

TLC Showcase

CHRISTINE LAURENSEN

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Introduction to *The Dragon of Exnaboe*

The *Dragon of Exnaboe* (working title) is set in the early years of the 13th century, a time of political turmoil across Britain, Europe and Scandinavia. It tells the story of Mai, a young orphan living with her grandmother, in rural Hjaltland (Shetland) and her journey, both physical and emotional, from child to young adult.

When the son of the local Jarl dies after receiving treatment from Mai's grandmother, Amma Ragna, they are forced to flee for their lives. It is at this point that Mai discovers that her grandmother has the ability to shape-shift and that a friendly dragon sleeps in the waters of a local loch. As the story continues, Mai makes many more discoveries about herself, her family and her place in the world, experiences life-threatening situations, and discovers an inner strength she never knew she had.

This story grew from an idea I had many years ago, about a fantasy story with a young girl as lead protagonist. I thought that it should be set during the Middle Ages, but knew little about what Shetland might have been like during that time period. I spoke to a friend of mine, who has a keen interest in local history, to ask about the best sources of information. She promptly invited me to come with her to a lecture about it that very night! This was so serendipitous, I couldn't refuse. The lecture gave me further inspiration and introduced me to some fascinating historical characters. I embarked on more research, which took me on a journey from Norway during the civil war period, and on through various battles for power across Britain and Europe. The result is a middle-grade fantasy novel, with (admittedly loose) ties to actual historical events.

Part of the prize for recipients of the Scottish Book Trust New Writer's Award is the opportunity to work with a mentor or to have professional feedback on an early, completed draft. Having taken the second option, I received a manuscript appraisal from Emma Pass, of The Literary Consultancy. Emma pointed out where the manuscript could be improved by strengthening the dramatic and emotional impact at specific points in the narrative. The feedback was clear, concise and accurate, and offered with respect, kindness and a great deal of encouragement, all things much needed by beginning writers like myself. This has been enormously helpful in guiding future edits.

The Dragon of Exnaboe, by Christine Laurenson

Mai was grateful to be barefoot as she crept from the small chamber, through the great hall towards the exit. Fortunately, the heavy outer door stood ajar, and she was able to slip out of the building without making a sound. Although it was well past midnight, it was still light outside. Mai knew she would have to go through the village again to get to Bjorn's house. She hoped they would all be asleep, so she could pass by unnoticed. She was in luck. Although she did hear the occasional murmur of voices or shout of laughter most of the houses were silent. She hurried past them all and then broke into a run.

Bjorn's house was very much like their own, made of turf and built into the hillside near the shore. It was almost invisible from above; the only indication that there was anything there was a thin spiral of smoke curling lazily upwards towards the sky. Mai ran, skidding over the wet grass towards the house. She was startled to see that Bjorn was awake and standing outside, gazing out over the sea. He had lit a fire on the beach, which crackled and spat sparks into the air. A round, black pot was positioned in the centre of it. Why on earth would he be cooking in the middle of the night? He turned as she approached. There was no trace of his usual smile. Mai walked slowly towards him, wondering what was wrong.

'You have something for me?' he said.

She stared for a moment, wondering how he knew, then dropped the necklace onto his outstretched palm. He carefully picked at the clasp. Mai watched his big, clumsy fingers struggle with the delicate mechanism, and wanted to help but felt unable to move. At last, the lid sprang open, revealing a shining red slab within. Was it a ruby? She had heard that people paid a lot of money for some stones, which made little sense to Mai.

Bjorn walked towards the fire and dropped the necklace into the pot.

'No!' cried Mai.

Bjorn turned and smiled.

'Don't worry. This is how it works.'

Mai gazed into the pot. The red shape within the locket began to shiver and bubble.

Bjorn reached for a short, metal pole. He carefully threaded it through the holes in the sides of the pot and lifted it clear of the fire. Then he tipped it over onto the shingle. Mai saw the locket tumble out and a stream of red liquid trickle from it. Bjorn used the edge of his tunic to lift the locket and then dropped it, hissing, into a rock pool. After a few seconds, he lifted it out and walked over to a flat rock to sit down. Mai followed, peering at the locket, which looked empty.

