

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?"



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.

“ *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.*”



“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.

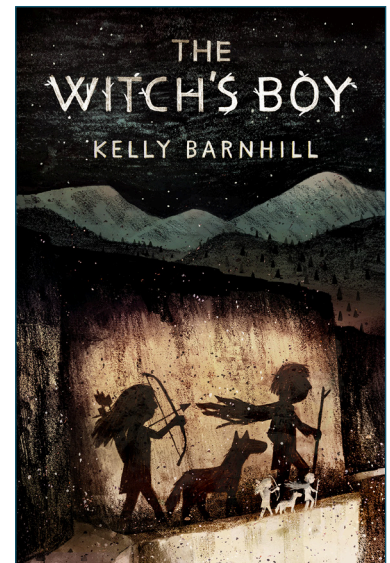
My son, alas, has no memory of the story I told him that day. He believes me that it happened, but the story, the hike, the waterfall and the mountain and the rocks and roots on the trail—they’ve all faded out of his consciousness as he presses forward on his own journey from babyhood to boyhood to manhood.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