



Caesar: Life of a Colossus

Adrian Goldsworthy

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Tracing the extraordinary trajectory of the great Roman emperor's life, Goldsworthy covers not only the great Roman emperor's accomplishments as charismatic orator, conquering general, and powerful dictator but also lesser-known chapters during which he was high priest of an exotic cult, captive of pirates, seducer not only of Cleopatra but also of the wives of his two main political rivals, and rebel condemned by his own country. Ultimately, Goldsworthy realizes the full complexity of Caesar's character and shows why his political and military leadership continues to resonate some two thousand years later.

In the introduction to his biography of the great Roman emperor, Adrian Goldsworthy writes, "Caesar was at times many things, including a fugitive, prisoner, rising politician, army leader, legal advocate, rebel, dictator . . . as well as husband, father, lover and adulterer." In this landmark biography, Goldsworthy examines Caesar as military leader, all of these roles and places his subject firmly within the context of Roman society in the first century B.C.

Caesar: Life of a Colossus Details

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Christopher says

Goldsworthy's biography on Julius Caesar is both insightful and full of details. It is bound to intrigue and excite both the professional historian and the casual reader. He balances Caesar's character in the light of the times he lived in making him more of a "product of his environment" rather than the exception to the rule. His insights into Caesar's brilliance as a military tactician make it hard to put down this book during any of the battles, which take up a good half to two-thirds of the book. However, there is one drawback to this book, which makes me give it four stars instead of five. This is the first third of the book dealing with the time from Caesar's birth to the end of his consulship just before the Gallic campaigns. While I grant that there are a lot of holes in the historical record about this part of Caesar's life, it doesn't make up for the lack of polish and purpose that seem to pervade the rest of the biography. Because of this it may take some time for a casual reader to warm up to the book. In fact, Goldsworthy spends so much time defending or speculating on Caesar's life before Gaul that if one only knew Goldsworthy's book it would be hard to say what, if anything, Caesar did before Gaul. Despite this, it is an incredible read and I recommend it to anyone interested in Julius Caesar.

Philip Lee says

CAESAR (Life of a Colossus)
by Adrian Goldsworthy

This life of Julius Caesar was originally published (minus subtitle on jacket) as one of Weidenfield's military history tomes back in 2006. With the success of the BBC/HBO TV series "Rome", it was quickly repackaged and relaunched to cater for a subsequent surge of interest in the founder of Imperial Rome. Arguably, Julius Caesar has always been ancient history's most popular figure. Even contemporary contenders for that distinction – Cleopatra as beauty/queen, Pompey Magnus as fixer/general, Cicero as writer/orator - were more or less satellites of Gaius Caesar of the Julii. What sets him above the other great figures of the day is the breadth of his achievements from the battlefield, to politics to oratory & authorship. Goldsworthy's biography, we are told, is wider in scope than other accounts. Whereas many books concentrate on Caesar the military tactician, others deal with the rise and fall of his dictatorship. What we have here is a life that claims to combine the man's political career with his military campaigns. But is that enough to pad out a full life?

Most biographies succeed or fail neither by strict adherence to fact, nor by spinning the good yarn. Where an author has to dig out hidden truths, then such facts may have something spicy to add. And where the telling of the tale reflects the legendary nature of its protagonist, then the story may benefit from spicier writing. However, built on original research & good writing, a successful biography needs to give the reader a contextualised portrait that stands up for itself. In the case of a well-known figure from ancient history, especially the most famous of all, the biographer is faced with two main obstacles. First comes the difficulty of finding out anything new. Secondly, when a tale has already been told many times, detaching the plausible from the mythologised takes precedence over constructing new narrative. And to compare the task of writing a biography of Julius Caesar with that of a "colossus" from recent times – say Winston Churchill – an author needs to keep the obscurity of the facts under control while encasing the narrative in familiar terms.

It's interesting that Goldsworthy draws only sparingly on Caesar's own Commentaries, preferring third hand accounts. But surely the reports he sent from the campaigns in Gaul, which were published more or less annually in Rome, would have been widely read at the time? According to Cicero, the author tells us, even tradespeople were fond of reading. Furthermore, Caesar was renowned for the clarity of his writing - making it easier for the less educated, and therefore I think we should simply assume he was a popular author in his lifetime. Although he didn't write an actual autobiography, like Sulla (his predecessor as dictator); I think it's necessary to distinguish between the way Caesar saw himself and the way others recalled him.

