David Walsh, "Entry on: Frontier Wolf by 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/1262. Entry version as of October 31, 2026.

Rosemary Sutcliff

Frontier Wolf

United Kingdom (1980)

TAGS: Christianity Hadrian Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History





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

General information	
Title of the work	Frontier Wolf
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1980
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *Frontier Wolf*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 196 pp.
ISBN	0192714481
Official Website	rosemarysutcliff.net (accessed: February 2, 2022).
Available Onllne	amazon.co.uk, play.google.com, kobo.com, waterstones.com (all links accessed: February 2, 2022).
Genre	Historical fiction
Target Audience	Crossover
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

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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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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	Dutch: *De omweg naar de keizer*, trans. Tine Leiker-Kooijmans, Amsterdam: Leopold, 1988. German: *Grenzwolf*, trans. Astrid Von Dem Borne, Stuttgart: Verl. Freies Geistesleben, 2013. Japanese: *Henkyō no ookami*, trans. Yōko Inokuma, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 2002. Spanish: *Los Lobos de la frontera*, trans. Francisco García Lorenzana, Barcelona: Plataforma Editorial, 2011.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 255 pp. Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Silver Branch*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957, 223 pp. Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, 252 pp. Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Shield Ring*, London: Oxford University Press, 1956. Rosemary Sutcliff, *Dawn Wind*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961. Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword at Sunset*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1963. Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword Song*, London: Bodley Head, 1997.
Summary	*Frontier Wolf* is the third book in a series of novels that recount the adventures of various generations of the Aquilii family down to the Norman period. In each case, one of the protagonists owns a Dolphin Ring, which has been passed on through the family. The publishers, Oxford University Press, state that the primary audience for the

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Dolphin Ring saga is an age-range of 11–16*.

At the opening of Frontier Wolf, set in the early 340s, the twenty-three-year-old centurion Alexios Flavius Aquila, nephew of the dux Britanniorum (head of the Roman military in Britain), is in command of a fort on the Danube frontier, which comes under assault from local tribes. Alexios goes against orders and abandons the fort in an attempt to get his men to safety, ignoring advice from his more experienced subordinate. Most of his men are killed, and as a punishment Alexios is sent to command the (fictional) fort of Castellum just south of the Antonine Wall. The fort is home to the 'Frontier Wolves', a group of soldiers that have developed their own customs and do not follow proper legionary etiquette. Although the Frontier Wolves give their new commander a frosty reception, Alexios soon begins to earn their respect, and also befriends Cunorix, who is a local chieftain's son. However, after Cunorix becomes chief, his brother Connla steals a visiting commander's horse and is executed, leading various tribes beyond the frontier to join with the Attacotti – a tribe from Ireland – in launching an assault on frontier region, and they are further aided by Roman spies who have switched sides. Faced with history repeating itself as enemy forces bear down on Castellum, Alexios decides to lead the survivors south, although this time he has made the correct choice; although they still suffer losses along the way, the majority of his men make it to safety. Afterward, as a reward for his service, Alexios is given a choice of promotions by the emperor Constans, but decides on the least glamourous option: to train captured Attacotti as the new 'Frontier Wolves', much to the approval of his uncle.

* Margaret Meek, *Rosemary Sutcliff*, London: Bodley Head, 1962, p. 39.

Analysis

Frontier Wolf follows the standard pattern for a Sutcliff novel: a young man who finds his fortunes in life radically altered, and so must learn to deal with the hardships that come his way and find a new place in the world. Moreover, it also deals with themes of initiation into a group via rites of passage. In this case, due to the high rank of his uncle Alexios has a promising career ahead of him in the army, but his

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inexperience leads to the deaths of many men and his banishment to the north Britain, where he must earn his place among the Frontier Wolves. In the end, not only does he gain the respect of his men, but also of his uncle and the emperor. However, when offered the chance to resume his promising rise through the ranks, Alexios decides to remain a Frontier Wolf. In this respect, Alexios is much like Sutcliff's other protagonists in that when the story comes to a close, the hero does not choose the option he would have at the start of the journey, an indication of personal growth and that a return 'home' (figuratively or literally) is no longer possible, a theme frequently present in children's literature. (Butler 2006, pp. 102–109).

