David Walsh, "Entry on: Mark of the Horse Lord by Charles Keeping, Rosemary Sutcliff", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2022). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1500. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Charles Keeping , Rosemary Sutcliff

Mark of the Horse Lord

United Kingdom (1965)

TAGS: Gladiators Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History





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

General information	
Title of the work	Mark of the Horse Lord
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1965
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *Mark of the Horse Lord*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, 245 pp.
ISBN	9780999158487
Official Website	Rosemary Sutcliff (accessed: August 3, 2022).
Genre	Historical fiction, Novels
Target Audience	Crossover (children and 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 Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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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Additional information

Adaptations	Radio: *The Mark of the Horse Lord*, ad. Ian Wishart, Story Time, BBC Home Service, 1966.
Translation	German: *Das Stirnmal des Königs*, trans. Grit Körner, Stuttgart: Union-Verl, 1969. Japanese: □□□□□ [O no shirushi], trans. Yoko Inokuma, Tōkyō: Iwanamishoten, 1969.

Summary

Former gladiator Phaedrus is bailed out of Corstopitum's (Corbridge) jail by the merchant Sinnoch, who introduces Phaedrus to the northern tribesmen Gault the Strong and Midir. Midir had once been a prince of the Dalriadain, but was secretly blinded and banished by his father's half-sister Liadhan who now rules as queen of the tribe. However, Gault, Sinnoch and various co-conspirators wish to remove Liadhan, and given that the Dalriadain believe Midir died as a child and Phaedrus bears a striking resemblance to him, they propose that Phaedrus pretend to be Midir who has now returned to take his revenge on Liadhan. Phaedrus agrees and is tattooed with the mark of the Horse Lord above his brow. After learning all he needs from Midir, Phaedrus heads north with Sinnoch. Along the way, Phaedrus encounters the Roman officer Titus Hilarion, who suggests that Phaedrus join the frontier scouts, but Phaedrus turns him down.

When Phaedrus arrives in Dalriadain territory, he is introduced to the rest of the conspirators, and goes before an assembly of the tribe's chiefs and captains. The assembly accepts that Midir has returned, although Conroy, who was Midir's cousin and best friend, as well as the reluctant consort-elect of Liadhan, clearly has his suspicions. The tribe travel to the royal Dun for the great midwinter feast, at which Conroy must ritually kill Liadhan's current consort Logiore. At the King-slaying, the Dalriadain launch their attack on Liadhan, although she escapes to the Caledones with help from her daughter Murna, who is captured by the Dalriadain, while Logiore is killed. Phaedrus is crowned king of the Dalriadain and is married to Murna. Conroy reveals he knows that Phaedrus is not Midir, but agrees to support

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him anyway.

Later, a spy is found in the Dun and killed. Despite Gault's insistence that the body should be burned, Phaedrus declares it should instead be thrown to the wolves, which earns him Gault's respect. It is also revealed that the spy had delivered poison to Murna to use on Phaedrus, but she had decided against it. The conflict between the Dalriadain and the Caledones escalates, and after Phaedrus is wounded in battle Murna nurses him back to health. Subsequently, Murna reveals she is pregnant with their child, and so Phaedrus sends her back to the royal Dun, lamenting that despite all that has passed between them she would never know his true identity.

As the conflict with the Caledones nears a close, Phaedrus is able to set their camp alight and kills their king, although Liadhan escapes again and seeks asylum at the Roman fort of Theodosia, commanded by Titus Hilarion. Hilarion refuses to hand Liadhan over to the Dalriadain, and Phaedrus worries that the Romans will support her claim to the throne. Midir visits Phaedrus at night and explains that he has a plan to get to Liadhan. However, Phaedrus and Midir are both captured when trying to infiltrate the fort, although Midir is able to escape and when he encounters Liadhan on the fort rampart he pulls her over the parapet and they plunge to their deaths. Hilarion offers Phaedrus a deal whereby he will release him, but only in return for a thousand young men from the Dalriadain to provide new auxiliaries. Phaedrus pretends to agree but, knowing this would leave the Dalriadain defenceless, when he is brought out onto rampart to talk to Dalriadain below he stabs himself with his brooch and falls over the side to his death.

Analysis

As is usually the case with Sutcliff's novels, the central character is a male who finds his circumstances radically altered and so must find a new place in the world. In this case, Phaedrus is at a loss having won his freedom in the arena; he has no home to return to, as he was born of a slave and her master, who are now both deceased. As a result, he quite literally must take on a new identity among the Dalriadain. Yet despite only playing a part to begin with, he grows to become the true king of the Dalriadain; this is made clear by the golden plover's feather he sees as he falls from Theodosia's rampart, with the chief of the Little Dark People having prophesised that the next time Phaedrus saw such a feather he would truly be a king. Moreover, many of the

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prominent Dalriadain, including Conroy, know that Phaedrus is not Midir but accept him as their king anyway, and by the time he parts from Murna it is suggested that she too knows his secret and yet remains loyal to him. As Sutcliff later observed, she often employed a similar plot in her novels, which consisted of "(…) a boy growing up and finding himself, and finding his soul in the process, and achieving what he sets out to achieve; or not achieving it, and finding his own soul in the process of not achieving it. And becoming part of society" and went on to highlight Phaedrus as an example of this (Fisher 1974: 190).

