



## The Twelve Caesars

*Suetonius*

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## The Twelve Caesars Suetonius

As private secretary to the Emperor Hadrian, Suetonius gained access to the imperial archives and used them (along with eye-witness accounts) to produce one of the most colorful biographical works in history. *The Twelve Caesars* chronicles the public careers and private lives of the men who wielded absolute power over Rome, from the foundation of the empire under Julius Caesar and Augustus, to the decline into depravity and civil war under Nero, and the recovery that came with his successors. A masterpiece of anecdote, wry observation and detailed physical description, *The Twelve Caesars* presents us with a gallery of vividly drawn — and all too human — individuals.

Robert Graves's celebrated translation, sensitively revised by Michael Grant, captures all the wit and immediacy of Suetonius' original.

## The Twelve Caesars Details

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## From Reader Review The Twelve Caesars for online ebook

### Hanneke says

Suetonius (70 - 140 AD) was a biographer, librarian and high official under Trajanus and head of the royal archives under Hadrian. This biography of the twelve emperors is thought to have been published around 121 AD. The lives of the emperors of the Caesarian-Claudian lineage, thus up to and including Nero, are extensively discussed, while there are only concise biographies of the emperors following Nero. It is said that this was due to the fact that Hadrian dismissed Suetonius for having an affair with his wife. Consequently, Suetonius did not have access to the imperial archives any longer and just had to rely on oral history which should have been quite possible at that time, as there must have been enough people still alive to be able to give first hand accounts of facts and events.

It is quite remarkable that the biography is still so enjoyable to read. I will refrain to comment on each emperor's life. The life stories of especially the Caesarian-Claudian emperors are in general well-known. Suetonius used the same formula to describe the life of an emperor, first starting with family connections vis-a-vis the previous emperor, how he gained power, description of vice and virtues, whether he was a mild or murderous person and, if so, how murderous (factually, most of them very murderous beyond belief!), and ending each biography in a gossipy way as to what this particular emperor's general behaviour was, also elaborating extensively on sexual preferences, description and names of wives, sons and daughters, how he looked and how his life ended. As to the latter, I think there were only three emperors who died natural deaths. All the others were murdered and quite a few certainly deserved it as did Caligula and Nero.

If you are interested in imperial Rome and have read other novels or biographies on the subject, I still think it is enjoyable to read this biography as it is amazing how accessible it is to the 21st century reader.

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### Darwin8u says

It is a great overview of Rome's emperors from the Julians to the Flavians. The mixture of historical biography and, what must have been, a political gossip tatter. Suetonius was a senator during the reign of Hadrian (2 Caesars after Domitian), so the further back, the less direct knowledge Suetonius had (which given his style of writing could be both good and bad). Still, despite some reservations about Suetonius' style and accuracy, it is hard to underestimate his influence on the narrative of the Caesars. He was a grand story teller and many of the narratives we have about these men (and some of the women around them) comes from his writing.

The book comprises (shocker) 12 chapters:

- 1 Julius Caesar
- 2 Augustus
- 3 Tiberius
- 4 Caligula
- 5 Claudius
- 6 Nero
- 7 Galba
- 8 Otho
- 9 Vitellius
- 10 Vespasian
- 11 Titus

12 Domitian

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## Knjigoholi?arka says

Ovako: da je Svetonije novinar, radio bi u Kuriru. Jer, iskreni da budemo, dobar deo njegovih pisanija treba uzeti *cum grano salis*, budu?i da se doti?ni potrudio da nam prenese ne samo potvr?ene ?injenice, ve? i rekla-kazala tra?eve od kojih su neki ?isto preterivanje - kao, na primer, opisi Tiberijevih orgija na ostrvu Kapri kojima niko nije prisustvovao ali, logi?no, svi znaju šta se tamo doga?alo, ili izuzetno oštar portret apsolutiste Domicijana koji, mada vrlo neprijatna osoba, i nije bio tako (po Rim) loš vladar kakvim je prikazan u knjizi. (Ina?e, da li ste znali da je Domicijan napisao knjigu o nezi kose, a bio je ?elav?)

