



# Teachers' Notes ESCAPE BY SEA

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Teachers' Notes written by L.S. Lawrence

## OMNIBUS BOOKS

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## INTRODUCTION

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In the year 206 BCE, Carthage falls to the Roman army. The only recourse for its citizens is to flee by ship and risk the wrath of the sea. Sara and her father Hanno, a Carthaginian senator, are wealthy enough to have a ship and crew at their disposal. When Hanno becomes sick with grief at news of his son's death by Roman sword, it is Sara who orchestrates their escape. Taking only necessary supplies, for their ship is loaded with valuable cargo, Sara and her father board the *Heron* and set sail. They narrowly escape the harbour, leaving behind other overcrowded ships wrecked in the ferocious storm.

Sara's people are traders, and despite their loss, she has faith in her father and their livelihood. However, once at sea, their future seems bleak. The *Heron* is attacked by Roman mercenaries and only Sara's bravery saves them from certain death. Atop the masthead, Sara unleashes heavy stones and smashes the boarding bridge set down by the Romans. The crew of the *Heron* capture a soldier, whom Sara's father realises is worth far more alive than dead. The soldier's costly gear reveals him to be a rich man's son, an ideal candidate for ransom.

Sara is given the task of tending the soldier's injuries, and her knowledge of healing craft ensures he survives the journey. The *Heron* drops anchor at Tarbarca, where Sara's father intends to collect a debt from the Greek trader Aratian. On learning that Aratian refuses to honour his debt, the crew threaten to kill him. Sara intervenes, pleading with her father to reconsider. For his daughter's sake Hanno consents, and instead they drop Aratian overboard with a cork float and depart the harbour. Aratian's betrayal is soon forgotten as they make plans to sail to Alexandria, a trading port.

Life at sea is lonely and Sara turns to her patient, Marcus, for companionship. When the *Heron* outruns a pirate vessel, the privateers turn their attack on a larger Roman vessel instead. Marcus persuades the crew of the *Heron* to offer their assistance, for if they are victorious, the Romans will be indebted to them. Though they win the battle, Sara's father suffers a belly wound and dies shortly after. On his death bed, Hanno tells Sara to trust Marcus.

Obala, the captain of the *Heron*, wants to return home, for the war in Africa is reportedly over, but Sara convinces the captain that her father's wish to sail to

Alexandria should be respected. Their cargo of silver bars, sword blades and steel will fetch a good price in Alexandria, but if they were to return home they would be accused of running weapons.

In Alexandria, Sara meets with her father's agent, who agrees to trade their cargo for gems, silks and spices. Sara intends to sail to Rome to sell her wares where there is no shortage of money. First, though, she must convince Obala and Marcus that it is their idea, for a woman's opinion is seldom respected in her world. She succeeds, and to her delight, Marcus promises to petition for his family's support on arrival in Rome. As a client of Marcus' family, Sara would be free to trade without fear of the Romans.

At sea once more, the *Heron* encounters another Roman vessel. It is decided, to avoid any suspicion, that Marcus should be transferred at once. He is no longer a hostage, but a passenger indebted to the crew of the *Heron* for their hospitality. They farewell him, and he promises to honour his debt when they meet again.

The *Heron* arrives in Italy safely, but having anchored there is no sign of Marcus or the Roman ship, *Huntress*. When Sara and her crew are accused of theft by Aratian, her father's Greek agent who was thrown overboard in Tarbarca, Sara fears they will not receive a fair trial. However, the next day, the Roman ship carrying Marcus sails into the harbour, having been delayed by a pirate attack. Once again, Sara tends Marcus' wounds and saves his life. Marcus' father, convinced of their honour, has already respected his debt and extended his family's resources to win the trial.

Sara's future, once uncertain, holds promise of exciting things to come.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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**L.S. Lawrence** was born in 1953 in London and emigrated to Australia in 1977, having gained a degree in History from University College. He taught in Australian secondary schools and two universities for many years, obtaining a master's degree in the process. Now semi-retired, he has returned to his first love, historical fiction and the ancient world. *Escape by Sea* is his second novel. *Eagle of the East* (Omnibus Books, 2007) is also a historical novel.

## **WRITING STYLE**

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L.S. Lawrence is passionate about history, and his fiction is based on historical events. His style is characterised by well-researched descriptions that are subtly woven into wonderfully poetic passages. So vivid and compelling is his recreation of the ancient world that readers are drawn in from the outset. Strong, charismatic characters are typical of his work, and his books are sure to find an audience with both male and female readers.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE STORY**

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### **POLITICAL**

Carthage and Rome were natural enemies, contending for mastery of the strait between Sicily and Africa. Whoever controlled it could dictate terms for trade between the eastern and the western Mediterranean, especially the grain trade with Egypt, a vital consideration for Rome. They had already fought one war over it, and in 206 BCE they had been at war again for a generation.

