

STORM HOUND BLOG TOUR POSTS



There are seven posts, one for each stop on the tour, and they can be used in the order they appear here. They are mainly plain text, starting with a quote from Storm Hound each time. Some of them have photos, which are all ok to use – either I took them myself or they are licensed to reuse.

Storm Hound by Claire Fayers, published by Macmillan's Children's Books, cover by Becka Moore.

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1. The Wild Hunt

I am Storm of Odin, he said, Stormhound of the Wild Hunt, follower of Odin One-Eye, also known as Arawn of the Otherworld. I run with thunder and lightning and all creatures tremble when I pass.

The dogs didn't look very impressed.

You have gravy on your nose, the old dog said.

Imagine, if you will, that you are standing on top of a mountain in the rain. Night is falling. (I have no idea why you'd want to climb a mountain in the rain, especially when it's getting dark, but I'm sure you have a good reason.) Thunder rumbles close by, and then the sky is split with a flash of silver lightning. In that moment, as you gaze upward, your rain-filled eyes can just about make out shapes racing through the clouds. Horses and dogs. The next time the wind howls, it sounds like the ring of hunting horns.

Be very careful climbing back down that mountain. To see the Wild Hunt, according to legend, means that disaster and death is coming.



The Wild Hunt of Odin. Peter Nicolai Arbo, National Gallery of Norway

The Wild Hunt appears in many guises across northern European mythology. In most traditions, the Hunt represents chaos, the forces of the supernatural world. It is a presage of disaster. At the very least, the person who sees the Hunt is likely to die.

One of the things I like most about the legend is its ambiguity. A glimpse of riders hurtling across the sky. No one really knows who they are or what they are doing. The various legends can't even agree about who leads the Hunt. In Germanic folklore, it is Odin, in some areas of England it's Herne the Hunter or King Arthur. Here's an extract from the Peterborough Chronicles, referring to a sighting of the Wild Hunt in 1127.

Many men both saw and heard a great number of huntsmen hunting. The huntsmen... rode on black horses, and on black he-goats, and their hounds were jet black, with eyes like saucers and horrible.

Meanwhile, in Wales, you'll find the Hounds of Annwn – the hunting hounds of the magical Otherworld, ruled by King Arawn. This is how they appear to Pwyll of Dyfed in the Mabinogi.

As he listened out for the cry of the pack he heard the cry of another pack, with a different bark, coming to meet his own... Of all the hunting dogs he had seen in this world, he had never seen dogs the same colour as those. The colouring they had was a dazzling bright white and with red ears. As bright was the dazzling whiteness as the brightness of the red.

I could have picked just one of these legends to use in Storm Hound, but one of the big themes of the book is that life is messy and you can't put everything neatly

into categories. In the end, I thought it was more fitting to use a combination of them all.

So, if you're standing on top of Mount Skirrid in the rain, look out for the dogs. Some will be black, some will be white, all will be fierce. And if you see one a bit smaller than the others, struggling to keep up, say hello to him for me. That will be Storm.

2. The Missing Mountain Top

“What is geography, after all?” said Professor Nuffield. “It’s the study of the land, and you can’t begin to understand a land and its people until you know something of their legends.”

Wales is a land of legends, and the Black Mountains around Abergavenny have more than their fair share. A group of red sandstone hills, wrapped around in green heather, just the name conjures up castles, magic and ancient battles.

I spent many pleasant hours walking in the mountains when I was researching Storm Hound. One of my favourite walks is to the top of Skirrid Fawr. It’s quite a low mountain and you’ll spot its distinctive shape straight away. The long peak has a dip in the middle as if a large part has been scooped out.



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<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2123041>

The mountain's name comes from the Welsh 'Ysgryd' which means split. The most likely explanation for the missing piece at the top is a landslip in the Ice Age, which formed Ysgryd Fawr (big Skirrid) and the nearby hill Ysgryd Fach (little Skirrid).

But the most likely explanation is not the most interesting and the inhabitants of the Black Mountains have come up with many more exciting tales.

The Crucifixion

The first story says that the mountain split in sympathy at the exact moment of Christ's death. Because of this, Skirrid is also known as the Holy Mountain, and people used to take handfuls of the soil to scatter on crops, houses and churches for good luck.

There was a church on the mountain peak – St Michael's Chapel. You can still see the ruins if you climb up.

The Devil and St Michael

Welsh folklore is cluttered with tales of people outwitting the Devil. In this story, the Devil tried to tempt the archangel Michael. When, inevitably, he failed (because who in their right mind would try to tempt an archangel), the Devil stamped in rage on the mountain and broke it.

