



## Sword at Sunset

*Rosemary Sutcliff*

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## **Sword at Sunset** Rosemary Sutcliff

This brilliant reconception of the Arthurian epic cuts through the familiar myths and tells the story of the real King Arthur: Artos the Bear, the mighty warrior-king who saved the last lights of Western civilization when the barbarian darkness descended in the fifth century.

Artos here comes alive: bold and forceful in battle, warm and generous in friendship, tough in politics, shrewd in the strategy of war - and tender and tragically tormented in love.

Out of the braiding of ancient legend, fresh research, soaring imagination and hypnotic narrative skill comes a novel that has richly earned its reputation as a classic.

## **Sword at Sunset Details**

Date : Published December 1st 2012 by Atlantic (first published 1963)

ISBN : 9780857892430

Author : Rosemary Sutcliff

Format : Hardcover 486 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Mythology, Arthurian, Fiction, Fantasy

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### Gary says

For those of you who have never read any of Rosemary Sutcliff's books you have missed out on a great youth writer of historical fiction and this in many's mind is her best book and my own personal 2nd best favorite of the Arthurian tales. Her books are about youth but they never write down to her audience. They are almost adult in every way. They all deal with morals and character development.

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### Alex Telander says

**SWORD AT SUNSET BY ROSEMARY SUTCLIFF:** The late Rosemary Sutcliff was a prolific writer from the 1950s through the 1970s, publishing a number of children's books, including the Eagle of the Ninth series and a series of Arthurian novels, as well as over twenty other children's books on historical subjects. She also penned nonfiction works and adult fiction, including *Sword at Sunset*, originally published in 1963 and re-released on May 1st of this year.

*Sword at Sunset* features an introduction by Canadian author Jack Whyte, writer of the successful *Camulod Chronicles*, a nine-book series beginning several generations before Arthur was born. Whyte freely admits that when he first discovered *Sword at Sunset* it changed his life, which becomes all too clear when one has read both authors. The characterization, the tone, and the painstaking attention to historical detail and accuracy are prevalent in both works, to the point where one might think Whyte owes Sutcliff more than an introduction and homage.

In *Sword at Sunset*, Sutcliff creates a world where the Roman legions have left Britain, yet the sense of Romanitas remains strong, especially in the noble characters of Ambrosius and Artos the Bear. They retain not just the armor, style of combat, and the Roman military organization, but a superior, almost arrogant sense of belonging to something that was once great and could be again. Sutcliff's early medieval world is not as "dark age" as normally depicted in fiction, but thriving with trade and societal infrastructure across Europe still seemingly intact. Artos the Bear spends the beginning of the book traveling to southern France where he looks to purchase strong breeds of horses to bring back to Britain to create a strong cavalry force to fight against the invading Anglo Saxons and maintain the British control and rule.

While it is not completely clear how Artos the Bear has risen to such great prominence, he nevertheless has the backing of the people, which spurs him on to defeat the Saxons in many battles. Sutcliff introduces many familiar characters from the Arthurian world, though there is no Merlin or Lancelot (the latter originally an addition made by Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century), but an important appearance is made by Arthur's incestuous sister Medraut (or Morgan). *Sword at Sunset* reads like a historical military text with its calculated and descriptive battle scenes that make the world come alive, to the point where the reader may indeed believe such events transpired in the fifth century, leaving the common storylines of romance and chivalry out of the story completely, much as they were in the original time of Arthur.

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### Sue Bursztynski says

This is, for me, the definitive historical version of the Arthur story, although I do have other favourites - Mary Stewart, Parke Godwin, Jack Whyte, Bernard Cornwell. Rosemary Sutcliff's Arthur is believable. If he existed, this is how he would have been - a Romano-British leader who is passionate about saving the world he lives in, keeping the light going before the dark sets in. For him, this is the Roman way, even after the Romans have gone from Britain. His Companions are very likely the original companions of Arthur in the oldest stories - Cei, Gwalchmai, Bedwyr. Bedwyr, in this one, plays the Lancelot role, because Lancelot didn't enter the mythos till quite late in the piece. The reasons for what happens between the leader's friend and his woman are heart-wrenching and who's to say it didn't happen that way?