This Second Punic War ended with Carthage's defeat and the loss of her overseas possessions, but the final fall and destruction of the city did not occur until sixty years later, at the end of the Third Punic War. In 206 BCE Carthage survived – barely – after paying an enormous ransom and being shorn of all power. Rome, having made itself ruler of the western Mediterranean, now turned its attention eastwards. In the next decade, it would defeat Macedon, and make it a Roman client. As a result, the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean shifted decisively. Rome's triumph in the Second Punic War thus laid the foundations of what was to become the Roman Empire. This not only lasted for most of a millennium in itself, but it also built a bridge between east and west that has stood ever since. Hence, the event is crucial to the history of Europe, and of the whole world.

### **SOCIAL**

Women in Carthage appear to have been treated as chattels outside the home, but might very well have been supreme within it. Nevertheless, they were probably without formal rights and were automatically assumed to be under the protection and supervision of a male – father, husband, or nearest male relative. This did not necessarily mean total subjugation. Roman women, on the other hand, had formal legal rights – limited ones, but at least they could acquire,

inherit and manage property and live independently. They could hire and fire. They could negotiate with buyers and sellers. They could even initiate divorce.

Women's knowledge went largely unrecorded, but there seems to have been a good level of practical midwifery, and this very well might have been extended to other areas of medicine and surgery. One obvious crossover from women's traditional skills is the technique of stitching wounds.

## **SHIPS**

Little is known about the detail of the rigging of ancient sailing ships. However, by this date, they were capable of voyages throughout the Mediterranean, despite its notoriously shifty winds. The square sails seen in ancient art are often shown as elaborately brailed.<sup>1</sup> This would be to change the shape of the sail, a feature that could only have been useful when working upwind, and the shrouds are sometimes shown as secured aft of the mast, which would have made it possible to brace the yard through a wider arc. The lateen rig, touched on in the text, is of unknown origin, but it would also have improved upwind performance.

*Heron*, a ship in *Escape By Sea*, is a small Mediterranean trader of the day, with a carrying capacity of around fifty tons, but built for speed. Most (not all) depictions of merchant ships show them as round and clumsy, but there was good reason to build faster sailers, and no doubt that Mediterranean shipwrights could do it. The luxury trades returned high profits for light cargoes, and piracy was rife, particularly in the last centuries BCE.

## **BEFORE READING THE TEXT**

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**1.** Talk to your class about historical fiction. Do readers have certain expectations when they read this type of fiction? Do your students expect events and facts to be accurate? Do they think the author has an obligation to tell the truth? Do they think there are any limitations when writing in this genre? How much research do they think is required for writing such a book?

**2.** Students could be asked to investigate Carthage, Rome and Greece at the time when the *Escape by Sea* is set (206 BCE). They could look at the class systems, the relationships between countries, culture aspects, the role of women,

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<sup>1</sup> Brail: small ropes that are led from the leech of a fore-and-aft sail to pulleys on the mast for temporarily furling it.

and the organisation and practice of government. Can they find similarities in today's world? Outside of technology, how far have we progressed?

**3.** This novel is based on dramatic events in ancient history. Students could be asked to find out all they can about the ancient city of Carthage, once a large trading centre of the Mediterranean. Where is it located, and in which modern country? Is it still a city? Who were the Carthaginians?

**4.** Students could be asked to investigate the wars between Rome and Carthage, in particular key events such as the attempt by Hannibal to conquer Rome and Italy by moving his army over the Alps; he was famous for his innovation of using dozens of African elephants and transporting his army over rivers by barge.

## **READING THE TEXT**

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Ask your students to keep a journal detailing their reading progress. This could include a list of characters as they appear in the book, names of places, and a short description of chapters and events.

## **COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS**

The following questions can be answered individually or they can be used as discussion starters.

**Chapter 1:** Sara's servants make the sign against demons when one of them is injured. This is a protective measure to ward off evil spirits. Do you know of any superstitions where similar preventive measures are used? What happens in this chapter that shows us Sara is capable of taking charge?

**Chapter 2:** Why do you think spices were considered valuable cargo? Sara says they are worth more than gold. What do you think would be comparable today? Why is Sara surprised when her father talks to the castaway on board the *Heron*? What do you know about social classes in this era?

