

# CIRCUS MAXIMUS

## Rivals on the Track

ANNELISE GRAY  
TEACHER RESOURCES

### THE BEGINNING

Before reading the book, read the blurb on the back cover.

**DISCUSS:** What sort of novel is this? Which genre does it fit? What is rivalry? Is it a good or bad thing?

**ACTIVITY:** Now, pretend you are coming to the novel without having seen the cover or read the blurb. Which vocabulary and phrases in the opening let the reader know that this book is set in Ancient Rome? How quickly do you discover this?

#### Set up

Read the first chapter.

**DISCUSS:** How does the author create a safe, jovial, familial atmosphere in the opening chapter? Where does the threat come from?

**ACTIVITY:** Jot down all the things you learn about the characters from the first chapter.

*"This is a reward poster," he explained. "The emperor's offering ten million sesterces to anyone who can find you and Porcellus and bring you back to Rome."* (Page 9)

**ACTIVITY:** Draw Dido's 'wanted poster', using information from the first chapter. The first chapter contains a letter from Opellius Otho to Scorpis, which sums up the story so far.

*'He was sitting at a table, studying the square of crumpled papyrus.'* (Page 6)

**RESEARCH AND DISCUSS:** What is papyrus? What else was papyrus used for other than a means of writing material? How would Romans communicate before modern media? How did they send their letters?

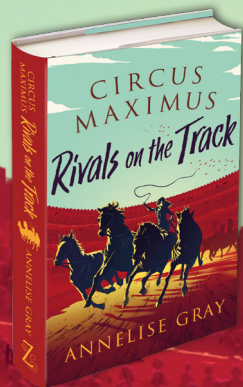
**ACTIVITY:** Condense the letter on pages 6-8 into a series of texts or social media messages. What are the important points to include?

### WRITING STYLE

Read to the end of chapter VIII.

**DISCUSS:** Why is this a pivotal chapter? Where is the tension in the passage? How does the author use





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the tension to set up the plot? Make a series of sentence predictions as to what may happen next.

Every story has a story arc to set the pace, including opening, build-up, dilemma, resolution, closing.

**ACTIVITY:** When you have read the entire book, use a story mountain template or draw a line graph to represent the key moments of tension in the novel. Where are the dramatic moments in the story?

**DISCUSS:** Look at how the author introduces Dido's past on pages 44-45. This is called a flashback. It is triggered by seeing someone from her past. How does the author make it vivid?

**ACTIVITY:** Write your own flashback (it'll be similar to writing a vivid memory). Think about which senses trigger the memory. Perhaps you could start your piece by linking it to a specific scent or tangible object.

### Simile/Metaphor

*'braced against the wind like shields raised for battle.'* (Page 1)

*'We looked at the stars, scattered across the indigo heavens like fragments of shattered glass.'* (Page 25)

*'They tore towards the distant turning post like a flight of arrows.'* (Page 121)

*'Muttumbaal, silent and still as an eagle on a branch.'* (Page 140)

**DISCUSS:** Why does an author use similes and metaphors?

**ACTIVITY:** Make a list of some of the similes and metaphors in the first three chapters. What do you notice about them? Write your own list of five similes and metaphors that point to our contemporary life. E.g., As colourful as crayons. Now write five that are timeless, e.g. As white as snow.

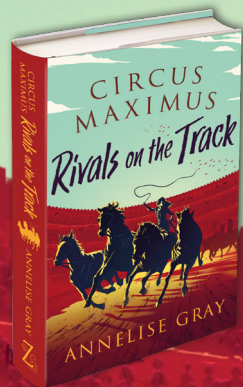
### SETTING

#### Time and Place

*Rivals on the Track* is set in Ancient Rome. It is historical fiction.

**DISCUSS:** Why do we read historical fiction? Look at this quote from Thucydides, Athenian historian, *'History is philosophy teaching by examples.'* What does he mean by this?





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Read the Author's Note on page 342. What does the author mean by 'careful' historical research? Why is the word 'careful' important?

**ACTIVITY:** If you were writing historical fiction, which era would you set your story in? Make a list of the details you would use to show the reader when your text is set. Do you need to do your own 'careful research'?

Annelise Gray has chosen to write about the Roman period of history.

**DISCUSS:** What are the advantages and disadvantages of setting a novel so far in the past? Why is this period of history so fascinating to us today?