At this point, I pray to digress and delve into my own motives for reading a biography of such a remote figure. I often read these accounts of real people's lives as a sort of antidote to my fiction reading. It intrigues me to see how well or ill character is conveyed by words alone; and I qualify that point of view by stating I come from the first generation brought up in the television age (I was born in 1956 and remember watching Popeye cartoons at the age of three or four). The virtual window of inscribed words on a page (whether of clay tablet, papyrus roll, paper book or e-reader screen) was established long before the time of Julius Caesar. By his era, real life & myth had already been recorded in histories or mimicked in prose & verse for more than a thousand years (if we go merely as far back as the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh). Caesar himself made unique contributions to the body of writing, not only by publishing the Commentaries his own accounts of his military campaigns, he was also a poet and critic. Biographers, therefore, are able to use his own writing – and that of contemporaries such as Cicero – to base much of their texts on. We also have two thousand years' worth of commentaries on those commentaries to help us decipher them. When we pick up any book purporting to be a life of Julius Caesar, therefore, I think we are entitled to expect a fine distillation not just of the grapes of truth (if such a phrase may be pardoned) but the true essence of the man.

Goldsworthy's method, especially in the first third of his book, is to extrapolate Caesar's youth and early career from a wide-ranging of reading around the subject. He conjectures on the likely upbringing the boy would have received as a member of an old but somewhat undistinguished branch of the aristocratic Julii clan. He then fills in the backstory of Sulla's dictatorship, which began when Caesar was about fifteen years old. The known facts give the first inklings of the young man's character: his dandiness, defiance and courage. Goldsworthy's caution prevents him from drawing too fine a portrait, though; and when he recounts the young adventurer's expedition to Bythnia (incidentally located in the very part of modern Turkey where I live) he is confronted with one important unknown fact. Did Caesar have a homosexual affair with King Nicomedes? Contemporary sleaze-mongers styled him “Queen of Bythnia” - a sobriquet to dog him for the rest of his life. Though there is no other suggestion that Caesar was anything other than heterosexual (and the prolific seducer of other men's wives), he was still issuing denials of the affair in the year of his assassination, four decades later! In addition to the mocking title of “Queen”, Caesar so distinguished himself in battle against King Nicomedes' enemies (and therefore the enemies of Rome), he was awarded the Civic Crown, the second highest honour possible. These are the facts.

It's all very well to assume Caesar, as a youth, received the same education as every other scion of the rich. That level of research could be summarised without quotes from Suetonius (writing on Caesar himself) or Cicero (writing about another young man). What stands out in Caesar's case? Where precisely were his estates? What local legends survive of him? What is known of the gardens he was to bequeath in his will? I believe there must be things of this kind worthy to include, no matter how dubious the sources may be. After his adopted son Octavian became the Emperor Augustus, Romans worshipped Julius Caesar as a god. Temples were erected to him and all kind of relics would have been dug out and revered. Still being in living memory, anyone who knew him would have contributed to this lore. For comparison, take the life of Jesus Christ, who was far less well-known, yet many little snippets of his family story came out after his death. For example, during the flight to Egypt, Joseph is believed by Coptic Christians to have worked as a carpenter on the Fortress of Babylon in Old Cairo. In the decades after Julius Caesar's death, I am sure thousands of

stories were told and many places identified with him. But this book is not based on field research, which is a great shame. We need to know more of his background than just the supposed shape and colour of his toga.

Other ways of getting at the real man could have included a comparative study of the sculpture. Roman artists followed the realism of their Greek masters and though not exactly a warts-and-all approach, neither was Roman stone portraiture ever more than lightly idealised or stylised. Caesar's portrayal in contemporary literature is undoubtedly biased towards the writer's politics. Suetonius in "The Twelve Caesars", written a century and a half later, was drawing on such like, which writers have done ever since. There is a short round-up of Caesar in literature towards the end of Goldsworthy's book, but nothing like the comparative study I would have expected. Gielgud's portrayal of Shakespeare's Caesar, which I saw at the National Theatre in London, 1977, was somewhat elderly and patrician (the actor himself was probably too old by then), but I seem to remember it was greeted as a classic performance. Caesar, was responsible for his own myth-making, and his efforts to promote himself have reverberated down the centuries.