Ozbiljni istori?ari ?esto naglašavaju da su Svetonije i Diovi spisi u velikoj meri obi?no sme?e, uzdižu?i u nebesa Tacita i smatraju?i ga za najverodostojnijeg od njih trojice. Me?utim, u tome i jeste problem sa ozbiljnim istori?arima - tako su prokleta **ozbiljni**. Jer, da nema masnih tra?eva koje su nam preneli Svetonije i Dio, kako bismo mogli znati kako je rimska svetina uopšte doživljavala svoje vladare? Morate priznati da oblik tra?a ?esto svedo?i o duhu vremena i naglašava aktuelne probleme u kojima se ra?a.

I tako, Kaligula je bio lud k'o kruška, Avgust je bio najbolji od svih mogu?ih, Neron je bio zreo za Frojdiv kau?, a da nije bilo veselog dede Vespazijana, odavno bi velika rimska imperija nestala u tami istorije i turisti danas ne bi imali Koloseum da se pored njega slikaju.

Eto, još jedan dokaz da je knjiga nezamenljiv medij koji nikad ne zastareva. :)

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## Lyn Elliott says

This edition is based on Robert Graves' translation, revised with an Introduction and Notes by JB Rives. Rives explains that he has removed the interpolations Graves inserted to provide context to remarks that non-specialist readers would not be able to follow otherwise, and has used a glossary and footnotes to provide extra information to help out. Despite this I still found I floundered a bit, because I just don't know enough about ancient Roman government and social hierarchies, which were clearly very rigid unless you had enough money to buy your way into a higher class or a particularly profitable office.

The Twelve Caesars on the whole were an appalling group of men, not only willing to go to any lengths to gain and hold on to power but most of them actively relishing cruelty. Suetonius had a very orderly mind and each of his biographies is broken down into headings and subheadings. Vices he identifies frequently, in addition to cruelty, are: greed, gluttony, sexual excess, duplicity, arrogance, extravagance. There are others, but I won't list them all. One regular piece of behaviour that Suetonius records but doesn't regard as a vice, apparently, is the utter ruthlessness with which women were taken up and pushed away. Some were taken from existing husbands to marry the emperor, who was just as likely to divorce and replace them with another as he was to stay married to them. All seemed to be sexually licentious. As I said, a nasty lot.

During the period covered by the lives of the first twelve Caesars, the Roman empire was expanding and the centre was juggling local competing claims for positions of power and the jostling of regional governors, princes and kings as well. I hadn't realised before what power was wielded by the legions posted throughout the empire, as they shifted their support from one emperor to another, especially during the times of open civil war.

Neither had I taken in before the extraordinary reliance placed on astrologers, readers of horoscopes and auspices. Having a so-called imperial horoscope could be, according to Suetonius, motivation for an already powerful man to grab for the imperial throne. It could also be a death sentence in the reigns of insecure emperors - more than once we read of an unfortunate man who is murdered on emperor's orders because he is said to have an imperial horoscope. Propitious omens for each emperor are given at the beginning of each life, and omens and portents of death and disaster appear near the end of each section.

All in all, it's a fascinating read. But there is nothing here that would lead one anywhere near the adulation of Roman culture that pervaded Western Europe for centuries. The sources of that don't lie in the imperial palaces.

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## João Fernandes says

### Example

"Oh look this guy Nero seems alright why do people say he burned down Rome he is like Augustus 2.0".

\*few pages later\*

"How pathetic, this idiot is just competing in and "winning" all music competitions, he's just a misunderstood attention-seeking teenager, the poor thing".

\*few pages later\*

"God no NO NERO WHY PLEASE STOP!"

Yes, the organisation of the stories is confusing, as shown above. You can't just split people's lives and personalities up into sections and present them thematically.

Yet it works at times, and it certainly doesn't take away from the magnitude of these biographies.

From Julius Caesar the God to Domitian the Autocrat, the tales of 12 men who were given tremendous power and in most cases succumbed to the monster inside.

Fascinating view of the lifestyle, traditions, logic and culture of a civilisation that once ruled the world.

