

Wildlife paradise

lost and found

Lauren St John's tales of a girl who has a bond with animals draw on the beauty — and brutality — of her childhood, **Amanda Craig** discovers

TALES OF CHILDREN who share a special bond with animals were the stuff of many modern parents' own childhoods, growing up as we did with Lassie, Flipper, Flecka and Andre Norton's SF novels about the Beast Master. Yet

only recently have such stories found their fullest expression for a new generation. Michelle Paver's *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* about Stone Age Torak is one such,

but for slightly younger readers, Lauren St John's South African tales about the orphaned Martine are terrific.

Starting with *The White Giraffe*, they are a thrilling mixture of heartfelt eco-friendly adventure and natural magic that are perfect for 8-11s. The third, *The Last Leopard*, is out this month. The most accomplished to date, it has Martine, her best friend and her grandmother venturing out of the relative safety of South Africa into the altogether murkier arena of Zimbabwe.

That tragic country is one St John knows well, because it was her home until she was 20. Her autobiography, *Rainbow's End*, is one of the best by a displaced white Zimbabwean, and its gruesome tale of a wildlife paradise underscored by murder go some way to explaining the darker, richer note that strikes from the first chapter of the new novel.

"It was absolute paradise," she recalls. "I was extremely quiet, shy, socially inept, obsessed with books and

horses, and I felt as trapped as my father did in South African suburbia. When a boy I sat next to in school at 11 was murdered, alongside half his family, we moved into their 1,000-acre game reserve.

"It didn't matter to me that we were in the middle of a war... I loved the freedom, and having mad pets like pythons, ostrich, impala and a giraffe."

Although the giraffe was one of the starting points for a series that has become a best-seller, St John's journey to becoming a children's author has been a long and eccentric one. After training as a veterinary nurse in England, she returned as a journalist and eventually became the golf correspondent for *The Sunday*

'I loved having a pet like a giraffe'

Times, following the sport for a decade all over the world.

She wrote seven non-fiction books, including biographies, but all the time "desperately wanted" to write fiction. Then, broke and at rock bottom just before Christmas three years ago, an image "popped into my head" of a girl riding a white giraffe. She went home and began writing immediately. Martine, the girl who can communicate with wild

animals and is their predestined saviour, was born.

"I wrote the whole book in one month. It was the single most amazing writing experience I've ever had," she says. "I felt the book already existed, and I was just listening to the words."

But when five publishers rejected it, she lost confidence and was struggling so much that she had reached the point of drawing up a list of alternative careers, selling her flat in London and moving to St Ives. What kept her going was the feeling that with *The White Giraffe* she was on to something special. Eventually, she went back to "the last person who believed in me", her former New York editor Clive Priddle, who encouraged her to change to Catherine Clarke, the agent who, in St John's words, "changed my life". One editor, Fiona Kennedy at Orion, told her to go away and "write more of everything",

doubling the length of the story. Thus Martine's troubled relationship with her grandmother, her best friend Ben, the seer-like sangoma Grace and the mysterious cave paintings that foretell Martine's future were suddenly all there.

Brave, resourceful Martine is very much the kind of girl you feel St John herself identified with. The survival tips are culled from her own childhood, when she had the kind of near-death experiences with pythons and rivers that you might expect, living so



"I was extremely quiet, shy, socially inept, obsessed with books and horses"

close to nature. She went back to Zimbabwe for *The Last Leopard*, and experienced the terrifying lack of petrol that her heroine does before reaching the otherworldly haven of Matopos game reserve.

All Martine's adventures take place in a single year, and will be confined to four books — the next, set in Namibia, is being written. Like Alexander McCall Smith, she feels that it's important to tell stories about the Africa that doesn't make the news — "where there are so many wonderful people, places and animals. It isn't just about people suffering".

A film of the first book looks increasingly likely as the director and the child star of *Bridge to Terabithia* have been signed to it by Walden Media, the branch of Disney that has

THE LAST LEOPARD

by Lauren St John

Orion, £9.99, 208pp

£9.49 (free p&pd)

0870 1608080

timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst