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# VITA AND THE GLADIATOR

Ally Sherrick

## READING GUIDE



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# VITA AND THE GLADIATOR

BY ALLY SHERRICK

## SYNOPSIS

When high-born Vita's father is murdered in Roman Londinium, Vita is forced to disguise herself as a slave at the gladiators' arena. Here she forges an unlikely bond with Brea, a native Briton gladiatrix. Together, they resolve to bring the killer to justice before Vita is discovered ...

A rip-roaring adventure set in Roman London from the rising queen of middle-grade historical fiction, Ally Sherrick – winner of the Historical Association Young Quills Award.

## WHAT THE PUBLISHER SAYS ...

*'We've seen them a thousand times in films and on TV, but everyone wonders what life was really like for gladiators in ancient times ...*

*Well, the wonderful Ally Sherrick sets the scene in Roman London – and, alongside our heroine Vita, you'll soon discover there's a lot more to it than fighting in the arena.*

*You'll love this cracking tale of a young girl caught up in a world of intrigue and revolt. It's a story of dreams, betrayal, cruelty and bravery ... with a great ending! Real history, grippingly imagined. What more can you ask for?'*

**BARRY CUNNINGHAM, CHICKEN HOUSE**



## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

Ally was born and grew up in Surrey. She graduated with a BA in Medieval History, English and French from the University of Newcastle in 1987 and, in 2011, with distinction from the Writing for Children MA course at the University of Winchester. After a short spell working as a trainee editor, she has spent most of her professional career working in public relations and marketing on a host of projects from the promotion of Britain to overseas visitors to science festivals, Olympics celebrations and the development and delivery of an oral history project. Her debut children's novel, *Black Powder*, won the Historical Association's Young Quills Award, the North Somerset Teachers' Book Award and was shortlisted for eight others. Her other books for Chicken House include *The Buried Crown*, a wartime adventure of Nazi treasure thievery linked to the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial discovery and *The Queen's Fool*, the story of Cat Sparrow, a girl with learning disabilities who, together with her French actor friend, Jacques, finds herself plunged into the centre of a treasonous plot at the court of Henry VIII and Queen Katherine. Ally is married and lives with her husband and assorted garden wildlife in South West Surrey.

## AUTHOR MOTIVATION

'I've always loved stories of Ancient Rome – especially the 'swords and sandals' epics of the big screen such as the Hollywood classic *Spartacus* and the more recent Ridley Scott film, *Gladiator*.

Both films feature plenty of bravery, heroism and sacrifice, plus the blood, sweat and brutality of gladiatorial combat in the Roman arena. But they are of their time, and the main gladiator heroes are all men with the women consigned to supporting roles as slaves, wives or girlfriends.

When I saw a photograph of a carved stone relief in the British Museum of 'Achillia' and 'Amazonia', two female gladiators (or gladiatrices as they are called now), my story whiskers began to twitch. Further research fanned the spark and led to the creation of my two young heroes, Vita and Brea.

Of course, I needed a time and place to set their story in too. I could have picked Ancient Rome, the heart of the Empire, but when I discovered that Roman London (Londinium) also had its own arena, I knew this was where



Vita and Brea's battle for truth and justice should take place. And what better time to set it in than during the reign of the famous emperor, Hadrian, the man responsible for the construction of the great wall stretching 80 miles across the far north of Britannia, a land in those days at the end of the known world.

This setting gave me the opportunity to explore two very different world views – that of privileged nobleman and magistrate's daughter, Vita and also of the fierce captive British huntress, Brea who Vita finds herself forced to share a cell with at the gladiator school along with Brea's wolf companion, Col. And it also enabled me to tell a story of how, in spite of the initial barriers of prejudice and class, through sharing their very different experiences, they were able to form a bond of friendship powerful enough to overcome the most formidable of enemies.' **ALLY SHERRICK**

## THEMES

- Courage against the odds
- Truth and justice
- Storytelling
- Friendship and loyalty
- Family and love
- Grief and acceptance of death

## WRITING STYLE

*Vita and the Gladiator* is written in the third person, past tense, and sticks closely to the perspective of main character, Vita. The author's straightforward but immersive storytelling style is typical of historical fiction, allowing her to weave in period details effortlessly while remaining emotionally engaged with the characters.

**328 pages, ages 9+**



# PUPIL ACTIVITIES

## 1. Welcome to the arena

Though there were bands of fighters who travelled from place to place putting on fighting shows in market-places, ‘real’ gladiators fought in a purpose-built arena or amphitheatre. This was a large, earth and wood or stone-built building typically located in a larger Roman town. The most famous example is the Colosseum in Rome, but there were amphitheatres in all major cities across the Roman Empire, including many in the Roman province of Britannia. The grand climax of Ally’s story happens in the arena in Londinium, the original location of which was discovered in the late 1980s in the City of London. You can visit the remains in a specially lit underground room, though at the time of Ally’s story, the arena would have been roofless and open to the elements.