### Food

Some of the 'careful' details that Gray has to get right are the way people lived. Look at the way food is referenced in the novel.

*'I bought onions, apples and cabbages from the greengrocer, a piece of bacon from the butcher and cumin seeds from the spice trader. Then I stood in line by the miller's stall, waiting for him to weigh some flour.'*  
(Page 14)

*'honey cakes and a wine jar.'* (Page 78)

*'rich-smelling bean stew'* (Page 109)

*'eggs being fried in chicken fat.'* (Page 275)

**ACTIVITY:** Find a Roman recipe online and try to make it. Does it taste good? This might be a good place to start <https://kidadl.com/articles/roman-recipes-ks2-to-learn-all-about-roman-food>

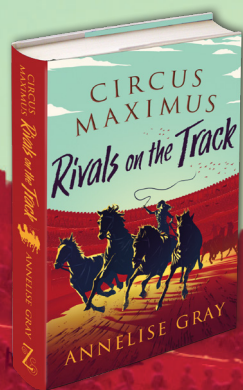
**ACTIVITY:** How nutritious was the Roman diet? Create a table of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, fibre and vitamins and minerals. Which foodstuffs from Roman times go into which column?

**DISCUSS:** How do you think Scorpis's family's diet differs from that of the emperor?

**ACTIVITY:** Create a menu of Roman food that you would happily eat.







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### Clothes

Gray also uses depictions of clothes and hairstyles to give the reader an indication of what life was like in Ancient Rome.

*'long-sleeved woollen tunic' (Page 12)*

*'Straggly dark-brown curls crept down the nape of his neck. He had been wearing it like that ever since we came back from Rome, and Parmenion had told him that it was the fashion among a lot of the charioteers at the Circus Maximus.'* (Page 13)

**DISCUSS:** Why do you think the tunic was made from wool? Which fabrics do we use for clothes today? Are any of them the same as in Roman times?

**DISCUSS AND RESEARCH:** Research Roman hairstyles. How do we know about these? Are any of them similar to the way we style hair today?

*'I spied the white uniform of Cassius Chaerea, standing watchfully in the shadows.'* (Page 236)

Members of the Praetorian Guard would have worn a toga, a symbol of their status in the Roman Empire.

**ACTIVITY:** Create your own white toga using an old sheet. You may wish to use a classmate as a model. Why might ordinary labourers not have worn this garment?

### Geography

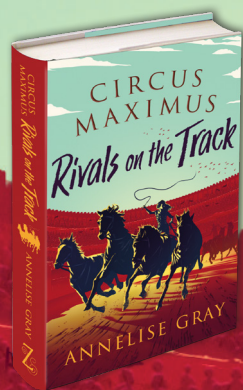
*'Green was spreading across the landscape around Utica, like an emerald wave rippling across a grey shore. They were planting the spring wheat in the fields and the smell of freshly dug soil mingled with the salt tang of the distant sea.'* (Page 12)

**DISCUSS:** How does the author create a sense of setting? What sort of place do you imagine this to be?

**ACTIVITY:** Find a map of the Ancient Roman Empire. Look for Utica. Does it surprise you that the empire was so large? Which modern-day countries did it cover?

*'The landscape around us had changed gradually since we left Utica. Mountains loomed larger beneath their crown of purple cloud, and wheat fields... It had been a slow, tiring journey, first by river then by road.'* (Page 97)





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**RESEARCH:** Can you research the journey from Utica to Thugga in Ancient Roman times? How far was it? Which river would they have navigated by? Which mountain range is referred to? Which mode of transport did the ancient Romans use to make this kind of journey? How long would it have taken? Compare and contrast with today. What are the cities called now? How would you travel from one to the other and how long would it take?

**ACTIVITY AND RESEARCH:** Choose between the ancient cities of Utica or Thugga. Create a leaflet advertising the town. What is appealing about it? Which attractions would you draw to the attention of Roman citizens wanting to relocate there?

## CHARACTERS

### Dido

Research the origin of the name Dido. Why do you think Gray chose this name for her main character?

*'Dido – a brilliant young female charioteer, who also races in the guise of a boy called "Leon"'. (Page xi)*

Dido has to disguise her physical appearance, but her character traits remain the same.

