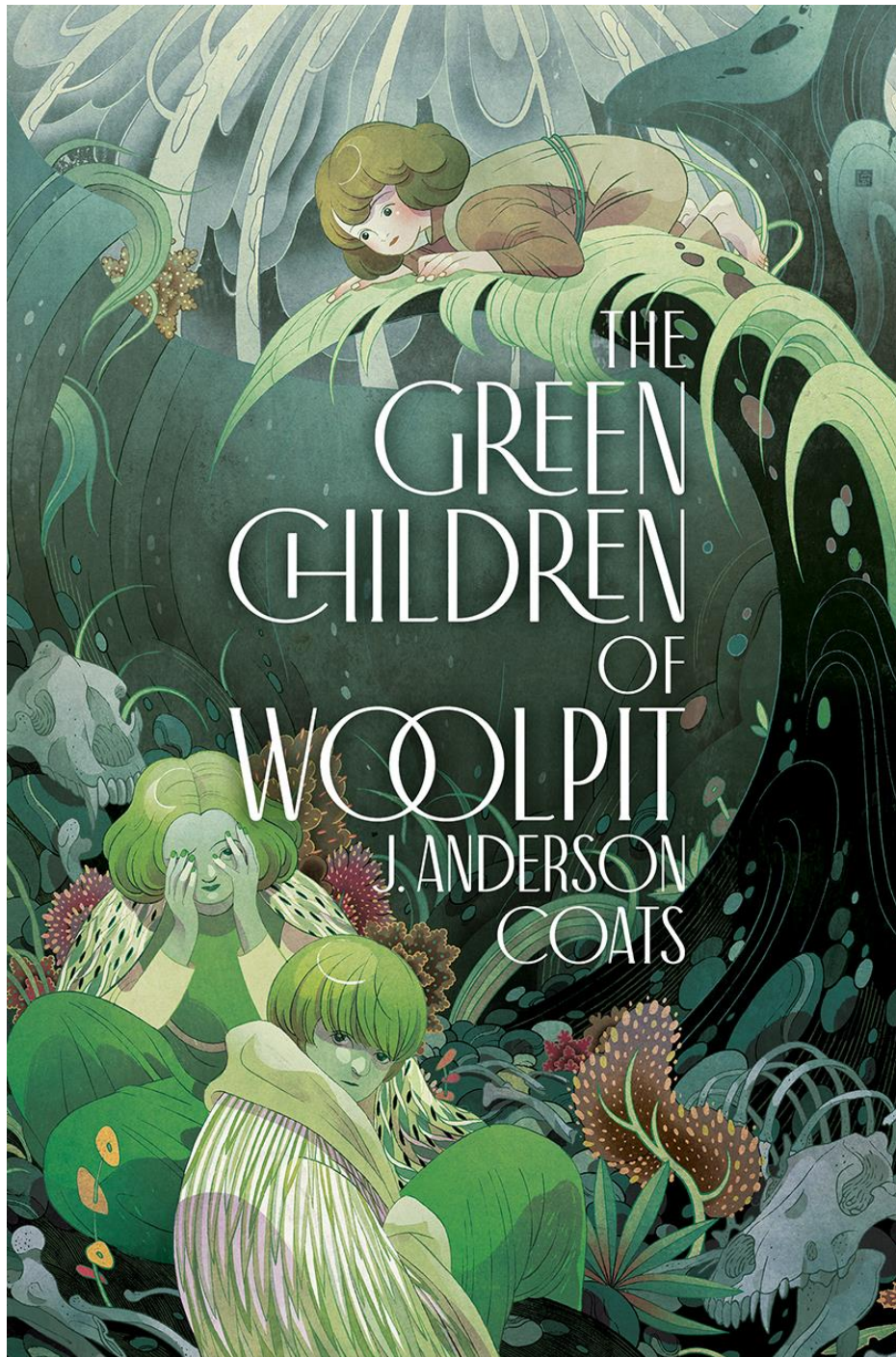


**The Green Children of Woolpit**  
**Discussion & Activity Guide**



If you are a teacher or librarian using this guide as part of a class discussion or a book group, feel free to contact the author with questions - [j@jandersoncoats.com](mailto:j@jandersoncoats.com)

Skype and classroom visits can be arranged.

