



THE BARK OF THE BOG OWL
THE WILDERKING TRILOGY, BOOK 1
by Jonathan Rogers © 2024

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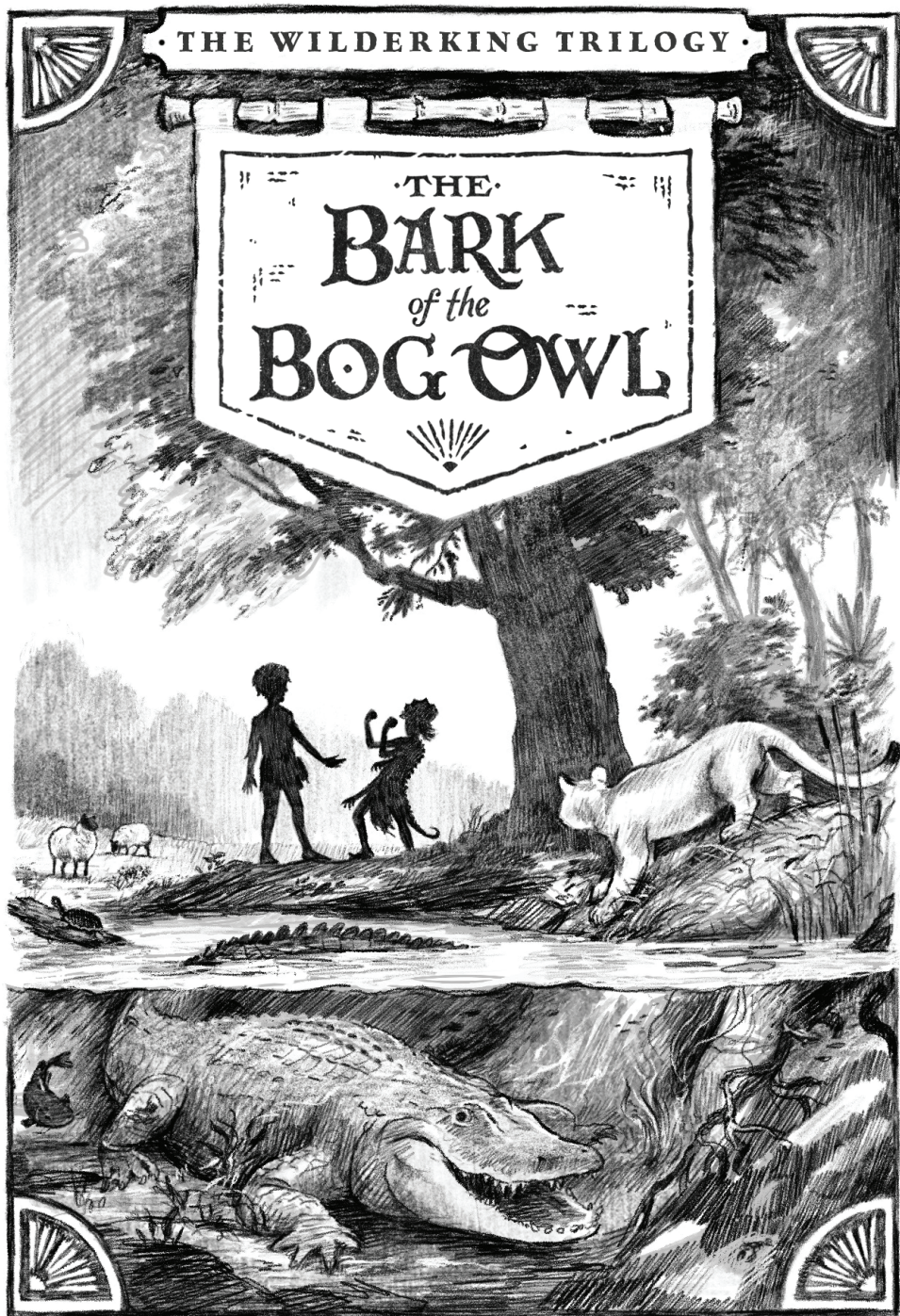
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For Lawrence and Gail Alligood, patrons of the arts.

And for Lou Alice, of course.

THE WILDERKING TRILOGY

THE
BARK
of the
BOG OWL



THE BARK OF THE BOG OWL

*His Majesty, King Darrow of Corenwald,
Protector of the People,
Defender of the Faith,
Keeper of the Island
Tambluff Castle
West Bank of the River Tam
Tambluff, Corenwald*

My Dearest King—

You will be glad to learn that I am still available for any quest, adventure, or dangerous mission for which you might need a champion or knight-errant. I specialize in dragon-slaying, but would be happy to fight pirates or invading barbarians if circumstances require. I would even

be willing to rescue a fair maiden imprisoned by evil relatives. That would not be my first choice, since I am not of marrying age. Still, in peaceful and prosperous times like these, an adventurer takes whatever work he can find.

As always, I am at your service and eagerly await your reply.