Alexios also exhibits the traits expected of a Sutcliff hero: he is brave, loyal, inspiring, and is willing to ignore orders for the greater good. In this regard he also echoes the heroes of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), and Kipling's Romano-British centurion Parnesius in *Puck of Pook's Hill (*1906), which both inspired Sutcliff. Moreover, as is often the case with Sutcliff's protagonists, Alexios develops these qualities through military service. Subsequently, he serves as a role-model for young (primarily male) readers, and it is inferred that if one wishes to obtain similar qualities the best place to do so would be the armed forces. Undoubtedly, Sutcliff's younger years spent living at various naval bases, and her experiences during World War II, meant that she was highly familiar with individuals who served in the British military, including her father and cousin Edward, who inspired her positive portrayal of similar figures in a Roman setting. As Sutcliff explained in her essay *History is People*: "... 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."*

The connection between man and animal is another prominent theme in the book. Here, the relationship between the frontier scouts and the local wolves has become highly ritualised, and the men do not kill a wolf unless they absolutely need to, and this is usually to obtain a wolf-pelt as the final part of their initiation into the unit. When Alexios kills the wolf to obtain his pelt, he feels the wolf has become "his" and that he must make a personal offering to the gods to mark the occasion. Additionally, the first person Alexios bonds with at Castellum is his junior trumpeter after Alexios gives him advice on how to look after a kitten. This close relationship between people and animals would certainly resonate with young readers, as Sutcliff well

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knew given that the dogs her parents had adopted when she was young had given her a sense of companionship that she often lacked due to her disability and frequent relocations**, and she would continue to own dogs throughout her life.

Another common feature of Sutcliff's Romano-British novels is a Druid that appears in the role of an antagonist. In *Frontier Wolf*, Morvidd desires war with the Roman soldiers after being slighted by the previous fort commander, and this results in the break-down of the promising friendship between Alexios and Cunorix. We also find a similar situation in early chapters of *The Eagle of the Ninth* with Marcus and Cradoc, who come into conflict after a Druid riles up the local tribe. Sutcliff felt that religion should only have a limited influence on society (Thompson 1986), and arguably her negative portrayal of Morvidd and other druids serves as a warning of what can happen when a religious figure gains too much influence. Furthermore, the druids of her novels may be analogous with the supposed problems that religious figures caused the British Imperial administration in the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, for example the Thuggee in India and the Mau Mau in Kenya. Such incidents were often embellished in the British media, but such exaggeration may have ignited the imagination of authors and script-writers such as Sutcliff; the Thuggee, for example, have appeared as antagonists in several films, including *Gunga Din* (1939) and *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984).

There are hints in *Frontier Wolf* of a change in Sutcliff's approach towards the theme of imperialism over time. *In The Eagle of the Ninth*, Esca explains to Marcus how annexation by the Roman Empire can lead people to forget their old way of life, but Esca still accepts Roman citizenship at the close of the novel, suggesting that while Roman imperialism has its drawbacks, its positives outweigh the negatives, just as many had felt was the case with the British Empire, particularly among the military circles with which Sutcliff was familiar. In contrast, *Frontier Wolf*, written decades later, alludes to a growing understanding of the complexities of imperial expansion, with a tribune informing Alexios "heroics" had gone out of fashion many years ago. Later, Alexios encounters with a woman whose husband was flogged to death by Roman soldiers and her young son recently killed by the Painted People, leading her to ask him sarcastically which side in the conflict she should choose. Here, as in other post-1950s Sutcliff novels, such as *Mark of the Horse Lord* (1965) and *Song for a Dark Queen* (1978), imperial expansion is met with a

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backlash that sees innocent bystanders suffer, seemingly reflecting growing contemporary disillusionment with Britain's own imperial legacy in the post-colonial era.

The story of an inter-tribal conspiracy may be based in part on the so-called Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 CE, which included Roman scouts betraying their comrades, while the emperor Constans is known to have made a visit to Britain, although no specifics are given. Both episodes are described by the Roman historian Ammianus (23.3, 27.8, 28.3). A general discussion of the sources Sutcliff used for each novel can be found in Talcroft's (1995) study

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* Rosemary Sutcliff, "History is People", in Virginia Haviland, ed., *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, Brighton: Scott Foresman and Company, 1973, 305–312, p. 306.

** Rosemary Sutcliff, *Blue Remembered Hills*, London: Bodley Head, 1983, 22–24, 82–83.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Christianity Hadrian Mithras Roman Army Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Abandonment Adventure Adversity Animals Authority Boys Character traits Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Gender Gender, male Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Integrity Invention Masculinity Resilience Values Violence

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Further Reading

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Addenda

An audio-documentary on Rosemary Sutcliff’s life and works can be found at:

https://audioboom.com/posts/7750122-rosemary-sutcliff-and-re-imagining-roman-britain-documentary (accessed: July 12, 2021, no longer available).

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