



Gladiator

Adapted from the novel by Dewey Gram



About the author

The book, *Gladiator*, was written by Dewey Gram. The screenplay for the movie was written by David Franzoni, John Logan and William Nicholson. The movie was a huge success, winning a large number of Oscars. The movie starred Russell Crowe as Maximus and Joaquin Phoenix as Commodus. The part of Proximo was played by Oliver Reed, who died before the movie was finished.

Summary

It is AD 180 and the Roman Empire rules most of the known world. Rome has become corrupt and Caesar Marcus Aurelius wants General Maximus, the Commander of the Roman Army in the North, to become Protector of Rome before he hands power to the Senate. He does not want his corrupt son, Commodus, to become Caesar. Commodus kills his father and orders Maximus and his family murdered. Maximus escapes, but is soon taken captive and sold as a slave to Proximo, a gladiator trainer. He is then taken to Rome, where Commodus is now Emperor. Maximus becomes the most popular gladiator, which infuriates Commodus, who thought he had died.

Commodus' sister Lucilla and Senator Gracchus agree to help Maximus escape but fail, and Commodus sends his troops to kill him. Maximus escapes, only to be recaptured. Commodus has many senators murdered. Maximus is forced to fight the Emperor in the arena but, before the fight, Commodus wounds him badly. In spite of his weakness, Maximus kills Commodus, but he is mortally wounded himself.

Chapters 1–2: Maximus, the Commanding Officer of the Army of the North of Rome leads a battle against the German Army. Marcus Aurelius, the dying Emperor, watches from the top of a hill while his ambitious son Commodus and his daughter Lucilla are sheltered in a carriage. After the battle, at the Roman camp, the soldiers and the Emperor pay honors to Maximus, which makes Commodus jealous. Commodus expects to be made Emperor, and Marcus Aurelius thinks Maximus would be more suitable for the position.

Chapters 3–4: Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus to become Protector of Rome until he can give power back to the Senate. He knows that Commodus will not make a good Emperor. When informed of this decision, Commodus kills his father and orders Quintus, Maximus' second – in-command, to have Maximus executed. Maximus escapes and rushes home to save his family, but arrives too late. His farm and family have been burned. He is then taken prisoner and sold as a slave to Proximo, the owner of a gladiator school at Morocco. On his way there, he is helped by Juba, an African slave.

Chapters 5–6: In his first training session, Maximus refuses to fight and is labeled a coward. Later, in the first real fight, he is chained to Juba, and together they defeat all gladiators. In the meantime, Commodus arrives in Rome and is received by a small crowd. He is not popular. Lucilla tries to persuade him to listen to the senators, who are worried about the problems in Rome. But Commodus has different plans. He will have 150 days of games in the arena, and has a spy watch the senators.

Chapters 7–8: Commodus spends large amounts of money on the games and is not interested in solving Rome's problems. Lucilla is worried about the future of Rome and secretly meets senators Gracchus and Gaius. They know that if they kill Commodus, Quintus will take control of Rome, so they decide to be patient. In the meantime, Proximo takes his gladiators to Rome to fight at the Colosseum. Maximus expects to have an opportunity to take revenge on Commodus. Proximo's gladiators, under the lead of Maximus, defeat the Roman fighters. Commodus finds the leading gladiator is Maximus and becomes furious, but has to let him live under the pressure of the cheering crowd. Lucilla visits Maximus in his prison. She wants his help to save Rome.



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Chapters 9–10: To make the Romans happy, Commodus has bread thrown at them at the Colosseum. He surprises the people by making Maximus fight against the best French gladiator, Tigris. Despite the fact that Tigris is fully equipped and Maximus is poorly protected, and although four tigers are placed in the arena to make Maximus' fight even more difficult, Maximus defeats Tigris. He refuses to kill him, though, because he has fought with honor. In front of the crowds, Maximus ignores Commodus' challenge to fight against him, and the crowd mocks at the Emperor. On the way back to Proximo's school in Rome, Maximus is informed by his former servant Cicero of where his former army is camped. Through Cicero, he sends a message to Lucilla saying he will help. Lucilla and Senator Gracchus try to rescue Maximus from the gladiator school, but Lucilla is being watched, and Commodus threatens her to kill her son.

Chapters 11–12: Soldiers go to Proximo's school in search of Maximus. They kill everybody, except Juba, whom they take for dead, and Maximus, who manages to escape through the back door. He is caught in the streets and made prisoner. In the meantime, many senators are killed. Commodus organizes a fight at the Colosseum between Maximus and himself, but stabs Maximus on the way to the arena and has the guards hide the wound under armor. Mortally injured, Maximus takes strength from the sight of his house, wife and son that appears in his mind, kills Commodus in the fight, and dies himself. Rome is free again.

Background and themes

The Roman Empire: The story is set in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century AD. Rome is said to have been founded in 753 BC by Romulus and Remus and was initially ruled by kings, but with the overthrow of Tarquinius Superbus in 510 BC, a republic was established led by elected representatives. There followed a period of military expansion of the Empire and a series of wars. The Empire covered an area from Spain to Syria. In the 1st century BC the rise to power of Julius Caesar brought the republic to an end. He was commander of the armies in Gaul and in 45 BC he was created dictator for life, and the era of the Caesars had begun. The period in which *Gladiator* is set is the end of the age of the "five good emperors" – Marcus Cocceius Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. The northern boundaries of the Empire were established in Britain and

Germany and within those boundaries, peace reigned and learning flourished. However, Marcus Aurelius was followed by his son, Commodus who became known as the most bloodthirsty tyrant in history. The Empire became increasingly corrupt and weak and invasions began on its borders from warring tribes. The Empire finally collapsed in 476 AD.