There's no Merlin or Camelot in this novel. This Arthur - or Artos, as he's known here - has to be on the move, to protect the land. His Companions can't allow themselves to get tied down.

You can only get the US edition of this book now, but if you don't live there, order it through your local bookshop - it's well worth it!

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### **Cindy says**

Wonderful story of the Celtic warrior that we know as King Arthur. This tale starts with Artos the Bear as a young calvary leader and ends with his last battle where he kills his traitorous son, Merdraut. The reader can very much feel the betrayal of Artos' friendship with the affair of Artos' wife, Guenhumara, and his best friend, Bedwyr (not Lancelot!). This story shows that King Arthur may not have been the very chivalrous and pristine knight that some writers pen him to be within their stories. I love Rosemary Sutcliff, and decided to read this after I read her book "The Eagle of the Ninth". I recommend this book to any reader who loves Celtic Britain or King Arthur!

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### **Alex Harrison says**

The Sword at Sunset by Mary Renault; in many ways it is almost a companion piece to the Eagle in the Snow by Wallace Breem (another of my very favourite novels).

Sword at Sunset, like the Eagle in the Snow deals with the very last waning of the Roman Empire in Western Europe, but this time, specifically in Britain. It is also my favourite version of the Arthur story / Arthurian legend.

I don't want to write too much about it and spoil anyone's future enjoyment, but this was one of Rosemary Sutcliff's few adult historical novels and it is superb in every way. Highly recommended indeed.

The best recommendation - I now own 3 copies. It's a book I will always own and always re-read.

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### **Nikki says**

Reread for my dissertation -- and all the more bittersweet this time because I knew how everything would play out. It's beautifully written, and it pretty much exemplifies Rosemary Sutcliff's usual shtick about male friendships (and a sepulchral voice that sounds like my dissertation supervisor whispers the words "homosocial bonds" ...), to the point where there is actually an explicitly gay couple in the story, and Arthur

and Bedwyr's relationship is deep and intense -- perhaps not sexual, but the subtext is there.

Sutcliff handles Guinevere well, too, and I have a lot of love for her version of Gwalchmai, too. But of course for my dissertation I was looking at Cei: a big, larger than life figure who drinks and womanises and is always, always faithful to Arthur, like a big faithful hound. Some of his role from the Cymric stories seems to go to Bedwyr, complete with the betrayal part (in 'Culhwch and Olwen', Cei and Arthur fall out, and that event is referenced in some of the other Cymric material).

Interesting that I'd say this is the closest to a Celtic Cei I've read anywhere outside the Cymric stories, but nonetheless Sutcliff didn't find him interesting enough to do more than reference him as a faithful hound type character without much depth whenever she needed him.

The end is a tragedy, as it should be, with all the dignity Arthur deserves. I cried.

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### **DoctorM says**

Of course I'd read Thos. Malory as a child. But when I found "Sword at Sunset" at sixteen or so, I knew that *this* was the version of Arthur that I needed. All those people who loved "Mists of Avalon" or "Once and Future King" just...baffled me. Sutcliff's post-Roman Britain was the only Arthurian version I could imagine at all. Spare, harsh, austere, dark...and that vision of the last lingering lights of civilisation and *Romanitas* being held aloft against the Saxon flood and the inevitable dark. Her Arthur--- Artos, he is, war-leader and cavalryman ---is a figure I can admire. This is fine writing and a vividly told tale, with characters worth caring about. An old, clear favourite.

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### **David Manns says**

The legend of King Arthur is one that has been retold many times down the centuries. Most are rehashes of the original Morte D'Arthur. Some rise above the crowd and bring a new perspective. For me the best retelling of the classic "chivalrous" legend is TH White's *The Once and Future King*. But what Rosemary Sutcliffe does with *Sword at Sunset* is set Arthur (or Artorius as he is here) in a historical context, specifically post-Roman Britain at the time of the Saxon invasions. And it works brilliantly.

