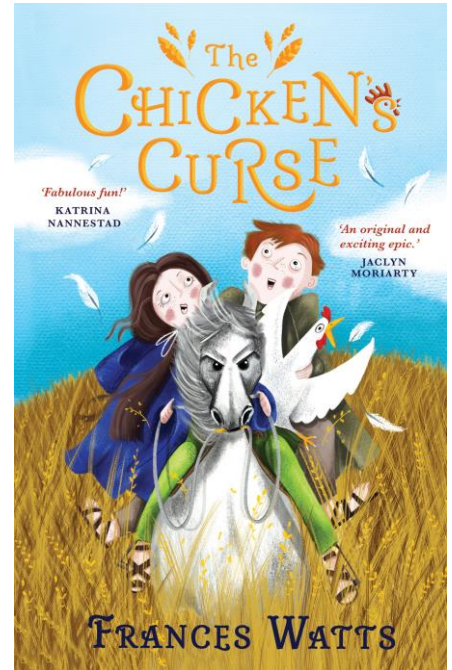


The Chicken's Curse

By Frances Watts

February 2020 ISBN 9781760525569
Paperback
Recommended for 8-12-year-olds



Summary

Felix and Livia are two runaways who are being pursued across the Roman empire, from the darkest, dampest corner of Gaul to the dry, desert sands of Tadmor. They must reach Rome by the Ides of April to rescue Livia's brother before he is sent into the arena to do battle with lions – and perhaps a vicious ostrich or two! Along the way, the pair are helped (and hindered) by a selfish sacred chicken, a foolish camel and a grumpy magic carpet as they encounter bandits, a shipwreck and a false accusation. Will they save Livia's brother in time, or will they all fall victim to the chicken's curse?



Don't let this whimsical story fool you because *The Chicken's Curse* is full of real historical details, with customs and beliefs (including portents and omens – there really were sacred chickens!) and historical events (such as Julius Caesar's quadruple triumph in April 46 BC) drawn from historical sources.

Use in the curriculum

The Chicken's Curse could be used in English classes or as part of an integrated unit on Ancient Rome.

It suits classrooms from Grade 3 to Grade 6.

In the English classroom, it lends itself to such discussions as:

- How do people's opinions change? How and why do Felix's opinions change?
- How does an author create a character?
- Literary forms: poetry and narrative types
- Use of humour in stories

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Themes

friendship, adventure, Roman history, talking animals, magic

Discussion questions

Pre-reading research

Break your class into groups of seven and ask each group to find answers to the following questions:

- Who was Julius Caesar and why is he famous?
- How large was the Roman Empire during Caesar's reign?
- How did the Romans capture parts of Europe and Africa?
- Why were sacred chickens important to the Romans before battles?
- Can you name three other superstitions held by the Romans?
- What types of animals often featured in the games held by the Romans during Caesar's reign?
- What happened to prisoners during these games?

Prelims

The 'prelims' (preliminary pages) are the pages of a book that precede the numbered pages.

- Why do you think the publisher has included a map at the front of the book?
- What mood is set by the poem by Titus Magius located on the page before Chapter 1?
- Do you think that this is going to be a funny or serious story?
- How do the images of chicken feathers and Roman soldiers reinforce this mood before you start reading the story?

Comprehension Questions for Chapter 1

1. Why is Felix worried when he hears the guards discussing a serpent outside the general's tent? (pp. 1-2)
2. Who were the Nervians? (p. 4)
3. What was the role of an augur? (pp. 3-5)
4. What happened to Publius Claudius Pulcher when he didn't pay attention to the sacred chickens? (p. 6)
5. What decision does Felix make to avoid being taken prisoner by the Nervians? (p. 8)

Comprehension Questions for Chapter 2

1. Why does Felix feel like the goddess Luna is smiling on him? (p. 10)
2. What do the guards mistake Felix for when he jumped into the bush? (p. 12)
3. Why does Felix mistake the hooded figure for a sacred chicken? (pp. 13-14)
4. How does the girl guess that Felix is not a messenger? (p. 15) What does this tell us about her?
5. Why is the sacred chicken running away to Rome? (p. 16)

(cont. over page)