The Devil and Jack O'Kent

There's a large flat stone on the top of Skirrid, where the Devil played cards with a local giant known as Jack O'Kent.

Once, the two of them got into an argument about which mountain was higher – the nearby Sugarloaf, or the Malvern Hills across the border in England. It turned out to be the Sugarloaf and the Devil, losing his temper yet again, scooped an apron full of earth from the top of Skirrid, meaning to dump it on the Malverns to make them taller. (The Devil, it seems, is a very bad loser.) But his apron broke and the earth and formed the little Skirrid hill.

Because the Devil never gives up in these tales, he later challenged Jack that he couldn't jump from the top of Skirrid to the Sugarloaf. Jack succeeded, and left a giant footprint in the top of Skirrid.

Skirrid Ghosts

Finally, while you're visiting the mountains, you should also visit Skirrid Mountain Inn, which is said to be the most haunted building in Wales, and probably the whole of the UK. Maybe even the most haunted place in the world given the number of ghosts who are queuing up to frighten people.

I have to admit, I've never seen any ghosts, but you never know what you might find with an open mind and a dash of imagination.

3. The Sheep of Fate

Hey! Sheep! the stormhound shouted.

The sheep gazed blankly at him, chewing grass.

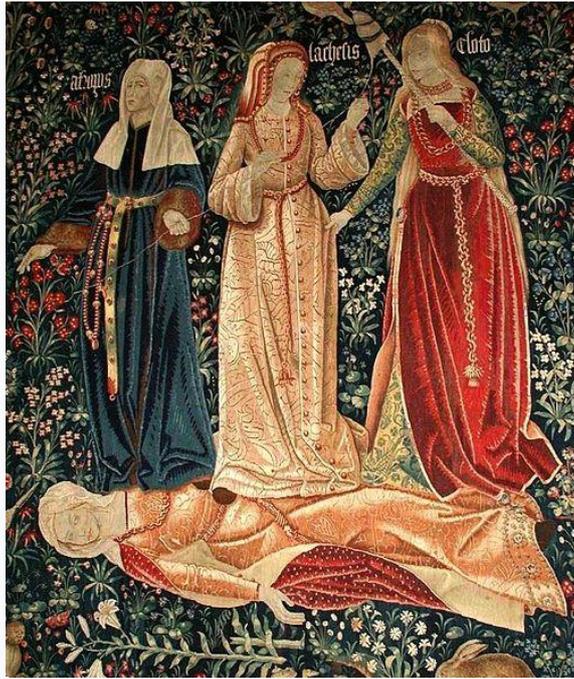
Eventually, one of them wandered closer. *You talking to us?*

Wales has a lot of sheep: just under 10 million at the last count, so it won't surprise anyone that a book set in Wales is going to feature sheep. They form a woolly Greek chorus, standing about the hillsides, watching and commenting on the action, and occasionally leaping out of bushes at people like the velociraptors in Jurassic Park.

Writing Stormhound, I learned a few things about sheep that surprised me. (Disclaimer: these things may not necessarily be true). They have a really bad sense of humour, and make the most atrocious puns. Storm finds that out straight away. They always seem to know more about the world that they're letting on, and they can give quite good advice sometimes if you know how to ask them.

One thing I had to cut from the book, however, was the secret link between sheep and fate. There wasn't quite space to include it, and it's a bit of a side-step out of Norse and Welsh mythology and into Greek.

According to Greek legend, Fate takes the form of three women: Clotho, Lachesis and Atropis. Clotho spins the thread of human fate, Lachesis measures it and Atropos cuts it.



Flemish tapestry c. 1520, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The Fates also appear in Roman myth, where they are called Nona, Decuma and Morta. They are often depicted as old women, inflexible and implacable. You cannot, after all negotiate with fate.

What has this got to do with sheep, I hear you ask.

Well, the Fates spin and measure and cut the thread of life, but what do you think that thread is made of?

My money is on wool. It's as likely as anything else and, in fact, it makes a lot of sense. Sheep are raised all over the world. They stand about in fields and on hills, staring at anyone who happens by. Watching and waiting. Because life is interesting and someone has to pay attention to what's going on.

Next time you see a field of sheep, don't try to engage them in conversation. They're not allowed to talk to humans, and if they did you'd get tangled up in woolly puns before you knew it. Just give them a wave and say hello. It always pays to be polite to Fate.