**ACTIVITY:** Divide your page in two, and on one side list Dido's physical attributes as 'Leon'. On the other side, list her character traits (what we learn based on her thoughts, emotions, actions and dialogue). You may wish to draw a picture of Dido/Leon in the middle.

**DISCUSS:** Does Dido remind you of any other protagonist. Who and why?

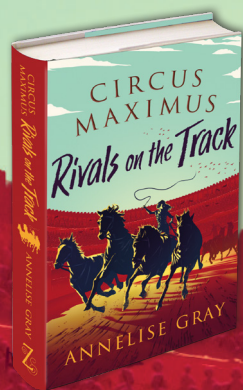
**ACTIVITY:** In the 'writing style' section, you drew a mountain or graph to track the plot of *Rivals on the Track*. See if you can draw a character arc for Dido that maps onto this plot graph. Where do Dido's moments of climactic action come from – write some keywords along the line that show what Dido is learning through the story.

Gray writes Dido as being very aware of her bodily reactions to what is going on around her.

*'Fear bubbled in my stomach.'* (Page 3)

*'It felt as if a swarm of wasps was crawling all over my body, creeping under the surface of my flesh.'* (Page 47)





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*'But my heart was still fluttering strangely around my chest, like a bird trapped in a cage.'* (Page 51)

*'My temples were throbbing.'* (Page 53)

*'I could feel the sweat pooling under the bandages wrapped tightly around my chest.'* (Page 57)

*'Every muscle in my body was screaming.'* (Page 120)

*'The guilt that had been gnawing at my insides for months now sank its teeth in.'* (Page 185)

*'My senses were drawn towards the place where my mother's lock of hair rested against my heart. I was convinced I could feel a tingling on my skin, as if something had awakened and was struggling to get out.'* (Page 203)

*'The wasps were crawling across my skin again.'* (Page 237)

**DISCUSS:** Why does she do this? What effect does it have on the reader?

**ACTIVITY:** Draw a template of the human body. Label the areas where you might feel a physical reaction to emotion e.g., Butterflies in the stomach. Write your own highly visceral passage. Pick a dramatic moment and explore the physical reaction of your protagonist.

In Chapter IV, Gray reveals Dido's most treasured possessions (Page 31)

**ACTIVITY:** Draw a picture of the possessions. What does each object tell you about Dido's character? Caption each object with an explanation.

On page 115, Dido finds another person's box of treasured objects.

**ACTIVITY:** Which objects would you have in your treasure box? What do they say about you? Draw a picture and caption, as above.

### Emperor Caligula

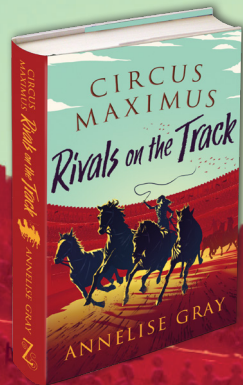
*'Has it slipped your mind that the emperor probably has half the Roman army out there, looking for a girl charioteer?'* (Page 3)

Caligula is introduced in the cast of characters, and first mentioned on page 3, but he doesn't actually feature in the story.

**DISCUSS:** How and why is Caligula a huge presence in the story, despite not being in any scenes?







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**ACTIVITY:** What does history tell us about Caligula? Research and create a social media profile for him. What would his bio say? Include details about his physical appearance and likes and dislikes. What would he choose as his profile image?

*'Ever since the humiliating defeat of his favourite driver at the Circus Maximus by the mystery charioteer known only as Princess Sophonisba, Caligula has brooded with all the petulance of a child who has lost his favourite toy.'* (Page 7)

*'But the emperor nurses a grudge like a bloodhound guards a bone.'* (Page 8)

*'But Caligula turns on anyone who lets him down.'* (Page 84)

*The statue is described as having 'a babyish curve to his chin,' and reminds Dido of his 'awful, childish laugh.'* (Page 150)

*'one should never underestimate the mad workings of Caligula's mind.'* (Page 165)

The personality of Caligula in the novel is very negative, with no redeeming features.

**DISCUSS:** Is this a true representation, or merely Dido's point of view (the book is told from her point of view)?

**ACTIVITY:** Write a passage as if you are Caligula defending yourself. Which arguments can you forward to show that you are in the right?

