

As a fan (and a student) of Ancient Rome since I was young, and a perpetual fan of Juvenile Fiction and YA novels, I've always been disappointed at the paucity of fiction with this setting. For "adults", there is at least an endless stream of mystery series, but, especially if one isn't interested in Christian fiction and conversion stories, it's slim pickings for younger readers. Since it's a more "niche" historical fiction period than, say, Tudor England or the American Civil War, I thought you and perhaps other Worst Bestsellers listeners might be interested in the annotated list I've put together of middle grade/YA "Roman historical fiction" (sticking to historical fiction -- no mythology, and mostly no fantasy -- to books that were published fairly widely and are probably still in libraries or easily findable used if not currently in print, and avoiding books with a strong religious message.)

Middle Grade

- *Detectives In Togas*, by Henry Winterfield. (Augustan Rome - circa 0). Exactly what it sounds like: a bunch of Roman schoolboys have to solve the abduction of their teacher. Good for the kid who likes e.g. Encyclopedia Brown or Nancy Drew.
- *The Time-Warp Trio: See You Later, Gladiator*, by Jon Scieszka. These are probably on your list already, because it's the closest fiction read-alike to Horrible Histories that I can think of. I love this series about three dorky losers screwing up time travel, and I hope that someday Worst Bestsellers does one for a Flashback Summer episode. They are funny with jokes for readers at all levels and ages.
- *The Thieves of Ostia* and sequels, by Caroline Lawrence (mid-first century CE). Middle-grade mysteries set in Roman Italy in the mid-first century CE. Several advantages to their relatively more recent date: (1) the "educational" historical detail reflects modern scholarship (yay!), including (2) paying attention to the lives of people who aren't elite Roman men (yay!), such that (3) Lawrence writes about a group of protagonists that reflect ancient and modern diversity (the initial two kids are an upper-class Roman girl, one is a Jewish boy, and a third protagonist, a girl of African descent, shows up pretty quickly. Yay!) and tackles issues like slavery, legal inequality, the brutality of the arena, and so forth in reasonably sensitive ways. There are also a million of them, plus some spin-offs as well.

YA - these skew toward female protagonists, because one of my enduring issues with trying to find YA novels set in antiquity is that so many of them are boy-centric. Obviously, everyone can and should read books about all kinds of people, but there's only so much *With Caesar Across The Rubicon: A Boy's Tale of Ancient Rome* that one can take. (I've read a *lot* of these! Hit me up if you really want a list).

That said, I had to start off with Sutcliff.

- *The Eagle of the Ninth*, by Rosemary Sutcliff. (Roman Britain - 2nd century CE). Written in the 1950s but actually holds up pretty well. A rollicking adventure-bromance between a wounded centurion and the British captive he rescues from the gladiatorial arena. More critical treatment of imperialism and subtle presentation of cultural difference than you might expect for the era. There was also a movie a few years ago

(*The Eagle*), that has Channing Tatum in it, for those who like that kind of thing. And a small but devoted fanfiction community writing fic that is definitely better than the movie (just search on ao3).

- Sutcliff wrote a bunch more Roman Britain books as well, spanning the 1st-4th centuries: *The Silver Branch*, *The Lantern Bearers*, *The Outcast*, *Song for a Dark Queen*.
- *Kleopatra VII: Daughter of the Nile*, by Kristiana Gregory - the *Royal Diaries* one about Cleopatra. It's pretty good, very much in the same line as others in the series. I believe Caroline Meyer also wrote a Cleopatra-centric novel, but I haven't read that one.
- *The Valiant*, by Lesley Livingstone (Late Republic/ 1st century BCE). First in a YA trilogy about female gladiators fighting for Julius Caesar. It's extremely YA: a group of teen girls with The Mean One, The Pretty One, The Non-White One, The One The Protagonist Befriends, and so on; they're *gladiators*; there's a dumb heterosexual romance with a bland dude with a stupid name. The depiction of the Late Republic (at least in the first one) is extremely weird, but historical details are obviously not the point here: badass girls with gladiator helmets are the point. For those who like YA dystopias of the fighty kind.
- *Blood and Sand*, by CV Wyk. (Spartacus - 1st century BCE) I admit I haven't read this one yet, but it claims to be gender-swapped Spartacus, so I'm pretty excited. Presumably would appeal to the same audience as *The Valiant*.
- **Cleopatra Selene Books**
(**Cleopatra who??** Cleopatra Selene was the daughter and only surviving child of Antony and Cleopatra; she was raised in Augustus' household, along with his children and adopted children and royal children from kingdoms under Rome's hegemony, including, for what it's worth, future emperors Tiberius and Claudius, the scandalous plotter Julia, Herod (yes that King Herod), and a metric fuck-ton of Parthian heirs, whom the Romans called "hostages" but who probably considered themselves more "exchange students". No one, to my knowledge, has written a *really good* YA novel about this frankly amazing set-up for a YA novel --the closest thing is the BBC "I Claudius." Which you should watch, especially if you want to admire young Patrick Stewart playing a villain. But I digress. There have been two separate YA novels/series about Cleopatra Selene recently.
 - *Cleopatra's Moon*, by Vicky Alvear Shecter
 - *Lily of the Nile*, *Daughters of the Nile*, *Song of the Nile*, by Stephanie Dray

They're both... fine, I guess. Both lean pretty heavily on the exceptional specialness of Selene, and her resistance to Roman attempts to stamp out her faith in Isis and her Egyptian identity. Neither deals as well with the subtleties of hybrid colonial identities in the Hellenistic Mediterranean as one might wish someone would do in this decade and age. I personally thought the character arc was stronger in the Dray

trilogy, which goes also entertainingly off the wall in places (Selene gets magical visions and there's an utterly bonkers subplot in the second or third book where she almost Anne Boleyns Augustus and becomes Empress) while also getting the characters to a place that was internally convincing as well as in line with What Actually Happened. By contrast, the Shecter one felt like it kept getting stuck because the author wanted to go in one direction, but felt that the "history" was tugging her in another. But either/both would appeal to readers who like the *Royal Diaries* series or Caroline Meyer's Tudor books or YA dystopia/fantasy that's more politics and fancy dresses than being forced to fight to the death in a literal arena.

A Couple That Are A Little Outside The Period Boundaries but...

- *Anna of Byzantium*, by Tracy Barrett. Well, the Byzantine emperors *called* themselves "Romans".... Another "historical princess" YA novel -- this time, about the real-life historian Anna Komene, who became a historian because her plot to usurp the throne from her brother didn't pan out. It's a superb YA historical fiction novel, for a time/place that doesn't get so much attention in the genre.
- Elizabeth Wein's Aksumite series. The first one, *The Winter Prince*, is a King Arthur retelling (one of the ones that leans into Arthur as a 6th century post-Roman leader; one thing that's great about it is the post-apocalyptic feel: there's all this decaying Roman technology that fewer and fewer people know how to fix, for example); the sequels (*A Coalition of Lions*, *The Sunbird*, *The Lion Hunter*, *The Empty* are set in 6th-century Ethiopia. From a historian's perspective, what I love about this series is how it takes on the breadth and expanse of "the Mediterranean" and "the Classical World" and reminds you that cultures were in contact, elites were intermarrying, trade of goods and ideas was happening.) From a YA-fiction-lover's perspective, what I love is that trademark Elizabeth Wein combination of a clear-eyed examination of the human capacity for cruelty with an equally deep appreciation for the human capacity for love. This would also be a great read-alike series for fans of Megan Whalen Turner, whose books I can't really in justice count in a round-up of "fiction set in ancient Rome" (but look: I did anyway).