Ally did lots of research before writing the book to be sure to make the setting as authentic as possible. For example, she included a scene in a special closed room where archaeologists believe the gladiators were kept waiting before the fight. Also a niche in the arena walls for a statue of the goddess Fortuna, the goddess of good luck and bad to whom gladiators would pray before a fight. And the souvenir stalls outside where spectators could buy a clay model of their favourite fighter, or perhaps a replica sword. When Vita and Brea appear there, the arena has just been renovated by the famous Emperor Hadrian, and could seat up to 7, 000 people. A pretty terrifying prospect for all but the most battle-hardened of warriors!

*‘And now, here was the arena rising up in front of them, its great timber walls easily the height of ten men ... She shivered at the sight of the huge entrance arch, its gates thrown wide to receive them, a row of soldiers standing to attention on either side.’ (Page 205/6)*

- a) Imagine that like Vita you have to fight for your life in the arena. You might be a trained gladiator – or like Vita, you might have been forced into appearing against your will. Write a short scene of up to 500 words describing what you experience as you first walk out before the crowds to meet your opponent in the ring.





- b) Gladiators who fought well and survived to live another day were often treated as celebrities by the crowds who came to watch them in the arena. In Ally's story, one of the star gladiators Vita and Brea have to stand up against is a fearsome warrior called Cronos the Skull-Crusher. Using books and online resources, research the different types of gladiator that used to fight in the arena in Roman times. Then design a colour A4-sized poster advertising a gladiatorial games coming to the town where you live. Include important things like the date, the place, where you can get tickets from and who the organiser is (it might even be you!). Make sure to feature a picture of your star fighter. And don't forget to give them a great stage name too!

## ***2. Justice and revenge***

The world of the gladiator into which Roman magistrate's daughter, Vita is unexpectedly pitched after the murder of her beloved father, is an alien one to us – barbaric and cruel-seeming. But for Roman society across the Empire, the arena was the place where imperial justice was seen to be served and a sense of order reinforced – a reminder of the power of the Emperor in Rome and the meaning and worth of Roman citizenship.

Though some volunteered to fight in the arena, the majority of gladiators were a mix of criminals sentenced to die by the sword (*damnati ad gladium*) or condemned to the games (*damnati ad ludos*), prisoners-of-war, or else slaves sold to the gladiator-school by their masters for being disobedient or unruly. Like actors, dancers and certain other groups in society, gladiators were classed as *infames*, despised and segregated from ordinary citizens. However, if they fought bravely in the arena and died well (if the games' organiser had decreed it should be a fight to the death), as mentioned in Activity 1, they were capable of winning admiration and even adulation from the crowd.

On a more personal level, in spite of being sold as a slave to a gladiator school by one of her father's assassins, Vita is determined to bring those responsible to justice. Meanwhile her cell-mate, the fierce beast-hunter and native Briton, Brea is on a quest to be avenged for what the Roman army, or 'Eagle-men' as she calls them, have done to her own family.



The pair argue about what justice means for each of them as the story unfolds and they learn more about each other's pasts. For example:

*'... now my path has crossed with his, I will hunt him down and take his lifeblood from him as surely as he took it from our father.'*

*Vita shivered and turned her head away.*

*'What is wrong? You must want the same thing for your father. Your mother and brother too?'*

*'Yes, but ... but not like that.'*

*'How then?'*

*'By arresting the one responsible, bringing him to trial and proving him guilty in a court of law. Then, after that is done, he will be sentenced to death and executed.'*

*The wolf-woman gave a loud snort. 'The Roman way! ... You know the snake's guilt. We both do. Better to strike quickly and have done with it.'*

*'But that wouldn't be just. Or fair either.'*

*'Was it just or fair when he ordered my father's throat cut and yours butchered?'* (Pages 185/6)

To explore this theme of justice in the classroom, encourage students to research the gladiatorial games. Then ask them to stage a debate exploring the rights and wrongs of gladiatorial contests and some of the other practices that took place in the arena – for example beast hunts (the venatio) and the execution of those termed 'criminals'.

Alternatively, or in addition, pairs of students could adopt and explore Vita and Brea's positions on what justice means to each of them and see if they can shift the other person's point of view through the power of argument. Then switch characters to gain an insight into things from the other person's perspective.

### **3. Gods, myths and monsters**

a) *'I'm sorry, Little Owl. I did not mean to speak harshly.' ...*



*Her heart fluttered at his use of her special pet name. The owl was sacred to her favourite goddess, Minerva – the goddess of wisdom, poetry and justice. (Page 4)*

The Romans believed in many gods, each with their own special representations and responsibilities. Vita's personal favourite is Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, poetry, justice and many other things besides. But she also prays to Fortuna, goddess of fate, fortune and luck, as gladiators would pray to her before heading out to fight. Meanwhile, there are several hints in the story that her intended husband, Agrippa might be a follower of the mysterious Cult of Mithras, particularly popular with Roman soldiers, and which revolved around the story of the god Mithras slaying a bull.

Research a god or goddess of the Roman world. Create a 3D or pictorial Roman-style shrine to them using appropriate imagery and items to represent what they stand for. For example, a shrine to Minerva might include a pen and papyrus scroll, the image of an owl and her famous helmet, shield and spear.