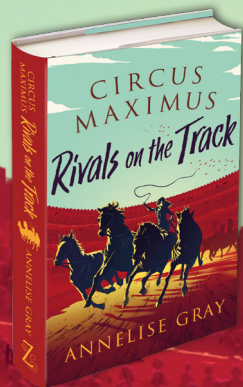
*'I felt helpless rage. Not towards Parmenion and not even towards Scylax – who I hated but who had been made what he was by pain and the brutality of the world he came from.'* (Page 95-96)

**DISCUSS:** What does Dido mean by 'the world he came from'?

*'What he doesn't like is ambition, not in others at any rate.'* (Page 165)

**DEBATE:** What is meant by not liking ambition in others? Are there any current leaders who seem to hold sway over a corrupt society, or a society in which people live in fear of punishment by the leader?





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### Cassius Chaerea

Cassius Chaerea was a soldier in the Praetorian Guard. The Praetorian Guard acted in protection of the Emperor.

**ACTIVITY:** Using the novel, and further research, write a job description or job application for the Praetorian Guard. Which attributes and skills are needed?

*'Probably the most dangerous man I knew.'* (Page 154)

Dido describes Cassius in this way about halfway through the novel.

**DISCUSS:** Does she change her mind by the end? Why?

*'I spied the white uniform of Cassius Chaerea, standing watchfully in the shadows.'* (Page 236)

**DISCUSS:** How does Gray make Cassius a menacing figure?

Re-read Chapter XXI

*'Hardly the way to greet an old friend'* (Page 164)

*'Cassius Chaerea always had a sinister habit of knowing more than you wanted him to.'* (Page 166)

**DISCUSS:** Why doesn't Cassius turn Dido in?

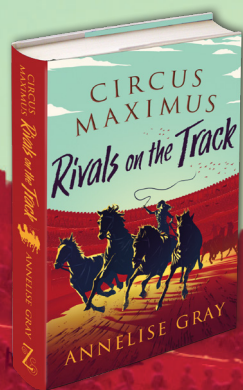
**ACTIVITY:** Create a conscience alley with your class. Think about the options Cassius has at this point – to capture Dido, to kill Dido, or to let things stay as they are. Which option will you argue for? Does Cassius show any compassion?

In the Author's Note on page 342, Gray writes that Cassius Chaerea was a real person, a member of the Praetorian Guard, whose job was to protect the emperor.

**DISCUSS:** Does he do a good job of protecting the emperor in this novel? What do you think about fictionalising the actions of a real person from history?







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### Scylax

*'A horribly familiar figure had stepped into my path. A small brute of a person with a thick neck and canine jaw.'* (Page 43)

**DISCUSS:** How does the author introduce Scylax as a villainous figure at the end of Chapter V? Compare and contrast the introduction of Barca at the end of Chapter VII. How does the author provoke tension in both? Why does she choose to make these character introductions at the end of chapters?

Re-read Chapter XXXIV

**DISCUSS:** How does Gray build menace and tension in this chapter?

**ACTIVITY:** Dramatise the chapter – either by role-playing, or by writing a film script complete with director's notes. When would you zoom in and when pan out? What stage directions might you use? Take one secondary character, such as Scopus, Parmenion or Muttumbaal.

**DISCUSS:** How does their relationship with Dido change during the course of the novel?

Look at how that character interacts with horses.

**DISCUSS:** Does Gray portray characters' goodness through their ability to work with horses?

*'But to my astonishment, Porcellus stretched out his nose and began licking the liver-spotted knuckles in front of him.'* (Page 118)

*'It irritated me how easily my grandfather could manage both her and Porcellus.'* (Page 174)

**DISCUSS:** Why does it irritate Dido?

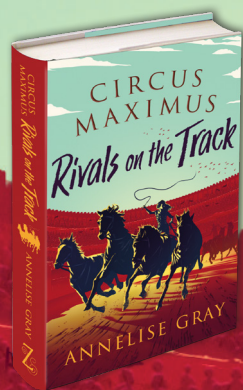
## THEMES

### Chariot Racing

Take a look at the Roman mosaic unearthed in Thugga, which depicts a chariot-driver, Eros:

<https://www.romeartlover.it/Thugga2.html#carceres>





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Notice the Latin inscription, which translates as 'we are all for you,' from 'omnia per te', and the given names of some of the horses.

**ACTIVITIES:** Fill in the missing parts of the mosaic. What would you name the other horses? And which faction do you think Eros raced for? Make your own paper mosaic depicting a horse or a charioteer. Use small pieces of tissue paper or coloured paper.

