

# Weekend

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## Free the word – and your child

A new project is turning books into real-life adventures, re-connecting kids with the wild in the process. By **Becky Dickinson**

The gipsy caravans are the first sign of life for miles. Four emerald blobs punctuate the windswept horizon. Nestled between them are the chalky white domes of five bell tents. These fan out like spokes on a wheel, inside which a ring of hay bales is arranged in an inner circle. At the heart of this, a fire splutters against the gusting rain.

An amorphous mass of children is spread around the camp, some scattered over the hay bales, others poking the flames, others foraging in the forest for wood and treasure. Clad in Joules wellies and Swedish outdoor wear, they appear to be having the time of their lives. They could almost be mistaken for Romani, were it not for the designer clothing.

The campers are, in fact, a 50-strong group of nine to 13-year-olds on a gipsy-themed adventure weekend in the Berkshire countryside, somewhere adrift of Hungerford. The trip, run by the Exploration Society, or ESOC, is a blend of outdoor survival and literature – a kind of Bear Grylls meets Hay-on-Wye.

It's part of a growing trend to engage children with books by bringing the pages to life outdoors. ESOC's latest

adventure follows on from the successful

partnership between Forestry Commission England and bestselling children's author Julia Donaldson.

Last summer, more than one million visitors took part in outdoor activities centred on *The Gruffalo* and *The Gruffalo's Child*, and this summer similar numbers are expected to take part in *Superworm* trails, based on another of Donaldson's popular tales. The events, which will run until the end of October, are taking place at about 20 sites across the country.

For ESOC's slightly older children, the homework before attending the camp was to read *The Dreamsnatcher*, a debut novel by Abi Elphinstone. The book centres on a gipsy girl named Moll and her wildcat friend, Gryff; it is a tale of magic, adventure and hard-fought battles between good and evil.

The story forms the narrative to the long weekend, as the children live and sleep like the heroine, and ESOC hopes this will be the first of many such book-related events. Some girls proudly show off their gipsy wagon, with its intricately painted end panels, patterned curtains and wooden bunks.

"It's adorable," they say. The trip's popularity meant there weren't quite enough wagons for everyone, hence the bell tents.

There are also gipsy craft and cooking sessions, and the much-anticipated arrival of *The Dreamsnatcher's* author, who will read to children around the campfire and lead reenactments, although given the level of dark

magic, bloodshed, and death, presumably nothing too literal.

The Exploration Society has been running outdoor adventures since 2011. While the introduction of a literary thread is a new concept, the main emphasis is still on empowering children to find their own adventures. ESOC's founder and director, Chris Brickel, believes autonomy is an essential ingredient of growing up and one that is starkly lacking in many children's lives.

"They go from lesson to lesson, from club to club, especially in London where they're not allowed to have just a bit of freedom. So to be able to go with your mate and make a den, or not be told 'right now you're doing this,' that's such an important thing."

The children are



New chapter: Abi Elphinstone reads from her book *The Dreamsnatcher*; top, right, children carve walking sticks

unplugged from Wi-Fi and Instagram – all forms of technology are banned – and it's reassuring to watch children engaged in free time, suggesting there is still something slow and timeless about being 10 years old. A group of girls emerges from the forest clutching animal skulls and pheasant feathers, which they form into lucky charms and headresses.

Three 11-year-old boys – Marcus, Ethan and Cole – have set up their own camp and are squatting beneath a tarpaulin, keeping an eye out for predators and bragging about spending

the night there. London may be a mere 90 minutes away, but there's an exotic sense of freedom here, as felt by Marcus and his clan.

"We can do whatever we want, that's the best thing about coming here. We're responsible for ourselves, no one tells us 'do this, do this'; they trust you," the boys say.

There are, of course, adults keeping a watchful eye, ensuring the vibe remains more *Swallows and Amazons* than *Lord of the Flies*. But on the whole, the kids just get on with it. They are free to roam the forest; they use knives, light fires, get filthy and



go to bed late. There are no showers and it seems unlikely that many will have brushed their teeth or even washed their hands during their stay.

While mornings are given over to free time, afternoons consist of instructor-led activities centred on gipsy crafts. One group is making elder whistles, another is whittling pieces of hazel into walking staffs. Somehow, the sight of a bunch of pre-teens armed with gleaming blades causes less of a shudder out here in the open than it would in a classroom.

Risk management and trust are all part of the philosophy, and the children respond with due care and respect. Many have been on ESOC expeditions before and are familiar with using knives. They handle them with impressive dexterity, stripping bark from wood as if they were peeling carrots.

At a pigeon plucking workshop, a freshly shot wood pigeon is parted from its plumage, then breasted. Children look on, firing questions about the size of the creature's brain and whether you can catch pigeon "dandruff", while the instructor tries to steer the talk towards an appreciation of food and its origins.

"Who fancies having a go?" he asks, and a flock of hands shoot up. Fortunately, there are plenty of dead birds to go around. As the afternoon wanes, the children head into the forest to collect wood and light fires for cooking. Supper is followed by singing, storytelling, hot chocolate and a night-time version of forest hide-and-seek, before the "gipsies" finally retire to their wagons and tents.

And as the laws of camping dictate, it seems with rain most of the night and into the next morning, Spirits are not dampened, however, and

Great outdoors

the excitement only escalates with the arrival of author Abi Elphinstone. She is immediately mobbed by fans demanding to know when the sequel to *The Dreamsnatcher* will be out and the names of the characters. For Abi, a former teacher, bringing literature to life in the great bustling outdoors is the perfect way to get youngsters inspired.

"Children's books aren't just about a solitary experience where you're in your bedroom reading. Writers are often explorers first, certainly when I go and hunt down a story I'm going out to wild places, meeting gipsies and carving catapults."

Later, she leads some children through the woods to take part in a creative writing session, complete with a crystal ball and ancient maps. "It's showing children that there's so much

A group of girls emerges clutching animal skulls

more to writing than spelling and punctuation and grammar. Children get put off by that. You can't write without those things, but to get a child really passionate about writing and reading, sometimes you need to start on a level which is about adventure and imagination first."

As the mother of a reticent reader, I hope she's right. Whatever these young explorers take away from the weekend, it will almost certainly involve a few stories of their own, as well as a pile of dirty laundry. And maybe even a desire to connect with literature in ways they hadn't thought possible.

For details of the Julia Donaldson Superworm trails, see [forestry.gov.uk](http://forestry.gov.uk). The next ESOC Dreamsnatcher event will be on August 29-31, for children in school years Four-Eight. It costs £345, including transport, food and accommodation. [explorationsociety.co.uk](http://explorationsociety.co.uk)