WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. On pages 18 and 19, Tilda explains to Matt how the foxhounds, Lightfoot and Lawless, are being trained to become hunting dogs. She tells him that, while they don't actually chase foxes anymore, people in the country think foxes are a pest. Matt seems to think fox hunting is a pointless bloodthirsty activity. Whose opinion do you most agree with? Do you think your opinion might differ depending on whether you live in the city or the country? Why?
2. Compare Matt's reaction to seeing Uncle Jack at the train station (page 2) with his reaction to seeing him at the Dartmouth marina (page 132). How is his reaction different? Do you think his opinion of Uncle Jack changes? Why?
3. Re-read chapter 19, in which Matt experiences a strange, fitful dream. What stands out most for you when you read this? Do you think dreams are like stories? What are the similarities? What are the differences? Do you think it is ever possible to accurately 'record' a dream?
4. In *The Skull In The Wood*, the story is told from three different perspectives: that of Matt, Tilda, and Kitty. Which of the other characters in the novel do you think would offer an interesting perspective on the events that unfold? Why? Could you have a go at writing a new chapter for *The Skull In The Wood* that would give us a whole new perspective on what takes place?

