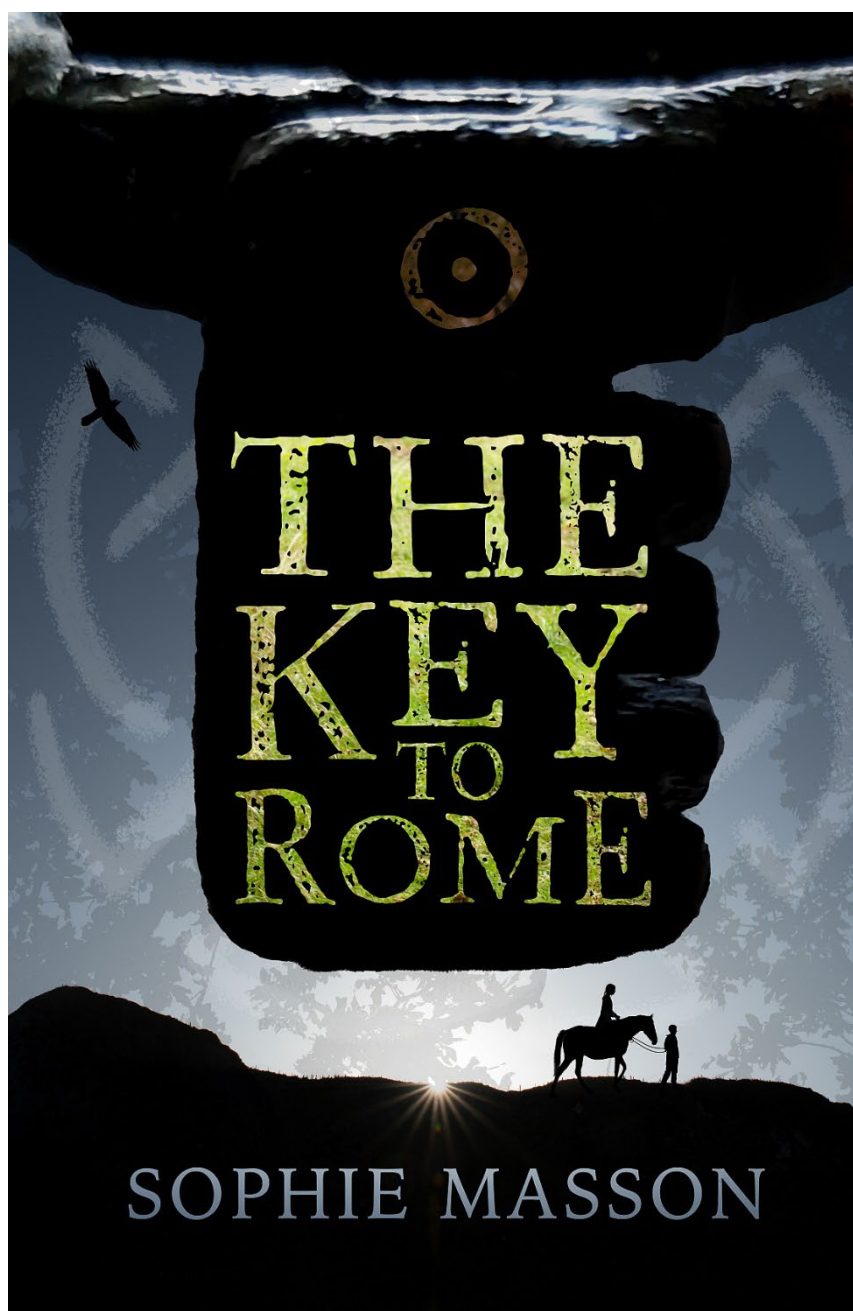


Teachers' Notes



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The Key To Rome

By Sophie Masson

Cover and internal illustrations by Lorena Carrington

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About the book

AD 84, Roman Province of Britannia

Twelve-year-old orphan Livia has to keep a promise made to her late father: to take a mysterious key to her estranged uncle Marcus. She sets out with the key, her old horse Pegasus and her father's doctoring kit, only to learn that her uncle has left for a town further north. By the time she reaches it, her uncle has gone, and she can't find out where-- until a boy named Mato informs her that he knows. But he refuses to tell unless she takes him too. So the two young people set out on a dangerous journey where they must keep all their wits about them, in a deadly game of cat and mouse. But figuring out who is friend, and who is foe, is the greatest challenge of them all...