Please visit <http://www.jandersoncoats.com/authorvisits.html> for details.

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## Book Overview

It's 1160, and Agnes is helping with the harvest when she hears crying coming from the woods nearby. When she investigates, she can't believe what she's seeing. There, at the bottom of a pit dug to protect the village from wolves, are a boy and a girl. They're shouting in a language no one understands—and their skin is bright green.

The lord of the manor asks Agnes's family to care for the green children while he looks for their parents. One night she is awakened by a strange green light, and the girl tells the reason she and the boy have come: Agnes is the lost princess of the kingdom under the mountain, and her *real* parents—the king and queen—want her to come home.

Agnes is skeptical, but she knows that the fairy folk cannot lie. When the green boy comes down with a mysterious illness, Agnes is convinced that she has to act fast and get him home. But she falls into the wolf pit and hits her head, and when she recovers, she learns some terrible truths. She is not the lost princess under the mountain. The boy is not her brother—and not even a boy at all, but one of the fairy folk. The green girl, Senna, tricked her into taking her place as a servant. Agnes is never going home.

Meanwhile, Senna is celebrating. Many years ago, she agreed to be a servant to the king under the mountain. Now she has won her freedom from the fairy folk by finding someone to take her place, but she can't quite shake the worry that she will not be welcome in this new world. So Senna sets about taking Agnes's place—her home, her friends, even her parents. There is just enough fairy magic left in a scrap of cloth in her possession that she can make anyone believe what she wants them to.

Agnes is determined to escape the kingdom under the mountain, but it comes at a very high price. When she returns to her village, she learns that the bargain that governs their obligations to the fairy folk has been broken, and both she and Senna will now be forced into servitude. In order to escape this ancient bargain, they must make a new one. They must work together to outwit the king under the mountain when neither has a reason to trust the other.

*The Green Children of Woolpit* is a suspenseful work of adventure fantasy with a strong current of historical realism suitable for grades four and up, addressing themes such as:

- The nature of belief; how and why people believe the things they do
- The evolution of friendships
- The role of stories and storytelling in preindustrial societies
- How families and communities influence self-perception
- The role of the supernatural in shaping our understanding of history and society
- The nature of belonging, especially with regard to adopted children and adoptive families

# Map



## Discussion Questions

### Belief

Agnes is reluctant at first to investigate the crying that no one else can hear. What are some reasons for this? Why does she eventually decide to follow the sound?

Why doesn't Agnes tell Glory the whole truth about the children in the pit right away? What happens when Glory and her father find out that the children are green? Why do you think they respond this way? What does this tell us about how people in Woolpit view Agnes?

Why are the people of Woolpit hesitant to believe the green children are supernatural creatures? What does Milord believe? Do you think he really believes, or does he have something to gain if they are fairy folk?

What is a neither-nor? What are some of the neither-nors in this book? What neither-nors can you come up with?

How does Senna convince Agnes that Agnes is the lost princess of the kingdom under the mountain? Do you find the Senna's story believable? Why does Agnes believe when her life in Woolpit is more or less stable?

What is glamour? Describe how glamour works. What can it do? What are its limitations? Why do you think the author chose this word to describe what the fairy folk can do, instead of a word like *magic*? Why do you think she chose to have their powers revolve around perception and belief?

At the beginning of the story, we learn that Glory's baby brother died recently. What are some of the things different characters think happened to him? Which do you find the most convincing? What does this variety of opinions tell us about how medieval people viewed their world?

On p. 141, Acatica says, "Our masters might not lie, but you still cannot believe anything they say." What do you make of this? Is the opposite of a lie the truth? How does this observation fit in with the book's theme of belief?

There is a modern perception that technology and scientific discovery have eliminated superstitious beliefs from the past, such as using salt and iron to keep the fairy folk away. Do you think this is true? Why might we want to think it is? What superstitious beliefs do modern people hold? Why do you think these beliefs are still around? In other words, why do people still believe in things that can't be proven?

