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Augustus



Synopsis

Caesar Augustusâ™ story, one of the most riveting in western history, is filled with drama and contradiction, risky gambles and unexpected success. He began as a teenage warlord, whose only claim to power was as the heir of the murdered Julius Caesar. Mark Antony dubbed him âœœ boy who owes everything to a name,â• but in the years to come the youth outmaneuvered all the older and more experienced politicians and was the last man standing in 30 BC. Over the next half century he reinvented himself as a servant of the state who gave Rome peace and stability, and created a new system of governmentâ”the Principate or rule of an emperor.Â In this highly anticipated biography Goldsworthy puts his deep knowledge of ancient sources to full use, recounting the events of Augustusâ™ long life in greater detail than ever before. Goldsworthy pins down the man behind the myths: a consummate manipulator, propagandist, and showman, both generous and ruthless. Under Augustusâ™ rule the empire prospered, yet his success was never assured and the events of his life unfolded with exciting unpredictability. Goldsworthy captures the passion and savagery, the public image and private struggles of the real man whose epic life continues to influence western history.

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Customer Reviews

Goldsworthy's Augustus breaks away from the more traditional narrative of Augustus "that he was walking in the footsteps of Julius Caesar, his adopted uncle and famous Roman general and dictator, even if he takes the time to discuss Augustus's father's life, and a quick overview of Julius Caesar's rise and fall from power. Goldsworthy, however, is not afraid to be critical and harsh in pronouncement and judgment at the brutality and harshness of his actions and rule. Yet, he is equal in his assessment of the great positives of the emperor's life and rule, as well as the hopeful optimism that great Roman figures had, like Cicero, Virgil, or Horace, upon hearing the news of Antony's death and Cleopatra's suicide (pp. 196-198), "The poets reflected an almost universal desire for a return to peace and stability after so many long years of upheaval and violence" (p. 197). After all, Goldsworthy is clear that violence and brutality in Roman politics was the norm, especially in Part One that deals with Caius Octavius, Julius Caesar, Cicero, Pompey, Catiline, among other notables in Roman history. Moving all the way to Part Four of his biography, Goldsworthy highlights how Augustus took a tired and depleted Roman state, having been wrought over the past two and half decades with civil war and unrest, and turned it into a prosperous and stable "empire." He also, in a way, shies away from the old narrative that he was remaking Rome into its old republican culture, but is clear to emphasize his renewal and revivalist campaigns that aimed at harkening back to the older days of the republic. In many ways, Dr. Goldsworthy shows how Augustus was a revolutionary and enlightened leader, possibly foreshadowing what will happen in France in the late eighteenth century.

This book is a remarkable, skilful and very rich piece of scholarship which is targeted at the general public. It is written in plain and clear English. It is a rather easy read and contains maps, diagrams of Rome, genealogical trees and plenty of photos to support the main text. It also makes a host of excellent points. To mention just a few, one of these is about the changing faces (and names) of Augustus, or rather Octavius, since this was his real family name. Another is that his reign, for lack of a better word, was hugely successful in bringing peace and ushering in prosperity to such an extent that it would be seen as some kind of "Golden Age" during the next centuries of what became the Roman Empire. A third is the skill with which Adrian Goldsworthy shows Augustus as a highly efficient politician and a master of spin and propaganda. There are also many other important points which are just as well made throughout the book. One slight reservation, however, is the author's claim that this book is a biography, rather than the "life and times of Augustus". In fact, it is at least both, and perhaps more of the latter. Note that this is not a problem at all since the picture that the author draws of these "life and times" is a rather fascinating one. He also

presents what is essentially the history of Rome and the achievements of the character he is dealing with during this period, with the two (the history and the achievements) being so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them without making the book significantly less entertaining. So, despite the author's claims, the end result is worthy of praise, even if it is not exactly what it says on the tin. • A similar comment can be made about the book's subtitle - "from Revolutionary to Emperor".

As military dictators go, Caesar Augustus was not such a bad one. • Great-nephew and principal heir to Julius Caesar, Augustus was just nineteen when Caesar was murdered, but it seems he was never in doubt of his right to take over the honours of the older man. His early career was as a warlord, using the wealth he had inherited and borrowing extensively to ensure that he had the largest army as the Roman republic descended into civil war. He was also helped by the loyalty of Julius Caesar's troops - a loyalty they were willing, on the whole, to extend to his heir. Having at length achieved internal peace, Augustus' later career was as a (fairly) benevolent military dictator who brought stability to Rome and enabled it to extend and, to some degree, pacify the empire. Adrian Goldsworthy is a recognised scholar of ancient Rome and has a doctorate from Oxford University in ancient military history. Although this is a period I know nothing about, it quickly becomes clear that the book has been thoroughly researched. While concentrating on Augustus himself, Goldsworthy takes time to set his story well into the period, giving plenty of information about the period before Augustus rose to prominence, so that the newcomer gets a real feeling for the society that he was operating within. As always with histories of so long ago, the source documents are limited and often even they were written a considerable time after the events. Goldsworthy acknowledges this and reminds the reader of the effect of contemporary and later propaganda on the picture left behind of such a prominent figure as Augustus. As he says "As always with the ancient world, it is easier to say what he did than it is to understand the man's inner thoughts and character."

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