*'A nearby wall was covered with advertisements for the next circus games at Utica... There was a poster too, with black lettering on it and a drawing of a huge oval racetrack which caught my eye.'* (Page 14)

**ACTIVITY:** Using information from the book, make your own advert for the games. You can use any media to do this.

Re-read Chapter V. Dido's description of the race is littered with her opinions on what's working and what Hanno and Abibaa should do.

**DISCUSS:** What does she mean: 'Glory. Or the Underworld.' (Page 39)?

**ACTIVITY:** Write a newspaper report of the race. You will need an impartial perspective, and formal prose.

*'I swerved past his bolting horses and caught a glimpse of his eyes as he sawed frantically.'* (Page 52)

**DISCUSS:** How dangerous was chariot-racing?

**ACTIVITY:** Write a poem describing the atmosphere of the chariot racing. Pick out the exciting words and phrases in the book.

*'At the archway, we found a colourful cast of performers had gathered for the opening procession.'* (Page 234)

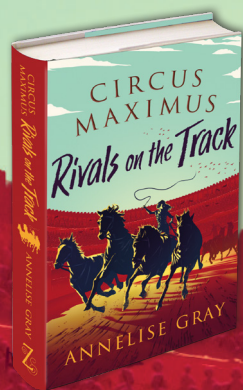
Read the rest of the passage.

**DISCUSS:** Compare it to the opening ceremony of a major sporting event today.

**ACTIVITY:** Draw a comparison chart of similarities and differences.

**ACTIVITY:** When you have read to the end of the games in the book, can you draw a table of results for





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the different factions? You will want to add up the laurel tally, and perhaps use a colour code.

### Stadium Safety/Sport as Big Business

Read the description of the new circus at Thugga in Chapter XXVIII.

**ACTIVITY:** Research the building of a new modern sports stadium. How do sports stadiums compare with the ancient world's circuses?

**DISCUSS:** What makes a stadium great? How important is the history of the site/club? Which elements need to be taken into account?

Glabrio's circus comes to a terrible end.

*'People behind us were complaining that they were being crushed.'* (Page 277)

**ACTIVITY:** Draw up a risk assessment for crowd control at a stadium. What do you need to include? Use the novel to help you. E.g., Closeness to tracks, hurling of objects, separation of fans.

It wasn't just dangerous for Roman crowds. It was dangerous for the chariot-racers too.

*'Stewards managed to stop the bolting horses, rescuing the shipwrecked driver who was stretchered off.'* (Page 249)

**DISCUSS:** What measures could you put in place to prevent so much danger? Refer to the text. Can you think of any modern sports that are dangerous for the athletes?

### Equipment

*'Zeno's chariots were so well-sprung.'* (Page 195)

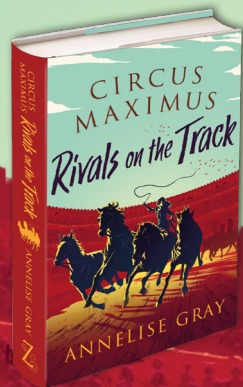
*'We should have invested in some better harnesses. That's all.'* (Page 244)

In Dido's race, the reins snap in half.

**DISCUSS:** What role did wealth play in being able to win a chariot race? Is that different from the world of sports today?







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**ACTIVITY:** Choose a piece of modern sports equipment. Research how it has changed over the years. Is it safer/lighter/better? Are there any ways you could improve on it? Draw up a design for a better version of the equipment you have chosen.

### Athlete Training Regime in Ancient Rome

*'I winced as I pinched the top of my arms which were covered by the long sleeves of the tunic. I definitely needed to start building muscle there again.'* (Page 14)

**DISCUSS AND RESEARCH:** How did Romans keep fit? How does it differ from how we keep fit? Are there any similarities?

*'He squatted and then straightened again, before repeating the exercise.'* (Page 75)

*'They were unmistakably charioteers, you could tell by their calloused hands and bulging calf muscles.'* (Page 131)

*'Finally, they laid sandbags across our shoulders and made us do repeated squats and jumps.'* (Page 145)

**ACTIVITY:** Devise an exercise regime for a chariot-racing athlete. Try to draw diagrams to help him. Give it to a friend to do.