An exciting historical mystery by multi-award-winning author Sophie Masson.

Cover, map and chapter decorations by Lorena Carrington.

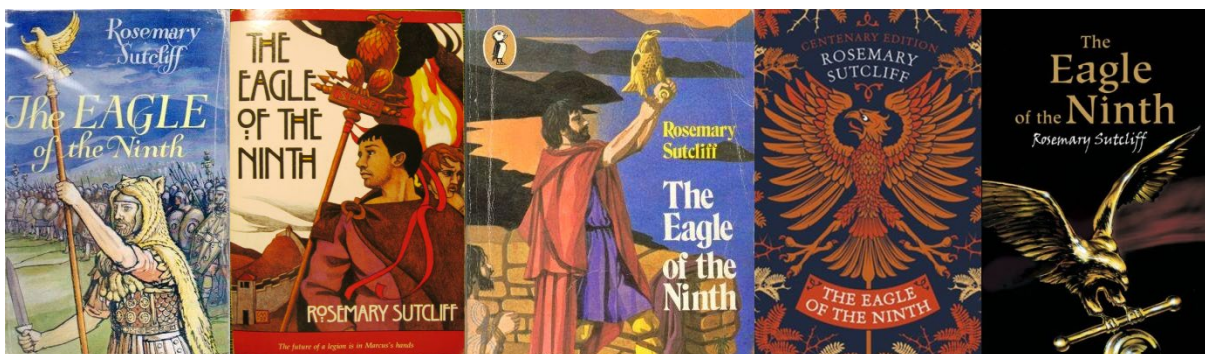
About the author:

Born in Indonesia of French parents, who are themselves of mixed ethnicity: Basque, Spanish, Portuguese and French-Canadian as well as French, Sophie Masson AM was brought up in France and Australia and now lives in regional NSW. Sophie is the multi-award-winning author of over 70 books, for children, young adults and adults, many of which have been published internationally. Her most recent titles for young readers are *Satin* (illustrated by Lorena Carrington, MidnightSun Publishing, 2023), *Sydney under Attack* (Scholastic Australia, 2022) *Cock-a-doodle-doo* (illustrated by Kathy Creamer, Little Pink Dog Books 2022) and *Four Up In Lights* (Christmas Press 2022). In 2019 Sophie received an AM award in the Order of Australia honours list for her significant service to literature. Her author website is at www.sophiemassonauthor.com and she blogs at www.firebirdfeathers.com.



