

The Wolf Wilder by Katherine Rundell



Feodora and her mother live in the snowbound woods of Russia. Ten minutes away, in a ruined chapel, lives a pack of wolves. Feodora's mother is a wolf wilder, and Feo is a wolf wilder in training. A wolf wilder is the opposite of an animal tamer: it is a person who teaches tamed animals to fend for themselves, and to fight and to run, and to be wary of humans. When the Russian Army threatens her very existence, Feo is left with no option but to go on the run.

Where is the story set?

Do you know of any other stories set in snowy woods?

Has anything made you want to read on?

Would you like to be a wolf wilder?

Once upon a time, a hundred years ago, there was a dark and stormy girl. The girl was Russian, and although her hair and eyes and finger nails were dark all of the time, she was stormy only when she thought it absolutely necessary. Which was fairly often.

Her name was Feodora.

She lived in a wooden house made of timber from the surrounding forest. The walls were layered with sheep's wool to keep out the Russian winter, and the inside was lit with hurricane lamps. Feo had painted the lamps every colour in her box of paints, so the house cast out light into the forest in reds and greens and yellows. Her mother had cut and sanded the door herself, and the wood was eight inches thick. Feo had painted it snow blue. The wolves had added claw marks over the years, which helped dissuade unwelcome visitors.

It all began – all of it – with someone knocking on that snow-blue door.

Although 'knocking' was not the right word for this particular noise. It sounded as though someone was trying to dig a hole in the wood with his knuckles. But any knocking at all was unusual.

Nobody knocked: it was just her and her mother and the wolves. Wolves do not knock. If they want to come in, they come in through the window, whether it is open or not. Feo put down the skis she was oiling and listened. It was early, and she was still wearing her night dress. She had no dressing gown, but she pulled on the jumper her mother had knitted, which came down to the scar on her knee, and ran to the front door.

Her mother was wrapped in a bearskin housecoat, looking up from the fire she had been lighting in the sitting room.

"I'll do it!" Feo tugged at the door. It was stiff; ice had sealed the hinges.

Her mother grabbed at her – "Wait! Feo!"

But Feo had already pulled the door open, and before she could jump back it slapped inwards, catching the side of her head.

The man had a face made of right angles: a jutting nose and wrinkles in angry places, deep enough to cast shadows in the dark.

"Where is Marina Petrovich?" He marched down the hall, leaving a trail of snow.

Feo got to her knees – and then lurched back, as two more men in grey coats and black boots stamped past her, missing her fingers by inches.

"Move, girl." They carried between them, slung by its legs, the body of a young elk. It was dead, and dripping blood. Feo ran after them. She readied her elbows and knees to fight.

The man spoke to her mother. "Marina Petrovich? I am General Rakov."

"What do you want?" Marina's back was against the wall.

"I am here because your wolves did this," he said. He kicked at the elk. Blood spread across his brightly polished shoe.

"My wolves?" Her mother's face was steady, "I do not own any wolves."

"You bring them here," said Rakov. His eyes had a coldness in them you do not expect to see in a living thing. "That makes them your responsibility."

"Neither of those things are true," said Feo's mother. "Other people send the wolves here when they tire of them: the aristocrats, the rich. We untame them, that's all. Wolves cannot be owned."

“You are mistaken,” said Rakov, “if you imagine I wish to hear excuses.” His voice was growing less official: louder, ragged-edged. “I have been sent to collect compensation for the Tsar. Do not play games with me. You owe the Tsar a hundred roubles.”

“I do not have a hundred roubles.”

Rakov slammed his fist against the wall. He was surprisingly strong for so old and shrivelled a man, and the wooden walls shuddered.

“Woman! I have no interest in your protests. I have been sent to wrest obedience and order from this godforsaken place.”

Feo let out a hiss of horror.

“You!” The General crossed the room to her, leaning down until his face, veined and papery, was inches from hers. “If I had a child with a stare as insolent as yours, she would be banished. Sit there and keep out of my sight.”

About this author

Katherine Rundell (born 1987) is an English author and academic. Her other books include *The Explorer* and *The Good Thieves*. As a child she lived in Zimbabwe, which inspired her book *Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms*. Her hobbies include tightrope walking and roof walking, which inspired her book *Rooftoppers*.



Photo by Nina Subin

Work with your tutor to answer these questions:



1) ‘The wolves had added claw marks over the years, which helped dissuade unwelcome visitors...’

Which of these words is closest in meaning to dissuade? Circle **one**.

persuade

prevent

invite

terrify

(1)

2) 'She readied her elbows and knees to fight...'

What word could the author have used instead of 'readied' in this sentence? Tick **one**.

clenched	
prepared	✓
punched	

(1)

3) 'Feo got to her knees – and then lurched back, as two more men in grey coats and black boots stamped past her...'

What does the word lurched tell us about how Feo moved out of the way?

That she moved suddenly or quickly. She wasn't expecting the men.

(1)

Work with your partner to answer these questions:



4) Find and copy a word or phrase that shows that General Rakov had a pointy face.

The man had a face made of right angles or a 'jutting' nose.

(1)

5) 'His eyes had a coldness in them you do not expect to see in a living thing.'

Tick **one** phrase that best matches the above description.

His eyes were blue like ice	
He had an unusually cruel and cold-hearted stare	✓
His eyes looked like they belonged to a dead man	

(1)

Work independently to answer these questions:



6) Find and copy a group of words that tells the reader how General Rakov's voice got

'Louder', 'more ragged-edged' – extend pupils' answers by encouraging them to work out what this unusual description might mean. Focus on 'ragged' and how this suggests rough/uneven. Use other clues in the paragraph to discuss how his voice might be changing as he is losing his patience.

7) Find and copy one word in the final paragraph that means the same as rude.

Insolent

(1)

8) Which word most closely matches the meaning of compensation?

apology

payment

punishment

(1)

Challenge



9) Write your own vocabulary question on this text or the previous one for your tutor or partner to answer! Use the question stems to help you.

Ask for pupils' feelings about 'define' questions. Do they feel confident in answering this type of question? Would they like more practice?

How do you feel about
vocabulary/defining
questions?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I find this difficult		I'm getting there			I'm good at this	