*Yours very sincerely,
Aidan Errolson of Longleaf Manor*

P.S. I have not yet received an answer to my last letter—or to my fourteen letters before that. Mail service being what it is on the frontier, I assume your replies were lost. I hope you don't mind that I have taken the liberty of writing again.

Holding the stiff palmetto paper between ink-stained fingers, Aidan admired his letter one more time before rolling it and putting it back in his side pouch. The mail wagon wouldn't be by for another couple of days, and he thought it best to keep the letter on hand, in case another postscript came to him.

Besides being an avid letter-writer, Aidan Errolson was a warrior and an adventurer. He lived to ride with King Darrow's armies. He thrilled to hear the clank of plate armor, the bright ring of a sword unsheathed. He would rather sleep on a bedroll

in a battle camp than in the finest bed in the finest castle in all of Corenwald.

At least, that's who he was on the inside. On the outside, Aidan was a shaggy-headed shepherd boy—a twelve-year-old bundle of knees and elbows in a homespun tunic and leather sandals. He had never had any real adventures. Being the son of one of Corenwald's great landholders, Aidan lived a comfortable and settled life.

And that, he believed, was the one great injustice of his otherwise happy existence. Aidan came from a family of adventurers. His grandparents had been pioneers, among the earliest settlers of Corenwald's eastern frontier. When he was a younger man, Aidan's father Errol had been one of Corenwald's greatest warriors. Errol was still a teenager when he first marched out to battle to defend the kingdom that his forefathers had carved from the tanglewood.

By comparison, Aidan's peaceful, prosperous, civilized life seemed rather dull. True, this was what his grandparents had toiled for, what his parents had fought for. But Aidan wasn't sure the life of a shepherd suited him. Longleaf Manor, his father's vast estate, presented precious little opportunity for the sort of adventures that take place in real life, and not only in a boy's imagination.

That changed forever on the day Aidan first heard the bark of the bog owl.



The first time Aidan heard the bark of the bog owl, he was tending sheep in the bottom pasture—or, rather, he was supposed to be tending sheep. In fact, he was dreaming the day away with little regard for his shepherdly duties. It was high spring, the sort of day that inspires a certain dreaminess in even the most earthbound and unimaginative of shepherd boys. Earlier in the day, a looming thunderhead had threatened to soak the bottom pasture. But it changed its mind and slid off to the south before dropping so much as a sprinkle on Aidan or his sheep. Now the clouds scudded across the blue like great bales of cotton under sail.

In the bottomlands that bordered the pasture, the forest birds were calling each to each. Even from where Aidan stood, he could hear the zoom of a thousand bee wings darting and hovering above the little swamp lilies that carpeted the forest floor.

Of all the pastures on Longleaf Manor, the bottom pasture was Aidan's favorite. Situated at the farthest edge of the estate, it was a floodplain meadow of the River Tam, which formed the eastern boundary of Errol's lands. Here carefully tended fields and pastures, indeed all the gentle arts of cultivation, gave way again to wildness. Before him stretched a scene of pastoral tranquility: soft, fat sheep nibbled sweet spring grass, secure in their shepherd's care and undisturbed by any fear of danger. But behind him began a wilderness not very different from the one

his forebears found when they first came to this country. There the red wolves still lurked beneath the moss-hung cypress and water oaks. Wildcats still prowled from limb to limb. And spring nights still resounded with the bellowing of great bull alligators summoning one another to battle.

Perched in the drooping elbow of a massive live oak, Aidan was composing a lullaby for his lambs:

*The gator glides along the Tam
Just thirty strides away.
But fear thee not, my little lamb,
Your shepherd's here by night and day . . .*

He was trying to work out a suitable refrain when he was startled back to reality. From the treetops only a few feet behind him, the piercing call of a wild animal rose above the forest buzz and echoed across the meadow.

Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo . . . Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo.

It began as the sharp, short laugh of a monkey or hyena, then became a growling bark—almost as deep as a hound's bay—and finally a wolfish howl. If the wilderness could speak with a single voice, it would sound like this.

Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo . . . Ha-ha-hahrawffff-woooooo.

It was the bark of the bog owl, and even though Aidan had never heard such a thing before, he couldn't mistake it for anything else. It spoke of wild places still untamed, of quests not yet pursued, of great deeds not yet done. Aidan's grandfather had

spoken of it. He had heard the bark of the bog owl when he first came to Corenwald from the old country. But as families like Aidan's settled and civilized this wild island, the bog owls pushed deeper into the swamps and marshes to the south and east.

Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo0000...Ha-ha-hahrawffff-woooooo0000.

Aidan was more than startled; he was thrilled straight through. An adventurer's heart beat wildly against his ribs. He felt himself to be the person he had always hoped he was: not a shepherd boy who wished he were a soldier, but a soldier who happened to be playing the part of a shepherd boy.