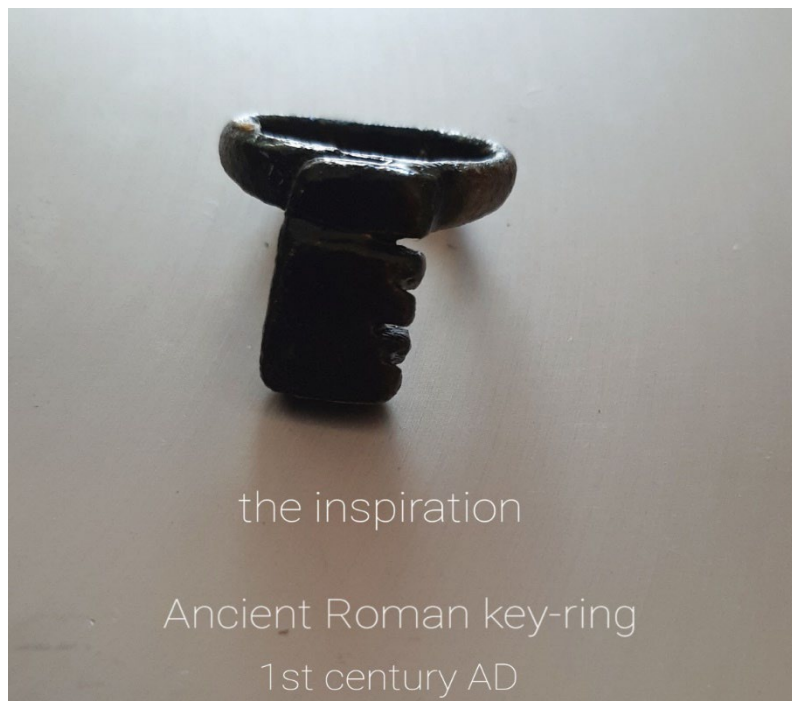
Something from the author

The Key to Rome grew out of two main inspirations. I've long been fascinated by Ancient Rome, and the cultures it came in contact with in its long period of domination, over hundreds of years, especially in Europe. In France, where I come from, 'our ancestors the Gauls' were very much a part of the history that was taught in the country: the Gauls being the original Celtic inhabitants of the land now known as France, but which the Romans called Gaul. The Romans left a strong imprint in France, with buildings, customs, and even language, for Latin, the language of the Romans, influenced very much the French language as it developed across the centuries. Across the Channel, in Britain, the Roman imprint was also strong, the conflict and contrast between Roman and Celt even more marked in some ways than in Gaul. And once we were in Australia, and I started reading in English, one of the books I read which became a big favourite was an amazing adventure story set in Roman Britain, [*The Eagle of the Ninth*](#), by Rosemary Sutcliff. It wasn't just exciting and immersive, but also made me think quite a lot about the relationship, hostile or not, that existed between the Romans and the British. (It's a hugely popular book that is still in print decades after its first publication, with many editions published).



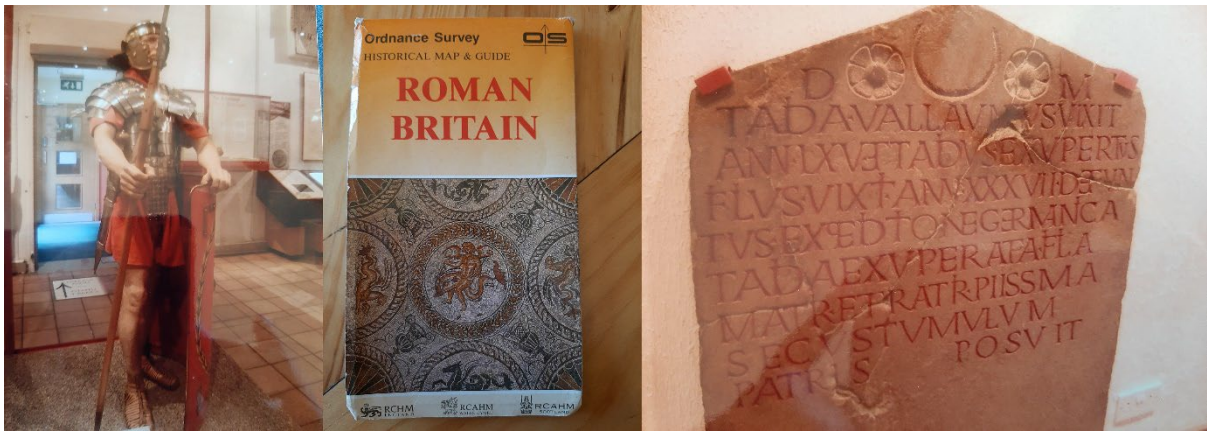
That book stayed with me, and as an adult author, writing something set in Roman times was always at the back of my mind. But it wasn't until a few years ago, when, in a little antique shop near the British Museum in London, I saw a display of Roman key-rings—that is keys, designed to be worn as rings-- that the idea began to really spark off. I went into the