Sure, there's white washing of Julius Caesar and Augustus, the "benevolent" crushers of the Republic. Sure, there's a vilification of Domitian, the emperor who "had to be assassinated", since the ruling dynasty at Suetonius' time was the one to succeed him.

It's not factual history. It's not a gossip magazine about all the divorces and family history. A little of column A, a little (or slightly more) of column B.

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## Greg says

Reading this book makes me kind of thankful that the sociopaths who we choose to govern us are relatively harmless men with only strange dreams of imperialism and desires for fame, riches, and adulation. Sure we have a Vice President who shot a friend in the face and who brazenly admits to authorizing acts that make him a war criminal, and yes there are Greek bastards who have made a living off of sanctioning genocide for their own twisted ends, and this is just naming two high points in the Hall of Fame of War Criminals that we have allowed to consistently run and or advise this country for the past forty years or so. Yes we have allowed a constant stream of sociopaths to be our guiding light for so many unbroken years (I'm trying to come up with a number, I'm having trouble figuring if Carter and Ford were war criminals, all the rest of the

leaders since Reagen have been, and the ones before Ford going back quite a bit were too, oh it hurts the mind to think of all the charges our living former leaders could face at Hague and which would put nooses around their necks).

We have our fair share of these people, but not one of them even holds a candle to 11 out of 12 of the leaders of Rome covered in this book. Even the 'nice' ones still had a brutality to them that would make Jeffery Dhamer probably say, 'hey wait a minute that shit is just fucked up.' Rape, murder, torture, incest, more torture, more murder, all kinds of killing of family members, add some more torture and then throw in a whole bunch of sexual deviancy and you get the outlines of the Caesars. Fun times.

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### **Brenna says**

Julius Caesar the catamite of King of Bithnyia?? Augustus singeing off his leg hair with hot walnut shells!! Caligula's seductive maiden dance!! Oh my! Simply delicious!

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### **Trevor says**

This was a fascinating book. Translated by Graves, who wrote *I, Claudius*, it is, in many ways, a shorter version of those books. Although, *Claudius* does not come out of this history nearly as well as he does from Graves' novels.

You may never have seen Monty Python's *The Piranha Brothers*, if not you should really try looking it up on youtube. If only because I'm quite certain that Nero is Doug Piranha in a toga.

There were bits of this where I laughed outright and other bits where I've laughed after thinking about it for a while. The best example of the later is how often we are told one of the Caesars was 'cruel'. It was the way this was brought up that amused me the most – almost like it was one of their many hobbies, as if they were saying, he liked to go to the theatre and also watch people being tortured to death.

The bits that made me laugh outright were mostly sexual illusions. Such as the quote about Julius having sex with just about anyone – “He was a man to every woman and a woman to every man”. Gaius (also known as Caligula) was an utter maniac, but was probably bettered by Nero. I really didn't think I would ever be shocked by anything anyone could do after Caligula, but Nero having sex with his mother as he was being driven around Rome (like an incestuous version of *Madame Bovary* without the tissues) and then having his mother killed after his elaborate plans to have houses fall on her or getting her to take a boat that would fall apart on schedule, really takes the cake.

But the best bit of the book is all the omens that happen. Eagles fighting and lightning striking and branches of trees growing or not growing – and how these all foretold who was going to be the next Caesar or win a war or whatever else people were interested in. Vespasian is a good example because when he saw the signs that would signify the end of his life – a comet in this case – he made a joke about it being a bad sign for some other king of another kingdom of the time. Imagine living at a time when omens like wandering chickens would be taken quite so seriously!

I also liked the idea of Caligula changing the heads of all the gods so that they all had his head. If you are going to have ultimate power...

Some people say power corrupts – if you ever wondered, this is the book for you. Here are people of near infinite power for their time and what did they do with it? If you ever wanted to convert to being a misanthrope – I can think of no better book. This is the sort of book that makes one despair about human nature.

At times this book is a bit like a Russian novel, with many names too hard to remember, it is an incredible insight into life at the time. And unlike the Piranha Brothers it would be hard to say the Caesars were ‘cruel, but fair’ – though definitely cruel, there really is no question about them being cruel.

