David Walsh, "Entry on: The Capricorn Bracelet by Charles Keeping, Rosemary Sutcliff", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1247. Entry version as of November 15, 2026.

Charles Keeping , Rosemary Sutcliff

The Capricorn Bracelet

United Kingdom (1973)

TAGS: Boudicca Hadrian Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Capricorn Bracelet
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1973
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Capricorn Bracelet.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 133 pp.
ISBN	0192713507, 9780192713506
Official Website	rosemarysutcliff.net (accessed: July 1, 2021).
Available Onllne	play.google.com (accessed: July 1, 2021).
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Charles Keeping , 1924 - 1988
(Illustrator)

Charles Keeping was an English illustrator born in Lambeth, London. During World War II, he worked in an ammunitions factory, as a gaslighter, and (after turning 18) as a wireless operator in the Royal Navy. After the war, he studied illustration and lithography at Regent Street Polytechnic and went on to produce illustrations for various publications, including *Punch* magazine. Keeping came to prominence when he was commissioned by Oxford University Press to illustrate Rosemary Sutcliff's *The Silver Branch*, the sequel to her most famous novel *The Eagle of the Ninth*, and he would go on to illustrate many of her subsequent novels set in Roman and post-Roman Britain. He also illustrated Leon Garfield and Edward Blishen's adaptation of Greek myths, *The God Beneath the Sea*, and served as the illustrator for many Folio Society editions, including the complete works of Charles Dickens. He lived in Bromley, London with his wife Renate, who was also an artist and proprietor of the Keeping Gallery until her death in 2014.

Source:

Douglas Martin, *Charles Keeping: An Illustrator's Life*, London: Julia MacRae Books, 1993.

thekeepinggallery.co. (accessed: July 1, 2021).

Bio prepared by David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992

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Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

(Author)

Award winning and internationally well-known children's writer Rosemary Sutcliff was born in Surrey, UK on December 14th, 1920. Her father was a naval officer and she spent her childhood in Malta and other naval bases. She suffered from Still's Disease, a form of juvenile arthritis, and was confined to a wheelchair for most of her life. She did not attend school or learn to read until she was nine years old, but her mother introduced her to the Saxon and Celtic legends, Icelandic sagas, the works of Rudyard Kipling, and fairy tales that became the basis for her historical fiction and other stories. After attending Art School and learning to paint miniatures, she turned to writing. She published her first book, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, in 1950, followed soon after by her best-known novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), about the Romans in Britain. It is still in print today and been adapted into a film, TV, and radio series.

She wrote over 60 books, predominantly historical fiction for children. Her stories span settings from the Bronze Age, the Dark and Middle Ages, Elizabethan and Tudor times, the English civil war to the 1800s. In 1959 she won the Carnegie Medal for The Lantern Bearers, and was a runner up for other books. She was a runner up for the Hans Christian Andersen medal in 1974. In the same year she was made an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for her services to children's literature, and was promoted to a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1992, the year she died. Two works based on Homer's epics, *Black Ships Before Troy* (1993) and *The Wanderings of Odysseus* (1995), were published posthumously. Sutcliff spent much of her later life in Walberton, Sussex, in the company of her father, house-keeper, gardener and various dogs. In her memoirs, *Blue Remembered Hills* (1983) she recounted her life up to the publication of *The Eagle of the Ninth*.

Source:

Official website (accessed: October 20, 2020).

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Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com and David Walsh, University of Kent, D.J.Walsh-43@kent.ac.uk

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Additional information

Translation

Japanese: *Yagiza no buresuretto: Buritania no rushiusu no monogatari*, trans. Shirō Yamamoto.

Summary

The Capricorn Bracelet was originally written as a series of scripts for the series "Stories from Scottish History", broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland. However, frustrated by the limitations imposed by the twenty minutes allocated to each episode, Sutcliff subsequently rewrote them as series of short stories. Each episode focussed on a member of the Calpurnii family, the first of whom, Lucius Calpurnius, fled London during the Boudiccan revolt and joined the Roman army. Lucius' descendants, who often share his name and inherit the eponymous Capricorn Bracelet, live on the northern frontier: the second is dispatched to oversee the construction of a section of Hadrian's Wall; the third is a cavalry commander at Trimontium (on the River Tweed); the fourth is also a cavalry officer who marries a girl from Traprain Law and becomes a bronzesmith, while his new brother-in-law joins the Roman army; the fifth is a frontier scout who helps prevent an early Saxon raid; and the final Calpurnii is a boy whose father must leave to fight in the usurper Magnus Maximus' campaigns on the continent. When word reaches the boy and his mother that his father has been executed along with Maximus by the emperor Theodosius, they go to live with his mother's tribe, the Dumnonii, who reside to the northwest, as the last remnants of Roman power in Northern Britain disappear.