shop and excitedly bought one of the key-rings. Made of lead, it was dated to the 1st century AD and wasn't particularly expensive, because apparently such rings are not uncommon finds. When I looked at it more closely, I saw that the ring size was very small—on my own hand, it only fitted on the little finger. So either it had been meant for a very small woman or a child, or it had simply been meant to be worn around the neck, on a leather thong or something similar. And what lock would such a key open? Definitely not a door, but probably a box of some sort. A money or valuables box? A medicine box? I had no idea as to the truth of it, but immediately what ifs began bubbling in my head...I began to see, through the mists of imagination, a figure become clearer, a twelve year old girl called Livia, living in the province of Britannia, whose widowed Roman father is a travelling oculist, an eye-doctor (they were commonly found in Roman times, especially in Gaul and Britannia, and indeed, in *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the main character, Marcus, disguises himself as an oculist). When Livia's father dies, he leaves her this key, a mysterious key that does not fit any of the locks of his boxes. And he tells her not to speak of it to anyone, but to find her uncle, who will know what to do. And so she sets off—into danger, and mystery, and an unexpected alliance with an enigmatic British boy named Mato...



It was wonderful writing this book, but quite challenging too. Even though the key-ring had given me the idea, I had to do a lot of research, especially about Livia and Mato's [helter-skelter journey](#) across Britain: for instance, what were the towns and settlements along the road? How long would it take to go from one to the other? I was fortunate to have a very useful map of Roman Britain, and also found good information on the Internet, for example, how long it took to go on foot on various Roman roads, what towns were like at that time, etc. I also found a very useful site that helped me with [deciding on the names](#) of British characters—Roman names are easy to research but Celtic names not so much, so it was great to find that site! I also did research on the ground: on a trip to Britain, I visited various

Roman sites mentioned in the book, as well as museums about Roman life in Britain at the time.



I enjoy research but I also had to consider how I was going to use it—I didn't want to bore readers with too much information! I did include extra information at the end of the book, in the glossary, in case anyone was interested in knowing more. And it's great to have the map in the book, too, beautifully drawn and designed by Lorena Carrington, which can help you see Livia and Mato's journey very concretely!

About the illustrator

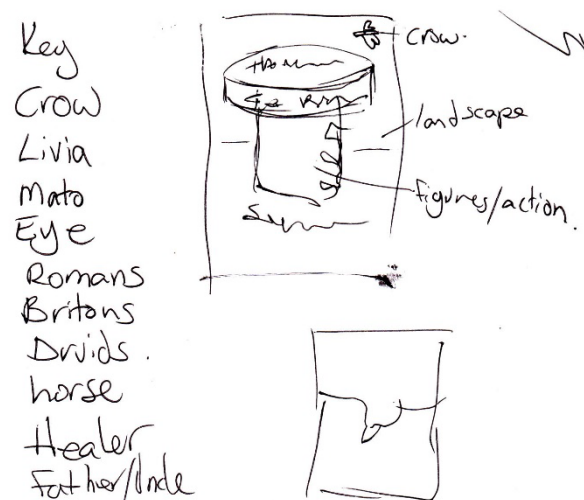
Lorena Carrington is an illustrator whose books have been published in Australia and internationally. Her works are created using photography and digital montage techniques to form richly layered images. She has worked with the likes of Kate Forsyth, Sophie Masson and Carmel Bird, and has illustrated fairy tale collections, picture books, and created covers for novels and anthologies. She also exhibits her work in galleries around Australia, and holds workshops on illustration, books and story. She is recipient of the 2020 Australian Fairy Tale Society award, for her 'outstanding contribution to the field of Australian Fairy Tales' and a 2023 May Gibbs Creative Time Fellowship.