## Discussion Questions

### Family

What is a foundling? What does the word “foundling” imply? What can we infer about the way in which medieval people thought about such children? What words do we use to describe children who live with adults other than their parents? What does this tell us about how we view these children?

How did Agnes find herself living with her adoptive parents? What can you infer about Agnes’s adoptive mother and father based on their decision to take her in and raise her? What does this tell us about families in the middle ages?

Agnes often refers to her grandmother, who has passed away. What can you infer about what Granny was like based on how Agnes talks about her? How do you think losing her impacted Agnes’s ability to fit in in Woolpit?

Why does Agnes “linger over the idea of a brother” (p. 67)? How does Senna use this information? Do you think Agnes might have been more skeptical of Senna’s story if her own brother had survived?

Why does Senna use glamour on Agnes’s parents? What does she want them to do? What does she want prevent from happening? Why do you think she does it? Would you make the same decision?

How does Agnes meet her biological father? How would you describe the kind of person he is? Do you think he’s selfish for wanting Agnes’s mother to stay in the Otherworld with him? Do you think he’s selfless for refusing to tell Those Good People where Agnes’s mother has gone?

In several places, Agnes tells us she views Glory as a sister. Have you ever had a friend that you’ve felt this way about? What are some characteristics of a friend you feel this close to?

Describe how Agnes feels about Mother the pig at the beginning of the story. What are some clues that she is not an ordinary pig? How does Agnes respond when she learns who Mother really is? Do you think Agnes would have made the same choice at the end if she’d known what would happen to Mother?

## Discussion Questions

### Friendship

Why is Glory upset with Agnes at the beginning of the book? Do you think this is the only reason, or is something else going on?

Have you ever grown apart from a friend? How did you feel? Do you empathize more with Agnes or Glory? Is there a way to stay friends with a person who is developing new interests, or is it better for each person to go their own way?

Why do you think Kate and Tabby are so mean to Agnes? Have you ever seen kids being treated this way for similar reasons? Have you ever been treated this way? What are some ways you can disrupt this behavior, as Glory sometimes does?

On p. 15, Agnes notes that there aren't a lot of stories where there are two girls who help each other. What do you think of this observation? Is this true of fairy tales? Is it true of stories in the modern day? Do you think the same is true of stories about boys?

Why do you think Agnes has had a hard time making friends other than Glory? Have you ever had trouble making friends? What can you infer about Glory based on her willingness to be friends with Agnes when other kids were reluctant to?

Why does Senna want to befriend Glory? Do you agree with her reasoning? If you had a way to make anyone your friend, would you use it? What are some other things Senna could do to make friends in Woolpit?

Why does Acatica help Agnes? Consider what this gesture means to Agnes—she is all alone in a strange place, and someone steps in to help her. Have you ever seen someone struggling like this? Name some things you could do to make the other person feel welcome and at ease.

Why do Senna and Agnes work together once Agnes returns to Woolpit? What can we infer about their evolving relationship? Do you think they will end up friends?

Why do you think Senna tried to trick Agnes instead of simply asking her for help? What does this tell us about the person Senna was, and the person she is becoming?

Do you think Agnes and Glory will stay friends after everything that's happened? Do you think they *should* stay friends?

At the end of the book, Agnes and Senna agree not to tell Glory what happened to Martin. Do you think this is the right decision? When is it better to tell a difficult truth, and when can a lie serve a greater good?

## Discussion Questions

### The Supernatural

Who are Those Good People? Why does Agnes call them this? What names do we give these creatures?

Throughout the book, Agnes recalls things Granny said about Those Good People. What kinds of things did Granny say? Where do you think Granny heard them? Why do you think Granny told them to Agnes? What role do supernatural creatures such as the fairy folk play in the Woolpit villagers' lives? In other words, what are some reasons these stories were passed down like they were?

Why does Martin come with Senna above the mountain? How does he behave while he's in Woolpit? Why does he return toward the end? What can you infer about the fairy folk based on these decisions?