Any narrative that ends in the pre-known sudden death of its protagonist is bound to be overshadowed by a Faustian cloud; especially a text like Goldsworthy's, which blithely reminds us what is going happen to its protagonist every fifty or so pages. It's hard to imagine anyone watching a film like "The Bunker" without the grim knowledge of how it's going to end. Yet it does not follow that as soon as Caesar crossed the little Rubicon river with the XIIIth Legion (an act of civil war), that his committal of treason therefore doomed him. Yet the expression "crossing the Rubicon" equates to "burning one's boats" not to "selling one's soul to the devil". It is no coincidence that so many of Caesar's words and actions (whether real, invented or associated) have similarly entered international parlance and culture. He may have uttered the phrase, "Veni, Vidi, Vici" ("I have come, I have seen, I have conquered") on a previous occasion, but when he included it in his Commentary on the Civil War, he was referring to the pushovers of Pontus and not to his greatest victories. A few months later, returning in triumphal to Rome, the expression was written out on placards and carried in procession and was taken to mean ALL of his conquests. "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" - the words with which Shakespeare has Mark Anthony open Caesar's funerary ovation - have become the catch-phrase of the populist rabble-rousing politician. Yet Caesar, then dead, remained aloof from the implication. Even the phrase, "Et tu, Brute", which he himself may not have uttered, remains an expression of the betrayal he obviously felt, and therefore not actually untrue. The myth he built around himself continued to grow long after his death, robbing the assassins of their justification.

Throughout the book, the initials BC are used, which I can't bother objecting to as date marker. The alternative BCE, though it is more politically correct, still refers to the Gregorian calendar (itself a revision of a calendar introduced by Julius Caesar), and anchors history to a Romano-Christian world view. What niggles me is the Faustian countdown effect of constantly referring to these dates. Goldsworthy even talks about BC decades as though they existed. Well, yes, of course ten year periods did exist, but not in the way we count them back from the estimated birth year of Jesus Christ. The Romans had their own *anno primo* (though never fully agreed on) from which Julius Caesar lived in the eighth century. Roman people would refer to a year as "when so-and-so had the consulship", or "x years after the dictatorship of another so-and-so", or "when the triumph of whatshisname was held". By constantly mentioning years in the countdown BC timetable, Goldsworthy alienates us from the mental set of the Romans.

When we get into the middle and latter thirds of the book, the narrative is dominated by Caesar's military campaigns in Gaul and the Civil War, the true military bias of the book is revealed. Generals throughout history (whether of the field or armchair variety) have studied Caesar's campaigns and Napoleon Bonaparte's commentaries on Caesar's set piece battles are mentioned several times. Caesar's luck, especially in recovering from his own mistakes, seems to have been a major feature of the campaigns he waged. Also, his caution, which probably cost him more victories than defeats, preserved him to fight another day. Of life on

his campaigns, Goldsworthy gives interesting details. For example, that Caesar would often stay with local Celtic nobles rather than in his own camp. That horses were fed on seaweed when all other fodder was used up. And that barley or even roots were sometimes made into bread for the legionnaires.

What Goldsworthy fails to do, I think because he always prefers to reserve final judgement, is to summarise the main qualities of Caesar's war fighting succinctly enough. And yet, all the evidence is in the book. Firstly, he was a front-line general who shared the risks of combat and thereby gained the devotion of his soldiers. As a youngster, he went East, organised local militias along Roman lines, and achieved modest successes against poorly-led opposition. Later on, in Gaul, again pitching well-trained troops against semi-wild native warriors, time and time again he overcame divided enemies. Finally, forced to fight against Roman legions in the civil war, he lost almost everything - except his head. Against a tired Pompey, the twelve years he had spent leading armies in the field gave him a significant edge and total victory in the end .

It may come as no surprise to the reader that Caesar suffered from epilepsy, and Goldsworthy does mention the bare facts. However, I would expect a biographer worth his salt to have investigated the incidence of epilepsy amongst other figures from military, political and literary history. Then, by comparing Casear's situation with their's, at least we could have had a better idea of what he and his followers were up against.

Nowhere does Goldsworthy make it clear that Caesar's ability to compromise with his fellow Roman aristocrats would, in the end, prove his downfall. His dictatorship was never the tyranny that Sulla's was, he didn't have people rounded up and killed. He wanted genuine reform: land redistribution to the less well off, the prosecution of corrupt officials, the reward of loyalty, even democracy. He was not vengeful, never dismissed the Senate or blocked elections to the various offices of state. Few could have borne him real grudges. It was simple jealousy, with which the Roman republic was rife (and which he practised as much as most), that set men against him. Jealousy was even encouraged by the system. Elections for the highest offices of state being held every year was just incompatible with a growing empire. Having already expanded far beyond the city-state it was founded as, Rome risked the same fate Athens had suffered four centuries before. An empire needs both strong central AND devolved local government. When appointments were made on a yearly basis and new governors took months to arrive at their territories, there was bound to be discontinuity and corruption. As long as men were able to fight amongst themselves for favours, they would do so to the detriment of the common good.