Sutcliffe was an accomplished historical novelist, in the main writing so-called "children's books" (but they can happily be read as adult novels. She never talked down to her readership). *Sword at Sunset* is another link in the chain begun by Eagle of The Ninth, (followed by *The Silver Branch*, *Frontier Wolf* and *The Lantern Bearers*) and tells, in flashback, in Artorius's own words, the story of Artos The Bear, Count of Britain, war leader under the High King Ambrosius, battling to hold together the last remnants of Romano-British Civilisation in Britain, in the face of Saxon invaders. The historical detail is meticulous. This is a book about war, about holding back the darkness for as long as possible, trying to forge a nation out of tribes, princelings and warlords. But into this context Sutcliffe still weaves the parts of the legend we know - the seed of sin that will undo Artos's efforts, the betrayal by those closest to him.

A large part of the book is taken up with his campaigning beyond Hadrian's Wall as he seeks to quell the Scots and forge alliances. It is here he meets and marries Guenhumara (Guinevere). There is sorrow and hardship, laughter and the bond of brotherhood. There may be no round table but there is definitely a band of Brothers.

There is no Camelot here, no Lancelot, no Merlin, but the tale is not lessened by their absence. The sense of doom, of inevitable fate pervades the novel as the old drama plays out. Artorius does indeed become High King but there is no real lasting peace. There are constant battles to be fought.

In the end, the light of civilisation must inevitably succumb to the Saxon hordes, for that is how the history of these Isles is written. We are a people of immigrants - Roman, Saxon, Jute, Angle, Norman....the list goes on. Britain is, and always has been, greater than the sum of its parts and we have never been defined by one race or people. We would do well to remember that now.

Sutcliffe's novel is superb, one of the best retellings of the tale of Arthur and a must for anyone interested in Arthur and what it means to be British.

Hic iacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rexque futurus.

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### **Athos says**

I enjoyed this very much, despite it being a story that I knew and knew well how it ends. After all, how many books have been written about King Arthur?!

The tactical skill and maneuvers of the battles were my favourite. They were very satisfying, like the strategy in the battles in Ender's Game. Often when you read about large armies coming together, the focus is on mass confusion and disarray and frustrating incompetence, but not here; whether it was just Artos' instinct as a war leader, or something that remained of his Roman training - who knows, but it was awesome!

The narration is from Artos' viewpoint, and about halfway through I started to notice the amount of description of each moment in time, and it jarred a little - as if it couldn't possibly be Artos who noticed all these things, but the author's eye coming through. I got over that, though. Artos is portrayed as such a skilled commander and judge of human nature, that it isn't surprising he WOULD notice all these little details.

When Artos and his companions grow old, he looks around at the young men of Britain and muses that in his time, young men were braver, larger somehow, and now they are diminished. Rosemary Sutcliff's books are like that to me - a bit larger and greater than what is published today in the same general genre. She can make you feel more - friendship is sweeter and deeper, the deeds of the day are greater and truer and more moving. I had this same feeling at the end of her Eagle of the Ninth - that I had a brief view of a larger, grander capacity of the human heart.

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### **Nikki says**

I didn't think I was going to like Sword at Sunset as much as I typically like Rosemary Sutcliff's books, even though it was surely combining two of my favourite things -- Sutcliff's writing and realism, and Arthurian myth. It began slowly, I think, and it was a surprising change of tone for Sutcliff -- her books are mainly written for children (of any age!), but this book had decidedly adult themes, with the incest and more explicit references to sexuality than I'd expected. It's also unusual for her in that it's written in first person, and narrated by Arthur himself.

It also, to my surprise, had a couple of LGBT themes -- a gay couple among Arthur's men, to begin with, and then the relationship between himself and Bedwyr. There's no Lancelot here, and Bedwyr takes that place in

many ways, but with more of a *shown* relationship than I've ever found typical between Arthur and Lancelot. It brought tears to my eyes several times, especially this moment: "I could have cried out to him, as Jonathan to David, by the forbidden love names that are not used between men; I could have flung my arms around his shoulders."

There's nothing explicit about them, at all, but their bond has a profoundness about it, even after hurt and betrayal, that defies easy categorisation.

The relationship between Arthur and Guinevere is also an interesting one, and again one that makes no shortcuts using the existing myth, but builds up something believable alone. His relationship with her, the odd barriers between them, and the attempts to reach each other, and their love that isn't quite enough to bridge that gap... It's all believable.