Good and evil: The story of *Gladiator* is one of good against evil, good represented by Maximus, Marcus Aurelius, Senator Gracchus and Lucilla, bad represented by Commodus, Quintus and Falco. Marcus Aurelius has absolute power in Rome but knows that the Empire is corrupt, that his son is unfit to take power, and that authority must be restored to the Senate. Maximus is a loyal and brave soldier, betrayed by Commodus, his life destroyed, but determined to have revenge on the man responsible for the death of his family. Gracchus realizes that Commodus is corrupt and plans to give the people "bread and circuses" so that they will not see what he is doing. Lucilla also knows that her brother is corrupt and joins with the others to defeat him.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- Guess:** Tell students: *From these people you are going to read about, one is jealous of another. Who is jealous of whom if all these statements are false?*
Lucilla and Commodus are not relatives. / Quintus is not Maximus' second in command. / Somebody is jealous of a relative of his. / Somebody is jealous of a second in command officer. / The person who is jealous is a woman. / Maximus is not the Commanding Officer of the Army of the North. / The Commanding Officer of the Army of the North is the person who is jealous.

After reading

- Discuss:** Tell students: *After Marcus Aurelius chose Maximus to help him onto his horse, Maximus and Commodus watched him go, "each thinking their own thoughts about him."* (page 8). In groups, students discuss what those thoughts were and share their ideas.
- Write:** Students write a letter that Maximus sent to his family in Spain after the battle. The letter begins, "I have learned that dirt washes off more easily than blood."
- Role play:** Students role play a conversation between Lucilla and Commodus after she walked with Marcus Aurelius the night of the battle. What does she tell him? What does he answer?



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Chapters 3–4

Before reading

- 5 **Guess:** Tell students: *One of the people you have read about will tell the guards to take another as far as the sunrise and kill him. Who do you think orders the guards to kill whom? Why?*

After reading

- 6 **Role play:** Tell students: *Imagine that a historian who is traveling with the Roman Army interviews Lucilla and Commodus after Marcus Aurelius' death in order to write about it.* In groups, students role play the interviews.
- 7 **Artwork:** In groups, students make an illustration of Maximus' farm before and after the Roman Royal Guard attack.
- 8 **Write:** In pairs, students write a speech that Commodus addressed to the Army announcing Marcus Aurelius' death and informing what has happened to Maximus. The class votes for the best speech.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

- 9 **Guess:** Tell students: *Proximo painted his new "students" red or yellow depending on whether he saw them as "fighters" or "losers." What color do you think Maximus will be painted? Why?*

After reading

- 10 **Role play:** Students take the roles of Juba and Maximus after their first fight in the arena. They speak about how they feel and what they think of this kind of entertainment.
- 11 **Group work:** Have students imagine that Commodus hires them to organize an advertising campaign for his 150 days of games. Groups prepare their publicity strategy and the class votes for the best.
- 12 **Discuss:** Tell students: *Both Lucilla and Commodus think it is good to leave the people of Rome their traditions. What traditions is each thinking about? Do people have good and bad traditions? Should governors try to change the traditions that he thinks are bad? Or is it a decision of the people?*

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

- 13 **Guess:** Ask students: *Proximo tells Maximus that if he wants to earn his freedom in Rome, he has to kill in a way that entertains the crowds. Do you think Maximus will do so?*

After reading

- 14 **Pair work and write:** Tell students: *Imagine you are TV script writers working on a soap opera based on Maximus' life. Write an episode in which Lucius tells his mother about his encounter with Maximus.* Students act out the episode.

- 15 **Research:** Students search the Internet for information about the Battle of Carthage and explain why the Roman fighters in the Colosseum are dressed as the Army of Africa. They prepare brief presentations for the class.

- 16 **Artwork:** In groups, students make a series of pictures that together are a cartoon strip illustrating the fight at the Colosseum. Then groups exchange their drawings and put the pictures in order. The class chooses one to be displayed on the classroom's walls.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

- 17 **Research:** Ask students to find out who Decimus Junius Juvenal was. Have them discuss what he meant when he wrote "Two things only the people anxiously desire: bread and circuses," and how they expect this to be shown in the coming chapters.

After reading

- 18 **Group work:** Tell students: *The fight between Tigris and Maximus is not fair for several reasons. Make a list of them.* Students compare their lists.
- 19 **Pair work and write:** In pairs, students write what they think Maximus would say to his wife. They write a monologue that Maximus would address to the little statue of her. Pairs read their texts and the class votes for the most moving.
- 20 **Discuss:** Ask students: *Why can't Commodus kill Maximus after his fight with Tigris? Do you think that people who die young and popular become unforgettable myths or heroes? Can you think of contemporary examples, from the world of music, for example?*

Chapters 11–12

Before reading

- 21 **Guess:** Tell students: *Commodus will tell Maximus: "The general who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who insulted the Emperor. It is a good story. And now the people want to know how the story ends."* Ask them: *How do you think the story ends?*

After reading

- 22 **Discuss:** Ask students: *Commodus told Maximus that he had taken all he loved from him. Do you think Commodus felt the same way? Was he jealous because Maximus had taken the love of his father and sister from him? Was he acting out of deep jealousy?*
- 23 **Role play:** Tell students: *Imagine Quintus is taken to trial after Maximus' death. Students role play the speeches of the defense and the prosecution, and the class decides on his future.*

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.