David Walsh, "Entry on: The Silver Branch 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/1265. Entry version as of October 30, 2026.

Charles Keeping , Rosemary Sutcliff

The Silver Branch

United Kingdom (1957)

TAGS: 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 Silver Branch
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1957
First Edition Details	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Silver Branch*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957, 223 pp.
ISBN	0374466483
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



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	Dutch: *De silveren tak*, trans. Ruth Wolf, Den Haag: Leopold, 1966. French: *L'honneur du centurion*, trans. Philippe Morgaut, Paris: Gallimard jeunesse, 2011. German: *Der silberne Zweig*, trans. Ilse Wodtke, Stuttgart: Union Verlag, 1965. German: *Der silberne Zweig*, trans. Astrid von dem Borne, Stuttgart: Verl. Freies Geistesleben, 2005. Italian: *La vendetta dell'imperatore*, trans. Giana Guidoni, Milano: Mondadori, 2012. Japanese: *Gin no eda*, trans. Yōko Inokuma, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 2007. Polish: *Srebrna gałąź*, trans. Dariusz Kopociński, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Telbit, 2011. Russian: *Serebri□a□nai□a□ vetka*, trans. N. Rakhmanovoĭ and A. Staviskoĭ, Sankt-Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000. Spanish: *El usurpador del imperio*, trans. Francisco García Lorenzana, Barcelona: Plataforma, 2009.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, 255 pp. Rosemary Sutcliff, *Frontier Wolf*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 196 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.

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Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword at Sunset*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1963.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword Song*, London: Bodley Head, 1997.

Summary

The Silver Branch is the second 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 has an age range of 11–16 (Meek 1962, p. 39).

Two cousins from the Aquilii family, Tiberius Lucius Justinianus (Justin) and Marcelus Flavius Aquila, serve under Carausius, emperor of Britain and parts of northern Gaul in 286–293 CE. In the novel, Carausius' position has been recognised by the co-emperors Maximian and Diocletian, even though he had proclaimed himself emperor without their consent. However, Carausius' finance minister Allectus conspires with the Saxon pirates who ravage the coasts and, with the help of the Egyptian merchant Serapion, Allectus assassinates the emperor. Justin and Flavius, having discovered Allectus' plotting, attempt to warn Carausius, who subsequently sends them to Hadrian's Wall, which they later discover was for their own safety. When they hear of Carausius' death and find out Allectus has also been conspiring with the Picts, the cousins join the underground resistance against the new emperor, and form a motley legion, using the eagle of the Ninth Legion as their standard, having discovered it in their great aunt's house at Silchester. Eventually, they aid the invasion of Constantius Chlorus, who defeats Allectus and retakes Britain. Justin and Flavius are given the chance to retire, but instead, decide to join Constantius as he marches north to secure the frontier.

Analysis

Sutcliff's protagonists frequently serve a didactic purpose by illustrating the qualities young men should seek to develop. These draw largely on those outlined in Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842), which Sutcliff had read as a child, and include "fortitude, temperance, veracity, spirit to resist oppression, respect for legitimate authority, fidelity in the observing of contracts, disinterestedness, ardent patriotism". Sutcliff had also observed many of these virtues

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among the military men she encountered in her youth, and her stories often allude to the army being a good place to develop one's character and find a sense of belonging, and this is certainly the case with Justin in *The Silver Branch*. Moreover, Sutcliff's mother's insistence that she not be impeded by her illness meant that she too was instilled with a strong sense of perseverance and stoicism (Sutcliff 1983, p. 55). Indeed, a disabled character who learns to live with their impediment often features in Sutcliff's stories, and in this case the sickly and stammering Justin finds himself playing a pivotal role in the fight to save Britain from Allectus and the Saxons. 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."

As with *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the influence of Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906) is readily apparent in *The Silver Branch*, with the Justin and Flavius finding themselves stationed on Hadrian's Wall like Parnesius and Pertinax, while the Picts and Saxons serve as the main threats to Roman power. Moreover, just as Parnesius decides to remain in Britain and defend this new "Rome", so too are Justin and Flavius inspired by Carausius' dream of fortifying Britain so that the light of "civilisation" will continue to shine even as the darkness envelops them.