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### Lois says

This is in my Top 10 books. I love it so much, i think i have read it 3 times (no joke). I took this book with me on my travels in Rome and I bored Matt with my constant readings whilst we were visiting all of the historic sites. I have a huge facination with Roman History, so I do appreciate that most people will find this utterly boring, but i love it, love it, love it, love it.

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### Evan Leach says

*The Lives of the Caesars* is one of the best surviving sources covering the early Roman Empire. In these 12 biographies, Suetonius discusses the lives of Julius Caesar and his 11 successors, from the mid first century BC to the death of Domitian in 96 AD.

*“I found a city of brick and left it marble.” – Augustus Caesar*

Now given that these biographies come from the second century, this could make for dry reading. Fortunately, two things prevent this. First, many of the emperors under discussion here were depraved, tyrannical, borderline insane despots. Second, Suetonius’ gossipy, salacious nature keeps things interesting. Our author duly documents the momentous events of each emperor’s reign, but his heart is truly set on describing more curious aspects of his subjects: their physical appearances, their dietary preferences, relationships with friends and family, and (especially) their sex lives. For example:

- **Julius Caesar:** “He regretted most bitterly the loss of his looks through baldness and was often the butt of jokes on the subject from his detractors.”
- **Augustus Caesar:** “It is said that his body was mottled with birthmarks spread out over his chest and stomach which in their shape, number, and arrangement resembled the constellation of the bear.”
- **Tiberius:** Pedophilia hidden behind spoiler (view spoiler)
- **Caligula:** “He habitually indulged in incestuous relations with all his sisters and at a crowded banquet he would make them take turns in lying beneath him, while his wife lay above.”
- **Claudius:** “He had a speech impediment and his head twitched all the time, but especially when he made even the slightest movement.”

• **Nero:** “He prostituted his own body to such a degree that, when virtually every part of his person had been employed in filthy lusts, he devised a new and unprecedented practice as a kind of game, in which, disguised in the pelt of a wild animal, he would rush out of a den and attack the private parts of men and women who had been tied to stakes, and, when he had wearied of playing the beast, he would be ‘run through’ by his freedman Doryphorus.”

Etcetera; John Adams this is not. It all makes for pretty entertaining reading. The question is how much of it is actually fact. Suetonius is not noted for his reliability; it’s not that he was just making stuff up, but one is left with the impression that he reported as gospel the things he read in earlier historians without thinking too critically about what was true (he reminds me of Pliny the Elder in this respect). Some of the stuff he reports, like the incredible portents predicting each emperor’s demise, is just bunk. He also seems unnecessarily harsh on some emperors (Tiberius and Claudius) who look like pretty capable rulers in hindsight. Written in 121, over a century later than some of the events he reports on, the *Lives of the Caesars* undoubtedly contains a certain amount of fiction. It’s up to the individual reader to determine how much of the *Lives* are true.

This dubious reliability is one mark against Suetonius. The other is his style, which is solid but unspectacular (at least in my English translation, anyway). Compared to his contemporary Tacitus and that historian’s magisterial style, Suetonius comes off as decidedly second-rate. The organization of the *Lives* is also somewhat curious; instead of going through each life chronologically, inserting personal details where appropriate, Suetonius chose to organize his biographies by subject area: chronology of reign, personal appearance, sexual preferences, etc. This is not bad per se, and didn’t affect my rating, but it’s definitely different and may surprise some modern readers.

Overall, this is an interesting and engaging ancient work and an important (if not completely reliable) source of Roman history. Good racy fun. **3 stars**, recommended\*.

*\*The book is worth the cover price for the biography of Caligula alone, who was probably insane and got up to no end of mischief in his colorful four year reign.*

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## **Faith says**

This book is really about six Caesars (Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero) and six men I never heard of before. Of the over 17 hours of the audiobook, just a little over 3 hours are devoted to the last six, but I was fine with that because I learned more about the Caesars I care about. Caligula and Nero are clearly the most entertaining, but Augustus is my favorite.

