

book the feel of an ancient epic poem. At the end of the first part of the book, we are told of how the Greeks and Trojans fought in Troy and how those descended from the Trojans are seeking revenge. Again, myth is linked to mortal life. The Persians are coming...

But this is more than a book where a nurse tells a child a mythical story – a brilliant ruse, I imagine of plenty of parents reading this book at bedtime – a girl must grow up. The second half of the book is told six years later. In the latter half of the first part of the book, the Athenian Themistocles turns up to meet Gorgo's father and makes friends with her. It is Themistocles who tells her of the Trojan war. Only Gorgo and Themistocles believe that the Persians are coming. Gorgo's house seems to be a magnet for famous figures from Ancient History – her father is the Spartan King Cleomenes who once led a Spartan expedition to Athens and expelled the Athenian tyrant Hippias. Hippias fled to Persia and persuades the Great King to attack. Cleomenes often has visitors in his house – Aristagoras turns up to ask Cleomenes to back the Ionian revolt against the Persians and he only turns to the Athenians when Cleomenes refuses. Philippides the runner turns up to ask the Spartans to help against the Persians at Marathon, but they refuse. The idea of so many famous people from Greek History turning up at the house of Cleomenes can seem a bit of a stretch at times but is a clever way to get information to the reader.

Gorgo is the narrator of the events of the Persian Wars – she hears the story of Marathon from Themistocles who was present at the battle. The Athenians are told how to find the silver mines at Mount Laurion because Gorgo is told by a nymph. She tells the story of Thermopylae because she is the wife of Leonidas. It reminds me very much of *Forrest Gump* – she seems to be present at all the major events in the Greco-Persian Wars! However, the narrative of the wars themselves briefly talks about the tactics and what is known about the battles from the historians. Marathon, Thermopylae and Salamis are covered in some detail, but Plataea is mentioned only very briefly. On occasions the gods intervene in the story – Poseidon sends a storm to destroy the Persian fleet, and Athene appears at Salamis. This elevates the events of the Persian Wars to the level of the great wars of the mythical past. The characters themselves are carefully written too. Themistocles is as mysteriously duplicitous as some Greeks found him! Gorgo remains as emotionally unattached to the death of her husband at Thermopylae as a Spartan woman should be.

In all, this is a book which covers a huge amount of material extremely well. It covers many myths and legends of the Greeks, the culture of Sparta and Athens and many of the famous events and figures of the Persian Wars. As a book for children, it is definitely something that parents could read at night – chapters are short and leave the reader in suspense at the end. As a book that children would read, I think it is highly enjoyable and for the more experienced reader. The high price reflects the excellent quality of the volume and this is definitely the sort of book that will last and serve to introduce new readers to the world of Greece. I look forward to his next book for children.

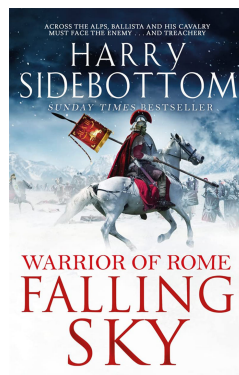
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Warrior of Rome: Falling Sky

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Harry Sidebottom once again has a winner with *Falling Sky*, the ninth book in his historical fiction *Warrior of Rome* series. While one would benefit from having read the previous books in the series, *Falling Sky* does stand on its own in this latest episode of Ballista and his cavalry as they pursue the newest enemy of Emperor Gallienus. The book is set in 265 CE in Gaul as Gallienus prepares for war to seize the territory taken by his opponent Postumus. Ballista leads part of Gallienus' army and faces challenges along the way – in the Alps

and then in southern Gaul. Loyalty is tested at every turn. Ballista is forced to navigate the murky and complicated waters of Roman politics, and to fight fellow Romans, not knowing whom he could trust, on the frontline under terrible conditions. Ballista's unit gets isolated and finding himself in a bind, he faces whether his leadership skills, strategy, and cunning will prove to be enough for him to succeed and ultimately retire to his beloved Sicily. This page-turner of an adventure presents us with a compelling plot, strong characterisation, and an intriguing moment in history.

One is left wondering at times if the usurper Postumus might have actually been a better leader than Gallienus. He certainly comes across as a much more humane leader, where Gallienus seems much more out for himself and unreliable.

This was a thoroughly enjoyable read. One would certainly benefit from some familiarity with the Latin names of towns, villages, and geographical features of ancient Gaul, as well as a basic familiarity with Latin military vocabulary. If one enjoys historical fiction, particularly historical fiction set in the late Roman Empire, then this book, and ultimately this whole series, will prove to be a must read.

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