

**Alice Roberts: ‘We think we’re  
more civilised now than we were in  
the Middle Ages – I’m not sure we  
are’**

**The celebrity academic, TV presenter and author talks about  
her new children’s book, Wolf Road**

Shaun Curran

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Are human beings any more progressed than they were hundreds of years ago? Professor Alice Roberts doesn't necessarily think so.

"In 500 years' time, I don't know if people will look back on our countries and our politics and see that there's really much difference from now and the Middle Ages," she says.

"There have been technological advances, of course. But I think we think we're much more civilised. And I'm not sure we are. We also see selfishness and hoarding and war and violence. I think we've got a long way to go".

A modern-day polymath, the 50-year-old academic broadcaster and author is an expert on such matters. Born in Bristol and educated at the University of Cardiff, Roberts is one of the most recognisable assets in the science and history communities. She has brought her specialism in history, archaeology, anthropology, and human anatomy and evolution to mainstream audiences via hit TV shows like *Time Team*, *Coast* and *Digging for Britain*; her best-selling books include *The Incredible Unlikelihood of Being*, *Ancestors* and *Buried*. In 2020, she was given the inaugural Royal Society David Attenborough Award for outstanding public engagement with science.

Her latest project is a prehistoric children's novel called *Wolf Road*, her first non-fiction book. Set in the Ice Age – Roberts has evocatively brought to life the primeval landscape – it follows 12-year-old girl Tuuli and her nomadic tribe as they make a pilgrimage to a summer camp, surviving on their wits as they battle the dangerous elements, not to mention the wolves and bears. Tuuli's outlook – and life – changes upon a chance, forbidden meeting in the woods with a boy from another tribe, Andar.

It's a book full of heart – fun, sweet, and moving. It's educational too: connecting to the life of our ancestors, many of the archaeological objects mentioned are real discoveries from the period, while the tribe's survival techniques are based not just on Roberts's familiarity with published scientific research, but her own experiences. Roberts has spent time with reindeer herders in Siberia, staying in tipi-like accommodation called "chums" (pronounced "chooms") at temperatures of -40°C.

When we meet at the Natural History Museum in west London, I soon get a keen sense of why in 2012 the University of Birmingham appointed Roberts professor of Public Engagement in Science. She has a way of making complex ideas accessible, but is also charismatic and relatable: last week, she went to watch *Barbie* at the cinema.

"I saw some comments saying it was anti-men. I didn't get that impression of it. That director is a genius. She's managed to produce something which is pink and fluffy and hilarious, and then in the middle of it, you've got a feminist sermon. People clapped in the cinema! When's the last time you had clapping in the cinema?"

*Wolf Road* is a book with a moral compass – and one that treats children with respect. What Roberts calls "the core of the book" – the bridging, or not, of ideological differences between different tribes – is brought into sharp relief by the disparity in attitudes between Tuuli and her elders. "When adults meet each other for the first time, there may be more antagonism, more concern about motives," says Roberts.

When she's travelled to different areas of the world for work, she's found children tend to be immediately friendlier than older people. "Pretty much everywhere I went, meeting children you realise it's much easier just to smile at each other and make a human connection. We learn a nervousness as adults. The barriers come down".

It's also easy to read that as a comment on our polarised society, I say. "It's a comment on being human, isn't it?" Roberts replies. But when it comes to understanding other cultures or points of view, doesn't the world seem to be going backwards?

"It's difficult to know. We should be going forward. We've got this amazing ability to talk to each other around the world, and to see other people's lifestyles. And you would have thought that would have meant you can extend your empathy, and you can understand that every human being is worth as much as any other".

Roberts says she wanted to focus the book on children as they are often overlooked when it comes to recounting history. "So often when we think about events or circumstances in the past, we frame it in adult terms. And I think we do that an awful lot with objects as well; we look at archaeological artefacts and we always seem to be interpreting them as though they are only being approached by adults. And I think there's actually quite a lot of objects which probably were made for children. We've overlooked that."

Tuuli's tribe's philosophy is for children to be exploratory, to go on discoveries and learn from their own mistakes. We discuss whether that kind of thinking is reflected in modern education; Roberts thinks it can be, though that's often down to which teacher children end up with. And as parents?

"It's a very tricky thing as a parent – where is the acceptable level of risk? How far up that tree are you going to let your child climb? Because you have this need to protect them. But actually, the best protection they can have is learning how to take those risks and manage those risks themselves. That's what they're going to have to do in the fullness of time".

Roberts deals with difficult topics in the book, something she was inspired to do by *His Dark Materials* author Philip Pullman – they've become Twitter friends. "Children are emotional beings just as much as adults. He [Pullman] writes for children but he doesn't shy away from big issues. And he doesn't dumb down. I wanted to write in that way. I didn't want to choose the easy option".

Roberts has never done that herself. She has always been happy to speak her mind, criticising the Government's handling of Covid and, more recently, the NHS. Once a junior doctor, she supports this summer's strikes. "They are barely earning any more than I was in the late 90s," she says.

"This is the reality of it. But it's also the conditions in hospitals. It's a real concern that we are beyond the point of squeezing till the pips squeak – the pips have been squeaking for a long time. They've all fallen out now. We're at the point where they're genuinely worried about patient consent and patient safety. And we cannot continue like this".

She says she's open to NHS reform, but "whatever happens, (the NHS needs to be) free at the point of need. I would hate to get to that point in Britain that exists in other countries where you are not going to be treated unless you have the financial wherewithal to be treated. Same goes for social care. They are intricately intertwined with each other".

It's not surprising to hear this: Roberts is an avid humanist. She co-wrote *The Little Book of Humanism*, and was once president of Humanists UK (she remains a patron). She's clearly still passionate about the philosophy's aims, which she describes as "kindness and empathy and combining that with rationality and logic, and using that to guide your decision making, on a personal level and on a social and political level".

She doesn't feel this kind of approach is taken across the country's institutions (in the past she has argued against religious teachings in schools).

"It has to come a point where people who are non-religious have to be not discriminated against," she says, in reference to the lack of official recognition humanists receive in law, particularly concerning ceremonies like marriage. "And we shouldn't have things like Bishops in the House of Lords with 26 automatic seats, which is just totally discriminatory".

She wanted to be the first humanist on BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*, but was rejected. "I was told it was only for religious people. The whole idea that somebody who's non-religious doesn't have an ethical and moral perspective to offer that's worth listening to? I think it's quite extraordinary. More than half the population is not religious".

Roberts says a turn towards humanism would make for a fairer society. "Because equality is hardwired in. There's no reason why any human is worth more than any other human," she says, returning to a theme of *Wolf Road*. "That's the logic of it. And if we were free to extend that into our society and politics, I think it would be a positive".

***Wolf Road* is published by Simon & Schuster, £14.99**

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