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## **umberto says**

While reading this biography of 'The Twelve Caesars', one word popped in my mind, that is, 'nobility' since all emperors in question were of course noble, feared and thus honored according to their own deeds. However, such nobility and deeds might intensify admiration or hatred due to each emperor himself. You can compare or assess each reign from your views acquired from reading unbelievably episodes of kindness or ruthlessness since they wielded absolute power within their families, colleagues, subjects, etc. as written by Suetonius and read by posterity interested in their biographies.

I think I won't waste my time here describing unspeakable, unthinkable and notorious horror instigated/done by

Tiberius, Caligula or Nero because many scholars have written in volumes for those readers to read and condemn them more or less. Therefore, I can't help admiring Divus Julius (aka Julius Caesar) as one of the great 'Caesars' since, as far as I know, he never claimed/called himself 'emperor' but I guess it's the celebrated aftermath by Augustus, his imperial successor.

I've long admired Julius Caesar because he did his assigned tasks with greatness, with a heart of gold. From his famous "The Conquest of Gauls" written in Latin, he wrote about his expeditions as a matter of fact without any boastful words or complacency. For instance: "Moreover, when given the chance, he would always cheerfully come to terms with his bitterest enemies. He supported Gaius Memmius' candidature for the consulship, though they had both spoken most damagingly against each other. ... Valerius Catullus had also libelled him in his verses about Mamurra, yet Caesar, while admitting that these were a permanent blot on his name, accepted Catullus' apology and invited him to dinner that same afternoon, and never interrupted his friendship with Catullus' father." (p. 33)

Moreover, captivated by his educated mind and sense of humour, I've respected him more when I came across his tolerance and mercy towards those native Britons, "from whom he exacted a large sum of money as well as hostages for future good behaviour." (p. 12) I think this is still one of the key strategic policies essential to charismatic leaders in political organizations in the world nowadays.

Finally, I'd like to invite my Goodreads friends to find a copy and browse any 'Caesar' you like and you'd be delighted to be more informed and thus learned on those obscure famous/notorious twelve Roman 'Caesars'. As for me, I will definitely reread my favourite Julius Caesar to learn more from his character and nobility.

Endnote: I think I'd post my review/comments (briefly scribbled as my notes in the book) as soon as I have some ideas on writing some for my GR friends, this takes time to reflect and decide what I should say to share my view as part of our pleasure derived from reading.

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### **Cassandra Kay Silva says**

No words. Each and every member of that "family" and ahherm non family who acquired that infamous title ceasar is such a massive wrecking case of extreams that I can't even begin to fathom that these men are real. Let alone contemplate what citizens must of thought of them in their day. Really? If Suetonius is to be belived how many of these men would in our day be catergorized as legally insane? I literally about fell out of my chair this weekend when I read that Nero had the gates blocked during his preformances and women were forced to bear children in the audience while listening to his work with the lyre. Its hysterical, and who is around to counter suetoniuses descriptions of these men? No one. Therefore he gets five stars because seriously this is the best ancient gossip column still in print.

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### **Jan-Maat says**

This Roman bedtime reading gives the reader a mixed experience. The length of the lives is uneven - the first three lives in the Robert Graves (he'd go on to recycle much of the material here into his novels I Claudius and Claudius the God) translation alone make up half the book, the division of each life into public (civil and military exploits), and private parts (adventures in bedroom and dining room) works against presenting each life as an organic whole and Suetonius' sense of cause and effect seems oddly haphazard, as though Suetonius had a sense that actions and attitudes have causes but couldn't quite link these in a logical way.

Even so, or perhaps precisely because of this, these short accounts of the lives of the twelve Caesars from Julius Caesar to Domitian became a literary model imitated by the writer of the later *Augustan History* and Einhard in his *Life of Charlemagne*. Suetonius had succeeded in devising a scalable and adaptable model for a biography.

