



Friends, Romans and Countrymen...

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Byline:

What have stories about the Romans done for us, asks **Tony Bradman**

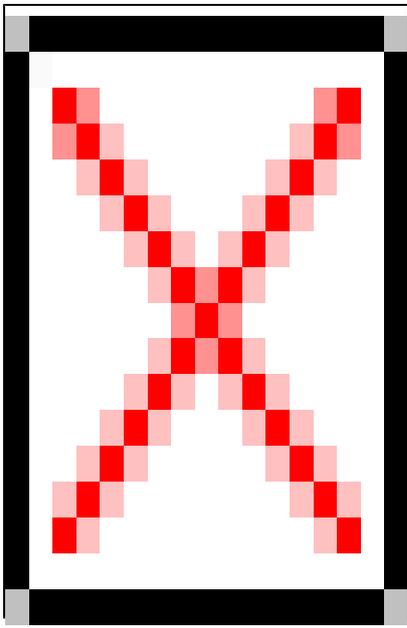
Tony Bradman adds up what stories about the Romans have done for us.

Latin was a compulsory subject at the state grammar school I went to when I was a boy. So I learned how to chant *amo, amas, amat*, with my classmates, that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus who were suckled by a wolf, and that according to Julius Caesar 'all Gaul is divided into three parts'. I loved the whole thing, mostly because our class had a brilliant teacher (take a bow, Agnes Stickings!), and I didn't give it up when the time came to decide what 'O' Level subjects I should do.

That made me unusual, for this was in the 1960s, a time when The Modern seemed to have finally arrived in the 20th century and everyone was supposed to be more interested in the future than the past. Of course I was reading science-fiction too, and watching **Doctor Who** and following the progress of the Gemini space programme. So when it came to choosing what to do for my 'A' Levels Latin didn't seem like a good idea. I mean, what good would Latin do me in a world of high technology?

It did seem for a while that there was much less in the Classics, and the numbers of kids learning Latin or Greek fell steeply. But our fascination with the ancient world never really went away, and in recent years has made a comeback. If you've got kids at a primary school, or you're a primary teacher, you'll know that 'the Roman Empire and its impact on Britain' is a recommended area of study in the Key Stage 1 and 2 National Curriculum for History. So all children have to learn about the Romans.

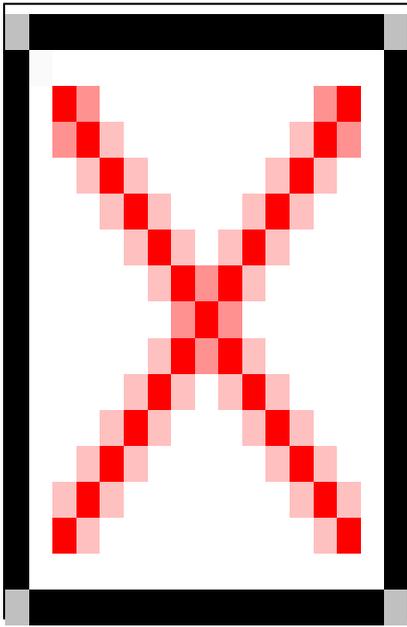
One way of doing that is to use non-fiction books on the subject, and there are plenty to choose from, as even a quick internet search will tell you. There are some great non-fiction titles too, but I think it's worth supplementing them with top-quality historical fiction. My interest in the Romans was re-kindled when I was at university and discovered **I, Claudius** by Robert Graves, and its sequel **Claudius The God**. The brilliant BBC TV adaptation appeared at the same time.



Long before that ? indeed, at the same time that I was chanting *amo, amas, amat* - I had also discovered the work of Rosemary Sutcliff. Those of you who have read anything I've written about my reading journey and historical fiction, or who have heard me talking about those things on school visits will know I'm an uber-fan of Rosemary's work. She is probably best known for her novel **The Eagle of the Ninth**, the story of young Marcus Aquila's quest for the truth about his father's vanished legion.

Sutcliff wrote many more Roman stories, though, most of them following Marcus's descendants in subsequent centuries. Read as a sequence, they take you through almost the entire history of Roman Britain, from the early years of colonisation to the Saxon invasions of the fifth century and beyond. I'll admit that for contemporary readers the writing is quite literary, but the storytelling is superb, and the themes - of colonialism, ethnic identity, disability - could hardly be any more relevant.

You should start with the [Eagle of the Ninth](#) [3], then move on to **The Silver Branch**, **Outcast**, **The Mark of the Horse Lord**, the Carnegie-winning **The Lantern-Bearers**, **Dawn Wind**? I have a particular soft spot for **Frontier Wolf**, the story of a disgraced young centurion sent to command a unit of auxiliaries - the Roman equivalent of 'special forces' - in the badlands beyond Hadrian's Wall. It's an utterly gripping story, full of fascinating detail and told with real verve. It would make a great film.