Something from the illustrator

I loved reading *The Key to Rome*. Sophie has written such a wonderful story of history, adventure and friendship. I knew I needed to include the key-ring, a sense of travel, and some hint of the history of the story on the cover, so set about brainstorming ideas. You can see in the page from my sketchbook (below), the list of possible elements to include, and a very rough drawing of the first idea for the cover, which is actually fairly close to how it eventually turned out. Below it is another, showing a crow swooping down over the top half of the cover, but it was too similar to something else I've done before. The problem with good ideas is that you often have them more than once! Thankfully the key was the better and more relevant fit.

Sophie had sent me a photograph of the ring she bought in London, and I definitely wanted to depict it on the cover. It's such an important part of the story itself, and also the story of how the book came to be. I tried recreating it with other photographic objects, but it didn't have the right feel, and I felt it was only right that the ring itself be on the cover. I think it works perfectly as a frame for the title. It's important to find a balance between trying to fit everything on the cover, and keeping it cohesive and uncluttered, so I was happy I was able to include the ring, the crown, Roman and Celtic design elements, and Livia and Mato on their journey.



I was so thrilled when Sophie asked me to create a map too. There's something exciting about finding a map in the beginning of a book! As the story is set in a real world place, I needed to keep the geographic element true to their place and history. It took a lot of double checking of historical maps, and with Sophie too about the important places to include. But of course, I couldn't resist including a few sea monsters!



Activities

Post-reading discussion questions

Why do you think Livia's father never contacted his family in Gaul but stayed in Britain?

In the book, the druids are seen in very different ways by the British and the Romans. What do each of them say? And why do you think they see druids so differently?

How does the author build up the characters of Livia and Mato and their growing friendship?

How is language used in the novel to advance the story and create tension?

Classroom research activities

Choose one of the towns mentioned in *The Key to Rome* and find out all you can about it.

Neptune, Apollo, and Pluto are Roman gods mentioned in the book, and Lugus as one of the British gods. Choose one of them and look up more about them.

Find out more about how an oculist like Livia's father or a healer like Enica might treat people in ancient times. For example, what ointments and herbs might they have used?

Classroom creative activities

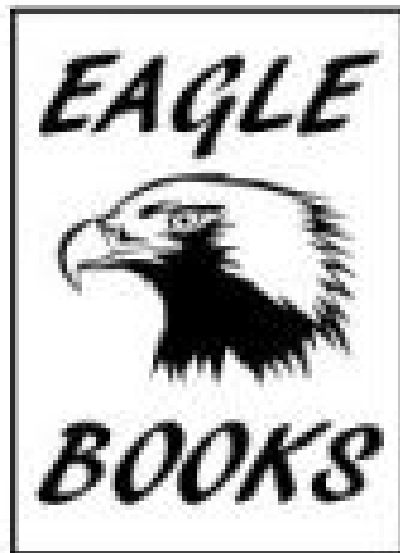
Imagine you are in Lovernia's group. From their point of view, write the scene of when they attack Livia and Mato.

Create a menu for a tavern in Roman Britain—and present it as a scroll!

Write an account of how Livia's father met the man who gave him the key-ring.

Create your own map by making up your own imagined land, or by tracing the important elements from a real map. It might be your hometown or region, or a place you've always wanted to go to. Then add all the made-up elements you like: for example, Roman forts, the dens of secret societies, dragon mountains, lake monsters, or anything you like!

Design a cover for either your favourite book, the last book you read (including this one!), or a story you've written. Think about the overarching themes, the characters, the intended audience, the parts of the plot you want to reveal on the cover. Can you hint at any spoilers or twists without actually revealing them? Think about what colour does to the feel of a cover. Could you use the same image but use colour to make it look like a mystery, a romance, or a horror story? Think about these questions, make some notes, then design a cover for your book. You can use any method you like - paint, pencil, collage, etc - but make sure you think about the parts of the story you want to reveal, without giving away spoilers!



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