

“MY LEGIONARIUS”

from the Novel

The Emperor's Babe (2001)

by

Bernadine Evaristo

Introduction

by Ingrid von Rosenberg

The Emperor's Babe was Bernardine Evaristo's second novel, written in verse like her first one, *Lara* (first edition 1997, an extended version 2009). Yet like all her work, *The Emperor's Babe* is unique, very different from its predecessor and from the books to follow: Evaristo loves to experiment with form, language and historical periods, yet always concentrating on the fate of black people in a western context. Was *Lara*, a semi-autobiographical story, set in the London of the 1970s with parts of the pre-history reaching as far back as 1835 and taking place in Africa, Ireland, Germany and Brazil, *The Emperor's Babe* is a revisionist historical novel set in an imagined Roman Londinum. Told in a sophisticated mixture of modern English and kitchen Latin, the text is sometimes hilarious, sometimes very touching. Evaristo's Roman Empire is a state where black people are citizens, can follow a trade or even become emperors, though, needless to say, many habits and circumstances are very reminiscent of present-day British society. The young heroine Zuleika is the daughter of a black green grocer in Londinum, who sells her at a very tender age to a rich Roman merchant, a fat habitual rapist with a second family in Rome. She entertains herself during her husband's absences with female friends and dabbles with poetry until one day she meets Emperor Septimus Severus, an African according to historiography and black in Evaristo's version. A great love story develops, which, sadly, ends with the death of both. The following passage presents the first sexy love scene between them, his soldiering and military leadership offering a fitting metaphorical field to denote the power battle between the lovers.



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MY LEGIONARIUS

I like you two ways
either take off you crown of laurels
drop your purple robes
to the floor
and come to me naked
as a man

or dress up.

- ZULEIKA

Real soldiers wear tunics and armour,
my emperor does without.

Stands before me, metal bands
tied with leather straps

over a bull's chest, iron wings
protect shoulders from flying sabres.

I finger your second skin,
My lord, cold, polished, my reflection

cut into strips; your tawny trunks perfumed

with juniper oil,

hard with squeezing the damp flanks
of stallions, dagger gripped

for my forging.
Are you ready for war, soldier?

A centurion's crested helmet and visor,
Curve of dramatic bristle.

Like an equus,
you roll your head, lightly brush

my inner thighs, leaving a trail of goose
bumps, and giggles,

then trace the tip of your sword
down the centre

of my torso. Dare I breathe?
Let your route

map a thin red line?
Silver goblets of burgundy vino by my bedside,

to toast the theatre of war,
Close your eyes, you command, a freezing

blade on my flamed cheek, hand around my neck.
I am your hostage.

I am dying. I am dying of your dulcet conquest.
You make my temples drip into my ears,

whisper obscenities,
plant blue and purple flowers

on my barren landscape;
here,

besiege me,
battery-ram my fortified gateway,

you archer, stone-slinger, trumpeter,
give to me, futuo me,

futuo me, my actor-emperor,
I hold

the pumping cheeks that rule the world,
I do. Ditch the empire

on your back,
Septimus,

it is crushing my carriage,
the weight of a soldier trained to march

thirty kilometres a day,
marching for centuries over roads

made with crushed skulls, legions
forming an impregnable walking

tortoiseshell,
on the battlefield, on

your back,
making the whole world Roman.

Vidi, Vici, Veni.
Take off your victory.

I am vanquished already, I can't fight you,
You stab me to death, again and again,

Stab me to death, soldier.