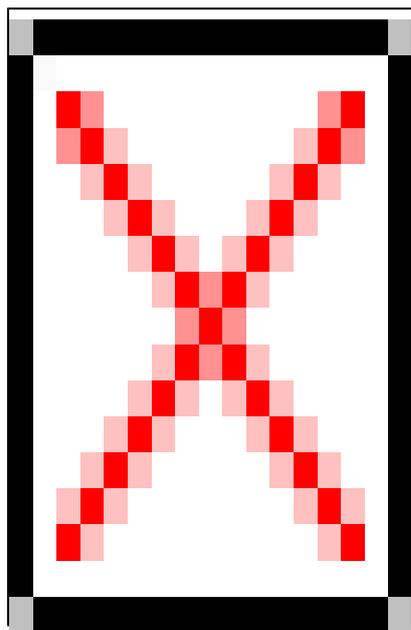
A more recent writer who really understands Rome is [Caroline Lawrence](#) [4]. Her middle-grade **Roman Mysteries** are deservedly popular, seventeen in the series starting with **The Thieves of Ostia**. The research is impeccable, full of the

kind of detail kids love, but it never gets in the way of the stories. Caroline has also written the **Roman Mystery Scrolls** for younger readers, and a couple of brilliant re-tellings from Virgil's **Aeneid** for Barrington Stoke, **The Night Raid** and **Queen of the Silver Arrow**.

I also enjoyed Carnegie-winner Tanya Landman's **Beyond the Wall**, the story of two young people in Roman Britain, British slave-girl Cassia and Roman Marcus. It's firmly in YA territory - Tanya Landman sees Rome as a patriarchy in which the young and vulnerable often suffered enormous oppression. The research is great, and the characters are very strong. The paths of Cassia and Marcus cross, and they help each other in a plot that is gripping and full of cliffhangers, but completely believable.

It took me a long time, but I did eventually get round to writing some Roman stories myself. The first was **Assassin** for Barrington Stoke, a story about a young boy in northern Britain who tries to kill the Emperor Hadrian before he can build the famous wall. Then my son Tom and I collaborated on **Spartacus: The Story of the Rebellious Thracian Gladiator**, a dramatised biography and a passion project for me. I've been a fan of the Kirk Douglas movie since I saw it at the tender age of 10.

Next up was the story of Caractacus, the first-century tribal chieftain who led the resistance to the Roman invasion. It's a famous, almost mythical story, but in my version - **Revolt Against the Romans** - I took the chance to explore the differences between the indigenous Britons and their invaders. I wanted to give kids a gripping story full of strong characters, but I also wanted to help them understand that the Britons had a rich culture of their own (and spoke a very early form of Welsh).



Of course the name that often comes up when we talk about Roman Britain is Boudica, and last year I finally got round to tackling her story. Boudica is often seen as a heroine who fought the Roman oppressors, but she also destroyed three Roman cities and slaughtered their inhabitants. So in **Queen of Darkness**, my version of the story, the young central character Rhianna discovers there was also something very dark about the Queen of the Iceni. I certainly wouldn't have argued with her.

Last but not least I want to draw your attention to [Empire's End: A Roman Story \[5\]](#) by Leila Rasheed. This is the fourth title in the **Voices** series of novels I'm editing for Scholastic, each one a story set in a period mentioned in the National Curriculum, but with a central character from one of the forgotten communities in our history. Leila's brilliant novel tells the poignant story of a young girl born in North Africa who comes to Britain as part of the entourage of the third-century Emperor Severus, and stays.

There are other titles worth reading, and I apologise to all the great authors that I might have left out. But these are the books that have been an essential part of my engagement with Rome and its impact on Britain. I hope you'll enjoy them

too.

Tony Bradman, MMXX

Books mentioned

The Eagle of the Ninth, Rosemary Sutcliff, Oxford, 978-0192753922, £8.99 pbk

Roman Mysteries series, Caroline Lawrence, Orion Children's Books, £6.99 pbk

Roman Mystery Scrolls, Caroline Lawrence, Orion Children's Books, £4.99 pbk

The Night Raid, Caroline Lawrence, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781123669, £6.99 pbk

Queen of the Silver Arrow, Caroline Lawrence, Barrington Stoke, 978-1781125267, £6.99 pbk

Assassin, Tony Bradman, Barrington Stoke, 978-1842999790, £5.99 pbk

Spartacus: The Story of the Rebellious Thracian Gladiator, Tony Bradman and Tom Bradman, A&C Black, 978-1408113356, £5.99 pbk

Revolt Against the Romans, Tony Bradman, A&C Black, 978-1472929327, £5.99 pbk

Queen of Darkness, Tony Bradman, Bloomsbury, 978-1472953742, £5.99 pbk

Empire's End: A Roman Story, Leila Rasheed, Scholastic, 978-1407191393, £6.99 pbk

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