

“I AM THE GREAT HORSE”
From idea to bookshelf and beyond
 by

Katherine Roberts

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Great Horse 1 – “Where do you get your ideas from?”

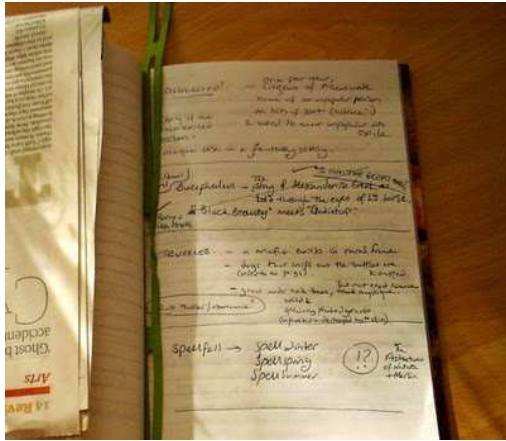


This is a question every author gets asked eventually. But it’s never an easy one to answer. We don’t just sit down one day in front of a blank page or computer screen, pluck an idea out of the air and start writing... at least it never works like that for me!

I don’t lack ideas for stories. They come to me all the time, at the rate of three or four a day if my mind is not too busy working on something else. They spring out of everything. Books I’m reading, newspaper articles, magazines, radio and TV, billboards in town, overheard conversations, peculiar things I see while out shopping or travelling, occasionally a dream. I write them all down – just a sentence or two – in a hardback notebook. It’s a bit messy. That’s a picture of it above. (The pieces of newspaper sticking out the sides are newspaper clippings that caught my eye but I haven’t got around to scribbling in the book yet.)

At this stage my ideas are just seeds awaiting the right conditions to grow into stories, and I don’t think I’m alone in having such a lot of them. All the authors I know seem to have plenty of ideas of their own, which is why we always smile when someone tries to give us one of theirs. We’re not too bothered, either, that somebody might steal them. After all, the seedling ideas are out there lying around for everyone to pick up should they so wish. I happen to believe that if you gave the same idea to 100 different writers and sent them away to work in isolation, you’d get 100 different books. The real problem is not finding the ideas believe me! It’s the growing of them into stories that’s the hard part.

One of these ideas, scribbled down in the middle of writing my Seven Fabulous Wonders series, says simply: “Bucephalus – the story of Alexander the Great, as told through the eyes of his horse.” Underneath it I added (at a slightly later stage): “Black Beauty meets Gladiator”, because I’d just seen the film *Gladiator* and enjoyed the swords and sandals, battles and gore, though of course that one was Set in Roman times a few hundred years after Alexander the Great... history was never my strong point at school! As you can see, it is sandwiched between some other unrelated ideas I had at the time. (The green line I drew across much later, after the book had been written, to remind me I’d used it.)



Most of the ideas in my notebook will never be developed further – there just isn't enough time in a human lifespan to nurture them all. And not all of them will grow into books. Some would make better short stories. Others might combine to produce something bigger. A rare few demand to be entire series. So the real question for me is not "Where do your ideas come from?" but rather "Why did you choose to write that one next?"

It's an interesting question for a professional author, because choosing which book to write next is not as simple as choosing the one you'd really love to write. Quite often it comes down to a contract – money, in other words, which is firmly tied to what the market or your publisher wants at the time. But with this particular book I was lucky. I had the dream contract from my publisher Chicken House. It said simply "new novel". Out of the 13 books I've published so far, only two have given me such complete freedom from market forces – my first novel *Song Quest* (which I wrote while I had another income to live off), and this one with its advance already in the bank. So it's a good example of the muse having a rare creative freedom.

So why choose Alexander? As explained, I was doing a fair amount of research into the ancient world for my *Seven Wonders* series, and he kept springing up, razing whole cities and demanding I give him a bit more attention, so that's where the seed came from. And the horse? As some of you will already know, horses are in my blood. As a child, I helped out at the local riding stables in exchange for free rides. Later, I worked as a racehorse groom, and at the time of scribbling down my idea about Alexander I was exercising up to three spirited racehorses each morning. It was a short leap of the imagination to see one of them as the young king's brave horse Bucephalus and the others in the string as those of his friends - kicking and squealing matches included!

As for why that one next, the twin towers had recently come down, prompting America to invade Iraq and later begin the un-winnable war in Afghanistan. This almost exactly mirrored what Alexander did when he invaded Persia and went on to wage his own un-winnable war in Afghanistan (*Muse: the only country that defeated Alexander the Great... did you humans learn nothing?*) I'm not a political sort of author – usually I prefer to hide such things in a safe fantasy setting – but the war was in the news, it was in the ether, prompting many books and novels from many different writers. So it was the right time for a book about Alexander. Yes, I know it

sounds crazy, but I do think the American invasion of Iraq was the trigger that made this one particular idea whisper in my ear: *write me NOW*.

So I gave in. I took a break from my Seven Wonders series and headed off down the library to find my first book about Alexander the Great. (Today I'd probably Google him, but this was 2003 before the heady days of the world wide web... or at least before it had reached the Welsh border country, where I lived at the time.) As soon as I read the famous story of how the 12-year-old Prince Alexander tamed the unrideable black stallion with a head like an ox, and discovered that the only other person who could ride the wild horse was a lowly groom, I was hooked...

Great Horse 2 - Choosing a viewpoint.



In my last post, you'll see I knew early on this story would be told by Alexander's horse, to the extent that I was able to scribble it down as part of my original idea. This is actually quite unusual for me. Quite often the idea for a story will come without any characters, in which case I have to invent a few before I can decide which of them I'll use as a viewpoint. Or the idea might come with a strong character, but until I start developing the story I can't be absolutely sure that character will make the best viewpoint.

Muse reminder: For anyone confused by viewpoints, this is simply the character whose eyes you see through when you are reading the story. Quite often a viewpoint character is written in the third person ("he" or "she"), but they can also be written in the first person ("I") like Bucephalus in this book, or even the second person ("you").

Tara K Harper has written a useful guide to viewpoints [HERE](#)

It might sound obvious, but the viewpoint character needs to be present in all the important parts of the story, or have some clever way of finding out about these - for example, another character could tell them, or they could see it on TV (assuming they have a TV, which of course Alexander the Great didn't... can you imagine him as an armchair conqueror?). The viewpoint character doesn't have to be the main character in the story, but it often makes sense to combine the two.

In this case, my main character was Alexander the Great. So the most obvious viewpoint to use for the book would have been Alexander himself. Why didn't I do this? Well, first of all I knew I had to write a book suitable for a young audience, because my contract was with Chicken House, who do not publish adult fiction. If I'd used Alexander, I'd need to leave out some parts of his story when he starts to grow older and I reached the dodgy question of his sexuality. The death count in his battles wasn't a problem – publishers of teenage fiction don't seem to mind how many characters you kill off, or how bloodily you do it – but if I was going to do Alexander justice, I wanted him to be a fully rounded character... and there was no escaping the fact most historians considered him to have had a same-sex relationship with his best friend, Hephaestion. Added to this, I was a bit wary of getting too far into Alexander's head. Could I, a girl born in the twentieth century who has never fought in a battle or had much desire to conquer the world, really understand Alexander the Great's innermost thoughts? I know authors are supposed to use their imagination, but with such a well-known historical character, I'll admit I chickened out.

A solution might have been to tell just the first part of the story, while Alexander was still a boy. There is plenty of exciting material even in the first few years of his life. But could I honestly end the amazing story of Alexander the Great halfway through and abandon him and his brave horse on some dusty battlefield in Asia? I decided I couldn't. What I really needed was a viewpoint that would enable me to tell the whole

story from beginning to end, particularly since some of the best-known tales surrounding Bucephalas happened later in his career. So not Alexander.

Another possible human viewpoint who would have been with Alexander and his horse most of the time was Bucephalas' groom. This seemed a bit more promising. The history books claim Bucephalas would only allow one special groom to ride him bareback, but not much else is known about this person. Being aware that horse stories are mostly read by girls, I decided at this stage it would be a good idea to make my groom into a girl, who could disguise herself as a boy to look after Alexander's horse. I called her Charmeia (Charm for short), stealing the name from a tiny scene near the end of Alexander's life where he hugged a common slave boy called Charmides much to the amazement of his generals and friends. No problem getting into *her* head – having been a groom myself, I understood grooms all right! At least I've never groomed a warhorse, but imagine sending a warhorse into battle is similar to sending a racehorse into a race like the Grand National. You bite your nails, watching helplessly, until they return safe and sound (because, sadly, sometimes they don't). But this girl would grow up, too, as the book progressed. Alexander's career spanned twenty years from the time he first sat on Bucephalas as a young prince to the time he died in Babylon, so not the groom.

I briefly considered changing viewpoints half way through, starting with my girl groom while she was still young, and then – when she and Alexander grew up – switching to a son or daughter of one of the characters so I'd have another young viewpoint to finish the story. This had possibilities... the Persian king's son Prince Ochus, perhaps, or maybe a fictional child of Charmeia's. But switching to a brand new viewpoint character so late in a book is usually a bad idea. OK if you know the character well from the beginning, maybe, but in this case they'd not even be born at the start of the story. So no to multiple viewpoints. To tell the story of Alexander all the way through, I really needed a character who could be with him the whole time, but who would not "grow up" during those twenty years he was busy conquering the world. The only really obvious answer was his horse, Bucephalas, who carried him into all his major battles.

Like most pony mad girls, I'd read Anna Sewell's **Black Beauty**, so I knew a horse's viewpoint could be done well, and that readers of all ages would accept it. Also at the age of ten, possibly inspired by *Black Beauty*, I'd written my own little book from the point of view of a pony called Flax, so I knew I'd enjoy doing it. Using Bucephalas as a viewpoint character would allow the reader a glimpse into Alexander's head when he spoke privately to his horse, while remaining blissfully unaware of anything that went on inside the king's pavilion. On the battlefield, I decided, even Hephaestion would be discreet. A horse's viewpoint would also cut out most of the tangled Alexandrian politics, which would have made the book three times as long, believe me!