The whole book takes some pains to be believable, emotionally, and historically. The themes, characters, etc, all seem to have some explanations for how the story could develop later... Bedwyr somewhat in the place that Lancelot takes later, Medraut almost exactly as he will be later, the moment in which Arthur realises how the badge he chooses for battle will be translated into that text which talks about him carrying the image of the Virgin Mary... And they're all aware of how the stories will be magnified, too. It's an interesting way to put it.

Oh, and I forgot to mention it when I first wrote this review, but I was fascinated by Gwalchmai, despite his relatively minor role. It's odd: he isn't related to Arthur (one of the constants of the Arthurian tradition more generally), and though he is a fighter, his main role is that of surgeon. He's also disabled. I don't think I've seen a portrayal of Gawain/Gwalchmai quite like this anywhere else.

It took me a while to get into *Sword at Sunset*, but it was worth trusting Rosemary Sutcliff and going with it.

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## Gary says

I had not heard of this work or of Rosemary Sutcliff until I found this at a bargain charity shop, and I already had my favourite Arthurian novels and series : Nancy McKenzie's Guinevere books, the Mists of Avalon, Mary Stewart , and Benard Cronwell.

Written in a style that needs concentration and focus to absorb it is nonetheless rewarding and enriching as it places Arthur firmly in the Romano-Celtic tradition dispensing with the anachronistic medieval knight and chivalry affair.

Sutcliff did her research of 4th century Britain well as we read of Artos and his companions (No 'Knights of the Round Table) travelling across Britain to keep the Saxon invaders and the raiding Picts and Scots out. An interesting part here comes from Artos engagement with the Little Dark People, a fascinating race of the original pre-Celtic inhabitants of Britain , skilled in herblore and mysticism , and fighting for survival against stronger tribes, they do not act aggressively to other people if unprovoked but once they are harmed they become fatal and implacable enemies. Their girls are beautiful but age quickly

There is no Merlin here, no Grail Quest, Lancelot is absent but his character is filled in with Arthur's close friend and comrade Bedwyr. and here's where the adultery committed with Arthur's Caledonian queen Guinemara comes in.

Very vivid and poetic description of 4th century Britain. Gritty realistic war scenes, strong sense of realism when confronted with love, hate and betrayal Masterful description of how Artos is drugged and deceived into sexual intercourse with his half-sister Ygernia (clearly the one we know in most tales as Morgause or Morgana) and the later arrival in his life of the result of that union and his doom, Medraut, a youth brought up on hatred.

Central to the novel is the struggle by Artos to keep Romano-British civilization alive against the ever encroaching and belligerent Saxon aggressor, Definitely a recommended part of your Arthurian experience- influenced the writings of Jack Whyte and the 2004 King Arthur film with Kiera Knightley and Clive Owen.

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## **Martin Lake says**

### **SWORD AT SUNSET**

I borrowed *Sword at Sunset* from my local library in my youth and thought it wonderful. Many years later I found it in paperback and settled down with much anticipation to read it. I put it down after half a chapter, unable to read further because of the densely packed lines, poor paper and blurry print. It was a sore disappointment.

Recently I saw it was available on Kindle and immediately bought it.

Once again I settled down to read it. Again I put it down after one chapter.

This was for a different reason. I was overwhelmed by the artistry and mastery of the writing. I was caught and entranced, swept into a lost time and a tale which I knew would take me beyond myself and my world. In that first chapter I knew I was in the company of a man with many strengths and many failings. His destiny would forge him into a hero, a shining beacon for his people. He would lead a doomed dream of defiance and hopeless hope.

I gulped and started to read the rest of the book. I could barely put it down.

Rosemary Sutcliff has rewritten the epic of Arthur for the modern age. She chose to place the novel in a time when a character such as Arthur may have lived, the century after the Romans left Britain when the scent and semblance of their power still lingered in towns and palaces and in the hearts and minds of a few.

Artos, the protagonist of *Sword at Sunset*, was one of the men who held fast to the dream of Rome.

Taking the novel out of the fanciful medieval setting enabled Sutcliff to bridge the gap between the man and the hero. She was able to blend the epic with an intimately personal novel about a man whose dedication to a noble cause could only come at a terrible personal price.