Aidan couldn't sit still. He had to do something—something adventurous. Seeing movement on the far edge of the meadow, he leaped from the tree limb, crouching as he pulled sling and stone from his side pouch. A bear skulking near his sheep! Actually, it was a clump of blackberry briars about the size of a bear; but it served Aidan's purpose well enough. He whirled the stone around his head and let fly, scoring a hit on the imaginary predator's head. Wheeling to his right, he slew two suspiciously wolfish-looking tree stumps before they could flee his lethal stones. He then took up his shepherd's staff with both hands like a broadsword. He hacked and jabbed at trees and bushes, thrusting, parrying, and lunging, battling through imaginary foes. Triumphantly, he mounted a high stump in a single leap.

Feeling full of himself, Aidan composed another song on the spot—not a lullaby this time, but a soldier's march. He turned toward the tangled forest—toward the bog owl's hidden perch—and sang this song of himself:

*Aidan of the Tam I am,
The youngest son of Errol.
With sling and stone and staff alone
I guard my flocks from peril.*

*Aidan of the Tam I am,
I know no fear of danger.
Though I am young, my arm is strong.
I dread not beast or stranger.*

*Aidan of the Tam I am,
A liegeman true of Darrow.
The kingdom's foes I will oppose
With sword and spear and arrow.*

He leaped from the stump, raised his staff over his head like a battle flag, and, whooping the Corenwald war cry, made a charge through the middle of the flock. The sheep scattered madly before him, bleating and bumping. Their eyes were white-rimmed with fright.

He circled back at a dead run and galloped along the forest's edge toward a little creek that hurried across the meadow on its way to the Tam. He planted the end of his staff on the creek bank and, intending to vault to the other side, flung his feet skyward and pushed off from the staff's handle with all his strength.

Aidan had never actually pole-vaulted before. As is often the case with first attempts, this one ended in disaster. Instead of

making a smooth arc over the creek as he had envisioned, he went into a careening somersault and crashed into the mud on the far side of the creek.

His adventurous spirit was extinguished as suddenly as it had been awakened. Mumbling, he plucked himself out of the mud and was poking around for broken bones when he thought he heard a giggle. He looked back at the sheep. Most of them were looking at him curiously, convinced that he had gone quite mad. But sheep don't giggle. Aidan had spent many hours with these very sheep, and he was sure there was not a giggler among them. Besides, now that he thought about it, the giggling had come from above, perhaps from the beech tree that overhung the creek.

As Aidan peered quizzically into the treetop, the air was split by another wild cry: *Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo* . . . *Ha-ha-ha-hrawffff-woooooo*. The bog owl! Somewhere in the beech tree sat the most mysterious and elusive of the creatures that teemed in Corenwald's vast forests. Nobody Aidan knew—not even his grandfather—had ever so much as seen a bog owl, though everybody claimed to know somebody who knew somebody who had. Yet here he was, in broad daylight, only a few feet away from one. He was determined to get a good look at it.

The tree had its full growth of spring leaves. Aidan had no chance of seeing the owl as long as it stayed in the treetop; he knew he had to make it fly. He picked up a small white pebble and threw it up into the crown of the tree where he thought the owl was hiding. There was no movement—not so much as the slight

rustle of the pebble falling back through the leaves. The pebble seemed to have gotten stuck in the treetop.

When Aidan bent down to find a second rock for another try, something bounded off the back of his head and into the grass beside him. It was the white pebble, apparently dislodged by a breeze in the treetop. Thinking little of it, Aidan continued his search.

He picked up a slightly bigger rock, a red piece of gravel a little larger than a robin's egg, and threw it toward the bog owl's perch. To Aidan's surprise, this rock lodged in the treetop too.

Aidan realized it would take a larger rock to flush the bog owl—one too heavy to get stuck among the leaves of a beech tree. When he bent down to find one, again he felt something hard bounce off the back of his head. It was a little red piece of gravel—the same one he had thrown into the tree. “Strange,” he muttered. “What are the chances?”

He soon found just the rock he needed: a brown, flat creek stone about the size of his palm. He cast it up among the leaves and stepped back a few paces, having no desire to get hit on the head again. No owl emerged, but Aidan was relieved to see the rock drop back to earth, according to the generally accepted laws of gravity.

Only it wasn't the same rock. Leaning over to pick it up where it lay, Aidan saw that the rock that had dropped from the tree was gray and squarish, not brown and flat. As he stood marveling at this turn of events, he found the flat rock—or, rather, it found him. Whistling down from the treetop, it cracked him squarely on the skull.

Aidan's anger rose along with the knot on his head. Then the tree began to shake, and a high, whinnying laugh rose from its branches. Aidan's mouth dropped open. His eyes bulged. He took a few steps backward, but as he turned to run from the enchanted tree, his feet got tangled and he fell flat.

Aidan managed to raise himself to a sitting position, but before he could get to his feet, the lower branches of the tree rustled again, and a strange creature dropped to the ground only a few strides away. Crouched on all fours, it appeared to be as big as Aidan himself. The creature was covered with large, reptilian scales like an alligator's. A long, thick, ridged tail trailed behind; its hard, bony skull was covered with a dozen or more pyramid-shaped lumps. It fixed a menacing glare on Aidan as it crept slowly toward him. Fear paralyzed the shepherd boy. This was more wildness than he had bargained for.