So I had my viewpoint character. And with him being a black stallion, I saw right away there would be comparisons with *Black Beauty* so I was determined to give him his very own character from the start. Fortunately, all the history books agree Bucephalas was no mild-mannered beauty. He had a big head, he was getting on a bit in years when Alexander's father bought him for his son, and he had been in battles before so would have certainly had the battle scars to show for it. Then there was the

famous story of the horse being unridable when he first came to Macedonia, so I gave him a temper to match. His “voice” arose from my image of a grumpy old warhorse, impatient with the youngsters but fiercely protective of his friends, both human and horse.

I usually pin up pictures of my main characters above my computer while I am writing about them, so at this stage I drew a sketch of Bucephalas to remind me what he’d act like when threatened...



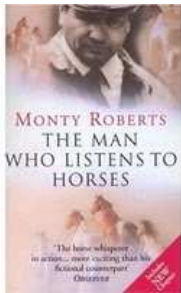
And with such a big headed character, I thought I’d let him kick his main literary rival out of the way before he got started. Here Bucephalas introduces himself...

FROM THE HORSE’S MOUTH

My name is Bucephalas, and you should know right away that I’m no Black Beauty. My coat is the colour of oil-from-the-ground, but that’s where the resemblance stops. I have a big head, a white splodge between my eyes, battle scars, and a brand in the shape of two horns burnt into my backside. I am, however, very strong and worth my (considerable) weight in gold as a warhorse – at least I used to be, until I did the most shameful thing a horse can possibly do and killed my own rider...

I was now ready to begin writing the book. But since I would be using a horse as my viewpoint instead of a human, and a stallion at that, I felt I needed to do a bit of research first to fix his voice in my head so that I would not be floundering around trying to bring him to life when I began the story.

Great Horse 3: Getting into the horse's (rather big) head.



Often at the start of a book, my main character is a bit sketchy. I try not to worry too much about this when I'm using a third person viewpoint, as I know some of the quirkiest character traits will only occur to me as the story takes shape and it'll be fairly easy to go back and write them in later. But here I felt I needed to do a bit of fleshing out before I started, because the temptation for a 40-something ex-grammar school girl writing in the "I" viewpoint is that it will come out sounding like a 40-something ex-grammar school girl. Not only did I want my viewpoint character to sound male and strong – Bucephalas being both a stallion and a war horse – but I also wanted to make him sound like a horse rather than a human.

It's true some animal stories (especially for a younger readership) deliberately humanise their characters, and this can work brilliantly. But with the epic story of Alexander this was not the effect I wanted. On the other hand, writing a totally authentic horse voice would have pretty soon left the reader floundering. So I decided Bucephalas could be fairly human in his thought processes, but not in his actions. Then it would be rather like translating his story from "horse" language into "human".

Cue first bit of research... yes it had to rear its ugly head eventually! I'll be posting in more detail about research later on and how I went about it for this book without bogging myself down in historical details. At this stage, I was simply aiming to get the horse viewpoint as authentic as possible, which meant researching general horse behaviour as well as horsemanship in Alexander's time. I already had a bit of an advantage here, of course. As you might realize if you've read my previous posts, I've been around plenty of horses and ponies in my time, so I know their ways from experience. But I needed to brush up a little on my facts, especially the historical ones... For example, did you know Alexander and his men fought all their battles without stirrups, because they hadn't been invented back then? Nor did they have what we would recognize as saddles, riding on a variety of "cloths" strapped to the horse's back. Fortunately, however, horses themselves have not changed very much over twenty-three centuries, and (consequently) neither has horsemanship. Horse trainers today still use many of the methods used by the ancient Greeks.

Some books I used:

The Man Who Listens to Horses - Monty Roberts

A delightful book by the best known real-life "horse-whisperer".

The Nature Of Horses: Their Evolution, Intelligence and Behaviour - Stephen Budiansky

Everything you need to know about horse behaviour.

The Art of Horsemanship - Xenophon

An ancient text written in Alexander's era and translated from the Greek by M H Morgan.

Xenophon's book has details of ancient harness and also contains this useful description of Bucephalas:

He was of the best Thessalian breed, black with a white star, and very large... some people reckon among the finest horses those with eyes that are not a match; such, they say, was Bucephalas.

"Odd" eyes suggests he had what we would call a China or wall eye – where the iris is milky, which I noted down with interest thinking I wouldn't dwell on this detail, but in true serendipitous fashion it became more important than I realized... see my next post!

I then let Bucephalas write his own little book, which I had no intention of pitching for publication as you can see from the scribbly state of it, but in which he'd tell me what it was like to be a stallion in Alexander's time. In true Great Horse character, it's called "Notes from the Horse's Mouth" or "Move Over Black Beauty, Here I Come!"



This little horse-authored book was organized into several pages, and at this stage it had a fair bit of blank space. I would add to it as I researched more of Alexander's story and the horse's character became more fleshed out. Some of Bucephalas' quirkier character traits, such as his taste for honey-cakes, only came later on as the story unfolded. But to give you an idea of the sort of things he wrote down for me at this stage, here are a few extracts:

I am the boss, and don't you forget it.

I have good sound legs and high hooves (*Muse note: this would not be so good for shod horses, but the ancient Greeks had not invented horseshoes.*).

I can gallop at a speed of 35mph.

I like mares the same colour as my mother (grey).

I have an excellent memory.

I have been taught to curvet – a prancing leap – for battle.

I have been trained to kneel down for my rider to mount (*Muse: no stirrups, remember!*).

A human clicking their tongue excites me, chirruping calms me down.

Spiked bits have been used to control me – does NOT work!

I remember individual horses and humans by smell.

I drop my dung on top of other horses' piles to show I'm the boss.

I like mutual grooming (scratching other horse's withers with teeth)
 I should be able to see almost 360 degrees, but I have a blind side... *more about this in my next post.*
 I have excellent night vision.
 I can see red and blue, but can't tell green from grey.
 I use a lot of body language – flat ears, lashing tail, raised hoof.
 I wear a silly little tasselled cloth for parades, and a much more sensible padded cloth in battle.

I added a couple of ancient quotes to get me in the mood:

“The horse is a warrior and a foreigner.” – soothsayer to King Croesus of Lydia
 “He sayeth among the trumpets HA HA!” – Book of Job (the Bible).

From this last quote, I stole Bucephalas' favourite expression: “Ha!” I then created a small HORSE-HUMAN dictionary, giving Bucephalas certain phrases he would use throughout the story:

HORSE - HUMAN

Dominating - Liberating (according to Alexander!)
 Dominating (other horse's) dung - Showing them you're boss
 Girl-filly - Girl
 Herd - Gang / army / cavalry troop
 Make a foal - Strictly censored!
 Man-colt - Boy
 Mutual grooming - You scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours
 Squeal - Threat / yell
 Squealing match - Argument / yelling match

This got me sufficiently into the horse's head for him to sound like a horse. But, of course, not all horses are the same. Mares act very differently from stallions, and geldings act quite differently from stallions and mares. The ancient Greeks did not geld their horses, which meant quite a few other stallions would be travelling with the army, and I was aware Bucephalas needed to be bigger and bolder than all of them. So I made him the most dominant stallion in the herd to reflect the fact his rider Alexander was the most dominant warrior. All the way through the story, I made him do the exact opposite of what I would do if I were a horse. For example, if confronted with an elephant I would turn tail and flee, like most of the other horses in this book. Bucephalas would make himself huge and tackle the elephant head-on. If squealed at by another horse, I'd clap my lips in submission. Bucephalas would squeal back and most probably bite and kick too, until the other horse submitted. This made writing his viewpoint great fun, because for the duration of this book I could have a REALLY BIG EGO without feeling guilty about it. (If you're ever tempted to think authors are anything like their characters, think again!)

At this stage, armed with my horse-human dictionary, I decided I'd got far enough into Bucephalas' (rather big) head and felt able to start writing chapter one.

Great Horse 4 – Beginning a book



Where does a story begin? At the beginning, you might say. But the true beginning of a story is harder to find than you might think, all stories being connected with other stories, right back to the beginning of time. Also, the true beginning of your story might be rather boring, in which case this would not be a very good place to start your book - you don't want your readers to give up before they get to the interesting parts! So maybe a better question to ask would be: "What's the first interesting bit?"

The most obvious beginning for any character is when they are born. If this book were purely about Bucephalas, I could have started it when he was a foal. Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* begins with the horse remembering his early life as a foal in his mother's paddock. It might have made quite a good story. How did the young colt get his name? Who looked after him? Was he difficult or easy to break in? Who rode him in his first battles? How did he become such a valuable war horse? How did he end up on the ship to Macedonia? What made him so wild that he bucked off the king's best horsemaster and would let nobody else sit on his back until the young Alexander managed to tame him...? Now, THAT'S an interesting question, and one I knew I needed to answer before going much further. As you can see, the older a character gets, the more interesting the questions become.

As for Alexander, I could equally as well have begun with his birth. Certainly, there was enough excitement in the young prince's life to make a good story. The omens surrounding his birth... his mother Olympias who famously slept with snakes... his fierce father King Philip, who lost an eye in battle and spent his nights getting drunk with his fellow Macedonians... Alexander's banishment after an argument with his father at a party... go to any history book and you'll read many fascinating tales about the boy Alexander before he ever set eyes on Bucephalas.

But neither of these beginnings would have been right for my book, because it was not going to be just about Alexander. It was to be about Alexander and his horse, together.