Suetonius was employed in the Imperial administration (view spoiler) under the Flavian emperors before being dismissed by Hadrian for allegedly having an affair with his Empress (view spoiler). In the lives of Julius Caesar and Augustus, Suetonius talks about their correspondence and ciphers in a way that suggests he had access to their archives (view spoiler) but this doesn't seem to have been the case for the later lives (which might support an enforced and unexpected early retirement). Despite his background he doesn't give a description of the Imperial administration, or better said the way in which the Emperor conveyed his wishes, or ascertained that they were carried out. The 'administration' emerges as a curious affair. It was normal for the Emperor to receive a visitor on official business in the bedroom for instance (Domitian), business might include sitting as judge in court cases (Claudius), the Emperor was expected to be available to hear petitions (Vespasian), yet at the same time space had to be found in the diary for having feasts and attending sports events (of the kind that generally involved people dying). Bureaucracy as we think of it doesn't seem to exist, at this period the equivalents of ministries, or a professional staff to execute the Emperor's will do not seem to have existed (except in the literal case of the army). This is slightly curious because according to *The Oxford History of the Classical World* (which incidentally doesn't recommend the Robert Graves translation) there were, on the evidence of the admittedly later Cassius Dio, something along the lines of ministers, but the focus in *The Twelve Caesars* is on the personality, not the mechanics of government. So instead there are slaves, freedmen and private contractors working in the Imperial household. Nero at the end is alone with a couple of slaves and Freedmen and struggles to even find a quiet spot to end his own existence (view spoiler).

The lack of internal consistency is puzzling. For instance Tiberius disliking his son Drusus for the latter's dissolute behaviour which comes in the middle of Suetonius' descriptions of Tiberius' own heavy drinking and team of sexual gymnasts (etc, etc). Nero on one page lusts after his mother and allegedly the two consummate an incestuous relationship while being carried around in a litter, shortly after Nero decides to kill his mother for being too overbearing (*The Annals of Imperial Rome* has a much more detailed account of the bizarre way he chooses to murder her - building a ship designed to sink and inviting her to go for a lake cruise on it, inevitably she survives (for the mean time), by swimming to shore (view spoiler)). Later 'everybody' hates and despises Domitian even though he hasn't done much more, according to Suetonius, than change a couple of the names of the months. Augustus apparently didn't like odd looking people, even though he had a limp, scabs that looked like ringworm (but really weren't Suetonius hastens to assure us) and just the one eyebrow (although that one was very long).

The basic issue here is that Suetonius is uncritical. He simply lays out anecdotes that he has come across. For example the infamous account of children nibbling Tiberius' genitals while he was swimming. Perhaps if he found children with gills this could be done. Otherwise it seems physically awkward, if not impossible, however debauched you are. Typically here and in all of the Capri anecdotes (some of which get retold in Fuentes' *Terra Nostra*) and many others, it is easier to imagine that these were simply tall tales, urban legends, that were told about the Emperors. Frequently there either aren't witnesses at all or witnesses who might talk, who could have reported on these particular deeds.

Reading through the life of Julius Caesar, noticing the interplay of politics, the law and money, how bribery and debt won him political office, then in office he gained the wealth to pay off the debt and build a power base and to avoid being prosecuted and the description of his hair: "His baldness was a disfigurement which his enemies harped upon, much to his exasperation; but he used to comb the thin strands of hair forward" he suddenly reminded me of Silvio Berlusconi (view spoiler), I felt from Suetonius that this is not a book from the distant past that describes another, now lost, world but a book about politics, how people look at politicians, how they struggle to be remembered and how people do remember them. A contemporary

version might for some countries be less bloody, but probably otherwise would be much of a muchness.

Similarly in the middle of the life of Augustus something flipped in my mind and I realised I was reading about a Mao (particularly with his habit of deflowering girls - although Suetonius sees this as part of the "decent normalcy of his sex-life" which certainly tells us something about Imperial Rome) or a Stalin. He may have definitively ended Republican government, but at least he kept the aqueducts flowing, as they might have said in those days before they had trains or timetables. Suetonius says that on occasion he would attend the Senate and greet every senator by name. There were six hundred senators. Assuming Augustus could greet four a minute that would have taken two and a half hours, since he'd also say goodbye to each of them that would have left enough time for a quick eulogy to his divine leadership and masterful reorganisation of the calendar (even assuming that only one hundred were present it would have still have been 25 minutes at a fast and perfunctory pace). Perhaps Mussolini's imagining of Fascist Italy as a rebirth of the Roman Empire wasn't so far off the mark after all.

