

ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF

Rosemary Sutcliff's famous trilogy about the declining years of Roman Britain is now newly available in smart Oxford University Press paperback editions. Dramatic covers feature one key detail – an eagle, dagger or burning torch – set against swirling black backgrounds. Inside, original illustrations, first by C. Walter Hodges and then from Charles Keeping, speak of a time when older children's adventure stories could still count on the service of expert illustrators. But what of the texts themselves? Historical fiction, like period films, often dates fast. Does Sutcliff survive into the age of *Spamalot* and *Horrid Histories*?

Her opening, still most famous story, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, sets the tone for what is to come. It describes how Marcus, seriously lamed early on in battle, determines to discover what really happened to the lost Ninth Legion at the time when his father was its First Cohort Commander. Backed up by his friend the slave Esca – unswerving masculine loyalty plays a large part in Sutcliff's stories – Marcus finally wins through after much fighting, plotting and hiding. Talking in the clipped tones of an inter-war public school prefect ('*You young fool!*') Marcus has little interest in the opposite sex. This is just as well since nearly all his time is spent on horseback or else living with semi-hostile British tribes.

But despite this dated vision of what it is like to be a young man, this richly atmospheric novel still works. It is written by someone who not only knows an enormous amount about the time but also identifies strongly with heroes who have much to put up with. Sutcliff herself



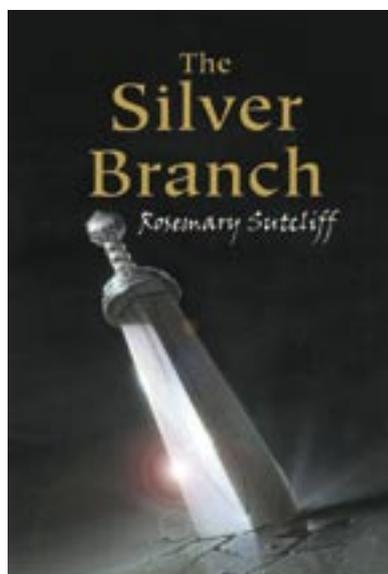
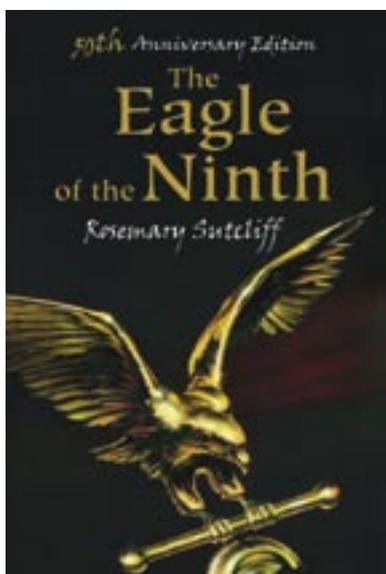
suffered terribly all her life from Still's disease, a rare form of arthritis. Knowing about pain from first-hand, she makes sure that readers in their turn are always made to realise that battle wounds can be both agonising and have a life-long effect. Her heroes also possess a psychological dimension. Marcus is forced to re-adjust his romantic view of the Ninth Legion, and his father who led it. This too involves another painful journey, this time of understanding, but one that has to be made.

The second novel, *The Silver Branch*, is more melodramatic. The hero now is Justin, who has something of a stammer and is not rated by his father as a potential warrior. Surrounded by traitorous villains who regularly give themselves away by their narrow eyes or wonky smiles, Justin and his mate Flavius once again battle through

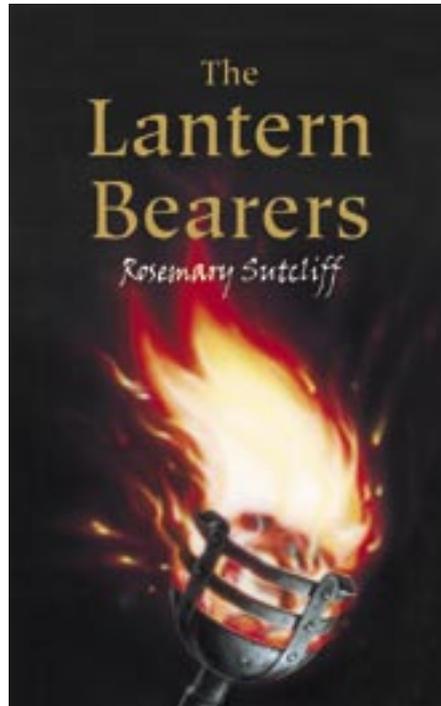
against enormous odds. The backdrop remains Roman Britain in a state of dissolution. Newly arrived Saxon warriors '*with the savage, wild-beast frenzy of their kind*' break into safe houses very much in the manner of Nazi raiding parties. (*Ja, we seek three men that ran this way. Maybe you hide them here?*) Written in 1957, its heroes' speech echoes the type of manly under-statement common in British films of that time. (On a rescue mission to a fiercely burning basilica, Justin opines '*It is growing a bit warm. Time, I think, that we got this lot outside.*') But the expertly plotted main story still carries all before it, with historical detail woven in as an integral part of the plot rather than deployed as mere foot-notes.