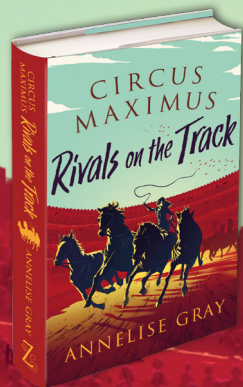
*'It was the most controlled display of horsemanship I'd ever seen.'* (Page 106)

*'The same extraordinary balance... an ability to shift his weight effortlessly, to communicate with his horses with the slightest pressure on the reins.'* (Page 160)

Dido often comments on what it takes to be a great charioteer.

**ACTIVITY:** With a classmate, conduct an interview with Dido to be your faction's chariot racer. Which questions would you ask? Which skills would you say you had if you were Dido?





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### Psychology of Sport

*'A lot of charioteers have thoughts like this after a bad shipwreck. It's known as seasickness. But it usually passes, with time.'* (Page 72)

Dido's feelings of numbness and grief about Icarus resurface after seeing Scylax again.

**ACTIVITY:** Create a mind map of all the positive things Dido could think about to overcome her sad feelings.

*'Even Abibaal thinks I don't stand a chance against him.'* (Page 178)

**DISCUSS:** Why is this sentence in italics? How does it speak to the importance of psychology in sport?

**ACTIVITY:** Create a dialogue of self-talk for Dido. Every time there is a negative sentence in italics, provide a positive piece of self-talk. For example, 'you raced in the Circus Maximus.' Make sure you end on a positive.

*'I noticed Barca didn't congratulate his son.'* (Page 145)

*"That is why you never got to the Circus Maximus," he said, cold contempt in his voice. "You think about losing before you think about winning."* (Page 220)

*'Fear is just another opponent. To be faced down, then defeated.'* (Page 124)

Dido hears this sentence again in her head on page 239.

**DISCUSS:** Is Muttumbaal a good trainer? In what way? Do you agree that fear must be defeated to win? What helps you win or succeed?

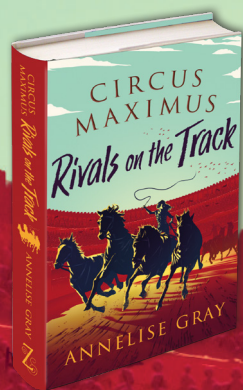
### Care for Horses

In Chapter II, Dido rescues Jewel from working in the mines.

**RESEARCH:** What were the uses of horses in Ancient Rome?

*'I stroked Jewel's rust-coloured cheek, keeping to her left side so that she could see me.'* (Page 29)





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**DISCUSS:** How does Gray portray the upkeep of the horses at Scorpus's place?

**ACTIVITY:** Create a manual on the care of horses in Ancient Rome. What equipment did they use in the stables? What did they feed horses?

### Role of Women

*'Chariot racing is a man's world. Always has been, always will be.'* (Page 11)

**DISCUSS:** What was the role of women in Roman times? Did they hold any roles of power? Could women take part in any sport? How does this compare to sport today?

*'No girl would be strong enough to hold a circus team of four chariot horses. I'll lay you money your princess is a man in a dress.'* (Page 15)

*'For most girls, I knew there was only one choice. Get married and start a family.'* (Page 32)

*'Performing horse-riding tricks in the Circus Maximus, for public entertainment. How is that a decent way for any female to behave?'* (Page 61)

*'There's not so much for a girl to do except get married once she's at a certain age. It's different for men.'* (Page 69)

*'I was worried that she had seen through my disguise with her girl's instinct.'* (Page 110)

**ACTIVITY:** Choose one of the above quotes and write a short essay debating it. Are there arguments for and against?

*'To tell the truth, he's the type who prefers spending time with girls rather than boys... aren't you Bodo?'* (Page 131)

**DISCUSS:** Why does Amandio say this?

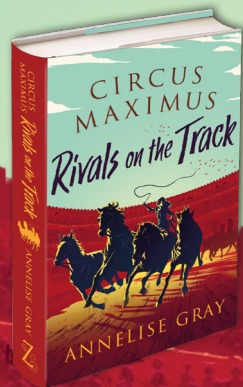
*'But then there was some talk among the local townsfolk, about Muttumbaal's wild daughter. He started saying she was shaming him.'* (Page 202)

**DISCUSS:** How much is how a person is viewed down to their own individual behaviour and how much society's impact? What does it take to change societal views? How does an individual impact change?