However, *The Mark of the Horse Lord* is unusual among Sutcliff's Roman Britain novels as the central protagonist is at no time part of the Roman army, with Phaedrus rejecting the offer to join the frontier scouts. This is because Phaedrus takes a dim view of what Roman imperialism has to offer, and the conversation between him and Hilarion during their first meeting sees Phaedrus reference Tacitus' *Agricola* (21) where Calgacus declares that the Romans 'make a desolation, and call it peace'. Allusions to such issues are present in Sutcliff's earlier novels, such as in the *The Eagle of the Ninth* when Esca attempts to explain to Marcus what local peoples can lose when conquered by Rome, although Esca still became a Roman citizen in the end. In contrast, the more complicated relationship between local and Roman evident in *The Mark of the Horse Lord* suggests an increasingly nuanced approach towards the theme of imperialism in Sutcliff's works. Indeed, *Song for a Dark Queen* (1978) would later also raise questions about Roman brutality, while *Frontier Wolf* (1980) also contains hints of cynicism, such as when Alexios encounters a woman whose husband was flogged to death by Roman soldiers. The decline of the British Empire throughout this period undoubtedly impacted on Sutcliff's work, and the more complex portrayals of imperial power in these later novels perhaps reflects her own growing sense of uncertainty on the matter.

Yet, as always, Sutcliff made sure to include a Roman character that emerges from the narrative in a generally positive light. In this case, Titus Hilarion respects Phaedrus' views despite disagreeing with him, and Phaedrus acknowledges that they have mutual liking for each other even though they find themselves in conflict. Indeed, the demands Hilarion puts to Phaedrus stem from his desire to do his duty and protect the frontier region rather than any vindictiveness. Characters such as Hilarion, and Marcus in *The Eagle of the Ninth* – good men who are forced to hurt those who otherwise might have

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been their friends in the name of imperialism – are perhaps Sutcliff's attempt to defend those among the British military, particularly those she had known firsthand, that had found themselves faced with such circumstances. The relationship between Hilarion and Phaedrus also has echoes of one of Sutcliff's favourite novels, Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1904), in which the centurion Parnesius earns the respect of the Picts although his primary concern remains the protection of Hadrian's Wall. Furthermore, the anguish inflicted on the locals by Romans is touched upon in Kipling's poem *A Pict Song*, which describes how 'Rome never looks where she treads, Always her heavy hooves fall'.

Despite the fact Phaedrus never joins the Roman army, like many of Sutcliff's other protagonists he serves a didactic purpose, demonstrating certain qualities young people – specifically young men – should look to cultivate: he is brave, honourable, observes the contracts he makes, and is willing do die for the greater good. Indeed, Phaedrus' decision to sacrifice himself reflects Sutcliff's desire "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.". In the same essay, Sutcliff observed that it would be difficult to write a story set in the present day that culminated in the hero's death as in *The Mark of the Horse Lord*, and that writing historical fiction allowed her to communicate such themes to her younger readers with greater freedom than if she had set her stories in the 20th century (1973: 306).

Arguably, a prominent theme in the book is the importance of 'correct' gender roles. Sutcliff considered herself to be 'old-fashioned' in this regard (Sutcliff 1983: 124), having been raised in the male-centric communities of various military bases and in a manner that she felt was more befitting of a boy than a girl. As a result, her novels tend to reflect this by being very male-focused, with women usually peripheral characters that act as either wives or mothers. In this case, although Murna is trained to fight she still comes to accept a position generally expected of women in mid-twentieth century Britain by embracing her roles of wife and mother-to-be. In contrast, Liadhan's desire to rule, particularly over a tribe that was originally led by men, means she cannot fulfill either role which leads to conflict. Liadhan's brutality and references to her as a mother goddess are also reminiscent of Sutcliff's characterisation of Boudicca in *Song for a Dark Queen* (1975), although while Boudicca's descent into darkness

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	is largely motivated by the brutality of the Roman officials, in Liadhan's case it is her pride that drives her. In many of her Roman Britain novels, Sutcliff portrays the local British tribes retaining a strong affiliation with ancient forms of religion, with festivals and rituals playing a major role in their society, such as the Feast of the New Spears in *The Eagle of the Ninth*. Druids and priests also still retain a strong and often negative influence. In contrast the Romans appear more rational, while priests and rituals play a far less prominent role in their society. The importance of ancient rituals among the northern tribes is a major theme in *The Mark of the Horse Lord*, with Phaedrus' progression to king in name and, then later king in spirit at the close of the novel, marked by various ritual events, including the sacrifice of Liadhan's husband, the sacrifice of a stallion ahead of Phaedrus' own crowning, and the prophecy imparted to him by the Chief of the Little Folk. Sutcliff was particularly inspired by the *The Golden Bough* (1890) by James George Frazer, which argued that many ancient religions shared similar elements, most notably the king who is sacrificed to renew his people, a role which in this case is initialled filled by Liadhan's husband and then later Phaedrus himself. Talcroft has also discussed how the character of Midir fills the role of the 'maimed king' and Liadhan the 'queen-goddess' (1995: 49–52, 130) as discussed in Frazer's work.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Gladiators Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adventure Adversity Authority Boys Character traits Conflict Death Disability Emotions Family Gender, male Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Initiation Integrity Masculinity Resilience Values Violence
Further Reading	Breeze, David, *Roman Scotland: Frontier Country*, London: Batsford, 2006.

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Fisher, Emma, "Rosemary Sutcliff", in Justin Wintle, ed., *The Pied Pipers: Interviews with the Influential Creators of Children's Literature*, London: Paddington Press, 1974,182–191.

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Sutcliff, Rosemary, *Blue Remembered Hills*, London: Bodley Head, 1983.

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Talcroft, Barbara, *Death of the Corn King: King and Goddess in Rosemary Sutcliff's Historical Novels for Young Adults*, London: The Scarecrow Press, 1995.

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