That's not to suggest Caesar was too saintly for his own good. He and the rest of the Roman nobility were a blood-thirsty lot, which Goldsworthy's book bears witness to and apologises for. What distinguished the Romans from their Gaulish, Egyptian and German neighbours was their organisational skill; meaning they were able to work together in a way unique in the ancient world. Co-operating as soldiers on campaign, they divided the labour of foraging, construction work and actual fighting in a manner that confounded their enemies. In times of war and peace they were business people, traders, settlers, opportunists, you could almost say proto-capitalists – slave-drivers without ethical qualms. In the upshot, Caesar's assassination differs not from any St Valentine's Day massacre type of peer justice. All Caesars, whether big-hearted Julius' or snidey little Edward G. Robinson's, live and die by the sword of jealous brothers-in-arms.

LeAnn says

After reading Colleen McCullough's massive *Masters of Rome* series, I wanted to know more about Julius Caesar, a man she clearly greatly admires, and to know how her research stacks up against that of professional historians.

Except for a few instances, Goldsworthy's biography of JC confirms the accuracy of McCullough's novels (which he described as "racy," proving that Oxford-trained historians are a rather sheltered lot). Of course, he maintains an academic distance better than the novelist, but on the whole, his portrayal of Caesar -- an ambitious, patriotic, talented Roman -- is sympathetic. He describes Caesar as "amoral" and yet verifies that Caesar largely acted in keeping with the morals and traditions of contemporary Roman society, yet breaking with them significantly by treating his adversaries with generosity and clemency.

Goldsworthy's biography is highly readable, engaging, and thorough. Readers who don't have time to invest in McCullough's novels can get much of the historical information in the biography. What they won't get is a real sense of the man behind all the great exploits, and after reading the biography, I suspect that McCullough largely got Caesar's personality and character right.

'Aussie Rick' says

Adrian Goldsworthy's book, *Caesar*, is another one of those great books that you cannot afford to miss. Following on from his excellent run of books; *The Punic Wars* and *In The Name of Rome*, this new title is a great addition to anyone's library.

The tale of Julius Caesar has been told before many times but I doubt as well as this in recent times. The research and story telling is exceptional. I found the book easy to read although it is quite detailed in regards to the political and social events and background that made up Rome during Caesar's period.

The accounts of Caesar's military campaigns were well told and presented with a number of basic maps to assist the reader in following the action. The author presented the facts covering Caesar's life in an un-biased way and left it to the reader to make up his own mind in regards to those controversial events in Caesar's life.

The book is about 520 pages in narrative text along with a number of black & white photographs and maps. Overall this is a good book and I am sure anyone who has an interest or passion for this period of history or for Julius Caesar will enjoy this book immensely.

Joyce Lagow says

I found this book incredibly dull. Well researched--no question that almost all of the known material on Caesar is summarized here--but does it have to be so boring? While reading it, I found myself constantly comparing it with Colleen McCullough's 5 volume fictional work on Caesar; IMHO, her books are infinitely preferable to this one volume. Same material, better read.[return][return]For someone who is supposedly a military historian, it is beyond my power to understand how Goldsworthy could make the Gallic Wars sound so dull. It appeared to me that he was bored by them. He seemed to pick up interest in the Civil War. I found his summary decent.[return][return]For me, a major problem was the style of writing--mostly simple, declarative sentences. Such monotony along with the appearance of a lack of real interest in his material made for heavy going.[return][return]Another very subjective complaint I have about the book is a lack of a point of view. I'm surprised that in 2007 someone can still make the statement in print of striving to be entirely objective. That's a vain hope! No one is. In doing so, his material loses life. There is a saying in opera, "strong opinions, strong production". I think it applies equally well to writing.[return][return]Granted,

any author of fiction has far, far more leeway than a historian. But McCullough brings her characters to life, which made it far easier for me to remember the material! Also, you can learn far, far more about Roman life, culture, institutions, etc from her glossaries which beat anything I have ever seen in novels.[return][return]Any really good general history ought to inspire the reader to go to original sources. I can't imagine desiring to read Caesar's Commentaries after reading Goldsworthy. Yet they are utterly fascinating.[return][return]The only reason why I didn't give this book the lowest rating is that it is useful to have the material all in one place. And it certainly helps to put one to sleep at night--a good cure for insomnia.

