



# Sophie Anderson

## My Writing Journey, with Baba Yaga and other Wild Women of Folklore

Growing up, I had no aspirations to be a writer. My mother was a writer and spent hours every day sitting at a desk indoors. I much preferred being outdoors, playing in the woods behind our house or on the nearby beaches; climbing trees, splashing in waves, exploring new places, or watching wildlife.

I did love stories though. Especially the old Slavic folk and fairy tales my grandmother told me. My favourites were about characters who lived deeply connected to nature; leshive (woodland spirits), rusalka (water spirits), vila (wind spirits), and Baba Yaga – the wise old woman who lived in a house with chicken legs deep in the forest – and who terrified and fascinated me in equal measure.

The novels I loved as a child also had connections to the natural world; *The Moomins* lived in harmony with nature, *The Animals of Farthing Wood* and *Hunter's Moon* gave a voice to the animals I glimpsed in the woods, and *Anne of Green Gables* shared my love of long walks and cherry blossoms.

Sometimes I would imagine my own stories while wandering or playing outdoors, but I never had any desire to sit and write them down, or to one day become an author. I wanted a job outdoors, where I could continue to explore the natural world and learn all its secrets. So, I studied mostly science at school, and biology and geology at university, and eventually became an exploration geologist - working in a variety of outdoor settings, studying the rocks and soil.

I wandered around sites, often on my own, collecting samples and recording data. Sometimes I would glimpse leshive hiding behind trees in woodlands earmarked for development, or rusalka crying in polluted streams near old factories. Baba Yaga's house with chicken legs was never far away; watching me from the shadows of industrial ruins or thickets.

In the back of my field notebook, I would sketch pictures of these characters, and write short poems or snippets of prose. But I didn't think of it as 'real' writing. I was just doodling; my mind wandering from the more important task of data collection.

After a few years working mostly on my own, I felt the urge to spend more time with people and to share my passion for the natural sciences with children, so I moved into teaching. Whilst much of

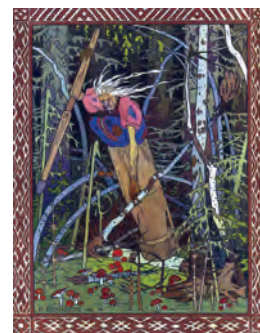
my time was now spent indoors, in classrooms, I did spend as much time as possible outdoors. I developed green spaces in the schools I worked in, ran gardening and wildlife clubs, and organised fieldtrips; to woodlands, wetlands, and beaches.

The secondary school science curriculum is mostly fact based, but there are opportunities to be creative, and I found pupils responded well whenever stories or poems crept into my teaching. I found myself planning lessons on mythical creatures; how dragons' features might be explained by science; or the evidence for mermaids, cyclops, and zombies. Stories leapt at the back of my mind, and sometimes I shared them with pupils, or 'doodled' them in the evenings. But I didn't have a huge amount of time for stories. It wasn't 'real' work, and I was a science teacher after all.

But a few years later, I had children of my own and everything changed. Stories became a much larger part of my life. I read to my children every day, and we went on long walks together, telling stories along the way. We spotted fairies hiding in undergrowth, dragons snoozing in caves, and mermaids splashing in plunge pools. My children demanded to know about these creatures, so I told them stories I had read, stories I remembered, and stories I made up on the spot to satisfy their curiosity.

I began carrying a notebook everywhere, to sketch pictures and write down my stories. At first, I did this for my children - but soon I was writing for the sheer joy of it. I still didn't think of what I was doing as 'real' writing though. My doodles were just the product of an overactive imagination. I was still a scientist and teacher, wasn't I?

One day I noticed Baba Yaga's house with chicken legs watching me from the fell



Baba Yaga by Ivan Bilibin, 1900.



Inside illustrations by Elisa Paganelli © Usborne Publishing, 2018.



tops, so I told my children about her; and about rusalka, leshive, and vila. I tried to remember all the stories my grandmother told me, and I began collecting books on Slavic folklore and mythology to jog my memory; and the more I read the more fascinated I became with the subject.

While researching Baba Yaga, I discovered a book called *Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, and that book has never been far from me since. It was the first time I read about the wild woman archetype in folklore, and it was a powerful Eureka! moment for me on many levels.

The wild woman archetype in folklore consists of strong female characters who are deeply connected to nature and are wise, intuitive, creative, passionate and powerful. Examples include witches, sorceresses, fairies, nymphs, sirens, mermaids, and of course Baba Yaga. Basically, all the folklore characters that I had felt most connected to since I was a child.

*Women Who Run with the Wolves* gave me a new understanding of these characters and seemed to connect the threads of my own life together. I had always loved nature and stories but had subconsciously separated these two passions. At school, science and English were very different subjects, and when I chose to study science I felt I left stories and storytelling behind. And though I sometimes wrote poems and stories, I only thought of them as 'doodles' – they always seemed far less important than my 'real' work.

Now I saw this connection between nature and creativity in the wild women of folklore, and in myself, I began to value my 'doodles' a great deal more. The ideas behind the wild woman archetype resonated with me deeply, and suddenly it felt important for me to embrace my creative side to become 'whole'. (I feel I should mention here there are wild men in folklore too, but I didn't feel such a deep connection to them.) It was an important turning point in my life, as I started to take

my writing seriously and dedicate more time to it.

I continued to read about wild women of folklore, and how they have been portrayed over the years. Many of the characters originate from ancient female Goddesses, and exhibit remnants of ancient pagan practices and beliefs such as herbalism, folk medicine, nature worship and natural magic. But in familiar fairy tales the characters have often been altered, to fit with religious or patriarchal narratives; portrayed as ugly, evil old crones to be feared, or dangerous seductresses.

Baba Yaga still watched me from the fell tops, and often crept down into the valley to follow me on my walks. I had an overwhelming urge to write a new story with her in it, where she was portrayed more in keeping with her origins as a Goddess and wise, wild woman. But I also wanted to keep, and explain, some of the elements that made her Baba Yaga – people's fear of her, and her links with death.

I thought about my Baba Yaga a great deal. It didn't feel like I was reimagining her, but that I was weaving her together from existing threads tangled up in old stories and myths. Baba Yaga was ancient, wise and powerful; she knew the secrets of life and death, and was caring, nurturing and kind. She was a Guardian of The Gate between this world and the next. A midwife of death, who guided souls with grace and compassion.

I adored having Baba Yaga in my world and a story began leaping in my mind, begging to be written. It wasn't Baba Yaga's story though. It was the story of a young girl, Marinka, living in Baba Yaga's house. Marinka was partly inspired by my children, but also by myself, because at heart I still feel like a young girl trying to find my place in the world.

As soon as I began writing Marinka's story, it flowed. I knew Baba Yaga was guiding me from the fell tops with her magic, and I felt I had an important story to tell: one inspired by tales containing ancient wisdom, that I could make accessible and relevant to today's readers. I believe this is what reimagining fairy tales is all about – making old stories resonate with new generations.

Two years later, Marinka's story – and my *Baba Yaga* reimagining – is a real book: *The House with Chicken Legs*; and I owe a huge debt to Baba Yaga and the wild women of folklore who inspired me with their stories and taught me to embrace my creative side and take my 'doodles' seriously. I hope the book resonates with a new generation of readers and brings a little ancient magic and wisdom into their lives.



*The House with Chicken Legs*  
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