What sort of prayers might someone from the Roman world want to offer up to your chosen immortal? Search for different examples from *Vita and the Gladiator* to get an idea. Imagine what might happen if someone (you?) got on the god or goddess's wrong side. How might this happen, how would they choose to punish you and how might you try and win their forgiveness? Researching famous Greek myths like The Twelve Labours of Hercules might give you some ideas!

b) *'What does the hare mean?'*

*At first Brea didn't answer, but when she turned round to reply, the track of a single tear glistened on her left cheek.*

*'For us it means the life that never dies – like the moon that fades each morning and is born again each night.'*

**(Page 151)**

Native British tribes such as Brea's would have had their own religion and mythology too – though less is known about them because they didn't write things down. Ally has created a version of a god of the hunt – 'the Horned One' – which Brea and her people worship. It is thought animals were significant to the native Britons too, not only as a means of survival, but also for their spiritual importance. Ally has tried to reflect this through Brea's attitude to the beasts





destined to die in the arena and in her association both with Col and with the symbol of the hare, a creature also linked to legends that grew up around the famous real-life warrior queen, Boudicca.

Research animal myths in ancient indigenous cultures (for example First Nations people in North America or Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands). Now pick your favourite animal and invent your own myth about it. Think about things like how it might have been created and who by. What special powers it has? Who are its friends, and who are its enemies? Is it a force for good, or something to be feared?

c) *'I am Theseus, Prince of Athens. I have voyaged to this fair island of Crete to do battle with the dreaded Minotaur, to slay it and put a stop to its reign of chaos and fear.'*

*Vita's heart bumped against her ribs. The story of Theseus and the Minotaur – one of her favourites! (Page 15)*

The story of hero Theseus and his journey into the labyrinth beneath King Minos's palace to slay the half-bull, half-man known as the Minotaur and his rescue from the underground maze by Princess Ariadne with her ball of twine, is one of the best-known of the Ancient Greek myths, as popular in the Roman world as it is today.

Ally has taken this myth – Vita's personal favourite – and woven it through her own story.

Encourage students to study the original myth of Theseus and the Minotaur using books and online resources. Then invite them to work in groups to identify the similarities and parallels – overt and more subtle – between Vita's circumstances and those of both Theseus and the Princess Ariadne at different stages of the story. Examples might include her appearance and escape from the stage in Chapter 3; her navigation of the rules and world of the gladiator training school after her arrival from Chapter 4 onwards; her following of various clues (thread) to identify her father's murderer; Leander's nickname for her; her appearance in the arena as 'the Princess Ariadne' and her final facing up to the 'beast' both literally in that scene and metaphorically in the scene with Agrippa in Chapter 28.



# WRITING PROMPTS/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## 1. Cowardice and courage

These two character traits feature strongly in the story and are often displayed by the same person at different stages. Do you think Vita becomes more courageous as the story progresses? Why? If you don't agree, explain why not. What about Brea, Taran, Cronos the Skullcrusher, Leander, Col, Otho and Agrippa?

What's the bravest thing you've ever done? And – if you're prepared to confess it – what's the most cowardly? If you had your chance again, would you do things differently? Why – or why not?

## 2. Slaves

*'It is not right that Festa is our slave ...'* (Page 284)

In Roman society, slaves, like Festa working in Vita's household and those in Otho's gladiator school, were the property of their masters and could be bought and sold at will. They couldn't hold citizenship which meant they couldn't vote and had no rights of their own. Though many were treated well by more enlightened slave-owners, the less fortunate were often whipped and mistreated, something which Agrippa is rumoured to be guilty of too. As a result, some slaves made a bid for freedom, like members of Taran's marsh rebels in Ally's story. If caught, such 'runaways' could expect a whipping at the least, to be branded with a hot iron, or in the worse case, even killed.

The enslavement of people in the territories the Roman army conquered was a key contributor to the creation, expansion and long-lasting nature of the Roman Empire and slaves were used in every part of society and economy. Although Ally doesn't refer to it in her story, the native tribes of Britons also enslaved people, usually those of enemy tribes, and traded them with the Romans.

What do you think it would feel like to have to give up your freedom like Vita or Leander and become a slave? Would you try to escape like Leander, or do you think you would stay put and hope one day your master



might free you? Give reasons for your answers. At the end of the story, Vita asks her mother to free their house-slave and maid, Festa. Festa accepts, though she asks to continue working for the family. What would you do in her circumstances and why?

### **3. Warriors and rebels**

*'Their power is too much now. I was foolish to think otherwise ...'* **(Page 289)**

These words are spoken by Taran, the rebel leader of the runaway slaves after the attempted revolt against the Roman authorities and the partial burning of Londinium at the end of the book. Why does he say what he says? What evidence is there that he's right? Do you think he was right to stage the revolt? Explain your reasons. Knowing what you know about the power of the Roman Empire and the Roman Army, if you were a slave, would you have joined him and the runaways in their fight? Say why or why not.

### **4. What's in a story?**

*'Words could be weapons too ...'* **(Page 243)**

What does Vita mean by these words? Do you agree with her? To help answer this question, explore and discuss how words and stories might be used as weapons of one sort or another by different characters and for different purposes in the book.