Some sheep facts

1. Sheep have four stomachs. (One for starters, one for main course and two for puddings!)
2. A sheep's wool never stops growing.
3. One pound of sheep's wool can make up to 10 miles of yarn.
4. Sheep have rectangular pupils and nearly 360 degree vision, meaning they can see behind without turning their heads. (Further proof that they are the watchers of the world.)
5. Sheep can recognise up to 50 other sheep faces. AND they can recognise human faces.
6. The world's most expensive sheep sold for £231,000 at a sale in Lanark, Scotland.
7. Sheep feel emotions and prefer smiling human faces to angry ones.
8. If you put a sheep on its back, it won't be able to get up again. (Do not do this!)
9. It is estimated that there are over 1,000 different breeds of sheep worldwide.
10. A lamb can walk within minutes of being born.

4. Finding the Right Place

Storm could see mountains from here: a low peak rising up in the distance, and three hills in front of it, which, if he squinted, looked a bit like the paw of a giant dog. He knew the mortal world was indifferent to the world of magic, but the sight cheered him a little, as if the landscape had made an effort to welcome him.

I've been asked many times already why I chose to set a fantasy adventure in Abergavenny. It doesn't seem a likely place for adventure – a little Welsh town, tucked away between mountains. What could possibly happen in Abergavenny?

A few years back I'd have agreed. I've always loved fantasy set in invented worlds, and when I started to write, that's where my imagination went. Fantastical stories needed fantastical settings. But, after two adventures with the Accidental Pirates, and a mystery set in an alternative Britain, I began to wonder. What if we didn't have to go to other worlds to find magic? What if magic could find us (as we say in Wales) over by here?

That's why, when Storm fell from the sky, he didn't crash into a fantasy landscape or even somewhere big and important, like New York or London, or even Cardiff.

At first, I did it purely for comedy. I thought it would be hilarious to dump my arrogant young stormhound in a place that had no pretensions of grandeur. Within a couple of chapters, though, I knew this little town was absolutely right. I love the way the town is surrounded by mountains as if they're standing guard. Walk along the narrow High Street and you'll find all the essentials – a book shop, some lovely cafes, and a cheese shop.

Also, of course, there is a castle.



Abergavenny Castle – photo by Claire Fayers

Storm enjoys going for walks here. The site dates back to 1087 and there's a real sense of history. Most of the castle was destroyed during the civil war in 1645-46, but there's a small museum sitting right on top of the original motte.

I had to invent a few things for the story. Abergavenny High School doesn't exist. Neither does the Abergavenny Dog Rescue Centre. But I know exactly where Jessie's house is. If you stand in the back garden you'll be facing the Sugarloaf Mountain and, if you squint a bit you may think the three foothills look like the paw of a giant dog.

I didn't actually find out about the Sugarloaf hills until I was well into editing the book, but that little detail had to go straight in. It was proof, if anyone needs it, that Storm's story could not happen anywhere else.

5. Ceridwen

The bike was the orange of sunset and various black lines and squiggles crawled over its sides. They looked a bit like writing, but it was anyone's guess what they meant – not that anyone looked long enough to wonder. For some reason, when the bike had passed people in town, everyone glanced away and walked purposefully in the opposite direction as if they'd just remembered something important. Even though a large white hare, missing the tip of one ear, sat upright on the pillion.

When I started writing Storm Hound, I didn't quite realise how many Welsh legends would sneak in. These stories have been part of me for so long, I guess they have a tendency to come out when I don't expect it.

While Storm of Odin is getting to grips with the human world, a stern-faced woman rides into Abergavenny on a motorbike covered in occult symbols. Her name is Ceridwen.

The original Ceridwen is best known as the mother of Taliesin, Wales's greatest bard, and, this being a story of magic, Taliesin's birth was far from ordinary.

Ceridwen had two children: a beautiful daughter and an ugly son. Wanting to bless her son with knowledge and wisdom, she brewed a magical potion. It took a year to create and it had to be stirred constantly during that time. Ceridwen hired a young boy, Gwion to do the stirring.

On the final day of the year, three burning drops of liquid splash from the cauldron onto Gwion's hand, and without thinking, he sucked his hand to cool it. Straight away, he gained all the magic of the potion.

Ceridwen, when she found out, was furious.

There followed a frantic shape-shifting battle with Ceridwen and Gwion both changing into various animals as Ceridwen tried to kill the boy. Finally, Gwion turned himself into a grain of wheat and Ceridwen became a hen and pecked it up.

Nine months later, she gave birth to a baby boy and she couldn't bring herself to kill him. Instead, she put him in a basket and sent him off down the river. Ceridwen drops out of the story at this point, but the baby is found by a king, who adopts him and names him Taliesin, which means 'radiant brow.'

The thing I love most about these old stories is their fluidity. They keep changing. They mean different things in different times and to different people. I began wondering about Ceridwen. What did she do next? Did she regret her actions? Did she ever try to find Taliesin? And what about her two children, the son and the daughter – what did they make of the whole thing?