**Chapter 3:** What threatens the *Heron's* crew in this chapter? What does Sara say she will do to help? Do you think 'bruisewort ointment' really existed? What can

you find out about the medicine practices of this time? Would women have had medical knowledge?

**Chapter 4:** Sara shows great courage and spirit in the circumstances that she finds herself in, away from her cloistered existence at home. Sara's bravery saves the *Heron's* crew from certain death. Atop the masthead Sara launches heavy stones as the pirates set down a boarding bridge and attempt an attack. Is the author taking a 'Western' view of this character that reflects our times more than Sara's? Is Sara's behaviour realistic? Is it really possible to recreate a character from an earlier period of history?

**Chapter 5:** Where is the *Heron* headed and why? Why does Sara get angry at her father? Do you think her anger is reasonable? What happens in this chapter that makes Sara think she is seeing her father for the first time? What does Sara prevent from happening? Do you agree with her sentiments?

**Chapter 6:** What do we learn about how Rome is governed? What do Sara and Hanno discover about the Roman soldier in this chapter? What is Sara's opinion of the Greeks? Can you trust her judgement? Why is Hanno pleased that Carthage no longer has a navy, and how does this help their prospects? What produce does the *Heron* have to trade, and what do they want to trade for? Why does Hanno admire the Romans?

**Chapter 7:** What is the Roman naming practice that Marcus tells Sara about? Do you think Sara likes Marcus? What does Marcus say to unsettle Sara? What do the Romans demand in return for peace? How much do you think that would amount to in today's world?

**Chapter 8:** Why does Marcus hold the business of trading in contempt? Can you think of any professions that might cause the same reaction in people today? Why does Hanno say 'this might explain a lot about Rome', and do you think this is a realistic view?

**Chapter 9:** What do we learn about Marcus' character in this chapter? Why do you think Hanno trusts Marcus? How does Marcus convince the *Heron's* crew to save the Roman ship?

**Chapter 10:** Why is Marcus offended at Sara's assumption? How does Sara put Marcus in his place? What happens to Hanno, and what do you think this means for Sara? What does Hanno say to Sara, and do you think she should trust his opinion?

**Chapter 11:** Why doesn't Sara want to go back to Carthage? How does she convince the captain to continue on to Alexandria? At the end of the chapter, Sara describes herself as being 'free'. Is she really? Do you think women can be independent in this time? Sara is a strong female character, but to what extent is she still subject to male dominance? How does this affect her character and actions?

**Chapter 12:** What do we learn about Sara in this chapter? What are her plans for the future?

**Chapter 13:** Why is it necessary for Sara to trick men into doing what she wants? Does she always do this? What might have happened if Sara had simply told Marcus and Obala of her wish to travel to Rome and pointed out the reasons for her proposition?

**Chapter 14:** What happens in this chapter to make the future uncertain? Though Sara has found freedom, what has it cost her?

**Chapter 15:** Who causes trouble for Sara and the *Heron's* crew in this chapter? Revisit your answer in Chapter 5. Do the events in this chapter make you change your mind? Why, why not?

**Chapter 16:** Are there any similarities between the Roman trial and what you know of trials today?

**Chapter 17:** What does Marcus' father do to assure Sara of a trading future? What have Marcus and Sara learnt from knowing each other?

## **CREATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS**

The following activities are for students to complete individually.



1. There are many descriptive passages of the *Heron* in the text. Research ancient ships of the Mediterranean and produce a model of the *Heron* or the Roman ship *Huntress*. Alternatively, using pop sticks, Blu Tack and drawing pins, construct a model of the drawing bridge showing how it might have worked.

2. *Escape by Sea* is historical fiction. This means the author has based his story on historical fact. This does not mean that it is a true story, however. Write a fictional story based on a real-life event.

3. Sara can trace her family back over twelve generations. Has anyone drawn up a family tree in your family? How much do you know about your heritage? See what you can discover.

4. A 'simile' is a figure of speech where you compare two different things, usually with the words 'as' or 'like'. The opening line in *Escape by Sea* contains a simile:

The long African summer was over at last, but the warm afternoons still lingered, humid, *ripe as a fruit about to fall*.

'Ripe as a fruit about to fall' is a simile, and here it is used to make a comment about the African summer. What do you think it means? Using the following examples, compose your own set of similes. You might like to link them with a theme.

- It was as cold as ice.
- She smiled like a slobbering dog.
- His bike was as old as his mum.
- The bath was like a stormy sea.