Obvious, then! My book should begin when Alexander and Bucephalas first meet. Anything important that happened to the characters before then could be worked in as

back story. Since this first meeting was also the famous story of how the young prince tamed the unrideable horse everyone else was afraid to mount, I knew it would make a fantastic opening scene. This event happened while Alexander was still a boy (actual age unknown, but somewhere between 9 and 13) and when Bucephalas was already an experienced battle stallion (middle aged in horse-years), so I decided it would be a nice touch to make Alexander and his horse the same age throughout the book - twelve when they first meet. A twelve year old boy is just setting out in life. A twelve year old horse has come to his full strength and is starting to get a bit long in the tooth (*Muse note: Literally! Horses' teeth grow with age, which is where we get this saying from*). So I had my first scene. But because this scene was also one of the better-known historical accounts of Alexander, I knew I would need to stick fairly closely to the story if I wanted to give my book an authentic feel.

Here is the historical account:

The stallion is wild and fights his handlers. After he has thrown the king's horsemaster, Philip impatiently tells the trader to take him away because he's clearly unrideable, and price he's asking (thirteen talents – a big price for a horse in those days) is ridiculous. But young Alexander has been carefully watching the horse, and noted how he seemed to be scared of his own shadow. Whenever Bucephalas saw it on the ground in front of him, he reared and bucked. So Alexander begs his father to let him try to ride the stallion, whereupon the king laughs at him – he's just a boy. But Alexander bets his pocket money that he can stay on the horse. If he does, his father will have to buy the stallion for him. King Philip reluctantly agrees to let him try. Alexander soothes Bucephalas, turns the horse's head into the sun so he cannot see his shadow, and vaults on to his back. It works, and the horse does not buck. They gallop towards the sun, by which time Bucephalas has learnt to trust Alexander, and when he turns him round to ride him back triumphantly to his father, King Philip says Alexander had better find another country to rule, because Macedonia will not be big enough for him.

Whether King Philip actually said this last bit or not, I'm sure you'll agree it's a great story, and I could have dramatised it from the horse's point of view almost word for word. Alexander acts perfectly in character, being brave and daring and also clever with his bet in forcing his father to buy the horse for him. But the shadow part bothered me. Bucephalas was an experienced war horse. He must have galloped fearlessly into battle many times to earn his high price of thirteen talents. He was also a stallion. Even if his ego wasn't actually as big in real life as I have made it in my book, he'd hardly be the sort of horse to mince about nervously jumping at shadows. So *afraid of his own shadow*? No! I decided something must have happened to the stallion to make him react like that... and at this point the "odd eyes" (remember them from my last post?) nudged their way into my thoughts again.

I started asking questions. What if the horse could not see so well? What if his shadow, moving about on the ground in the corner of his eye, scared him so much because, with his hazy vision, it looked like a predator leaping at him? Losing the sight in one eye is more traumatic for a horse than for a human. They are prey animals, which means they have all round vision with little overlap between the eyes. They are not used to having a blind spot. It's possible that Bucephalas, not being a young horse, could have been losing the sight in his weaker "odd" eye. But since he was a battle stallion, I decided to give him a more heroic injury in battle. This would

also help explain his wildness. A traumatic eye injury, coupled with the death of his rider and subsequent unsympathetic handling, would be enough to turn a spirited stallion into an unrideable beast.

So, in my version of the story, Alexander (after watching the horse carefully as before) notices he has a blind side and handles Bucephalas appropriately, thus winning the horse's trust:

[Alexander] cuts across the riding ground towards me with a determined expression. I flatten my ears and gallop straight at him. This usually frightens man-colts into jumping out of the way. But Alexander does not move. He stands in front of me, his stocky legs planted firmly in the sand and his arms spread as if to catch me. An untidy pale mane flops into his eyes, which are fixed on mine. His chin tilts up to one side. "Steady, Bucephalas!" he calls in a shrill voice. "Time to stop running now." "Get out of the way, you fool!" yells one of Philonicus' grooms, not realizing it is the king's son he's talking to. "That horse is a maniac! He'll kill you!" But Alexander does not move a muscle. He keeps his odd eyes on mine. One is brown; the other flecked with blue. I've never seen a human with eyes like that. Nor have I seen a man-colt so determined and with such bright energy inside him. Something shifts in my head. I forget the grooms chasing me, dig in my toes, and come to a snorting stop, a whisker's length away from the prince. One of Philonicus' grooms puffs up behind me. "Slowly," he says. "Grab his lead rein. Then we'll come and get him. He knows we won't stand for no nonsense." Alexander grins. "Don't worry, I know how to handle horses. I could ride before I could walk." In one smooth movement, he steps forward and lifts my reins over my ears.

I can feel the blood pounding through his body, so I know I scared him. But he does not tremble like most man-colts when they hold my rein. While I am deciding whether to let him lead me back to the others without a fight, he squints up at the sun and turns me so that the light shines into my eyes and makes the ghosts disappear. Before I know what is happening, he has moved to my shoulder, gripped my withers and vaulted softly on to my back.

You'll see I took the injury a little further here, giving Bucephalas the ability to see ghosts from his damaged eye. I happen to believe horses – and other animals – see things humans don't. When we used to exercise the racehorses, we'd trot them around a circuit of country lanes, taking the same route every day passing an old bench set on the verge opposite a farm drive. Usually they'd trot past with no problem at all, but you could guarantee that about once a week a horse that had gone past happily every other day would spook at this bench. Some days the whole string would refuse to go past. To human eyes, nothing looked different, and this would happen in all kinds of weather and in all seasons. There was a ghost sitting on that bench at those times, I know it. And a battle stallion would see plenty of ghosts.

At this point, Bucephalas added an important note in his guide to being a horse:

I can see ghosts from my damaged eye.

Interestingly, this is the main "fantasy" aspect to the book, but I didn't include it just because I'm a fantasy writer and wanted some magic in the story. It arose out of the horse's character together with the historical account of Alexander meeting Bucephalas for the first time.

Great Horse 5 – Research

Of course I had to do some research. All historical novels require a good amount of research if they are to feel authentic, and my knowledge of Alexander the Great when I started this book was sketchy to say the least. The things I knew about him could be counted on a horse's hooves:

1. He rode a large black stallion called Bucephalas, a horse nobody else could handle except for one groom.
2. He defeated the Persians and built an empire stretching from Macedonia to India.
3. He had a best friend called Hephaestion and married an Afghan princess called Roxanne.
3. He died in Babylon, aged 33, leaving no heir.

The bits between were a hazy mixture of battles, plots and politics. The historical characters were simply exotic names to me or as yet unknown. And I'd never travelled to any of the countries Alexander conquered. So I needed to research the story on two levels: historical and geographical.

Fortunately, there is a mass of historical information available about Alexander the Great, so I had my pick of the history books. Purists would probably recommend going back to the "primary sources" (i.e. the first written accounts), but I decided that in this case a random selection of secondary sources would provide an accurate enough picture of Alexander for my purposes. The Persian side of things required a bit more imagination on my part because history is obviously written by the victors – dead men cannot talk (or write!) Alexander even took an official historian along with his army, no doubt guiding the man's pen through the more questionable aspects of his campaigns in the way any politician would do today. But if you read the official accounts closely enough, you can sometimes peer through the gaps to where a veil has been pulled across the truth, and it is these areas of history that provide the most fertile material for a writer's imagination.

I decided that Bucephalas should tell Alexander's story as accurately as possible, even the less flattering parts, which meant filling in some of these gaps myself.

In the prologue Bucephalas makes this quite clear:

People may tell you some of this story isn't true. But Alexander's royal historian was paid to write lies, and he never ventured down to the horse lines anyway, so what could he know? Climb on my back, if you dare, and let ME carry you into the battles that changed the world.

For the geography, I needed a book with lots of photos because I didn't intend to travel in Alexander's footsteps to take my own. If you've read my [first post](#) in this series on my inspiration for the book, you'll see I had a good excuse – war in Iraq and Afghanistan. But travelling in those parts today would not take me back 2300 years, so much of the atmosphere would be different. The ancient city of Babylon where Alexander died lies in ruins today, and the Persian Gulf is a different shape. More practically, I did not have time to travel if I was to meet the delivery date for this book and my advance would not have funded such a journey... though it's one of my wilder dreams to ride a horse in Bucephalas' hoof prints when circumstances allow!

So, even though it doesn't sound very glamorous, for this story I became an armchair traveller.

These are the books I chose:

Alexander of Macedon by Peter Green (my bible, now covered with notes scribbled in the margin!)

Alexander the Great by Robin Lane Fox (who advised on the film version)

The Greek Alexander Romance (written in Alexander's time)

In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great – Michael Wood (for the geography)

This last book proved especially useful because it accompanied a TV series of the same name, which I was also able to watch. And in addition to these main texts, I read up on specialist subjects such as warfare in the ancient world, battle tactics, Greek myths, the Iliad (Alexander's favourite book, which he carried with him on his campaigns as bedtime reading), and – of course – horses.

Here's a selection:



So how did I go about organizing all this material? Normally when I'm researching a book, I'll do most of it before I start the writing because it's surprising how many background details you need to know to get the atmosphere right even if you include very few of them in your book. You can always tell if a writer has done their research, because page one has the smell and taste, sound and feel of the period, as well as the visual scene. I don't know if I succeeded, but my first scene alone required knowledge of: the location of Alexander's home (Pella, Macedonia), its climate (dusty riding ground), method of horse transport (ship), horse harness (spiked bit, cloth), minor historical characters (Alexander's father King Philip, his mother, the horsemaster, his young friends), weaponry (javelins), and some background about the war with Persia, as well as all the more obvious stuff about Bucephalus and horses in general.

The second aim of researching a historical novel is for plot.

Ah ha! I hear you say, so writing historical novels is easy... the plot is all worked out for you, right? Well, sort of.

