

# In Search of the Eagle



**Ideas for sharing the adventure of  
Rosemary Sutcliff's novel, *The Eagle of the Ninth*,  
and Kevin Macdonald's film, *The Eagle***

**(for pupils in key stage 3/P7, S1, S2)**

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# The author

Rosemary Sutcliff was born in Surrey in 1920 and moved frequently as a child because her father was a commander in the Royal Navy. She also spent a lot of time in hospital being treated for Still's disease, a form of arthritis. Her mother taught her at home and introduced her to many stories that she loved, including Celtic and Saxon legends and the tales of Rudyard Kipling, but she did not learn to read until the age of nine.

She turned to writing after training as a painter of miniatures at Bideford School of Art in Devon (having been reported as saying that she wanted “a bigger canvas” for her work).

The first of more than 60 books for children was *The Queen Elizabeth Story*, published in 1950, followed the next year by *The Armourer's House*, set in London during the reign of Henry VIII. Soon afterwards, in 1954, she had her first major success with *The Eagle of the Ninth*. As well as historical adventures and novels, which allowed her to draw on her passion for archaeology, she retold the classics she most admired including *Beowulf*, *The Odyssey* (in *The Wanderings of Odysseus*) and *The Iliad* (in *Black Ships Before Troy*). She won the Carnegie Medal for *The Lantern Bearers*, her third novel about the world of the Romans in Britain.

Her arthritis meant that she used a wheelchair and walking stick for the whole of her life, struggled to hold a pen and wrote standing up.

For more information about Rosemary Sutcliff visit  
[www.rosemarysutcliff.blogspot.com](http://www.rosemarysutcliff.blogspot.com)



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# The book

*The Eagle of the Ninth*, published in 1954, is the first in a sequence of novels about the Roman army in Britain, all of which explore the changing relationships between the Romans and the various peoples who become their captives and their conquerors.

It was inspired by the real-life stories of the Romans' lost Ninth Legion, which at the time of writing was believed to have disappeared somewhere north of York early in the second century AD, and the discovery of a bronze Roman eagle in the ruins of Silchester, a ruined Roman town in Hampshire.

## Synopsis

The centurion Marcus Flavius Aquila has asked to be posted to a remote fort on Hadrian's Wall, near where his father disappeared with the lost Ninth Legion. He has grown up listening to rumours that his father was to blame for the loss of the Ninth and is desperate to find out what really happened. When injury forces Marcus to give up his army career, he devotes himself to finding more traces of the legion and recovering its lost eagle standard. Meanwhile he has bonded with Esca, a British slave who he has saved from death in the gladiators' ring. The pair set off into the dangerous enemy country north of the Wall in search of the Eagle of the Ninth.

Rosemary Sutcliff's other major "Romans in Britain" novels (*The Silver Branch* published in 1957 and *The Lantern Bearers* in 1959) are set in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. They all feature Roman soldiers called Aquila and readers will enjoy finding the other ways in which they are connected to the story of Marcus, Esca and the Eagle.



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# Discuss: what's in a name?

After reading *The Eagle of the Ninth*, find out:

- Why Marcus has three names (Marcus Flavius Aquila).
- On which occasions he would be called by all three of his names, or by only two of them, or only one.
- What is important about Marcus's last name, Aquila.
- Why Marcus's young neighbour, Cottia, has another name (Camilla)? Why does she prefer to be called Cottia?



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# Book extract: image of a people

***From “Esca thought for a while . . .” p92 to “. . . the man who worked the sheath of this dagger” p93***

With her artistic training, Rosemary Sutcliff had a highly visual imagination and her descriptions are vivid.

In this extract from *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the difference between the Romans and their subjects, the Britons, are summed up when Esca compares the pattern on his own shield-boss (the raised section in the middle), influenced by the Celtic “curves of life”, with the orderly design of Marcus’s Roman dagger-sheath and shield.

- Read the extract
- Research examples of Roman and Celtic design from the second century AD (use the internet, books and museums). Display the results of your search and see whether you can follow Esca’s argument.



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# Tale of tribes

Esca is the son of a clan chieftain of the Brigantes; Marcus's neighbour Cottia and her aunt are Iceni.

- Research everything you can about these two tribes and their relationship with the Romans.
- What do you know about the most famous leader of the Iceni?



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# Bond of brothers

Despite their initial master-and-slave relationship, Marcus and Esca become close and eventually trust one another with their lives when they set off on the perilous quest to find the lost Eagle.