Analysis

Many of the stories included here are relatable to children and teenagers (particularly males) as they deal with a rite of passage. The first and last stories see a boy transition into manhood (as Britain itself undergoes a transition during the earliest and last days of Roman rule), while several other Calpurnii are outsiders who are eventually accepted into a group after proving themselves to their peers. The desire among the Calpurnii to be accepted into the group echoes Sutcliff's own experiences as a child, as recounted in her memoirs (1983), when she experienced severe bouts of loneliness as a result of her illness and frequent relocations.

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The stories emphasise a sense of continuity throughout this period, as the rise and fall of Roman power in Britain, mainly along the northern frontier, is told from the perspective of different generations of the same family. Moreover, this does not end with the collapse of Roman hegemony, as the final incumbent of the bracelet will pass it onto his children. This is reminiscent of a recurrent trend in children's literature published in the 1950s–1970s, whereby the protagonist would discover an object which connects them to the past and serves as a reminder of the legacy that has been bequeathed to the them by their forebearers (Butler 2006, pp. 262–263). In this case, the bracelet represents a legacy consisting of Roman "values" that include loyalty, perseverance, fair play and temperance, and they are exhibited – or learned – by the various generations of the Calpurnii family. Such qualities were originally summarised in Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), and then taken up by Kipling's centurion Parnesius in *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), both of which Sutcliff read, and, just as with Macaulay and Kipling's works, Sutcliff's stories serve a didactic purpose, demonstrating the positive qualities that young people should develop. As Sutcliff explained in her essay *History is People* (1973, p. 306): "... I do try to put over to the child reading any book of mine some kind of ethic, a set of values... I try to show the reader that doing the right/kind/brave/honest thing doesn't have to result in any concrete reward... and that doesn't matter."

Moreover, as is often the case in Sutcliff's Roman Britain novels, nearly all the protagonists are Romano-British soldiers of middling rank. Sutcliff had encountered many such men in a contemporary setting, including among her own family, during her childhood spent at various naval bases in the UK and then when living through World War II. Subsequently, her novels infer that military service provides an opportunity for people, particularly young men, to find a place in the world and learn the aforementioned admirable values originally outlined by Macaulay. In particular, the first Calpurnii and Straun, whose sister marries a Calpurnii, are able to find a new home in the military ranks.

In contrast to many of Sutcliff's other stories written after the 1950s which provided a more complex and darker image of Roman imperialism in Britain, such as *Mark of the Horse Lord* (1965) and *Song for a Dark Queen* (1978), *The Capricorn Bracelet* returns to a more straightforward narrative that sees the amicable integration of Roman and local, as was the case with Marcus, Cottia and Esca in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. The stories here generally include the Calpurnii

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marrying local women, and in the fourth story we see a two-way process whereby Lucian Calpurnius retires to Traprain Law with his wife to become a bronzesmith while his new brother-in-law joins the Roman army. Sutcliff's decision to present these stories in a lighter tone is perhaps due to the fact they were originally intended to be used as scripts for radio drama for children, and the medium and time restrictions would make it harder to provide a more nuanced narrative.

Only the first and last stories include historical events, the Boudiccan Revolt and the usurpation of Magnus Maximus. In the case of the latter, the removal of soldiers from Hadrian's Wall is likely to be a homage to Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, which also features these events. However, the narrative does include many historical sites that were inhabited at this time, including Traprain Law and the fort of Trimontium.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Boudicca Hadrian Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adventure Adversity Animals Authority Boys Character traits Child, children Child's view Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Gender, male Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Initiation Integrity Masculinity Parents (and children) Resilience Values Violence

Further Reading

Breeze, David, *Hadrian's Wall*, London: English Heritage, 2003.

Collins, Rob, *Hadrian's Wall and the End of Empire*, New York and London: Routledge, 2012.

Haselgrove, Colin, *The Traprain Law Environs Project: Fieldwork and Excavations 2000–2004*, Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2009.

Hunter, Fraser and Lawrence Keppie, *A Roman Frontier Post and its*

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Thompson, Raymond H., "Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff", 1986, d.lib.rochester.edu (accessed: July 1, 2021).

Wright, Hilary, "Shadows on the Downs: Some Influences of Rudyard Kipling on Rosemary Sutcliff", *Children's Literature in Education* 12.2 (1981): 90–102.

Addenda

An audio-documentary on Rosemary Sutcliff's life and works can be found at audioboom.com (accessed: July 1, 2021).

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