What are the two things that keep Those Good People from doing whatever they want? How would this story be different if they were all-powerful? Why do you think the author gave her fairy folk these limitations? Can you think of other instances in fairy tales where supernatural beings had limits placed on their abilities or behavior?

We tend to view people in the middle ages as being very religious. Were you surprised that the Woolpit villagers did not view the fairy folk as evil or creatures of the Devil? How do people in Woolpit view Those Good People? Why would someone like Glory's mother or Granny not want one of Those Good People in their house? What can you infer from these views about how medieval people understood their world?

What do you think about the bargain that the king under the mountain offered to Senna's people during the Roman invasion? Is it fair? Why do you think Senna took the bargain? Would you?

How does Agnes escape from the kingdom under the mountain? What does she have to do, and what does she have to give up? Would you make the same decisions?

The fairy folk in *The Green Children of Woolpit* are very different from similar creatures in modern movies and TV. Why do you think the author decided to make her fairies cruel? Why do you think we view fairies in the way that we do?

Would you describe *The Green Children of Woolpit* as a fairy tale? Why or why not?



## Discussion Questions

### Stories and Storytelling

Describe how Agnes feels about stories. How does this make her life difficult? How does it help her?

On p. 8, Agnes observes that “if a girl does the safe thing, there’s no story.” What does she mean? Do you think this is true? In other words, is it necessary to take a risk in order to experience something new? Do you think it’s worth taking risks even if bad things might happen, or is it better to always do the safe thing because it’s safe?

According to Granny, stories keep people safe.

- What kind of stories Granny is referring to?
- Think about the fairy tales you know—how might hearing them keep someone safe? What lessons or messages do these fairy tales impart?
- Why do you think fairy tales are still around and still popular, even after so many years and so many new stories?
- Do you agree with Granny? Do stories keep Agnes safe? If stories don’t keep someone safe, what do stories do?

Agnes wants nothing more than to be “the girl in the story.” What does she mean? Why do you think Agnes feels left out? How do you think this will affect the decisions she makes over the course of the book?

How do the Woolpit mas feel about Agnes’s stories? Have you ever had an adult question your honesty? How did you handle the situation?

On p. 66, Agnes says, “I may tell stories, but I’m no liar.” What’s the difference between lying and making up a story? How does this fit in with the story’s theme of belief?

How does telling stories help Agnes escape the kingdom under the mountain? What characteristics do the fairy folk have that might make them susceptible to stories?

## **Projects & Activities**

Monks & Chronicles

Eight Hundred Years and Counting

On the Big Screen

A Medieval Fairy Tale?

Green Children Reimagined

## Monks & Chronicles

### Introduction

As a class, have students brainstorm everything they know about monks, chronicles, and other forms of medieval record-keeping.

Either individually or in groups, have students conduct research to confirm or correct their prior knowledge. Have them take notes and cite their sources according to the style guide of your choosing. Some potential guiding questions:

- Who were monks? How did someone become a monk? What were the rules of being a monk? What did they do all day? What were they not allowed to do? What types of monks were there, and how were they same and different?
- What is a chronicle? Why were chronicles kept? Who kept the chronicles? How did the compilers get their information? Where were chronicles kept? Who controlled access to them?

Have students create a new list of correct information (with citations) for the class to refer to, either on a big piece of paper, on the board, or in a shared document online.

### The Source Material

The story of the green children of Woolpit comes from two different chronicle accounts written at different times by two monks who lived miles apart. Their names are William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall.

Have students read each account. (These accounts appear on pp. 17-18 and 19-20 of this guide.) Have them list differences and similarities in these accounts. Then have students compare and contrast these accounts with the fictional *Green Children of Woolpit*.

Students can create a three-columned chart in their writing journals; alternately, there is a blank chart available in the Reproducibles section.

### Analysis

In small groups, have the students discuss their findings. Some potential questions:

- What do the two chroniclers agree happened? Where do they diverge?
- Why do you think one monk included story elements that the other one did not?
- Why do you think the two medieval accounts are not exactly the same?
- Are you surprised that monks (whose job it was to pray) wrote down a story that isn't religious? What does this tell us about medieval monks? What does it tell us about medieval chronicles?

- What parts of the chronicle accounts did the author of *The Green Children of Woolpit* use in the book? What parts did she leave out? What did she add that wasn't in the chronicles? Why do you think she made these choices?

Then ask students to consider the story behind the story. Some potential questions:

- Considering what you've learned about monks, what is missing from each chronicle account? In other words, how do you think being a single man who is not allowed to get married, whose job it is to pray, affected what each monk chose to write down?
- Do you think the account would be different if a nun had recorded the story? What would she have included that a monk might not?
- Do you think the story of the green children is literally true, and kids with green skin walked out of a forest in the twelfth century? Why or why not?
- Do you believe the story that the green girl told the monks? Do you think *she's* making things up? Why or why not? What reasons might she have had for stretching the truth?

## **Eight Hundred Years and Counting**

The legend of the green children of Woolpit has been around since the twelfth century, and ever since then, scholars, historians, folklorists, antiquarians, artists, writers, and a whole lot of other folks have been discussing, analyzing, interpreting, debunking, and otherwise sharing this story.

The story comes from two different chronicle accounts written at different times by two monks who lived miles apart. Their names are William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall. Have students read each account. (These accounts appear on pp. 17-18 and 19-20 of this guide.)

Have students imagine that they have gone back in time, and they have been asked to figure out what's going on with the green children. Either in small groups or as a class, have students come up with a list of questions that would be helpful to have answers to. Some ideas:

- Why are the children green?
- Why doesn't anyone understand them?
- Why does no one from any nearby village recognize them?
- Why don't their parents or relatives claim them?
- Why will they eat only beans?
- Why does the boy die but the girl does not?
- How to explain why it's always twilight where they live?
- Why does the girl's skin become less green over time?

Then have the students form small groups (or new small groups) to try to brainstorm some answers to these questions.

From these answers, ask students to come up with an explanation of who the green children are, where they came from, and why they're green. Have the groups reconvene, and compile the explanations on the board. Have each group talk the class through their explanation, sharing their reasoning.

Have the class create awards for the explanations and make ribbons to hand out. Some ideas to get them started:

- Most Convincing
- Most Creative
- Most Exciting
- Most Farfetched

## On the Big Screen

After students have read *The Green Children of Woolpit*, ask them to imagine that they are Hollywood film producers who are making a movie version of the green children story.

As a class, brainstorm characteristics of students' favorite films. Have students start thinking about what kind of movie a story like the green children would lend itself to. Some ideas:

- Genre – Fantasy, Horror, Historical, Drama, Comedy, etc
- Tone – Scary, Suspenseful, Fast-Paced, Lighthearted, Tearjerker, etc
- Audience – Kids, Teens, Adults, Families

Encourage students to review the medieval chronicle accounts (pp. 17-18 and 19-20 of this guide) to give them more ideas to work with.

Either individually or in small groups, have students create:

- A “comp title” – what existing movie will your film be the most like?
- A drawing of the set (or sets)
- A scene from the movie, written out in the format of a script
- A list of characters and which Hollywood actors and actresses should play each one
- A movie poster advertising the film

Hang the movie posters around the classroom, or share them online. Time permitting, have students act out the scenes they have written.

## A Medieval Fairy Tale?

In their journals, have students create a two-column chart. (A suitable chart also appears in the Reproducibles section of this guide.) In the first column, have them respond to the following questions with regard to their favorite fairy tale.\* After the students have read *The Green Children of Woolpit*, have them respond to the questions in the second column of their chart:

- Who are the characters?
- What is the central problem?
- How do the characters solve the problem?
- What lesson (if any) is the story is meant to teach?
- Why do you think this story is still popular?

As a class or in small groups, have students reflect on the following questions, based on their charts:

- What are the elements in a typical fairy tale?
- What are some common plots and themes in fairy tales?
- How is *The Green Children of Woolpit* like a traditional fairy tale? How is it different?
- Why do you think fairy tales exist? What are we meant to learn from them?
- How did you learn about fairy tales? Books? Movies? TV? Do you think this influences your interpretation of other fairy tales?
- Why do modern people still enjoy fairy tales, even when (at least culturally) we no longer believe in fairies?