The plot of the novel is superb, the characters fascinating and beautifully realised. I don't know how she was able to pack so much punch into every line. Her descriptions of the country are wonderful, her insights into the hearts and minds of her characters humane and clear-sighted. She maintains a light but firm grip on a lengthy narrative which spans twenty years and a thousand miles. Her descriptions of love, friendship and the terrors of battle are breathtaking.

I know of no other novel which captivates me so much that I believe I am walking in the world it describes. It is a masterpiece.

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## **Lucy Barnhouse says**

"There will be more songs tomorrow." I loved this book for different reasons, reading it in my early 30s, than I did when discovering it in my teens. I still love it -- Sutcliff's descriptions of landscape and evocation of seasons are quite wonderful -- and the remarkably realized Arthur at its heart, an Arthur who tells his own story. Reading it in this particular life phase, I found it a very moving tribute to the uncertainty and loneliness of trying to craft a life's work, and the exhilarating joy of finding friends to work alongside you. Plus, it's King Arthur! How could I not love King Arthur? On a less besotted and more practical note, early medieval Britain's multiple peoples and religions are also fascinatingly treated; as a medievalist, I appreciated Sutcliff's work at imagining the shifting power dynamics of this postcolonial landscape.

## Isis says

This is Standard Arthurian Legend without the Standard and the Legend; Sutcliff grounds her story in the real history and salts it with the grit and pain of real war. The characters' names may not be recognizable (other than Artos and Guenhumara, which are barely so) but the story is familiar. And even the standard story (Arthur betrayed by his son by his half-sister, and by his best friend) is really only a minor part of this story of one man's battle to unite Britain - the tribes and the remnants of Rome - against the Saxon invaders and their allies.

I am also tagging this glbt because one important thread in this book is the story of two of Artos's soldiers who love each other; and there are implications that Artos and Bedwyr (the Lancelot role) may be lovers as well - certainly they are "closer than brothers". But really, the themes are similar to those of Sutcliff's other books, of loyalty and brotherhood, of love for one's country and those who fight shoulder-to-shoulder with you to help you keep it safe, and of keeping the light of civilization burning bright against the barbarian dark.

The writing is magnificent, and my emotions took a beating in this one.

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## Ron says

The best "modern" Arthur story I've read. Wish I'd read it forty years ago. About as close to a happy ending as you can hope for given how many of his close friends and relatives were betraying our protagonist.

Not to be confused with historically accurate, you understand, but that's never been a big consideration in Arthur stories. I can sum Rosemary's errors in one word: stirrup. Western Europe still didn't have stirrups when Charles Martel stopped the Umayyads at Tours in 732. Artos couldn't have had them in Britain 400 years earlier. And without stirrups using long spears like Medieval lances is impossible. Hey, it's fiction.

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## Cphe says

This is very simply a wonderful book. Rich in characterisation not only of Artos the Bear but also of his wonderful Companions.

It is Artos, warrior, horseman, leader of men who gave rise to the later more romantic, sanitised depiction of King Arthur.

We see a different side to Guenhemara, who he takes to wife.

This is a gritty story, and for me a more plausible story of the rise of Arthur and brings him to life on the pages. It is a story that is vibrant and engrossing. I know that this review will in all probability be unable to do justice to just how very rewarding and enriching this book is.

Many feelings come forth for the reader in this bloodthirsty and rousing story. The dream that Artos had that early Britain would be united against her foes. It is a story rich in paganism, pageantry and comradeship but it is also a story of treachery.

This is a magnificent book....I didn't want it to end

## SA says

If I had read this book as a child, it would have fundamentally changed my life in the way *The Dark is Rising* did.

I'm not sure I can do credit to "Sword at Sunset." Sutcliff wrote this fundamentally realist version of the Arthur mythos in the fifties, and the degree to which it has apparently influenced all realist and semi-realist Arthurian narratives that follow it is vast. I've read a fair amount of these and other Arthurian books--not that I would call myself an Arthurian per se, more of a habitual enthusiast--and Sutcliff's rendering reads so fundamentally sound that it's clear where later iterations lightly lifted their plot from.

The balance of the Romano-British tradition juxtaposed against the Saxon expansion was masterful. The two key dramatic parts of the Arthurian narrative were kept and for the first time in a decade or more, they actually kept me on the edge of my seat--even knowing what would happen.

