



# Julius Zebra: Bundle with the Britons

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

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Julius Zebra is the people's champion ? Rome's favourite gladiator ? and, in this illustrated comedy for children, he is eager to win freedom for himself and his animal friends. Unfortunately, Emperor Hadrian has other ideas.

The subject of Roman history is one that many children find fascinating, particularly the colosseum and its gladiatorial bouts. In this sequel to *Rumble with the Romans*, Gary Northfield once again thrusts his cast of cartoonish critters into the arena. Julius and his pals (including a short-tempered lion and a very bossy mouse) are looking forward to a tropical holiday on their way to freedom but their hopes are dashed when they arrive in Celtic Britannia and are forced to battle giant, angry rams and bulls.

The damp and drizzly weather makes the gladiators' already tortuous training regime unbearable but all of Julius' far-fetched escape attempts come to no avail. Hated by both their Roman leaders and the barbaric Britons, the animal heroes have to stick together if they are to survive their nightmare vacation, and it is tough to maintain morale when dinner is a soggy biscuit and the only shelter from thunderous rain and wind is a decrepit barn.

Julius and his animal friends represent the slaves that were oppressed throughout the Roman Empire. Their eagerness to fight for freedom and to stand up for the rights of homogenous peoples is an important and worthy message but is sadly hidden too often behind a battery of brash jokes.

Fortunately, the jokes are well-delivered and are most visible in imaginative, cartoon line drawings and their accompanying speech bubbles. The combination of daft animals and revolting facts from history is an excellent source of comedy and Northfield is clearly well-researched in both fields. For example, Centurions keep themselves warm in the freezing North of Britannia using stinging nettles and animal skins and the animal gladiators enjoy painting themselves with foul-smelling woad.

Though there are many moments of hilarity and a great amount of disgusting historical facts that *Horrible Histories* fans will enjoy, Julius Zebra's narrative is somewhat unfulfilling as a whole and reads rather like a sketch show of silly scenes. The next instalment will be welcomed by existing fans but may require a different formula if it is to attract a wider audience.

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