Pamela says

Many people here have done detailed reviews of this so I am not going to go into that much detail. If you divide this book into thirds, the first third dealing with life in Caesar's time, the development and education of a patrician male, etc. was very well done and interesting. It helps greatly to explain the behaviors of the main characters throughout the rest of the book. The middle third bogs down after a good start. It deals with Caesar's campaigns, particularly the conquest of Gaul. Unfortunately, the author discusses every tribe and every battle in great detail and, as they are all basically the same tactics and outcome, this gets boring pretty swiftly. A synopsis would have done as well to showcase Caesar's extraordinary military talent and ability to inspire loyalty in his troops and also in the people he conquered. The last half picks up with the Civil War (although again there is too much about each individual battle), his affair with Cleopatra and his assassination. The epilogue contains a good summary of the varying views of Caesar through the ages along with literary and cinematic versions.

Taken as a whole, **Caesar: Life of a Colossus** is a good presentation of what is known about an extraordinary historical figure.

Kalliope says

This is not an easy book to write, the biography of Caesar. The man who died at the hands of many but whose life has been revived repeatedly by numerous pens and brushes. From Plutarch, to Suetonius, to Shakespeare, to G r me, to the Hollywood or TV studios, to the Asterix cartoons..., we have a whole array of possible accounts to choose the version that better suits our imagination. And that is of course without counting the image that emerges from his own Memoirs, the *Comentarii*, and possibly from a collection of poems by him.. (*De Bello...*)

Gaius Julius Caesar was a solid personality. He was a devoted son, a courageous soldier and astute commander. As a resourceful engineer he built bridges across the Rhine that held the footsteps of his soldiers but shook the minds of the Germanic tribes. He was a worthy husband but also expected a worthy wife, becoming a determined divorcee as his wife had to be above suspicion. Married or not, he was also a gallant philanderer who chose well, as his penchant for the women of other senators or his picking of a legendary beauty indicates. He was a loving father to his dear Julia even if he married her with political aims to someone twice her age. He had to know what was right for her as she did fall deeply in love with Pompey, her magnificent husband. His writing became the textbook of generals in posterity providing a tool for success for figures who further changed history, and we can think of Napoleon. His clemency was also notorious, and he seemed to have relished his power most, not in punishing but in forgiving. As a reformist politician, Caesar realized that if the Roman society had to change, the core revision had to involve land laws

because everything else was grounded there. His reforms also extended to the calendar. He synchronized it anew with the sun, in an almost perfect convention that lasted for about sixteen centuries. As a dictator he changed the concept of his position from the Roman elected nomination for a maximum of five years, to the fuller, more modern and more odious powers. And last but not least, he was the brave and resolute prey of one of the most famous assassinations in history.

His death features as the main plot in Shakespeare's tragedy which coined the essence of treason in the: "Et tu, Brute?". This death even becomes the first chapter in Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician, as if the orator's life could only be understood in reference to the figure of Julius Caesar. And this death has inspired the palette of many visionaries of which my favorite is Jean-Léon Gérôme's:

If Julius Caesar was a solid man, Goldsworthy's book is a solid biography. The author follows a very orderly chronological line, expanding, when necessary, with elucidatory explanations of social, political or military structures. I welcomed these because they help in abridging the gap of understanding that arises when traveling in one's mind through historical times. Goldsworthy had to fill-in the knowledge holes and, probably more difficult, empty them of Hollywood debris.

Goldsworthy's style is very clear and clean. One wonders if he may be have been smitten by Caesar's own, who although writing at a time when Cicero was stripping the traditional oratory style of its grandiloquence, produced an even more factual and limpid style. The author remains somewhat detached and only in a few occasions does he venture to make comparisons with later military figures and draw judgments. His is certainly the account of a historian, keeping a neutral tone and evaluating what we know and admitting what we do not. He shows particular concern and wishes to wash away the pollution produced by popular culture.

Having to keep the same distance as Goldsworthy, one feels at times a bit too removed from such a rich personality. The reading at once awakens our desire to grasp fully this character so that we can admire or hate him, while keeping him removed and remote.

The cover chosen for most editions befits the content of this book: a stony and captivating view of Caesar's face, but as a fragment.

This book has earned five solid stars.

But please note that I would give six stars to another version that suited my imagination beautifully -- the one by Goscinny and Uderzo in their Asterix saga.