If you have the slightest inclination towards the Arthurian mythos, read this. Sutcliff was a master at her craft, and this is her crowning adult reader work.

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## Sally Ewan says

Ah, the beauty of a well-written book. While I was reading this, the characters stayed with me, so that as I went about my daily life, I was aware of them there in my mind, as real as the rest of the world around me. Sutcliff has a very powerful writing style; calm, quiet, yet full of strength. This is the story of Arthur fighting the Saxons in post-Roman Britain, yet it is a more realistic Arthur, without the trappings of medieval chivalry that distract us from the hardships of battle. This Arthur is a king who fights for freedom and peace, "the dream that keeps men alive", and in him we see glimpses of our own High King. (Indeed, Sutcliff explicitly refers to the king who must sacrifice himself for his people.) Arthur is a true hero, called to do hard things at a great cost, putting his own interests aside for the sake of others. This is an inspiring story, and I admire the way the author wove together other parts of the legend into this more earthy version.

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## Brian says

Sword At Sunset is an a retelling of the Arthurian legend with the emphasis on realism. Arthur, or Artos as he is here known, is a warlord struggling to unite the disparate tribes of Britain against Saxon invaders.

The writing bears all the Rosemary Sutcliff hallmarks: detailed observation of nature, a powerful sense of location, and a poignant lyricism. However, the narrative is over-long and lacks the driving plot of its predecessor, *The Lantern Bearers*. In places it seems to get bogged down by the amount of history it attempts to cover.

Nevertheless, it's an entirely convincing reconstruction of what life must have been like at the onset of the Dark Ages in Britain and a very satisfying read, especially for readers who enjoy historical fiction.

Warning: Although this is part of the same sequence as *The Eagle Of The Ninth*, *The Silver Branch* and *The*

Lantern Bearers, all of which were considered children's books, the themes of Sword At Sunset are entirely adult and include incest, adultery and ethnic slaughter.

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## Kendra says

How can I ever say enough about this book. My star rating above is 4 1/2 stars...not 5 because although I did love the story, the writing, the voice, the characters, etc...there were times when I felt bogged down and other brief moments when I was a bit lost and not sure about the details. But overall, this book is fabulous!

I had never heard of Rosemary Sutcliff and had never heard of Sword at Sunset, originally published in 1963. Amazon recommended it as one I might enjoy and it was a perfect recommendation! Set in the 11th Century, the main character is King Arthur, or Artos as he is known here. Artos spends his entire life fighting to save Britain.

It feels like such a cliché to say but it's true when I explain that there were many times I was so wrapped up in the story that I forgot what was going on around me in the real world. I was RIGHT there in the wilds of ancient Britain...right there in the battles and traveling adventures. The characters are so real and the descriptions so vivid...it was so easy to immerse myself.

Enjoy these short morsels taken from the book:

*"For the first three days the hunter led us northwestward, by the road and then by looping marsh ways that followed the firm ground among the reedbeds and winding waters and thickets of thorn and willows, where left to ourselves we should have been hopelessly lost within an hour, and where, even as it was, the horses were often fetlock deep in the dark sour-smelling ooze. One twilight we passed the burned-out remains of a Saxon settlement that had been our work in the previous year, and something - a wildcat, maybe - screamed at us from the ruins. After three days we began to pull up out of the marshes, into softly undulating country and low hills, where the wind over the dead heather made a sound that was harsh in our ears after the softer wind-song over the marshes that we had known so long."*

*"I was managing him with my knees alone, the reins loose on his neck, that I might have one hand for my spear and the fold of my cloak across his eyes. I sang to him, shouted in his laid-back ear. 'On, brave heart! Sa sa sa-up, come up, bold and beautiful! Come up, my hero!'*  
*And old Arian answered me like a hero indeed. He gathered himself together, greathearted as he was, and with the terror of the fire in his nostrils, galloped straight forward into the dark, through the steaming and crackling inferno of the gateway and the massed spears beyond."*

*"My most dear, we have fought many fights together, and this is the last of them and it must be the best. If it is given to men to remember in the life we go to, remember that I loved you, and do not forget that you loved me."*