The "darkness" here, and in the next novel *The Lantern Bearers*, are the Germanic settlers who bring "The Dark Ages" with them (Meek 1962, pp. 33–50). This image of Britain attempting to keep a spark of "civilisation" alive while under threat of Germanic invasion would have certainly been relatable to many of Sutcliff's readers in the wake of World War II, and the influence of the war on children's literature published in the 1950–1970s is well documented (Butler 2006, pp. 8–9). Additionally, a scenario involving a variety of people coming together to serve the greater good with a "Blitz Spirit" is also common in post-war Children's Literature (Butler 2006, p. 114), and in this case, we find the motely members of the reformed "Lost Legion" fighting against Allectus and his Germanic allies, for which the Home Guard may have served as an influence.

One of the more troubling aspects of *The Silver Branch* is the shift in the representation of Egyptian characters. *The Eagle of the Ninth* had featured the affable legate Claudius Hieronimianus, who appeals to

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the Senate to grant Marcus a pension and to give Esca citizenship. In contrast, Serapion in *The Silver Branch* is a perfume seller and poisoner, as well as a liar and a coward, who is described as being a lizard-like "creature". The latter draws on negative stereotypes of people of Egyptian origin that have often been a fixture in representations of the ancient world, but why this shift in the representation of such characters occurred in Sutcliff's novels is unclear. It is possible that media coverage of the Suez Crisis (1956), which took place between the publication of the two novels, led Sutcliff to consciously or subconsciously incorporate such tropes, which were frequently referenced by the British media in their portrayal of the conflict.

Understanding one's place in history is also a prominent theme here, as it is throughout Sutcliff's novels. Items such as the Dolphin Ring, the eagle standard, and the farm on the South Downs connect Justin and Flavius to their ancestors who have fought and farmed in Britain for over 150 years. Interestingly, the cousins' rediscovery of the eagle is reminiscent of how characters in Children's Literature published in the 1950s–1970s would find an object that would connect them to the past (Butler 2006, pp. 262–263), and in this case, the eagle inspires the heroes to take up the mantle of Marcus and their other predecessors to fight for freedom.

In notable contrast to Kipling, who often depicted the Christians of the Roman Empire as foolhardy evangelists, such as in the *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *The Church that was at Antioch* (1929), in Sutcliff's novels Christians often form an amicable relationship with the pagan protagonists. In *The Silver Branch*, the Christian centurion Anthonius comes to the aid of an old lady who is intimidated by Allectus' guards and then joins Flavius and Justin as part of the underground resistance. Sutcliff believed that religion should not be allowed a too great an influence on society (a "stranglehold" as she called it, Thompson 1986) and while her fascination with ancient cults and rituals often sees them play a role in her novels, her heroes are always tolerant of the beliefs of others, setting another example for the young readers.

Sutcliff sought inspiration from a variety of archaeological and historical materials for her novels. In this case, the novel provides a fictional explanation as to why a bronze eagle was found during the excavation of the forum-basilica of Silchester in 1886. The sculpture, now in Reading Museum, was originally interpreted as a legionary

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standard although now is believed to have come from a statue of Jupiter (Durham and Fulford 2017). Major events described in the novel such usurpation of Carausius, his subsequent overthrow by Allectus, and the invasion of Constantius Chlorus was recorded by the Roman historian Aurelius Victor (*De Caes*. 39.20–21) as well as various panegyrics in Constantius' honour. Sutcliff also stated in the introduction to the novel that the Saxon who is poisoned by Allectus was based on a body found in one of the defensive ditches of the late Roman fort at Richborough, while the character of Evicatos was inspired by an Ogham inscription found at Silchester. A discussion of the sources Sutcliff used for each novel can also be found in Talcroft's (1995) study.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History

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

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

Further Reading

Butler, Charles, *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children's Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper*, Lanham: Children's Literature Association and Scarecrow Press, 2006.

Burton, Philip, "Rosemary Sutcliff's the Eagle of the Ninth: A Festival of Britain?", *Greece and Rome* 58.1 (2011): 82–103.

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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.

Kipling, Rudyard, *Puck of Pook's Hill*, London: Macmillan and Company, 1906.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington, *Lays of Ancient Rome*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1842.

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

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

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

Thompson, Raymond H., "Interview with Rosemary Sutcliff", 1986, available at the Camelot Project website (accessed: July 13, 2021).

Victor, Aurelius, *De Caesaribus*, trans. H. W. Bird, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994.

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:

https://audioboom.com/posts/7750122-rosemary-sutcliff-and-re-imagining-roman-britain-documentary (accessed: July 13, 2021, no longer available).

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