

# Swords, sandals and the return of a hero

Rosemary Sutcliff's Roman adventure, a hit in the 1950s, has made it to Hollywood.

Amanda Craig on the rediscovery of a great writer



I wo muscular young men, one a Roman soldier and the other a Brigantes chieftain's son, are galloping along the seashore of the Scottish Highlands, one of them clutching a priceless military treasure. Behind them run a troop of wild clansmen, bent on retrieving the totem snatched in battle from a lost legion, and now the focus for an uprising.

The prospect of another sword 'n sandals movie may make some parents groan this Easter, but *The Eagle*, the adaptation of Rosemary Sutcliff's bestselling classic *The Eagle of the Ninth*, has been long awaited by thousands of fans. Her story has always thrilled readers. It tells of how a young Roman commander, Marcus, takes a native Briton, Esca, first as his slave and then as his trusted ally beyond Hadrian's Wall to find the Eagle standard of the lost Ninth Legion, led by Marcus's father. Now the full Hollywood treatment by Duncan Kenworthy and Kevin Macdonald, it features Channing Tatum and Jamie Bell as Marcus and Esca bonding in the wilds of Roman Britain in AD140.

"The director, Kevin Macdonald, has spoken of it as 'a western, which is very appropriate because Romie loved westerns', says Anthony Lawton, Sutcliff's

seems to be a peaceful stay-at-home character doing something perfectly worthwhile in a quieter way," she once said. "It always seems to be a fighting man."

"She believed in re-encarnation," Lawton says. "She felt that she had been alive in Roman times and that she was simply the vehicle for the stories. I didn't believe her, but we used to go out for a drive and she'd always point to a spot and say, 'I know there was a Roman settlement there. There wasn't anything to show why she believed this, but years later they unearthed one exactly where she had said it would be. So I'm not ready to write off her beliefs completely.'"

Sutcliff was the only daughter of a Royal Navy commander. She was born in Malta and didn't learn to read until she was 9 because of a childhood that was constantly interrupted by fruitless operations to attempt to cure her. However, thanks to her mother, she developed a passion for stories and archaeology, and was strongly influenced by Rudyard Kipling and Mary Renault: after training as a painter of miniature at Bideford College in Devon, she turned to writing. "She said she needed a

**'When the urge to write of a character comes into my mind ... it always seems to be a fighting man'**

bigger canvas, and that was what writing gave her." Lawton says.

Part of the second golden age of children's fiction of 1950-60, Sutcliff was one of the young adult writers who, alongside Henry Treece, Geoffrey Trease and Leon Garfield, brought history to life with a series of vividly imagined, thrillingly written adventures. She has left a distinct legacy in the work of outstanding contemporary children's books such as N. M. Brown's *Warriors of Alanya*, Katherine Langrish's *West of the Moon* and Kevin Crossley-Holland's classic *Arthur trilogy*, all of which draw on her mixture of myth and archaeological discoveries. *The Eagle of the Ninth* was inspired by two real-life stories, one about the lost Ninth Legion and the other about the discovery of a bronze eagle in Silchester, the ruined Roman town in Hampshire. Despite the bloody battles that run through the film, the heart of it is the relationship between Roman and Briton, symbolic of the fairly constant first-century struggle between Rome and the tribes of northern Britain. It's a clash of cultures that echoes down the ages, and the film turns the occupying Romans into Americans, with echoes of Vietnam, or even Afghanistan, in its violent depiction of mutual incomprehension and savagery. Sutcliff's insight into the military mind was, Lawton thinks, informed by her father's work and friends, but she also describes in her autobiography, *Blue Remembered Hills*, how the love of her life, an air force officer, would drive her around in his Morgan.

"She was a bird-like woman who looked a bit like Edith Piaf," Lawton says. "She wasn't at all twisted in her psyche, she was remarkably sorted out. She was warm, sociable, welcoming, with many friends."

Her first book, submitted to OUP, was a retelling of Celtic myths. It was rejected but the publisher suggested that she try Robin Hood, and in 1950 her career was launched with this, and *The Queen Elizabeth Story*.

Sutcliff's success meant that, in a time when there were no disability benefits, she could live in some comfort in the stables of a Georgian rectory with a housekeeper and a driver/handyman: her home was laid out very much like a Roman villa, around two courtyards.

**BATTLE READY**  
Channing Tatum in *The Eagle*



"She couldn't get herself up without and she needed a wheelchair to get outside, but she could shuffle down corridors with a stick, and then stand writing desk to work," Lawton says. "at *Sinsler* paid for her to build a reading room next to her study — she won bundles of books from the London L sent down, and she also had a network of experts to tell her about Roman formations. Romie wrote three drafts hand on lined foolscap, in precise, 9 writing that was then typed up. She hold a pen or a brush, but she y constant discomfort, I think. Many heroes are wounded, or outsiders — Boadicea — which I suspect was the of this, but she never saw herself as quite the opposite."

In *The Eagle of the Ninth* she gave readers a hero who, unlike her first crippled and then run whose experience of I been dependent on at enlarges his sensibility makes him more th kind of aggressive cho man familiar computer games as *Call of Duty*. film misses out of this emotional scenes, then at should interest generation in c the finest historio ventures yet write

**The Eagle of the Ninth**  
Chronicles is published OUP at £9.99. The film *Eagle* is released on March 25, rosemarysutcliff.com