David Walsh, "Entry on: A Circlet of Oak Leaves by Victor Ambrus, Hugh Marshall, 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/1498. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Victor Ambrus , Hugh Marshall , Rosemary Sutcliff

A Circlet of Oak Leaves

United Kingdom (1965)

TAGS: 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	A Circlet of Oak Leaves
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, “A Circlet of Oak Leaves” in Caroline Hillier, ed., *Winter's Tales for Children 1*, ill. Hugh Marshall, London: Macmillan, 1965.
ISBN	Not applicable for editio princeps
Official Website	Rosemary Sutcliff (accessed: August 3, 2022).
Genre	Historical fiction, Short stories
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



Victor Ambrus , 1935 - 2020
(Illustrator)

Victor Ambrus was born László Győző Ambrus in Budapest in 1935 and studied at Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts (1953–1956). In 1956, as a result of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 he fled from Hungary to Austria and then Britain, where he joined Farnham Art School, later moving to the Royal College of Art on a Gulbenkian Scholarship. In his last year at the college, Ambrus drew illustrations for the Times Literary Supplement, and went on to spend many years working for Oxford University Press where he illustrated the works of various historical fiction writers, including Hester Burton and Rosemary Sutcliff. He is the winner of multiple awards, including two British Library Association Kate Greenaway Medals. Ambrus also featured as a cast member in the TV series *Time Team*, for which he often provided illustrations

Sources:

Martin, Douglas, *The Telling Line: Essays on 15 Contemporary Book Illustrators*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1989, 83–105.

Victor Ambrus: A Time Team Tribute, available on Time Team Official YouTube channel (accessed: August 3, 2022).

Bio prepared by David Walsh, University of Kent, djw43@kent.ac.uk

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Hugh Marshall (Illustrator)



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

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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).

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

Afrikaans: '*N kroontjie eikeblare*, trans. Lydia Pienaar, Kaapstad: J. Malherbe, 1970.

Summary

One evening at a tavern in Isca Silurium (Caerleon), sometime in the mid-second century CE, a group of cavalry auxiliaries and Roman legionaries get into to a debate over who has the most important role during a battle. As the conversation turns to a battle with the Picts beyond the Antonine Wall a decade before, at which point the Thracian horse-trader Aracos steps in and mentions that he fought in the battle as part of the Dacian Horse. When one of his fellow patrons notes that one of the Dacian Horse had been awarded the *corona civica* (a circlet of oak leaves), the highest award a soldier could receive, for his heroics in the battle, they judge from Aracos' reaction that it was he who had received the award, and for the next two years he becomes the tavern's most popular patron. However, when another veteran of the battle visits the tavern, he reveals that it was not Aracos who had received the Corona Civica, and Aracos leaves after being jeered at for his lies.

Returning to his lodgings, Aracos is met by a young medic who has brought him a package from his old comrade Felix. The medic explains Felix died defending a supply train and on his deathbed had requested that this be delivered to Aracos. Aracos opens the package to find the Corona Civica and thinks back to the events surrounding it. Aracos had wanted to become a soldier, but had been rejected due to a heart murmur, and so became an army medic instead. Just before the battle with the Picts, Aracos had found Felix, to whom he bore a resemblance, overcome with fear, and so offered to switch places with him. Disguising himself in Felix's uniform as the Dacian Horse' Pennant Bearer, Aracos' heroics in the battle earned him the Corona Civica, but it was awarded to Felix. Aracos was then discharged from the army having fallen ill after the battle, telling Felix to keep the Corona Civica in the hope that he will one day earn it. Now knowing Felix had died saving others, Aracos decides to continue the façade, and resolves to keep returning to tavern until everyone forgets about the Corona Civica.

The story includes twenty-two half-page to full-page illustrations by

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Victor Ambrus (all later editions except for the original edition), with nearly every scene depicted.

Analysis

As is the case here, the main protagonists in Sutcliff's Roman Britain stories are often men of similar rank in the Roman army who display honour and valour in the face of great odds. In the case of Aracos, despite his physical impairment he still takes part in the battle with the Picts, and earns the Corona Civica in the process, while Felix eventually overcomes his fear of fighting and dies defending others. That Aracos is able achieve a great victory despite his condition, which had prevented him from becoming the soldier he hoped to be, also echoes several of Sutcliff's other Roman heroes, including Marcus in *The Eagle of the Ninth* and Justin in *The Silver Branch*, and is certainly influenced by Sutcliff's own struggles with her Still's Disease. Moreover, Aracos' decision to honour Felix's memory by not revealing the Corona Civica to his fellow tavern patrons is also admirable; subsequently, as with many of Sutcliff's other novels and short-stories, *A Circlet of Oak Leaves* serves a didactic purpose, illustrating to young readers what qualities they should strive to develop. As Sutcliff explained in her essay 'History is People' (1973: 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."

The depiction of violent clashes between the Roman forces and the tribes of northern Britain follows a trend seen in many of Sutcliff's other works, including *The Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch*, *Frontier Wolf*, *Mark of the Horse Lord* and *The Capricorn Bracelet.* This is in part due to the significant influence that Kipling's' *Puck of Pook's Hill* (1906), which included several stories set on Hadrian's Wall, had on Sutcliff (1956: 53–54). Indeed, just as Kipling's stories served as an allegory of Britain's frontier in India, so too do Sutcliff's Roman soldiers in *A Circlet of Oak Leaves* illicit parallels with a romanticised image of the British army as they battle with naked undisciplined Painted People under the leadership of their anachronistically named 'captain'. Indeed, Sutcliff held the rank-and-file soldiers and their commanders of the British army in great esteem, having grown up on military bases while her father served in the navy and her subsequent experiences in World War II (Sutcliff

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1983). However, unlike Kipling's stories which feature primarily Romano-British and Romano-Gallic soldiers, in *A Circlet of Oak Leaves* Sutcliff presents a broad of range of ethnic groups serving as auxiliaries, including Dacians, Thracians, Germans, Cretans, Asturians, providing a more realistic portrayal of how diverse the Roman forces would have been. However, unlike many of Sutcliff's other historical novels, the story is not based on any historical event and does not include any historical characters.

Ambrus' illustrations range from figures presented in isolation (e.g. Aracos is first shown alone), to Aracos speaking with the young medic in his rented room, and full battle scenes. Given the prominent role of cavalry in the story, Ambrus undoubtedly took great pleasure providing the illustrations of the scenes involving them, as horses were his favourite animals to draw.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Roman Army Roman Britain Roman Empire Roman History
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Authority Character traits Conflict Death Disability Emotions Gender, male Hierarchy Historical figures Identity Integrity Masculinity Resilience Values Violence

Further Reading

Dixon, Karen and Patricia Southern, *The Roman Cavalry from the First to the Third century AD*, London: B.T. Batsford, 1992.

Mattingly, David, *An Imperial Possession: Britain in the Roman Empire 54 BC–AD 409*, London: Allen Lane.

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

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

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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.

Addenda

A Circlet of Oak Leaves was later collected with other Sutcliff short-stories in:

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Heather, Oak, and Olive: Three Stories*, New York: Dutton, 1972.

Rosemary Sutcliff, *Eagle's Honour*, London: Red Fox, 1995.

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

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