**ACTIVITY:** Pick a social cause that you feel strongly about. What individual act can you do that might prompt the beginnings of societal change? How would it influence other people?







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Look at the book by Rashmi Sirdeshpande called *How to Change the World*. Which movements in the past have made a change on the world? E.g., Suffragettes

**ACTIVITY:** Create a poster about the social movement you have chosen.

*'I think it's harder on Ismene. But then, it always is for women. We don't get to make the choices we'd like to.'*  
(Page 339)

**DISCUSS:** Is it still harder for women? Do women have more choices today than in Ancient Rome. What facts can you find about women being able to make choices today?

### Slave Exploitation

*'At the town fullery, slaves were hard at work in the laundry vats, trampling the grease and dirt out of the clothes with their feet.'* (Page 127)

*'Their skinny bodies and exhausted faces were evidence of the toll the work took... I saw a man struggling to carry an enormous block of stone, his face screwed up in pain. A foreman shouted and brought a stick down on his shoulders.'* (Page 150-1)

*'We've got these men on reduced rations to hurry them along.'* (Page 152)

**RESEARCH AND DISCUSS:** What was the role of slaves in the Ancient Roman Empire? How were they treated?

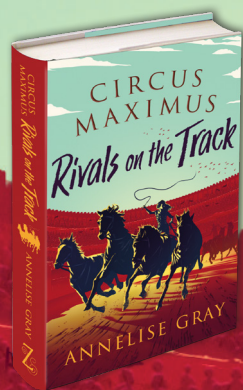
**ACTIVITY:** Imagine you are a Roman slave, either working in the laundry or working on the building of a new circus. Using information from your research and the text, write a diary entry for one day.

Slaves were often used as building labourers.

**RESEARCH:** How did the Roman's construct their large amphitheatres and circuses? Which materials did they use? How did they build scaffolds? Which tools did they use? How do we know?

**ACTIVITY:** Design a new Roman building. Which materials are you going to build it from? What will it look like? You can choose a private villa or a public building. Sketch the layout with details from research and the book.





# CIRCUS MAXIMUS

## Rivals on the Track

ANNELISE GRAY  
TEACHER RESOURCES

### ENDING

*'He gave me the helmet and smiled. It might have been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. And I knew then, whatever life held for me, that if any young driver of the future asked me what made a great champion, I would remember what Danel did that day.'* (Page 316)

**DISCUSS:** What does Dido mean by this? What does make a great champion?

**ACTIVITY:** Who is your sporting hero? Why? Are modern sports stars role models? Give two examples of how.

**ACTIVITY:** You are the casting director of a film of *Rivals on the Track*. Who are you casting as your main characters? Explain reasons why.

Reread Chapter XLI

**ACTIVITY:** Draw the events as a comic strip. Think carefully about what needs to be left unsaid, and what needs to go into sound and thought bubbles. Are you using onomatopoeia?

One of the key messages that comes across throughout the novel is the phrase: *'There are only two things that matter in this life. Winning and family.'* (Page 141)

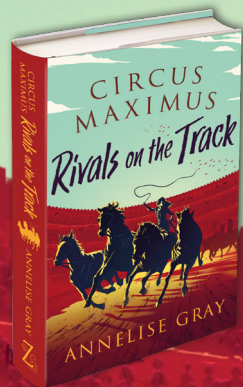
**DISCUSS:** Do you adhere to this motto? What are the two things that matter most to you?

**ACTIVITY:** Brainstorm all the things that are important to you. You could draw it as a mind map or pie chart. Are some more important than others?

Dido ends the novel, happy with *'the feeling of just being myself.'* (Page 340)

**DISCUSS:** Why can she be herself now? What do you think of the novel's ending? Is Dido truly happy? Do you think the author has left the ending open for another book in the series? What does it mean to 'be yourself'?





# CIRCUS MAXIMUS

## *Rivals on the Track*

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### FURTHER READING

*Circus Maximus: Race to the Death* by Annelise Gray  
*Time Riders: Gates of Rome* by Alex Scarrow  
*Empire's End: A Roman Story* by Leila Rasheed  
*Wanted!* by Kate Thompson  
*Defenders: Dark Arena* by Tom Palmer  
*The Roman Quests: Death in the Arena* by Caroline Lawrence  
*The History Keepers: Circus Maximus* by Damien Dibben