5. Reread Chapter 16 and note the power of language. The advocate uses dramatic phrasing, rhetorical questions and repetition to persuade the Magistrate of his argument. Think of something that you were wrongly accused of, such as not doing your homework or eating the chocolates that disappeared from the pantry. Write a speech in your defence using the devices outlined above.

## **AFTER READING THE TEXT**

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The following questions can be used in a class discussion or answered individually by students.

**1.** The Romans sought to dominate other cultures through war. Does the Roman soldier Marcus learn anything from his captors? Do the Carthaginians learn from the Romans? Sara and Marcus see cultural differences in practice with Hanno's treatment of his hostage Aratian. Can you think of a modern equivalent of two very different cultures learning from each other?

**2.** Create a profile of one of the main characters, based on the questions:

- Who do you like most and why?
- Who do you sympathise with most and why?
- How has the author developed your involvement with the characters?

**3.** 'We do not always know what we think we know' is an idea that can be traced to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. This can be applied to our perceptions of other people, even those we are close to. Consider the characters in the text. Marcus, the Roman soldier, misjudges his father. Obala, the *Heron's* captain, believes that Sara will be happy to be returned to Carthage and domestic life. Sara too, is guilty of misjudging Marcus and misunderstanding her father.

Should we trust Sara's perceptions of other people? She hardly knows her cousins, for example. Is it reasonable to accept her estimations of them? To what extent is she consulting her own interests when she makes that assessment?

These questions can lead to an exploration of the 'unreliable narrator'. Consider the positioning of the text in *Escape by Sea*. It is told through a third-person limited omniscient narrator. This means that as readers, we are only privy to Sara's thoughts and opinions. What difference would it have made to the narrative had the thoughts of other characters been directly reported in the same way as Sara's?

It is also important to note that a character's opinion is not necessarily shared by the author.

**4.** Considerable research has been done to ensure that the text is relatively free from historical errors. There really was a Second Punic War. It really did end in the way described. There was a peace that lasted for another sixty years. Roman society, Carthaginian ships, trade, Alexandria, the port at Ostia and piracy really were as described.

But most readers would be unfamiliar with this history. Would it make any difference to the reader if there were any historical inaccuracies? Imagine you read a book set in Australia and it said the national sport was tobogganing. Is it okay for an author to use a real setting, like Australia, and make things up that aren't true? It is most likely that *Escape by Sea* never happened. Is this important? Consider fantasy and science fiction. These types of books don't represent reality at all. How are they successful, then?

**5.** Can one person make a difference? Is there such thing as heroic stature? Can Sara be considered a hero? Had Sara not been able to save Marcus, and therefore lost everything and been sold into slavery, would she have been less of a hero?

**6.** Consider a typical hero. Commonly, a virtuous character is responsible for averting disaster and in a tragedy, a character's flaws may be the cause of the disaster. L.S. Lawrence's text offers an alternate hero. Our protagonist, Sara, is not wholly virtuous – she deliberately manipulates and deceives people for personal gain – but it is one of her virtuous qualities – mercy – that almost leads to her downfall. Is this an argument for pure pragmatism? Had Sara acquiesced in Aratian's murder, would things have been easier for her?

## **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

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**1.** Much of *Escape by Sea* is set aboard a ship. Imagine living on a boat in close proximity to other people. In groups, create a two minute script about what might happen if people live together on a ship for long periods of time, and perform it.

**2.** What do you think would have happened if Sara and her father hadn't escaped Carthage? Consider the possibilities, and write a brief synopsis describing the story as you imagine it.

**3.** Reread Chapter 16 and take notes on the trial. In groups, hold mock trials. Assign the roles of magistrate, advocates, the accused and witnesses. Ask your teacher to provide the details of the crime and inform the defendant if they are really innocent or guilty. Act out the trials and have the class perform as a jury.

4. Though piracy is common in *Escape by Sea*, we never meet any pirate characters. Research famous pirates, and choose one to write a poem about.
5. Choose a culture you know little about and research it. Write 500 words explaining your findings.
6. Choose an event in the novel and retell it from the point of view of another character.

## **EXTENDED READING**

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Read other historical novels to compare with *Escape by Sea* such as *Eagle of the Ninth*, *The Silver Branch* and *The Lantern Bearers* written by Rosemary Sutcliff, *Eagle of the East* by L.S. Lawrence; *The Pearl Hunters* by Kim Wilkins. An annotated list, that covers various historical periods, can be found at [<http://lexicon.ci.anchorage.ak.us/guides/kids/booklists/historicalfiction/>](http://lexicon.ci.anchorage.ak.us/guides/kids/booklists/historicalfiction/)