Both of them have been trained since birth to be leaders of their people (Esca was his chieftain father's armour-bearer).

- What does Rosemary Sutcliff tell us about how they grew up and how similar are their views likely to be concerning their duty to their people?
- Why does Marcus free Esca before they set off to the north?
- How does this change their relationship?

After reading *The Eagle of the Ninth*, look again at each chapter (from Chapter V, where Esca enters, to Chapter XX) and think about whether Marcus or Esca is in the more powerful position at that point in the story.

- Draw a chart to show the changes in the two men's status.
- Think about ways in which two young men or young women in very different circumstances, with one apparently much more powerful than the other, might meet today.
- Choose an important task that your two characters might need to do together, involving finding something precious.
- Write a story, a short play or a storyboard about their journey to carry out the task.



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# The film

*The Eagle*, directed by Kevin Macdonald and starring Jamie Bell and Channing Tatum, is partly filmed in the Highlands of Scotland where about half of the action of the book takes place. In many scenes the two lead actors are shown alone in the wild landscape.

- Think about which other kinds of films this reminds you of and collect clips or images of your favourites.
- What does the film tell us about the conditions Marcus and Esca endured on their journey?

Kevin Macdonald decided to give the Roman characters American accents.

- Think of occasions throughout recent history (in the past 50 years) when Americans have occupied other countries. Research reviews of the film and see whether any reviewers have mentioned these countries in association with the film.



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# Compare and contrast

Once you have seen the film:

- Draw another chart to show the changes in the relationship between Marcus and Esca in *The Eagle*. Are the shifts of power more extreme in the book or in the film? Why might this be? What does Esca do in the film that he does not do in the book?
- Which aspect of the story in the book is completely absent from the film? Why might this be?
- How is the ending of the film (the very last scene) different from the ending of the book? Why might Kevin Macdonald, the director, have chosen to end it in that way?
- What do we expect to happen next in the film? And in the book?

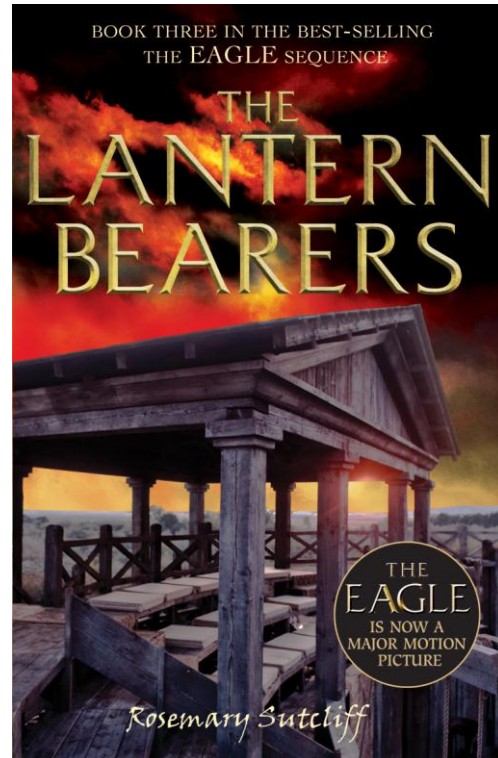
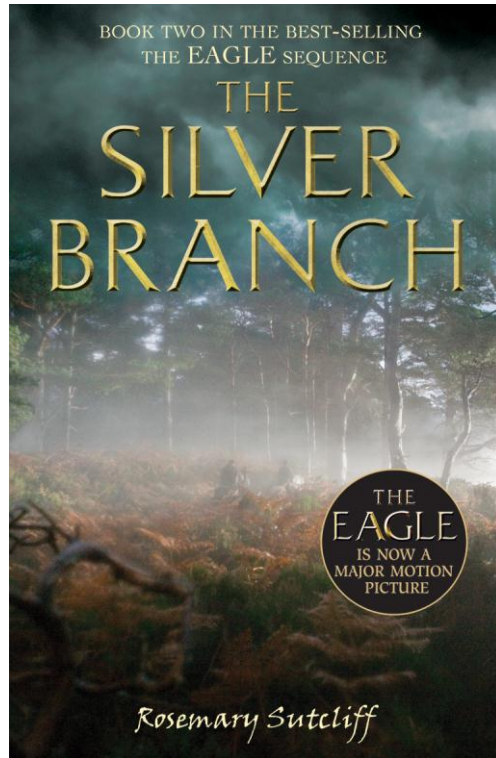


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# If you liked *The Eagle of the Ninth* . . .



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