History is like life. It does not usually make a neat and satisfying plot. Also, sticking too closely to the known events can make it boring because your reader will already know the outcome. The best way to dramatise history is to take the known facts and expand on these, filling in the gaps with your own plot twists and characters. But with

Alexander and his carefully chronicled life story, it was more a case of deciding what to leave out! I left out quite a lot – anything the horse would not know about, such as Alexander’s sexual life, went straight into the bin – but even so I ended up with a first draft of 200,000 words, which I had to cut down to 150,000 words following screams of horror from my publisher. (*Muse: and even that proved too long for a children’s list... more about this later*) To simplify things a bit, I decided Bucephalas’ story would take a linear form – starting with Alexander taming the horse and working through to when Alexander died in Babylon – which meant the details could wait until I needed them. All I really needed at the start of the book was a brief outline of the main events, including anything about Bucephalas and all Alexander’s major battles. I listed these events as chapters, which I later decided to call “Hoofprints” to reflect the horse’s viewpoint, and wrote them in the margins of my reference book to remind me which bits I had to read later on.

Note: At this point I pretty much assumed Alexander's story would ALL be battles, and it worried me that Bucephalas (not a young horse to start with) would be getting older all the time, ending up in India an ancient nag of 30 plus, in which case how did he cope with the long journey and all the fighting? But in the end I discovered there were surprisingly few big battles, and Alexander spent the months and years between them sorting out all the other details of building an empire, as well as besieging a few cities and leading minor skirmishes mounted on other horses. So Bucephalas had time to rest, which gave me plenty of scope to add fictional characters and glimpses into the other side of the story – that of the Persian hostages and the plots against Alexander by his own men disillusioned by years of war.

I then drew a sketch map, later tidied and beautified by professional artist Brian Sanders for the book itself:



(*Muse tip: If you’re writing a fantasy book or historical novel set in an unfamiliar location, ALWAYS DRAW THE MAP FIRST. It will save you a lot of rewriting later on!*)

Finally, I felt ready to plunge into my first bit of uncharted territory... what happened after Alexander tricked his father into buying Bucephalas? And at this stage I needed to know a bit more about the other characters in the story, both human and horse. There were going to be a lot of them, I knew that! But how many should I include, and who would be the main ones in Bucephalas’ story?

Great Horse 6 – Characters

Characters make stories worth reading. A book can have the most exciting plot in the world, but if the reader doesn't care about your characters then there's not much point worrying about its plot, because chances are nobody will read as far as the end anyway. Many readers (especially younger ones) seem to prefer their characters to be larger than life – feisty heroines, handsome heroes with bravery to match, or evil villains guaranteed never to perform a single kind act so everybody can cheer when the hero defeats them. But real people are not like that – at least, most of them aren't. This makes writing about real people especially tricky.

Historical characters



Well known historical figures such as Alexander the Great might be larger than life, but they seldom fit neatly into your typical hero or villain category, and don't usually make a very sympathetic character for readers to identify with. More or less everyone agrees Alexander counts as a hero of sorts, but he also did some questionable things that would rival any storybook villain. After spending some time in his company, I was by turns amazed, horrified, and full of admiration for his ambition and vision. In the end, I didn't try to make Alexander into either hero or villain. I just let him be himself... a complex and fascinating character.

Although Bucephalas counts as a hero (*Muse: dare you to suggest otherwise!*), my book needed a human character readers could identify with a bit more easily than Alexander. Charmeia the groom fit this role nicely. She isn't "feisty" in the way of popular heroines, but in the context of this story I think she is amazingly brave! A slave at the start of the book, she runs away (even though the penalty for this is death) to bring poison in a mule's hoof to Pella with the intention of avenging her mother's death. When she sees Bucephalas fighting his grooms on the riding ground, she pretends to be a boy so she can stay with the horse and protect him from the horsemaster, who becomes the horse's sworn enemy after Bucephalas loses him his job. Later, in her efforts to protect Bucephalas from battle, she stands up to Alexander

on several occasions, and struggles to return to the horse's side even when it puts her own life in danger. As a girl travelling with the army, I hoped Charmeia would be sympathetic enough to make the kind of character my readers might care about. Her being a fictional character was also an advantage... anything that happened to her should create more tension in my plot than Alexander's historical exploits. More about plot in my next post.

As for minor characters, the historical ones alone run into the hundreds. I knew I'd have to simplify them somehow, for my own sanity as well as for young readers. Since this is a story of war, I divided them into two categories: Them and Us.

Them (people who fought against Alexander):

King Darius – Persian king.

Bessus – Persian leader who seized power after King Darius fled from Alexander.

Prince Porus – Indian leader.

Princess Roxanne – Afghan princess who became Alexander's wife.

Us (Alexander's friends and allies):

General Parmenio – leader of King Philip's army.

Hephaestion – Alexander's best friend.

Philotas – Parmenio's son.

Alexander's Guard - eight of his boyhood friends.

As to whether these secondary characters were heroes or villains, I'll let you make up your own mind! Much depends which side of the story you are telling. To the Persians, King Darius was certainly a hero to meet Alexander in battle, and Bessus a villain on both sides for betraying his king. Was Roxanne a heroine? Maybe since she agreed to marry Alexander as part of a peace treaty, maybe not since she might well have poisoned her husband at the end to avenge her people - more about the mystery of Alexander's death later.

Fictional characters

As you might imagine, with so many historical characters to fit into the book there wasn't much room left for fictional ones. But I couldn't resist adding a few:

The old horsemaster – enemy of Bucephalas and Charmeia.

Tydeos – Charmeia's friend in the horse lines.

Demetrius – one of Alexander's Guard.

Queen Penthesilea – the Amazon queen (mythical rather than historical).

Unusually for a book published on a children's list, you'll notice many of these characters are adults. Even though Alexander and Charmeia begin the book aged 12, they grow up before the end. With a story spanning 20 years, this was unavoidable, and in my [second post](#) I explain how their growing up was my main reason for choosing the horse's viewpoint. With the readership in mind, however, I added a few younger characters as the story progressed. In fact, I developed a near-fatal soft spot for the Persian king's son Prince Ochus, taken by Alexander as a hostage after his first battle against the Persians. As one of the more sympathetic characters, the Persian prince was in danger of taking over the entire book, and accounts for many of the missing 50,000 words my editors sensibly advised me to remove. (*Muse: Prince Ochus' story would make a whole book of its own!*) I also made Roxanne younger than she is normally portrayed, so that when Alexander marries her she is still a girl,

accounting for the fact she does not become pregnant until the end of the book.

Horse characters

In much the same way Tolkien's hobbits are substitutes for children in his epic "Lord of the Rings", I hoped my horse characters might provide a way into this book for younger readers. Adult horses are different from adult humans, and not just because they have four legs and a tail. They are more like loyal friends and servants than heroes or villains. In some ways their relationship to their riders and grooms is like that of child to parent... trust, dependency, love, and either willing obedience or outright rebellion, according to what they are being asked to do at the time!

Obviously the horse characters in this book would be more important than the humans as far as Bucephalas was concerned, so I needed them to have their own characters, and had a lot of fun naming them and drawing them all. I gave Bucephalas a special mare to care about from the start – a dapple grey called Aura – and a special stallion friend called Petasios.

I let Hephaestion ride Petasios, and gave the rest of Alexander's friends horses to reflect their characters. They changed around a bit later on, as some got wounded or their riders died, and later in the book Aura had some foals - a colt called Hoplite and a filly called Electra, both of whom Alexander eventually rode into battle.



Putting the horses and humans together, when Alexander leads his first skirmish on the Thracian border we have:

Bucephalas carrying Alexander – dominant stallions!

Petasios carrying Hephaestion – best friends

Aura carrying Demetrius – gentle faithful companions

Psylla carrying Hector – first casualties in battle

Harpinna carrying Ptolemy – good tough fighters

Apollo carrying Perdicas – vain but strong and brave

Borealis carrying Leonnatus – big and strong

Zephyr carrying Philotas – small and with divided loyalties

Hades carrying Iolaus – carrying the shadow of death

(Muse: Bucephalas says "horse carrying" rather than "rider rode" to reflect the horse's viewpoint.)

These horses became Bucephalas' special herd, and to keep track of them all I ended up with sixteen different lists on my noticeboard as the book progressed. I sketched them all too, but there isn't really room for all their pictures here.

There's just space for Zoroaster, the sacred Persian horse of the sun captured from the Persian camp, about whom Bucephalas makes this comment, having never seen a

gelding before:

I have already smelt him. He is tethered at the end of our horse line near my usual spot. He is white all over and nearly as big as me, though he is fat and soft, not hard and muscular like us warhorses. His mane has been braided with silver threads, and his tail has little bells in it that tinkle whenever he flicks away a fly. He smells of flowers and he looks ridiculous.

I make myself huge and squeal at him. But the white horse doesn't squeal back. He simply turns his big dark eyes on us, pricks his ears and stares at me. Then he gives a big sigh and goes back to his hay. This is MOST confusing. He is a male horse, but he acts more like a mare.



Great Horse 7 – the plot thickens

There is a theory that plots for historical novels are easy. Want to write a historical novel about Alexander the Great? Just grab any book about Alexander, and you've got the plot more or less ready made. All you have to do is research his battles and dramatise them... well, sort of.

It's true found this book easier to write than my fictional fantasies. For one thing, Alexander's world was already quite detailed, so all I had to do was read up on the history. Most of my characters also already existed in fairly rounded form, thanks to the many dedicated historians of the period. The basic plot was, therefore, simple enough: After his father is assassinated, Prince Alexander sets out to finish the war with Persia, gets a taste for battle, thinks he's the son of Zeus and goes on to conquer the rest of the world. Easy enough (at least on paper!)

Again, sort of.

Having the historical events set in stone certainly made plotting this book easier than plotting an entirely fictional story. As explained in a previous post, I divided up Alexander's journey into Hoofprints (chapters) and listed all the main scenes, starting with his taming of Bucephalas at the palace in Pella, covering his first campaign to secure Macedonia's borders, then the audacious journey across the Hellespont into Anatolia, down the coast to Egypt, east into Persia, up into Soghdiana (Afghanistan), across the Himalayas to India where Bucephalas is fatally wounded in battle against the elephants, and ending with the long trek back to Babylon where Alexander died.