At first I thought Ceridwen would be a straightforward villain, still seeking magical power, but as I got to know her I started to like her, and I soon discovered she had a very different motive. I won't say any more here, but I hope you enjoy her part in the story.

6. The Invisible College

More than twenty sheep were grazing quietly when a silver car purred to a halt at the side of Ross Road just by the sign that said: *Abergavenny 5*.

Three men got out. They all looked quite identical – to a sheep, anyway. The first was tall and thin with grey hair the texture of wool caught in a bush. He stood gazing up and down the road, his hands in his pockets. One of his companions unfolded a map and laid it on the car bonnet. The third man produced a pair of metal sticks and began pacing up and down the grass slope by the road.

Several sheep strayed surreptitiously closer. The gentleman with the sticks paused mid-stride.

'I don't like the way the sheep are looking at us, Professor Utterby,' he said. 'They're up to something.'

This is how we meet Professors Utterby, Nuffield and Ryston, the last three members of the Invisible College, a secret institution devoted to the dark arts.

I made up a lot of things in Storm Hound, but the Invisible College wasn't one of them. It really existed – though it had nothing to do with the dark arts.

The college existed as an idea rather than a physical place. References to it date back to the 17th century, in particular by the chemist Robert Boyle. (It's no accident that I made Professor Utterby a chemist). Little is known about it, but it appears to have been an informal group of like-minded thinkers who would meet to share knowledge and exchange ideas. The group split between London and Oxford,

and in 1660 the group petitioned the King for formal status and the Invisible College became the Royal Society.

The notion of the Invisible College crops up in various guises, especially nowadays when online learning can take the place of buildings. In fiction, Pratchett had his Unseen University, of course. And BBC Radio 4 has an interesting set of podcasts on creative writing called The Invisible College. The link is here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p053dm4v>

I like to think that, after the creation of the Royal Society, a breakaway group of philosophers and magicians continued to meet in secret, delving further into the world of magic. The Invisible College has continued to this day, its numbers dwindling as magic faded, until only the three professors are left. But now, magic has returned to the world in the form of a fallen stormhound, and the three professors are ready to make themselves great again. Will they succeed? You'll have to read the book to find out!

7. Cats vs Dogs vs Sheep

Storm ran to the middle of the garden. *Begone, foul enemy!*

The cat didn't move. A skinny tabby, fur thinning with age, she stared at him with faded green eyes. *This is my territory, dog. Don't go leaving your stink all over it.*

Storm stopped still, not quite sure how to respond. The cats in Odin's halls would never dare to come near a stormhound, never mind address one in that impertinent fashion. But in the world of humans he and this cat were about the same size – and the cat had the advantage of claws

Are you a cat person or a dog person? Or maybe a sheep person – you'll find plenty of sheep in Storm Hound, too. Take this handy quiz to find out.

1. You come home after a long day. Do you?

- a) Lie down for a nap.
- b) Start eating the carpet.
- c) Want to go straight back out again.

2. A friend comes to visit. Do you?

- a) Greet them warmly.
- b) Wait for them to say hello to you, then shrug and walk away.
- c) Ignore them and carry on eating the carpet.

3. What do you think about clothes for animals?

- a) Any clothes that come near me get shredded.
- b) I'll put up with it if I really must.
- c) Why do I need clothes? I come pre-clothed in wool.

4. What do you think about humans?

- a) I love them all!
- b) They can be useful sometimes. Their laps are warm.
- c) I like to watch them hurry by.

5. Where do you like to spend your weekends?

- a) Watching the world go by in a field.
- b) Jumping in puddles.
- c) Wherever is most inconvenient for the humans.

6. What is your best feature?

- a) My cunning brain.
- b) My warm heart.
- c) My cuddly good looks.

7. Are you superstitious?

- a) Yes. I am descended from gods and one look from me can bring you bad luck.
- b) No. Not at all.
- c) I'm a bit woolly on this subject.

8. Your friend asks you not to sit on her new chair. Do you?

- a) Jump up there straight away – you have to show her who's boss.
- b) Sit on the floor and stare at the chair longingly.
- c) Wonder why she's let you into her house at all.

9. How do you like to walk?

- a) Alone.
- b) In a big group.
- c) Walk? No thanks, I'll just stand here and watch.

10. Say 'hello' in Welsh

- a) Wwf!
- b) Miaw?
- c) Shwmae baaaaach!

Answers:

Actually, there is no reason why you have to be one thing or the other. Cats and dogs both make excellent pets and you can like both of them equally if you want to. (I'm not so sure about sheep.)