In a sense the doings of Caligula - providing a marble stable with an ivory manager for his favourite horse or Nero bolting the doors of the theatre when he was performing, obliging pregnant women to give birth in the aisles and desperate men to pretend that they had died so they would be removed as though for their own funeral - was a form of political theatre. A cross between the extravagances of a contemporary pop-star and a modern politician designed as much maybe to distract, amuse and depoliticise the Roman public as to indulge themselves (view spoiler).

Although of course since Roman times no political unit has ever invaded another, over thrown its government and imposed its own puppet ruler who turns out to be reliably interested in only lining his own pockets and advancing the fortune of his large family. The behaviour of the Emperors is evergreen, if slightly more extreme than we tend to hear on the evening news, government as theatre, the most senior politician as rock star idol (possibly just in his own eyes), the politics of friendship and networking (once all rivals are dead or in exile), the prematurely dried up and disillusioned political heir - groomed for the job but who can't be bothered to do it, the anxious and suspicious leader who knows how fickle and fleeting political power is, these are political archetypes that reoccur consciously and unconsciously through history.

That these stories and the generally unpeaceful succession of one emperor to another, can blind the reader to how odd and unusual this has been in world history. On the whole supreme leaders have been far more successful in establishing dynasties and secure successions. The turnover of leaders starts to look suspiciously like democracy, although election is by means of the sword rather than the ballot box.

Anyway, it is all here. Dreams, omens (this a book rich in signs and portents), curious forms of punishment (poor Nero has to ask what an 'old fashioned execution' is, and the answer persuades him that suicide is preferable (view spoiler)) and the wit and wisdom of the Emperor Vespasian who declared it better to allow a poor man to earn a days wage than to have mechanical cranes (view spoiler) and that of his son Titus who declared a day wasted in which he hadn't done a good deed (presumably good by Roman rather than commonly held standards, he did sack Jerusalem after-all since his Dad was busy elsewhere in the Empire - nice of him to tidy up the old Jewish revolt for his old man).

Because of all the anecdotes, I can recommend this as light reading, I could follow along while coughing and sneezing with a cold, though I wouldn't recommend reading this if you had diarrhoea or were vomiting - the descriptions of poisonings and attempted poisonings would only serve to make the reader fretful and nervous - only three of the twelve Caesars here described got to die an unambiguously natural death.

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## Glenn Russell says

This Penguin Classic of *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius is the perfect place to start for anybody interested in ancient Greco-Roman history and culture. Not only is this a most engaging translation by Robert Graves, author of *I Claudius*, but there is a short Forward by classics scholar, Michael Grant. Additionally, there are ten maps of the city of Rome and the Roman Empire along with a glossary of key terms. From my own experience, once I started reading, I couldn't stop. Matter of fact, I was inspired to write a Goodreads review of each of the twelve Caesars – Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian.

Specifically, here are a couple of quotes from Michael Grant along with my brief comments:

“Suetonius’ principal contribution lies in his relatively high degree of objectivity. With him, we have moved away from the traditional eulogistic treatment, and have entered a much more astringent atmosphere, in which the men whom he is describing are looked at with a cooler and more disenchanting eye.” ----- This ‘disenchanted eye’ is a thoroughly modern perspective, one having synchronicity with our 21st century sensibilities.

“The best quality of his work is his power to create rapid, dramatic, and often moving narratives, including, at times, impressive set-pieces, among which the death of Nero is especially notable.” ----- Unlike a dry academic writing, Suetonius is lively, vivid and sometimes racy.

And excerpts from the translation by Robert Graves:

“During gladiatorial shows he would have the canopies removed as the hottest time of the day and forbid anyone to leave; or take away the usual equipment and pit feeble old fighters against decrepit wild animals; or stage comic duels between respectable householders who happened to be physically disabled in some way or other.”

“Nero’s unreasonable craving for immortal fame made him change a number of well-known names of things and places in his own favor. The month of April, for instance, became Neroneus; and Rome was on the point of being renamed ‘Neropolis’.

Again, once I started reading this book, I couldn't stop. Who would think a classic work of history and biography would be so engaging?

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