'What-?'

'Patience,' said Bjorn.

He felt around the inside edge of the locket and then pressed. There was a faint click and the base sprang out, revealing a small rectangle of wood, crowded with symbols. Bjorn carefully prised it out and began to read aloud to Mai.

'It is time. Nagol must be woken. Do not delay.'

'Time for what? Who's Nagol? I need to get back-'

'No!' roared Bjorn, grabbing Mai roughly by the arm.

Mai had never seen Bjorn act like this before. She could feel the prickle of tears in her eyes and a swell of rage in her throat. She glared at him and yanked her arm away.

'What's wrong with you? Tell me what's going on. Now!' she said.

Bjorn stared at her, a slow smile spreading across his face.

'You are so like your father sometimes. Come. We have to leave,' he said, getting to his feet.

'Leave? And go where? What about Amma Ragna?'

'She'll join us later. But even if she doesn't, we must still leave.'

'No! I won't go. They'll kill her if the boy dies, and he *will* die.'

'Exactly,' said Bjorn. 'And then they'll be after you, too.'

'I don't care. We have to get her first.'

'No. No delays. Now, come. We must wake Nagol, so he'll be ready for the journey.'

'Who's Nagol? What journey?'

'You'll see.'

Bjorn's refusal to answer her questions infuriated Mai. She wondered if she could out-run him. As if he had heard her thoughts, Bjorn grabbed hold of her again and quickly tied a rope around her waist.

'What are you doing? Get this off me!'

'I'm sorry, Mai. No time to explain. Now, hurry!'

With Bjorn striding fast and dragging her with him, Mai was soon too breathless to speak. They hurried north, over marshy land that chilled her bare feet and stony hills that dug painfully into them. Mai panted and moaned. The journey seemed never-ending. And all the while, she wondered what was happening to her grandmother and if she would ever see her again. At the brow of a small hill, Bjorn stopped. He pointed down towards a sea loch.

'There. That's where Nagol lies.' he said.

Mai stared down at the shining water. It glinted and shimmered in the summer night, every slight movement on the surface throwing up discs of light like a thousand golden coins.

'Nagol?'

'What does that loch remind you of? Look at the shape of it.'

Mai stared down at the water and began to see what looked like the outline of a great beast of some kind.

'A monster?'

Bjorn laughed.

'Close enough,' he said, and ruffled her hair.

She felt the anger melt from her, especially when Bjorn then reached down and untied her.

'I'm sorry I had to do that. I couldn't risk you running back.'

'But how did you know?'

'Because that's what I would have done,' said Bjorn with a chuckle.

Mai smiled at this but then remembered about Amma Ragna and fear rushed in again, tightening her throat, and making her heart pound.

“Why are you doing this to me?” said Mai. “What’s going on?”

Her anger made her voice shudder and, to her horror, she felt close to tears. She hated being forced to do things without explanation.

‘Mai, you know I would never hurt you and Amma told me what had to be done.’

‘What? You’re making no sense!’

‘The boy was dying before you ever got there. He’ll be dead now, and you and your Amma will be blamed. If you don’t leave now, this instant, you will both be sentenced to death.’

Mai felt sick. Amma Ragna was still there. How would she get away? If anything happened to her... The mere thought of losing her Amma was almost too much to bear. Her eyes began to fill and she felt heavy with sadness. As if he knew what she was thinking, Bjorn stopped and turned her to face him.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Bjorn. ‘She’ll be here soon. Come now, we must hurry.’

Mai struggled to keep up, as Bjorn strode off down the hill towards the loch. He still hadn’t answered her. She still didn’t know who Nagol was, or how Amma Ragna would be able to get away from the Jarl’s house. So many questions and not one hint of an answer. But she trusted him. He loved Amma Ragna; he would never let anything happen to her, would he? Soon they stood near the edge of the water. Bjorn gestured to her to stand back. Then, he began to sing. His low voice carried a tune that was as strange as it was beautiful.