But don't worry if you haven't read the book yet and think this post is going to spoil the story for you, because of course these events alone are not enough to make a book into a novel. They're just WHAT happens - dry historical accounts littered with names and places and dates and numbers of dead, and the main reason I hated history at school! (*Muse: This is true. Katherine gave up history in Year 9 in favour of doing Art for O level... she says if history had been taught in a different way at her school, concentrating more on the people and children's lives back then, she might have liked it better.*)

The real trick of plotting a novel is to ask WHY something happens. Why exactly did Alexander set out to conquer the world? Was it to prove himself to his men, to escape his mother's influence, his spirit of adventure, his fear of treachery such as that which killed his father, an enormous ego, or maybe even naïvety in believing himself the immortal son of Zeus? Add to Alexander's story the "whys" of all the other main characters in your story, and you've got something approaching a plot.

For example, when Charmeia sees Bucephalas fighting his grooms on the riding ground at Pella, I made her fall in love with the horse and set out to look after him. A girl's instant love for a horse is believable enough, but being a fantasy writer I decided to make this a bit stronger by giving her a magical "horse bond" with Bucephalas (which Alexander also has). I worked this fantasy element into my historical plot to create conflict between Charmeia and Alexander, and also to make

the times when they and the horse were separated more tense. With minor characters, simple revenge or friendship was often enough. Others were more complex. It might sound strange, but I actually found Alexander the hardest character to work into my plot – some of the things he did seemed reckless and unbelievable, and those were areas where I decided the official historian had invented a few white lies.

But just sometimes all the elements of my plot fell neatly into place, all the WHATs and WHYs working beautifully together. There is a scene during the epic battle against the Persians at Gaugamela, where Alexander, after completing a clever cavalry manoeuvre that gets him and his personal guard behind the Persian lines, has a chance to finish the war by killing the Persian king. But he turns back from the chase in order to help the rest of his army, led by General Parmenio, who are in difficulties at the far side of the field. In the heat of the moment, within spear range of King Darius and with the battle madness on him, I did not quite believe Alexander would hear a messenger chasing after him on a slower horse at this point, let alone be persuaded in the confusion of battle to turn back. So I “invented” something that might delay him... his best friend Hephaestion, riding at his side as always, takes a bad enough wound to shock Alexander out of his single-minded chase after the Persian king. When he stops to help his friend, Darius’ chariot draws further away, and by the time the messenger arrives Alexander realizes the chase is doomed. I honestly believed this wound to be entirely fictional until months later, when I read a different account of the battle and discovered that *at Gaugamela Hephaestion took a nasty wound to the thigh...* it’s these moments of serendipity that send a shiver down an author’s spine.

I should probably say something about battles before ending this post. I love battles. They are very exciting to write with lots of action and look great in films. But again, they are just WHAT happens. A whole book of endless fights and battles would be extremely boring if you didn’t know WHY the characters were fighting and didn’t care who lived and who died. So while there are plenty of battles in my book (the main ones being at the Granicus, Issus, Gaugamela, and the Indus) much of my story concentrates on building conflict between the characters, both human and horse. Conflict between the human characters leads Alexander into battle. Meanwhile, Bucephalas has his own lesser (but to him just as important) battles with the other stallions in his herd, fighting over the mares.

From the feedback I’ve had so far about "I am the Great Horse", I think part of the reason some readers don’t like historical novels is that the plot is to a certain extent predictable. The closer you stick to a historical figure such as Alexander, the more predictable it becomes. If you write historical novels, the Muse would be interested to know how YOU make your plots come alive?

Great Horse 8 – Endings

Endings are like beginnings – not as easy as you might think, because no creation ever really ends. If you've created a world that seems real, and populated it with characters your readers care about, then your world and those characters will live on beyond the end of the book in the reader's imagination, and may even (as the number of unplanned sequels on the shelves prove) give rise to whole new books. So how do you decide where to end a book?

In the same way you might be tempted to start a book with the birth of your main character, the most obvious ending is when your main character dies – but, of course, this rarely makes a satisfying ending! Who wants to spend time reading about a character they care about and will hopefully fall in love with, only to discover that character dies on the last page? (*Muse: not me!*) Obviously there are exceptions to this rule, but in general the best endings occur well before this happens.

How much before? Well, I think this depends on the genre you are writing. For example, many romances end with the main characters falling in love and getting married - or at least kissing each other passionately - on the final page. This is an excellent ending for a romance, because in real life marriage is where things start to get more complicated! In genre fantasy the ending usually comes when the final epic battle of Light against Dark is won. In a murder story things get turned around - the death usually comes first, and the ending of the book is actually at the beginning, when the mystery of the murder has been solved. But I was writing a historical novel about a well-known historical character and wanted to complete the story in one book. So, although I didn't start my book with Alexander's birth, in this case I did decide to end it with his death.

What?! I hear you say. But you've just said this doesn't make the best ending! Ah, but if you've followed my previous posts you'll see that Alexander is not the true hero of this book. Heroic, certainly, but not a character I expected my readers to fall in love with and care about enough to cast the book down in disgust if I killed him off. Anyway, a glance at any history book will tell you Alexander the Great died in Babylon in 323BC, so I'm not giving too much away by telling you the book ends with his death.

At this point my story ended neatly too, because Alexander left no heir to his great empire. When his generals asked him on his deathbed to name the person his empire should go to, he mumbled something historians usually translate as "to the strongest". As you might imagine, this set off a major power struggle between his generals, who ended up dividing the empire between them and destroying much of what they had achieved. No one person was strong enough to take over from Alexander the Great. *Muse: Roxanne was pregnant at the time, but nobody knew if her child would be a boy or a girl or survive long enough to take over from Alexander – later she gave birth to a boy, named Alexander after his father, who was assassinated along with his mother when he reached the age of 13.*

From the point of view of the other main characters... Bucephalas, Charmeia and her friend Tydeos... this ending was actually quite a happy one, because by the end of the

book Alexander had become more of a villain than a hero, even to his own men. Killing him off certainly felt quite satisfying to me, after some of the atrocities he had committed along the way. His men might have loved and mourned Alexander, but the fighting was over! They could at last go home. They were also quite rich after plundering the treasure of the fabulous Persian empire, so even common grooms like Charmeia went home with enough gold in their pockets to set them up for life. This enabled me to give most of my fictional characters, humans and horses, a happy ending.

The exception of course was the Great Horse himself. If you read the history books, you'll discover that Bucephalas was badly wounded in Alexander's final battle against Prince Porus' elephants and died in India. Alexander set up a statue to him on the banks of the Indus and named a city after him, called Bucephala, before leading the remains of his army back to Babylon. But since I'd chosen Bucephalas to narrate my book, this clearly was not going to work if I wanted to end it with Alexander's death! The problem niggled away in the background as I was writing the first few chapters. At one point I even considered ending my book in India before the final battle, or maybe halfway through it. But fortunately I am a fantasy writer, and in the end I shamelessly employed an element of fantasy to get around this.

In a fantasy novel, whenever your plot starts getting tricky you can always add a bit of magic to sort it out. Wave a wand, or better still invent your own magical rules. As long as you stick to those rules throughout your book, your readers should believe in them when you use them to make your plot work later on. In this case, I used Bucephalas' ability to see ghosts, which you may remember I set up right at the beginning of the book with his **damaged eye**, and used several times throughout the story when he sees the ghosts of dying men and horses fleeing from battlefields. With this fantasy element firmly in place, fixing up the ending so the horse could continue to tell the story beyond the Indus was simple enough. I won't give away all the details here, in case you haven't read the book yet, but suffice to say that in "I am the Great Horse" Bucephalas does not die at the Indus. Instead, Alexander leaves Charmeia in charge of the wounded horse and leads his army back to Babylon, believing Bucephalas – now a ripe old age for a horse – will never carry him in battle again. This proves true enough, since the Indus proved to be Alexander's last battle.

So I had my final scene. Alexander's death should be simple enough to write, you might think - and yet this event proved to be one of the most intriguing parts of my book! How exactly did Alexander the Great die? Not gloriously in battle, as he would probably have liked, but slowly in great pain on his sickbed. I believe the historians are still arguing over the exact cause, the most common theories being poison, sickness, or an old war wound. I think the current favourite is that he died from drinking bad water, and what killed him were nasty bacteria in the Euphrates river that runs past Babylon. There are pleasing echoes of HG Wells' "War of the Worlds" here... the invincible conqueror defeated by tiny microbes. The war wound theory is also possible, I suppose, since he took many nasty wounds while leading his men into battle and storming cities. But being a writer, I'm on the side of the more intriguing poison. With the number of enemies Alexander made during his short life, I've no doubt poison would have been in many people's minds. But who did it, and how, and – more importantly – WHY? No, I'm not going to give this bit of my ending away, either! But suffice to say I could just as easily have written this book as a murder

mystery, and it would have made a good story.

Muse: Katherine did begin to write a sequel about Roxanne's son as a murder mystery starting with Alexander's death... but her publisher wasn't keen at the time, so it's gone back into her safe for the time being.

And so we come to the end of the writing process... which is only the beginning of the editing and publishing process that brings a book to the shelves so you can read it. At this point, in late October 2004, Katherine had a version of the book that was 200,000 words long and was called BUCEPHALAS (after the great horse, naturally!). This is what authors and publishers call a working title, and the actual title for this book came after much discussion – *more about titles in a later post.*

Great Horse 9 – Editing, the author’s view

The editing process is where your book stops being *your* book and starts to become your publisher’s book, and I believe learning to work effectively with an editor is the single most important thing that separates a hobby writer from a professional writer. It’s possible (if you’re very lucky and very talented) to get paid for work that has not been edited, but I don’t think it’s possible to have a long-term professional career without an editor.

