David Walsh, "Entry on: The Hundredth Feather by 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/1501. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Rosemary Sutcliff

The Hundredth Feather

United Kingdom (1984)

TAGS: Roman Art 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 Hundredth Feather
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1984
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, "The Hundredth Feather" in Peter Dickinson, ed., *Hundreds and Hundreds*. Harmondsworth: Puffin Books, 1984, 9/160 pp.
ISBN	0140317325, 9780140317329
Official Website	Rosemary Sutcliff (accessed: August 3, 2022).
Genre	Historical fiction, Short stories
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
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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



Courtesy of Anthony Lawton.

Rosemary Sutcliff , 1920 - 1992
(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

Summary

In this short story set in a Roman province (likely Britain), Andros, a mosaic-maker, has been hired by a merchant named Cornelius Kaeso to install a mosaic depicting the goddess Juno and her peacock in his dining room. To make the 'eyes' on the peacock's tail, Andros has fashioned 100 pieces from the fragments of a glass vessel that had been accidentally broken by a household slave. As he works on the mosaic, Andros reflects on the aspirations he had to craft mosaics for the wealthy of Gaul and Rome when he was young, but, while he has become a competent craftsman, he has never found the success or appreciative audience he had hoped for. Kaeso's often maligned daughter Serenilla then enters the room to watch Andros work, which she takes great enjoyment from.

After Serenilla is called away by her nurse, Kaeso himself appears to inspect the mosaic, commenting that it looks expensive enough, especially by lamplight, and after Andros tells him it will be finished in several days Kaeso announces that he will host a dinner-party as soon as it is done. A few days later, when Andros has almost finished the mosaic, he discovers one of the last five glass pieces is missing. Serenilla visits him again, and saddened that the peacock will not be completed, offers Andros the blue bead from a necklace she has recently bought as a replacement. Using the bead to complete the mosaic, both Andros and Serenilla gain satisfaction from having their contribution recognised by the other.

Analysis

The date and location of the story are unclear, but Andros' desire to go to Gaul, which is described as a more prosperous region, suggests that as was the case with many of Sutcliff's novels the story takes place in Britain.

Sutcliff often sought to make her works didactic (1973: 306) and one possible moral of this story is that there is always someone who will appreciate your efforts, no matter how menial, while another is that art can bring together people from very different walks of life. Andros and Serenilla are two individuals that could not be more different: old and young, male and female, rich and poor. However, one trait they do share is that they go unappreciated, with Andros never having achieved his dreams of becoming a well-respected mosaic-maker,

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while Serenilla's "dull-looking and lumpish" appearance is a source of disappointment to her mother, who wanted a beautiful daughter in pretty clothes, and her father largely ignores her in favour of her brothers. In the end, despite their differences they find solace with each other, with Serenilla not only interested in Andros' work but also willing to sacrifice her favourite necklace to see it completed, while she finally finds a sense of accomplishment in making such a contribution.

The character of Serenilla may also contain certain autobiographical traits of Sutcliff, such as a difficult relationship with an overbearing mother and an absent father, although unlike Kaeso's emotional absence in the story Sutcliff's father was literally away at sea for much of her childhood. Moreover, the distraction that the mosaic provides Serenilla is reminiscent of the refuge that Sutcliff sought in reading and art during her own isolated adolescence (Sutcliff 1983; Fisher 1974: 183).

Sutcliff would often spend around two months researching the period in which her stories were set (Meek 1962: 12–13), and one can often see influence of academic discourse in her works. In this case, the story touches on various often discussed issues regarding 'art' and its manufacture in the Roman Empire. One such issue is what was classed as 'art' and who was deemed an 'artist', for although Artos wants his 'art' to be admired, he is seen more as a craftsman than an artist. Moreover, Kaeso has no interest in art and only wants a mosaic so he can show-off to other merchants, suggesting that it is the prestige that comes with being able own a mosaic, rather than its specific content, that people of Kaeso's class are interested in. There is also the process by which materials were acquired for mosaics, with Andros thankful for the broken glass vessel, as otherwise he would not have had the means to make the peacock's tail as beautiful. One wonders how common such circumstances were, and to what extent the mosaic-makers must have made do with what materials were available, and how this impacted on the final result.

Additionally, it is inferred that the more well-regarded mosaic-makers reside on the continent, as we also find in the Sutcliff short story *Eagle's Egg* (1981) (the British artisan Vedrix hired to lay a mosaic in the council of chamber at Eburacum (York) when the town council cannot afford to bring in an artisan from abroad). The suggestion that the work of local artisans in Britain was of a lower standard than their continental contemporaries echoes R. G. Collingwood's derogatory

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	appraisal of Romano-British art as blundering, stupid and ugly (Collingwood and Myres 1937: 249–250), whose works Sutcliff used to research her stories (Meek 1962: 71). However, recent analyses have tended to be more nuanced than this, observing that art manufactured in the provinces would have been influenced by local styles and may not have sought to emulate those on the continent. (Croxford 2016).
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Roman Art Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Child, children Expectations Friendship Parents (and children) Values

Further Reading

Collingwood, Robin George and John Nowell Linton Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1936.

Croxford, Ben, “Art in Roman Britain”, in Martin Millett, Louise Revell and Alison Moore, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 599–618.

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.

Henig, Martin, *The Art of Roman Britain*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1995.

Meek, Margaret, *Rosemary Sutcliff*, London: Bodley Head, 1962.

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

Sutcliff, Rosemary, “History is People”, in Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Brighton: Scott

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Foresman and Company, 1973, 305–312.

Addenda

My documentary on Rosemary Sutcliff's life and works to make her centenary can be found here.

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