\* If students don't have a favorite fairy tale, ask them to choose one they know well. If a student is unfamiliar with fairy tales, assign them one. Most students will likely be very familiar with European fairy tales, to the exclusion of stories from other cultures. Be ready to address this lack of diversity in a constructive way, and encourage kids to explore non-European fairy tales. A good starting point is the Multilingual Folk Tale Database (<http://www.mftd.org/>).

## Green Children Reimagined

The story of the green children of Woolpit comes from two different chronicle accounts written at different times by two monks who lived miles apart. Their names are William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall.

One of the most interesting things about this story is how often it has been analyzed, reimagined, interpreted, debunked, discussed, and otherwise shared – ever since the seventeenth century! Now it's your turn.

Have students read each account. (These accounts appear on pp. 17-18 and 19-20 of this guide.)

Have students use words and/or pictures to write a green children story of their own. Some ideas:

- What happens after the story in the chronicle ends? What does the green girl do next? What about when she's a teenager, or an adult? Is she an ordinary girl, or is there something special about her?
- Does the boy really die? If not, what happens to him?
- Do the green children leave their home village voluntarily? Were they chased away by someone or something? Do they ever go back? If so, what do they find?
- Are the green children fairy folk, like the author of *The Green Children of Woolpit* imagines? If not, what are they? Why did they come to Woolpit? Did they come by accident, or do they have a specific purpose?

Give students the opportunity to share their work with other students in small groups, the whole class, or online.



## The Green Children of Woolpit

by Ralph of Coggeshall  
Chronicon Anglicanum

On a boy and girl who emerged from the earth:

Another marvelous thing, not unlike the previous one, also happened in Suffolk at Saint Mary's of Woolpit. A boy was found with his sister by the denizens of that place, near the edge of a pit which borders the town. They had a similar form to other people in the shape of their bodies, but in the color of their skin they were different from all the mortals of our world - for the entire surface of their skin was colored green. No one was able to understand their speech; they were therefore brought before an astonished crowd to the house of Lord Richard de Calne, a knight, at Wikes, where they cried inconsolably.

Bread and other food was placed before them, but they refused eat any of the dishes which they were given, even though they were being tortured constantly by the greatest hunger pangs. The girl later confessed that this was because they believed that all of this sort of food was inedible.

At last, when beans with their stalks, newly harvested, were transported into the house, the children pointed at them with the greatest eagerness so that some of the beans might be given to them. When these had been brought before them they opened up the beanstalks, not the beanpods, thinking that there would be beans contained within the hollow of the stalks. But when they found no beans therein, they began to cry again. When those standing nearby noticed this, they opened the pods and showed the children the exposed beans, and with great joy they were fed by the beans that were shown to them, touching no other food under any circumstances for a long time.

The boy, in truth, was always overwhelmed as if by fatigue, and he died after a short time. The girl, enjoying her continued health and growing accustomed to whatever food she liked, lost her leek-green color entirely and little by little recovered the flesh-colored appearance in her whole body. After she was reborn in the bath of the sacred baptism, she lingered for many years in the service of the aforementioned knight (just as I have repeatedly heard from that same man and his family) and stood out as excessively cheeky and impudent.

Often asked about the people of her homeland, she used to assert that everything and everyone there was tinged with a green color, and that they could see no sun, but they still enjoyed a kind of brightness as happens just after a sunset. When she was asked, moreover, how she came to this land with her aforementioned brother, she responded that it was because of a cavern the two of them found when they were following the

herds. Approaching it they heard the delightful noise of some bells and, captivated by the sweetness of their sound, they advanced through the cave by wandering for quite some time until they came to its exit.

There they emerged, shocked and terrified by the excessive brightness of the sun and the unfamiliar temperature of the air, and for a long time they laid there beyond the mouth of the cave. And although they were terrified by the discomfort of their arrival, they were willing to split up to search for the entrance to the cave. But they were unable to find it again in the least, up until they were apprehended by the townsfolk.