My first ever experience of being edited was with a magazine called Visionary Tongue run by a team of professional writers, when fantasy author Storm Constantine worked on a short vampire story of mine called “Rubies” (which you can read on my [website](#)). Although at first the edits seemed like extra work (*I’d redrafted my story about six times already... what could possibly be wrong with it?!*), I really enjoyed working with such a celebrated author and saw an immediate improvement in my work. Even though this particular magazine did not pay contributors, the editing process gave a level of professionalism to the publication, and was valuable experience for me as a new writer.

A few years later, when I’d written my debut novel Song Quest, I had the pleasure of working with Barry Cunningham (editor of the first Harry Potter book!) and Helen Wire, who together made a great team. There was quite a bit of editing to do, but all the hard work paid off when the book won the **Branford Boase Award** for a first novel for children, which honours both author and editor, thus recognizing the importance of the editing process in bringing a first novel to the shelves.

When I came to write “I am the Great Horse” to some extent I made the author’s classic mistake of falling too much in love with my own book. I had such passion for Bucephalas and Alexander’s story, all I wanted to do was pour these passions into the page. I forgot younger readers might struggle with such a huge book - 200,000 words before editing! So the first thing my editors asked me to do was cut out 50,000 words.

To begin with this seemed a big ask – some entire books aren’t even that long! – but in the end, losing that many words was surprisingly easy. I took out one plot line (the Persian Prince’s story), then condensed the rest by taking out some of my more long winded scenes (such as five pages detailing a charge Alexander made up a ridge to tackle an enemy at the top) and condensing them down to just a few lines. With my first person/horse narrator, this was probably easier to do than with a book written in the third person - do too much of this, and your story can feel as if it is being “told” rather than “seen”, which then starts to read dangerously like a history text book. So where the book started to feel a bit too boring with this approach, I removed the whole scene and skipped to the next. Again, the style of the story helped me with this. If I hadn’t been using a linear plot, cutting whole scenes would have been much trickier (though not impossible).

At the time, every cut I made felt like being slashed by Alexander’s sword, but I can see now I could have taken out quite a bit more without destroying the story. If there’s something I’ve learnt from being edited, it’s that you can always cut. But there does

come a point when a story ceases to become worth everyone's time and expense to publish as a book. The Twitter version: **"My name is Bucephalas. I am the untameable black stallion who carried Alexander the Great and conquered the world - HA!"** Is fine, but is it entertaining? I'll leave that up to you!

I actually believe the editing process is just as important in the second, and the third, and the hundred and third book, though it does not always seem to be carried out in such depth later in authors' careers, particularly if that author becomes a best-seller. Perhaps editors are afraid to destroy a best-selling formula? Or perhaps they are just too busy to edit all the books they publish to the same extent? I only know that for all of my five books so far with Chicken House, my experience has been similar: Barry reads and suggests the larger changes (such as "I don't understand why they're doing this" or in the case of *I am the Great Horse* "FAR too long - where can we cut??!") Then Helen takes the new version and gets down to more detail, providing me with a sheaf of suggested changes and queries and notes made at chapter level. She also works on the words themselves to correct grammar, take out commas, and makes sure the speech marks pair up, etc. This is called copy editing, and next week you'll be able to read Helen's guest post for a fascinating insight into how she approaches her work.

I like being edited more as time goes on, and I begin to see all the flaws in my writing that I was blissfully unaware of a few years ago when I started. Editing makes your book the best it can be for your readers, and the best it can be for the market – which are hopefully the same thing! If you imagine an author sitting in a room creating something beautiful, editing cleans the window so the story can be enjoyed in its full glory by those outside looking in. So if you're new to the process, don't be scared. Being edited is not as painful as it sounds, and can be enjoyable as well as instructive. The best part is knowing that your book or story will be read after all the hard work – something that is by no means guaranteed when you are writing the book. Without its editors, "I am the Great Horse" would still be a mammoth 200,000-word manuscript with an unpronounceable title lurking in electronic form on my computer.

So I'd like to take this opportunity to thank my editors Barry Cunningham and Imogen Cooper at Chicken House for bringing this book into the world, my American editors over at Scholastic US for the beautiful silver hardcover version, and our fabulous guest editor Helen Wire who has kindly agreed to give you a glimpse of what happens behind the scenes...

Great Horse 10 – Editing, the editor’s view by Helen Wire



The Muse is delighted to welcome freelance editor Helen Wire to this blog, pictured here passing on her love of books to a young reader! This week she gives us a fascinating glimpse into her work on the Great Horse manuscript... over to you, Helen.

HELEN WIRE:

Without exception everyone who read and assessed Katherine’s massive 200,000 word manuscript of what was to become *I am the Great Horse*, “loved it”. Katherine had already been very successfully published by the **Chicken House** so we – the innovative publisher of great books for children and young adults Barry Cunningham, his deputy managing director Rachel Hickman, their in-house editor Imogen Cooper and I, a freelance editor – already knew what a thoroughly good writer she is. And we weren’t disappointed.

No one reading this Great Horse blog could fail to recognise that Katherine is a gift to an editor – she barely needs editing. And that leaves one free at first reading to simply enjoy her stories. From page one of *Bucephalas* – the working title for what became *I am the Great Horse* – I was hooked. I wanted to read on, and not just because I was being paid to. First to read it was Barry, who wrote some notes prior to the manuscript coming to me for a first reading before we all got together to discuss this epic story with Katherine. To give you a real sense of the kind of things editors and publishers say to one another about a book they have agreed from the outset is brilliant, I quote below an email I sent Barry in response to the few notes he had written. The page numbers I quote below must relate to the first manuscript. (Luckily, I found this five-year-old email lurking in the memory of one of my by-now discarded computers.)

From: helen wire [...]

To: Barry at the Chicken House Cunningham [...]

Cc: Imogen Cooper [...]

Date: Wednesday, February 2, 2005 9:13 pm
 Subject: BUCEPHALAS

Dear Barry and Imogen

What a marvellous book ... I didn't have any of the reactions you mention, Barry, in your notes to me (in bold below).

It is truly extraordinary how Katherine has written this whole book from the horse's point of view without ever faltering.

Having Alexander talk to his horse is a brilliant device for getting into the king's mind – he could and did share any confidence with Bucephalas and know absolutely that any vulnerability or self-doubt he revealed would go no further. And now Katherine has let us the readers be privy to those moments of intimacy. What a knockout!

BarryC: I enjoyed it – it's much more direct and easy to read than the more complicated parts of Katherine's Echorium Sequence. But it is rather too long—

HW: It is long but there's no part of it I would want to cut. What's Katherine's view? Unlike the [other author's] book you once considered splitting into two chunks, I think it wouldn't be too hard to break the Bucephalas story up into two or even three volumes. What do you think?

BC: sometimes all the battles tend to blur together.

HW: They didn't for me. And on the contrary, in her meticulously spare prose Katherine rarely wastes words on anything that is not driving the story forward. She doesn't overly dwell on each of the battle scenes and they all seemed very distinct and vital to me. And it's all a lively history lesson too. I could very easily get bored by battle scenes but I wasn't ever – not for a single moment.

BC: I'm not overly sure about the end – it seems that the final break of the horse bond isn't really a satisfactory end to the Charm and Alexander thing – even if it is for the horse part of their lives.

HW: It seems to me that the horse bond broke exactly as predicted throughout the book, and when it happened Charm was indeed finally set free to pursue her life with Tydeos. I really liked the clever way Katherine ended it all with the ghost of Bucephalas making the final links – far better than any stereotypical human-to-human ending [with Alex & Charm] would have been. But I would be interested to know if Katherine would consider coming up with any other ideas about how to end it.

BC: Obviously the horse doesn't develop much as a character either – he's pretty much the same throughout.

HW: That seems entirely appropriate to me – he is a horse after all. He is a strong and well perceived character though.

BC: The evil horsemaster is perhaps not a big enough adversary either ...

HW: Well I suppose he could be developed, but in the big scheme of things he's actually a minor character who has ghastly consequences whenever he appears. He is at the heart of some of the nastiest plots, and is certainly horrible enough as it is to provide the story with an evil undercurrent. Indeed, he shot the arrow that wounded Alex (p. 512). I was more puzzled that the Macedonians seemed very careless about having him properly dealt with earlier, and Charm sometimes seemed naively fair

with him despite the woeful mistreatment to which he'd always subjected her.

BC: and perhaps we need much more of Alexander at key moments to feel the reality of his awesome character – he often just seems bad tempered.

HW: He did become increasingly bad-tempered as the story unfolded but that seemed entirely well done and appropriate to the kind of pressures he was subject to. He started as a young energetic, forceful young man who was playful with his mates, and gradually became a powerful and determined leader inevitably being corrupted and brutalised by the deaths and pain for which he was responsible. It's all there in the text.

I thought Alex's character developed rather well throughout the story and that he displayed a far greater range of emotions than mere kingly rage and cruelty. The device of having him talk to Bucephalas, and also to Charm, was a terrific way to contrast his tough nature with his gentler feelings (p. 427) of friendship, protectiveness, caring (p. 424); fear, remorse, compassion (p. 474; vulnerability and uncertainty (p. 528); repentance (p. 536); irrationality (p. 564); vengefulness (p. 582). And knowing how much he cared for Bucephalas makes it doubly painful for us when he unthinkingly hurts his beloved horse. We witness his growing madness and fears via his intimate talks with his horse.

BC: I'm tempted to say let's play a little looser with history at the end – since Alexander is writing his own anyway.

HW: Well yes, but Bucephalas can only tell the story that he the horse is witness to. The horse would tell it straight, not as Alex might have wanted it written. Having a ghost horse is quite a big deviation from known history.

I have marked up the text and started compiling more detailed notes/queries [for Katherine] There's not much to be changed throughout but of course it is very long and they all add up. I have a few queries but they will be easy for Katherine to deal with.

BC: Let's chat when you've read it.

HW: OK...

