


Erica Wagner



 Children's books don't always travel as well as books for adults. Or, rather, books that have currency in the world of children's literature don't always find the same following in different countries — not only because of cultural differences, but also because children, unlike adults, are more dependent on adults to guide their reading. I say “are” — I am thinking about my own childhood — but I probably should write “were”, because kids now have phones and go online like the rest of us, and are much more plugged in for themselves.

So I'm not saying that no one had ever heard of C. S. Lewis in America, where I grew up — but when I came across *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* at the age of 9, thanks to the children of some English friends of my parents, I was struck with the force of revelation; I brought back the Narnia books from England and all my friends were equally amazed. What had we been reading? *Little House on the Prairie*. *Harriet the Spy*. No one had thought to lead us to Narnia.

I did not hear of Alan Garner — whose classic children's novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, has recently celebrated its 50th anniversary — until I came to work at *The Times*, and I began to feel that this was an author I ought to get to know. Now I wish that I'd read *The Weirdstone* when I was a lass, but I didn't and that's that.

And Rosemary Sutcliff? I never read anything of hers until ... well, until a few weeks ago, when I was invited to a screening of *The Eagle* and thought — after I'd seen, and enjoyed, the film — that I'd have a look at the book, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, before handing it over to my son.

It bears repeating: it's not that Rosemary Sutcliff — whose godson, Anthony Lawton, is interviewed by Amanda Craig on the facing page — is unknown in America. She is published there and published well; her books are adorned with raves from the



“
I wish I'd
read these
children's
books when
I was a lass,
but I didn't
and that's that

Chicago Tribune and the like. But if her books were in the library of my school, I never found them; if they were on the shelves of my local bookshop, I missed them. I read Mary Renault's books about Alexander the Great; T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. But no Rosemary Sutcliff.

And, again, I'm sorry for my younger self; but thrilled for the middle-aged person who now has a whole stack of delicious books to get through. Surely there is nothing like the joy of discovering an author, even if you feel a bit embarrassed that it has taken you this long to get to him or her. And while the film is, as Amanda says, a fine, straight-down-the-line sword'n'sandals epic, the book is much more subtle. Indeed, if I had a problem with the film it's that it seemed, on reflection, a bit like *Dances with Wolves* in reverse: are we really being encouraged to see the British tribes as savages who do things such as murdering their own children? It seemed to me that just might be the case — and that's not how it is in the book. Most interestingly, the relationship between Marcus, the Roman soldier, and Esca, the Briton, is wholly different in the book and the film, for the simple reason that in the book Esca is freed from enslavement at the beginning of their epic journey; it's not that way on screen. It's a profound change, and a strange one, to my way of thinking.

I'm sure you know all about Rosemary Sutcliff. I know I've got some catching up to do. But what's wrong with rereading books you love? Go on ...