As he sang, the surface of the loch began to shiver. Light glittered over it in tiny sparks and speckles, getting brighter and brighter, and then rose up from the water in a glittering curtain, each pinpoint of brightness moving constantly, as if blown by some fierce wind. Mai stared, almost unable to breathe. Bjorn put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

‘Don’t be afraid. No harm will come to you,’ he whispered.

Mai continued to watch the strange dance of light, and as she did, she began to make out what looked like the shape of an enormous beast, with four legs, a long

writhing tail and a huge, muscular body. A great pair of wings unfolded from its back. The creature began to get smaller and more solid, as the light faded away. It rose into the air and flew in a slow spiral. Shining scales covered its body, dazzling and iridescent in the early morning light, now purple, now green, now silver and gold. It was the most beautiful thing Mai had ever seen. The creature glided down and stood before them, gazing at them with great amber eyes. It was roughly three horses long nose to tail, which should have been terrifying, but for some strange reason Mai was not afraid. She walked towards the great beast, Bjorn at her side. It lowered its head towards her and allowed her to stroke its neck. Mai laid her head against it and listened to its soft snuffling. Bjorn touched her lightly on the shoulder and she stepped back.

'Nagol is Amma Ragna's most loyal friend,' said Bjorn. 'Your grandmother saved his life, so he is bound to her forever. He has slept here, at Exnaboe, ever since the day you came here with your grandmother ten years ago.'

Mai watched as the gentle creature wandered around, sniffing the air, snuffling amongst the low bushes and wandering in and out of the water at the edge of the loch.

'It's a queer sort of name. What does it mean?' said Mai.

'I'm not sure it really means anything. I remember her talking about how she found him, lying by the side of a river, weak from hunger and terribly injured. He was much smaller then, just a baby really. She thought he was a kelpie at first, a water horse, but... Anyway, she managed to carry him home and nursed him back to health. He was not a good patient, and tried to bite her more than once. So, maybe the name came from those two things, since "neggi" is an old word for horse and "nagga" means to bite... but you could ask her yourself.'

Mai frowned in puzzlement.

Bjorn pointed towards the sky.

'Recognise that bird?'

Mai looked up and saw a white eagle circling above them.'

'It looks like the one that follows me around when I go to collect water.'

Bjorn chuckled.

'And you never wondered why?'

'Yes. I even asked Amma Ragna but she just told me to stop being fanciful, that the bird maybe nested nearby...'

'A bird that nests all year round?'

'What are you saying?'

'Watch. Here she comes now.'

The bird swooped down over them, landing a short distance away, near the dragon. They seemed to know each other, and stood nose to beak for a few seconds, making excited noises. Then the bird turned and began to walk towards them. As it did so, a strange wind blew up around it, causing the air to tremble and quiver. The bird seemed to stretch upwards, getting taller with every step. Sand and seeds, caught up in the strange wind, swirled around it. The bird disappeared into a shimmering column of light and out of that brightness stepped Amma Ragna.

About the Writer

Christine was born in Shetland and brought up in England, making her a stranger wherever she goes. She is an old-fashioned bibliophile and, when not reading stories, she is writing them, something she has done her entire life.



Having graduated from Robert Gordon's in Aberdeen with a D.A. and Post-Dip. in Drawing & Painting, she subsequently took a post-graduate diploma in Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen. More recently, in 2016, Christine graduated from the Open University with a first-class honours degree in nothing in particular, cementing her reputation for taking courses offering little or no employment prospects. She is unrepentant.

In 2016, Christine was shortlisted for the Kelpie prize, and in 2017, she won a Scottish Book Trust (SBT) New Writer Award. She has had two poems published in SBT publications, *Journeys* (2015) and *Secrets and Confessions* (2016) and a short story published in *The New Shetlander* magazine (Voar, 2015).

She has also self-published three books, *Jeemsie's Ghosts* (middle-grade fiction), *Dark Business* (a crime thriller for adults) and *Dead Short* (a collection of short stories), through Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP).

Currently, Christine is in the process of editing two books for young people and working on the first drafts of two crime thrillers for an adult readership.