All very best
Helen

Co-incidentally at the time, Katherine and I both lived in Gloucestershire, so Barry and Imogen drove up from their Somerset office and we all met at my house to discuss the text. I have always had the greatest respect for Barry's publishing intelligence and instinct but I was horrified when he said we would have to cut 50,000 words because Bucephalas was just too long for the children's book market. I had reckoned the original text to be one of the best and most interesting I'd ever read. I couldn't bear the thought of having to cut any of it, let alone 50,000 words. Where on earth would I start? Fortunately, Katherine came to the rescue and offered to see what she could do to reduce it. Being the consummate professional she is, Katherine toiled away on the mammoth task of rethinking and cutting the text she must already have been working on for months, years even.

(Muse: the book took about a year part time to research, 9 months full time to write, and 2 years to edit and publish!)

Various communications passed between publisher and author but on 26 May 2005 Katherine emailed us, saying:

Dear Barry,

I have now read through *Bucephalas* again, and spoken to Helen about it as you suggested.

I am worried that the book has changed somewhat from my original vision, but I agree it is tighter and more of a controlled story now than a wild gallop through history. I think most of the "flatness" you mention comes from having shortened the first part, which makes the rest of the book seem unbalanced. Also, Helen feels some of the condensing I did last time is not as exciting as when it was written out in full, so if we can't have the length then I will need to condense these parts even more to avoid slowing up the story. I also feel that, from the Gordian Knot onwards, I need to make slightly more of the supernatural elements, particularly towards the end in order to build up to the ghostly ending. And we both agree the first chapter should be more explosive to fit the new, condensed version of the book.

She then went on to list the various cuts and changes she could make. As an experienced editor I know that most writing can benefit from cutting and refining to allow the essence of a story its greatest clarity. But there is always a risk that cuts as drastic as those Katherine was having to make could leave the story without its original expansive freshness and vitality – hence the slight “flatness” Katherine mentioned above. It can happen with words just as it often happens when a first, uninhibited, rough sketch in drawing is too carefully redrawn for the final artwork and thereby loses all the vitality of the original sketch. But, as anyone who has read *I am the Great Horse* will know, Katherine did yet more word magic and the book, like its equine narrator, is magnificent.

Muse: A final question: Katherine broke a few rules in *I am the Great Horse*, changing from present to past tense and back again several times during the story (e.g. battles told in present tense, journeys in the past). What is your view on tenses as editor?

HW: Without going back and rereading the whole book, I'd say what she did worked well in the service of the narrative and was never confusing, so if a rule was broken that's what makes writing creative.

Thank you very much Helen!

Great Horse 11 – Titles

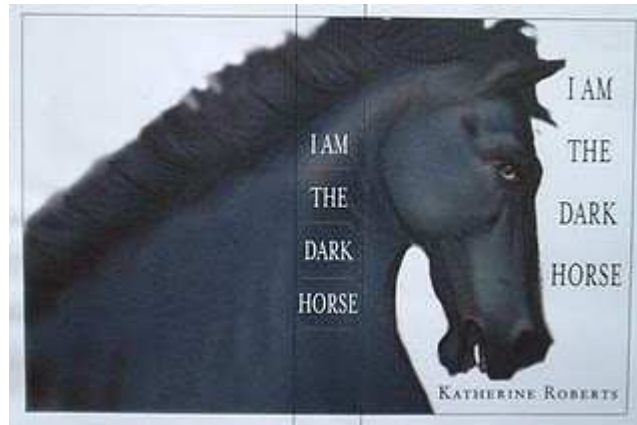
At last we come to the title. You might be wondering why it took so long to get to this point, but titles can be trickier than you think. Sometimes they come straight away and everyone loves them – like the first book of my Seven Fabulous Wonders series, which I knew would be called “The Great Pyramid Robbery” before I wrote a single word. But more often the published title comes after much discussion with the editor, and the author’s original ideas can usually be improved upon.

This might seem overly fussy, but the title is probably the most important word(s) in your book, because title and cover image taken together must inspire a potential reader to pick it up in the first place. They may then turn it over to read the back cover “blurb”, or leaf through the pages to get a feel for the story, but if your book is shelved the traditional way in a bookshop then chances are people won’t even see the cover image, only the spine with title and author’s name. So unless you are a celebrity who can guarantee sales on name alone, the title has to work very hard indeed. (*Muse: this is why you sometimes see authors or their agents sneakily turning their own books face-out on the shelves so people can see the cover as well!*)

Up until this point, in early 2005, my book was still known as “Bucephalas”. But my editors soon dropped this title because of being difficult to spell... Bucephalas? Bucephalus?... as well as being difficult to pronounce. Bookshop assistants would struggle with it, they decided. They also felt that younger (and many older!) readers might not realize this was the name of Alexander the Great’s horse. I squirmed a bit, because I’d become quite attached to my working title after living with it for so long, and had difficulty thinking of my book as being called anything else. But I had to admit my editors were right, because I’d often spelt it wrong myself to begin with - Bucephalus was the breed of horse; Bucephalas was the horse’s name - so out it went. With no obvious alternative, Chicken House began to call the book “The Amazing Horse Story Without A Name”.

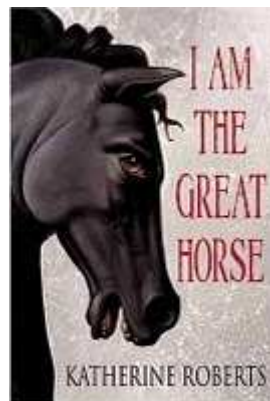
And so it remained throughout the editing process. While I tried to get “Bucephalas” out of my head and think of something better, my editors tossed ideas back and forth between them, and since this book was to have a simultaneous American edition my US publisher Scholastic got involved, too. We wanted a title that would suggest this was a story about Alexander the Great being told by his horse... yet at the same time one that did not sound too historical, in case people thought this was a history book about Alexander and were put off by that. I don’t know how my editors went about their brainstorming. I have an image of them curled up before a roaring fire in Chicken House’s office with coffee and doughnuts having fabulously creative sessions, but at home alone in my study I had to rely on other methods.

Normally I just scribble down ideas until something jumps out at me. But in this case nothing did, so I decided to try a word collage.



But aside from the fact it looked lovely on their design, we didn't think "dark" really described Bucephalas' character. (*Muse: Maybe we were wrong... what say you, American readers of this blog?*)

And so we arrived at the final title you see today. It took about two months to find, and has been the trickiest title of all my books so far. I think it works very well with the fabulous horse's head cover. The only thing I wish we could have added is a strap line on the front mentioning Alexander the Great, because without it the book looks like a standard horse story until you turn it over to read the blurb – though perhaps this would have put off more readers than it attracted?



Of course, the book could have been published in America with a different title, which happens more often than you might think. And when books are translated into other languages, the title often doesn't translate very well and so gets changed for their market – sometimes without the author even realizing, if they don't speak that particular language. So far "I am the Great Horse" has only been translated into Greek, and I believe the Greek title is the same as the English one... but I'll leave that up to my translator [Anna Vasileiadi-Dardalis](#) to tell you in her exciting interview coming up in Great horse 13.

Great Horse 12 – Illustrating maps: Brian Sanders

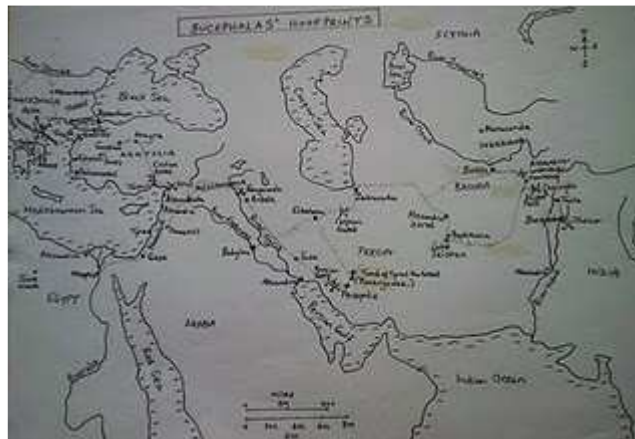
(All maps except Katherine's sketch are © Brian Sanders)



They say a picture is worth a thousand words... and when you're talking about maps, a picture can be worth a hundred thousand words! There is just one map in this book, but it tells you all you need to know about Bucephalas' epic journey with Alexander. So this week the Muse is delighted to introduce talented artist Brian Sanders, who created the beautiful map you see at the front of "I am the Great Horse".

Brian has been a professional artist for five decades, during which time he has worked in every area of the illustrative arts ranging through book publishing, magazines, newspapers, government agencies, film, television and art education. Although he loved to draw maps in his childhood, he has only recently been asked to produce them for books, and the commission for "I am the Great Horse" came from book designer Ian Butterworth, with whom Brian has worked over many years.

The project began with a rough sketch of the historical area supplied by Katherine, together with a draft of Bucephalas' manuscript as a guide.



Brian then researched the historical details to embellish his version of the map before going to a pencil draft:



When this was completed, Chicken House sent Katherine a scan of the sketch with notes from Brian attached, so she could check it for accuracy before he began the finished art.

Ian Butterworth had also requested a border to the map, so for this Brian decided to continue the mosaic theme from his portrait of Alexander riding Bucephalas. This was the result:



The ground for the finished artwork is faux parchment used to simulate papyrus, and the medium is watercolour with body colour added for extra detail. Brian decided to use actual hoof prints and footprints to demonstrate the routes taken and, because there were so many of each, resorted to a more basic technology... he made potato cuts in the shape of hooves and sandals, dotted the routes in pencil, then printed directly over them. (*Muse: Potato cuts are brilliant fun for making stencils... have you ever tried making any yourself?*)

The full colour map was originally going to be a fabulous double-page spread in the first UK edition of the book. But in the end it had to be turned sideways and reproduced on the inside front cover to conform to the more traditional paperback format preferred by the main UK booksellers. The Muse still thinks it looks fabulous, and younger readers with sharp eyes should have no trouble counting every single hoof print, though older ones like Katherine might need a magnifying glass to see all the details.