The last novel of the trilogy, *The Lantern Bearers*, is a compelling story of revenge, with Saxon raiders once again the chief villains.

As before, Sutcliff combines twentieth century-type dialogue (*You look so pretty in that dress*) with evocations of another time when magic was routinely accepted as an explanation for various everyday events and ritual sacrifices were a common occurrence. She herself believed that over time history repeated itself in spirals of similar patterns. Having her young Romans talk like Battle of Britain pilots sits comfortably with this view. Others may find it difficult to reconcile authentic echoes of the past, such as the bragging match conducted in this novel, with characters who, in most other ways, behave and think with an essentially modern outlook. But the frequent battles, always described so graphically, usually serve to sweep away most reservations about character and plot. The conclusion to this novel however suggests that in the long run violence achieves little save perhaps in sometimes restoring individual honour and pride.



This tension between individual triumphalism and a more general sense of doom as Roman Britain approaches its end is found in most of Sutcliff's writings. So too is the manner in which she simplifies her young outsider, uni-dimensional heroes, glorying in their courage but less concerned with what else makes them human. She is more interested in the nature of Britishness itself, and the way that a new country was taking shape from the ruins of an old empire. Brought up by a mother who believed in rigid naval discipline, she too warms to strict authority but only when it is combined with understanding and compassion. Sometimes feeling unwanted herself by this same formidable mother, she identifies strongly with young heroes – there are few heroines – who have also known a similar sense of rejection.



In love with one particular era of history, she believed that on occasions she experienced genuine psychic flashes about what life was like in Roman Britain. Essentially romantic, she still describes the dirt, disease and ignorance once so common but more as incidental details than as over-riding images.

Red Fox have this year also re-published Sutcliff's *King Arthur* trilogy. Completed ten years before her death in 1992, it draws on a rich variety of literary sources. The sense of things falling apart, so strong in her other fiction, finds an appropriate echo in the gradual break-up of the Arthurian Round Table. King Arthur has been treated satirically in T.H.White's classic *The Sword in the Stone* and more recently sceptically in Philip Reeve's brilliant debunking novel published this year, *Here Lies Arthur* (Scholastic). True to her instincts, Sutcliff treats him romantically, writing at times with real poetic force. At the moment when Arthur claims his sword Excalibur, she describes how 'the thin winter sunlight was so piercing-bright that he seemed to hear it; a high white music in the blood.'

There are still far too many quests, jousts or tournaments to wade through, plus legions of beautiful but otherwise uninteresting damsels, on hand first to stir up a quarrel and then to nurse a subsequently badly wounded hero back to health. But this repetition remains faithful to her main source, the original text by Sir Thomas Malory writing in the fifteenth century. The central, doomed love affair between Guinevere and Lancelot, once often omitted in retellings of this story for children, is beautifully rendered by Sutcliff in all its tragic sense of inevitable disaster. Writing in a more lyrical vein than she usually allows herself, the effect for the reader is like falling backwards into a pre-Raphaelite picture.

Romance and poetry is in short supply in children's fiction these days. The chivalric code that Sutcliff describes so uncritically may seem unreal and even absurd now, while the emphasis on masculine strength as opposed to feminine beauty no longer persuades. But it is good to have an author like this still in print, not just for her story-telling skills but also because she provides a world-picture which, while no longer fashionable, comes over as deeply satisfying for readers in the mood for this sort of fiction. One of the glories

of available children's literature today is that it is not strictly tied to the now in the way that is true of so much television. While Philip Reeve's take on King Arthur is more in tune with the times, and should certainly be read, Sutcliff continues to speak to children still looking for unabashed historical romance in their reading. Long may her voice continue to be heard.

Nicholas Tucker

The Eagle of the Ninth
Oxford University Press ISBN: 978-0192753922
The Silver Branch
Oxford University Press ISBN: 978-0192755056
The Lantern Bearers
Oxford University Press ISBN: 978-0192755063
King Arthur Red Fox ISBN: 978-0099401643
All priced at £6.99 each

It is hoped that *The Eagle of the Ninth* will soon be turned into a film by *Last King of Scotland* director, Kevin MacDonald

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