6. Why do Felix and the girl decide to take the sacred chicken with them to Rome? (p. 17)
7. How does Felix work out the correct way to head towards Rome? (p. 18). What does this tell you about him?
8. Why is Felix touched by Livia's concern? (p. 22)
9. Why does Livia think the sacred chicken should be dumped? (p. 23)
10. Why does Felix feel a wave of weariness wash over him? (p. 23)

Characterisation

Divide a page into two columns and make a heading for Livia on one and Felix the other. Choose words to describe each character and place them in that character's column. For every word you put in a column you must give an example of something that character did, said or thought in the story that proved they are the word you chose. You could say, for instance, that Livia is smart because she quickly proved that Felix could not be a messenger; and that Felix is a peacemaker because he tries to stop Livia and the sacred chicken from constantly fighting.

Humour

Why do you think the author chose to include funny, fantastical characters such as the sacred chicken, the talking camel and the grumpy flying carpet in a story about a runaway slave and army deserter? Imagine if these characters were not in the story. Do you think you would have enjoyed the story more or less? Give reasons for your answer.

Themes

'She was right, Felix thought. Spending time with Livia was making him question everything he'd thought he knew.' (p. 87)

- How does travelling with Livia change Felix's opinion about slaves, and later in the story, about the wars Rome fights?

'Felix had never realised it before, but he saw now that poets could be very powerful.' (p. 124)

- What particular incident causes Felix to realise this?
- What happens later in the story to reinforce this theme? (*Hint*: it occurs in the arena.)
- Do you agree with the premise that poets and writers can be very powerful?

Poetry

There once was a general called Caesar

Who suffered a form of amnesia

He said he won all

But he forgot Gaul

What a silly old geezer.

Limericks: This kind of poem is known as a limerick.

(a) Research the term and describe the elements that make a limerick.

(b) Can you come up with your own version of a limerick following the same rhyming pattern? Start with the line, 'There once was a student from ...'

(c) Is it very likely that a poet in Ancient Rome would have written limericks?

Epic Poems: What are three attributes for a poem to be considered epic in ancient times? Titus Magius's epic poem at the end of the novel retells Felix and Livia's journey in four-line stanzas that represent each of the novel's chapters. To retell each chapter in just four lines the stanzas distil events to the barest and most important elements. So, the first line of the poem, *A serpent of enormous size*, describes the omen that Felix overhears the soldiers discuss on the first page. Can you 'translate' actual instances from the book from the rest of the poem?

Literary Theory

What is the Hero's Journey? See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1Zxt28ff-E> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero%27s_journey

- Do you think this term applies to Felix and Livia's travels to Rome?
- Give examples from this story that illustrate each of the stages of the Hero's Journey.

Author motivation

'I was born in Lausanne, a small city in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Although I moved to Sydney when I was three, I made frequent trips to Switzerland with my dad, who would take me to historical sites – particularly Roman sites – and tell me stories of glorious battles and (far more interesting!) inglorious defeats. This is where my love of history began. I studied both literature and Roman history at university, but when the time came to choose a major, I decided on literature. And so Roman history remained the road not taken ... until I became a writer. Now I'm able to pursue my own interest in history while also, I hope, inspiring a similar love in young readers.'

'I've always been particularly attracted by the quirky details of history, and it was while writing *The Raven's Wing* – a novel for young adults set in Ancient Rome – that I first encountered the Roman love of omens and portents, some of which were quirky indeed. For example, the outcome of a naval battle could depend on whether a sacred chicken ate scattered grain ... While researching the role of sacred chickens in Rome, I came across a mosaic of a chicken that looked like rather a character. And so I made it one in *The Chicken's Curse*.'

— Frances Watts

About the author

Frances Watts is the author of more than 25 books for children, including the bestselling picture book *Kisses for Daddy* (illustrated by David Legge), which has been published in 20 languages; *Parsley Rabbit's Book about Books* (illustrated by David Legge), a Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year; and *Goodnight, Mice!* (illustrated by Judy Watson), winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Fiction.

She is also the author of the medieval Sword Girl series (illustrated by Gregory Rogers) as well as two young adult novels, *The Raven's Wing* and *The Peony Lantern*.

Frances lives in Sydney, Australia.