Here is the digitally enhanced version used in the actual book:



In the US hardcover edition, the same map is reproduced in black and white so it could be spread over a double page, which makes it easier to read if not quite so pretty. We are still waiting to see what will happen for the US paperback. (*Muse: If any American readers would like to see it in colour, now is the time to write to the US publisher [Scholastic](#) and start begging!*)

Brian Sanders has had a long and interesting career as an artist. During the 1960's, his work was used in the earliest newspaper colour supplements, leading to Stanley Kubrick employing him to record on set the making of "2001 a Space Odyssey". (*Muse: WOW!*)

Following this, he worked with formats ranging from large-scale posters and military paintings to postage stamps, of which he has designed over fifty sets world-wide, including "A History of WW2 in Postage Stamps". He has also designed a series of forty coins titled: "Historic Fighting Ships".

He has exhibited widely with one man shows at The Imperial War Museum, York Castle Museum, The Association of Illustrators Gallery, National Trust of Cornwall Trelissic Gallery, and The Sir Rowland Hill Museum. There are permanent exhibitions of his work at the The Uncover Postal Museum in Wyoming USA, and his Royal Mail stamp art is in The British Postal Museum and Archive.

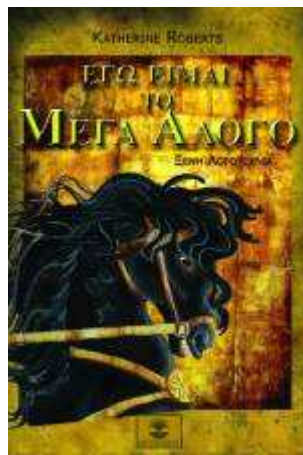
His painting of Her Majesty The Queen presenting Standards to the Royal Tank Regiment is in the collection of the RTR Museum (*Muse: WOW again! Bucephalus is very lucky to have his map drawn by someone who has painted a portrait of the Queen of England!*)

In partnership with Lizzie Sanders his wife, Brian has jointly produced many 3D paper works, including an Edwardian dolls' house and an accurately detailed model of Stonehenge. Brian also did the artwork for a large-scale pop-up model and other illustrations for a book about the doomed ship Titanic.

More details on the [Sanders website](#).

Brian also writes and illustrates his own books – his most recently published book is: "[Evacuee a Wartime Childhood](#)", the first of a graphic trilogy.

Great Horse 13 - Greek translation by Anna Vasileiadi-Dardalis



This week the Muse is delighted to introduce Anna Vasileiadi-Dardalis, who translated "I am the Great Horse" into Greek for the fabulous Greek language edition pictured here.

Anna is also an author herself, so Katherine was very excited when she agreed to an interview. This is what she has to say about the Great Horse and translating books into other languages...

KR: Since I do not read Greek myself, I find the Greek edition very mysterious. When you translate a book, do you translate it word for word or edit the text as you go?

ANNA: I suppose you must be feeling the same way I feel when I read Japanese – or even German! They say that a translation is like a woman... hasn't to be faithful in order to be good.

Of course there are differences between two languages. Being an author myself, I feel that need of keeping as strict to the original text as I can. At the same time, by reading the book as from the first time, I try to sink in the original author's mind – you, at this particular case – and find out/imagine the facts, the sentiments, the pictures that are to be expressed. In that perspective, I sometimes have to use synonym words or phrases of my own language and literature that give the exact same feeling to the Greek readers.

As an author and a literature translator, I can say – and I think that many agree in that – that translating a literature book is more difficult than writing one. Because, one has to respect some other person's way of expressing, and express at the same quality level of the original text.

KR: I am aware that English titles often get changed in translation... how did "I am the Great Horse" translate into Greek?

ANNA: It's true that we often have to change the titles so that are well accepted by the local readers and draw their attention as well. With this book, we didn't need to do anything. The title was just there! Alexander was Great and his horse could not be but

the Great Horse. So we kept the title exactly as it is – in the Greek language of course.

KR: The golden Greek cover is very beautiful! Were you involved in its design at all?

ANNA: Yes, it's lovely, isn't it? It took us enough time to make it. The truth is that I'm involved in almost everything. Both the publisher and I had a specific picture in our minds on what the Great Horse should look like on the cover. Black, shiny, furious, strong, forceful... simply the best! It took some different pictures by our illustrator until he deeply understood what we had in mind, and the final one was this. A papyrus on the background and golden letters on the title, and everything seemed perfect! I feel that he's done a great job – although I was a headache in the meantime.

KR: I believe you were interviewed about the Great Horse on Greek TV... is this normal when you translate a book, and what was the experience like?

ANNA: Well... you cannot actually say it normal. It depends on who finds out the work and whether he likes it, or who people one knows. It was not one of the major TV channels but too many people watch it all over Greece. And it was not only one channel, but four different interviews in three different channels. It gave the book some publicity, I must admit. And it was an interesting experience anyway.

[Click here to watch one of Anna's interviews.](#)

KR: You are also translating my Seven Fabulous Wonders series, which are written in the third person (using "he" and "she"), rather than the first person (using "I") like the Great Horse... does this make them easier or more difficult to translate?

ANNA: To be honest... no, I can't find any difference. It's almost the same. Maybe because of the fact that I'm writing my own books and I have the ability to handle both cases... I don't know. But the truth is that the Seven Fabulous Wonders are as exciting as the Great Horse to me.

KR: The Great Horse is a long book, which has put off some foreign language publishers from buying rights... did its length cause you any special problems?

ANNA: It's a fascinating story, easy to read, great humor, lot of sensitivity... I think it's really amazing and in fact, I didn't want it to end!

KR: Do you prefer writing books or translating them?

ANNA: They are different but I like both. You know how it is to create something as an author, so you can understand my feeling. On the other hand, being an author gives me the opportunity to "create" as a translator, too, and give the original text the literary standard that it deserves. So it's as exciting.

KR: Finally, if you could pick any book in the world to translate, which one would it be?

ANNA: The Great Horse... again!!!

Thank you very much, Anna! The Muse sends you an amphora of unicorn glitter.

Visit [Anna's website](#) to find out more about her books (if you don't speak Greek, click on the English flag to translate).

Great Horse 14 – Finally, a book trailer!

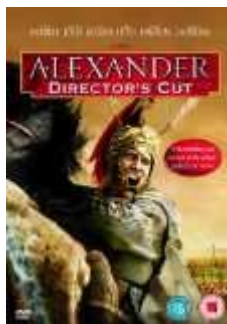


The final post in this series must go to fan [Jaguar Jedi](#), who has created this fabulous book trailer on YouTube to tell Bucephalas' story:

[CLICK HERE TO WATCH THE TRAILER](#)

Along with other horse footage, this trailer uses promotional clips from Oliver Stone's film "Alexander", which came out at the end of 2004, just after I had delivered the manuscript of "I am the Great Horse" to my publisher. Already a fan, I drove 20 miles to see it on the big screen. I was eager to experience Bucephalas' battles close-up, but also a bit anxious in case I had got something glaringly wrong. In the event, I needn't have worried. Although the film concentrates more on the human characters than the horses, everything seemed just right, especially Alexander's stormy character.

I was fascinated by how the film cuts back and forth through his life in the way of a literary type of novel, whereas my book tells the story in linear form that might have made a more obvious film script... which proves there are no hard rules to writing books or making films! I later bought the DVD with the director's cut, where Oliver Stone explains his decisions for using the flashback structure, and re-cuts his own film to make it even better.



[Alexander \[2004\]](#)

This is what Jaguar Jedi has to say about making the trailer:

I'm a big history lover and so this was super fun to do. But - it was difficult to pull off

the history aspect as well as tell the story through a 3+ min video. Most trailers tend to be all heavy and dramatic, but I wanted to stick to the style of the book (and Bucephalus) and make it adventurous, spirited, and buoyantly rousing. After all, the book is from the view of a proud warhorse! It was very important to keep that invigorating spirit.

It was tough to cast certain people. For example, my brother and I felt that the Queen of the Amazons should be dark-skinned. However, I couldn't think of anyone fitting the "warrior queen", so at last I used Keira Knightley as Guinevere in "King Arthur". Ironically, we both agreed that we'd love Alun Armstrong as the Horsemaster, and that footage was from "Little Dorrit". If you've read the book you may remember the dog that adopted herself into the groom's camp, Perita. The German Shepard from "Gladiator" plays her.

But hardest of all was the main female, Charmeia. I could literally not think of anyone to play her. Not being able to think of anyone held me off this video for a year. Then, somehow, I came up with the idea of "One Night with the King", having seen it in theaters years ago. For young Charmeia (training and exercising Bucephalus for Alexander) I used the character Sharbat from "Zafir". (Who also dresses up as a boy, incidentally.) The footage for Tydeos, Charmeia's friend groom, is also from "One Night with the King".

And I guess the narrator dude is Old Ptolemy, LOL. The audio at the beginning is from "The Black Stallion".

Through editing I was able to make it look like there were scenes taken from a movie and put into a trailer in the latter half, while the first concentrates on Bucephalus' point of view. From Pella, Thebes, Granicus, Halicarnassus, Gaugemela, the Hindu Kush and India, there's such an epic vastness about the world that Alexander the Great conquered. I **really** wanted to show him cutting the Gordian Knot, with the thunder and lightening and Bucephalus rearing up, but LOL, there's only so much an editor can do.

And yes, Derek Jacobi is in there. Because I love him, and he's awesome. ☺

I know the titles are not accurate Greek. It was the font I downloaded, and while it looks nice to non-Greek speakers, it's not real Greek at all. Also, as a Persian horse, Zoroaster would really be an Arabian, not an Iberian as shown. But the footage was too good to pass up... a white horse about to be captured

(For a full list of music and films used in this trailer and a copyright disclaimer, see Jaguar Jedi's comments on You Tube.)

More information about "I am the Great Horse" and my other books can be found on my website www.katherineroberts.co.uk.

LET THE HOOFPRIENTS BEGIN!