## The Green Children of Woolpit

by William of Newburgh

Historia Anglicana

On the green children:

And it does not seem right to me to skip over an oddity, unheard-of in my lifetime, which was learned to have occurred under the reign of King Stephen of England. I have hesitated to tell the aforementioned tale for some time now, although many have reported it; it used to seem ridiculous to me that a story either about nothing or else the most hidden account in Christendom should be taken seriously. While I have been overwhelmed by the weight of so many and so great witnesses, that I assembled those who had believed and marveled at the tale, about which I was unable to either reach out to or gather information from any learned man.

There is a village in East Anglia, or so it is said, about four or five milestones from the monastery of the noble and wealthy king and martyr, Edmund. Some ancient pits, which are said to be wolf pits, can be seen nearby, and they grant the adjacent village with its name: Wolfpit. At harvest time, when the reapers were busy with the collection of the harvest throughout the fields, two children emerged from these pits; a boy and a girl, completely green-skinned, covered by strangely-colored clothes made from an unknown material. And because they were wandering, shocked, through the fields, they were caught by the reapers and led into the village, and although many flocked to the spectacle of such an unusual thing, the children refused to eat the food they had been offered several times throughout the day.

Although they were already almost dying from hunger, they would nevertheless take no notice of any food that was offered. As luck would have it, however, it happened that beans were being brought in from the fields, which the children snatched up then and there. They looked for beans in the stalk, and finding nothing in the hollow of the stalk, wept bitterly. Then some people who were at hand presented them with beans dug out from the shell, which they immediately accepted and devoured happily. They were nourished by this food for several months, until at last they learned the use of bread. At last their peculiar color gradually changed and became similar to ours by the stronger quality of our food, and they also learned the use of our speech.

And it seemed to the wise that the children should receive the sacrament of holy baptism, and this was done. But the boy, who seemed to be the younger in age, died a premature death, living only a short time after the baptism; his sister, however, remained unharmed and differed in no way from our kind of women. Afterwards she undoubtedly got married near Lenna, so it is said, and it is even said that she was still alive just a few years ago.

Once the children reasonably had the use of our language, they were questioned as to who they were and where they were from, and they are said to have replied, "We are people from the land of Saint Martin, which is obviously held in the revered land of our exceptional birth."

They continued to be questioned, as to just where this land could possibly be, and how they arrived here from there. "We don't know either," they said, "We only remember this: that when one day we were feeding our father's herds in the field, we heard some loud noise. It was the sort of noise we are now used to hearing near Saint Edmund's, when the bells are said to ring. And when we turned our minds to that marvellous sound, lying down all of a sudden just as if in some departure of the mind, we stumbled across you in the field where you were harvesting."

Asked whether or not their homeland believed in Christ, or if the sun rose, they answered that that land was Christian and had churches. "But the sun," they said, "does not rise in our country. Our land is lit up minimally by sunbeams, since a small amount of that brightness has reached us, which in your land either precedes the sunrise or follows the sunset. Also, some shining earth is seen not far from our land, with a very bountiful river dividing the two."

These things and many others, which would take too long to recount, they are said to have answered carefully and with thorough hesitation. Let each person say what they wish, and reckon how these things are possible; but as for me, it does not pain me to have related this unnatural and wondrous event.

## Reproducibles

Monks & Chronicles - Three-Column Chart

A Medieval Fairy Tale? - Two-Column Chart

## Monks & Chronicles

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Ralph of Coggeshall's Account</b>	<b>William of Newburgh's Account</b>	<i>The Green Children of Woolpit</i>

## A Medieval Fairy Tale?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>My favorite fairy tale:</b>	<i>The Green Children of Woolpit</i>

## About the Author

J. Anderson Coats has received two Junior Library Guild awards, two Washington State Book Awards, and earned starred reviews from Kirkus, School Library Journal, the Horn Book Review, and Shelf Awareness. Her newest book is *The Green Children of Woolpit*, a creepy middle-grade fantasy inspired by real historical events. She is also the author of *R is for Rebel*, *The Many Reflections of Miss Jane Deming*, *The Wicked and the Just*, and the forthcoming *Spindle and Dagger*.