David says

The text of Adrian Goldsworthy's biography of Julius Caesar is divided into three parts, one of which the Caesar's rise of political power inhabits, his campaigns in modern-day France and England the second, those who in their own time were called aristocrats, in ours assassins, the third.

This good book is best enjoyed by those with either an excellent memory or great patience. The author seems to assume that, if you bothered to pick up this book, that you are willing to keep track of a great variety of unfamiliar names, titles, groups, and places, only some of which appear in the Glossary at the end of the book. (If the names, etc., are **not** unfamiliar to you, then your education was probably had superior to mine, and you don't need to read this book.)

An example from (Kindle edition) page 209: "... Gallo-Greek inscriptions using the Celtic language by Greek alphabet are fairly common finds from southern Gaul and attest to the long presence and influence of Massilia." Who? Some old guy in a toga? I don't remember any old Greek-speaking guy in a toga named Massilia. OK, OK, rather than just skipping over it, I'll use the text search function. Oh, there it is, the only previous mention of Massilia, on page 73: "... Massilia (modern Marseilles), the old Greek colony on the coast of Gaul and now part of the Roman province of Transalpine Gaul, ..." Oh, yeah, I remember now, but, in the period between the mention on page 73 and the mention on page 209, I slept several times, took a long plane ride, called my elderly mother when necessary, drove quite a bit, exercised occasionally, ate too frequently, read the newspaper almost daily, wasted time repeatedly looking at comical pictures of kittens on the Internet, etc., etc., and this fact was lost, like some ancient text, in my personal swirls of antiquity.

Still, for a serious book about a long-ago time and place, this is a real page-turner and full of the sort of information that would get you slapped with a libel suit if the principals hadn't died 2,000 years ago, like the one (p. 146) where a guy appropriately named Clodius dresses up as a girl harp-player in order to meet his lover at a women-only religious event. I could almost see him as Tom Hanks or Robert Downey. in an ill-fitting blonde wig with pig-tails, excessive blue eye shadow, and five o'clock shadow.

I guess it's not shocking news to anyone that sometimes it can be more fun to be ignorant than learned. In this case, history that I should have known all along came as an interesting surprise. For the first third of this book, Caesar (even though he is a wildly successful military commander) comes off like some sort of cut-throat political hack, mostly interested in accumulating power and seducing associates' wives. When he starts campaigning in Gaul, the book lets you know effectively that he was still something of a leadership novice, but with smarts and luck on his side. His success as a general was not a foregone conclusion, and some smart money back in the capital was betting against him. It would be as if Barack Obama had sent Rahm Emmanuel off to quiet the Mexican border, and he ended up conquering all of South America. (OK, OK, that metaphor doesn't quite work because times are different, but I hope you get my drift.)

Once he's on a roll, Caesar tears hell-bent-for-leather around the rim of the Mediterranean, seemingly for the sole purpose of demonstrating to other powerful Romans that he's not someone to be messed with. Once again, the names and places come hot and heavy, and my magnifying glass came out to try to match the tiny, ill-defined maps on my Kindle ebook reader with the text it accompanied.

The book acknowledges previous generations of Caesar-biographers but doesn't align itself with any school, often taking great pains to declare itself agnostic on the great issues of Caesar-analysis, for example, to what extent Caesar's reforms were the result of a consistent political philosophy. So, this book seems a good starting point for a novice exploration of Caesar's life and works, if you are willing to be patient, see above.

James Murphy says

The last century of the Roman republic was an unusually violent time. Ambition, the bids for political and military power, the taking advantage of opportunities by notable Romans with the skills to govern, made it an age of political turbulence within the seat of republican power, an age of war along the borders and civil wars among rival factions within Rome as the old, stable system of the republic gave way to dictatorship. The first to achieve supreme rule and the right to govern as virtual dictator was Julius Caesar. Another civil war followed his death when Caesar's chosen heir, Octavian, had to deal with those conservative republican elements who'd brought down Caesar. When he defeated those armies aligned against him and outmaneuvered his allies, he was free to become emperor and sole ruler in his own right. The republic passed into history.

This sweep of history is the course of Caesar's life and immediate legacy of his political power. It's quite an epic story. Goldsworthy's book is more than biography because in order to explain Caesar and the forces governing his conduct as well as the ways in which he influenced events he has to include a history of this period of the republic and also quite a lot about Roman society, the workings of the political system, religious practices, the Roman army, marriage customs, tribal structure in Gaul, and much more. Because the scope of the man's life was played on such a huge stage and influenced all parts of the Mediterranean world, the history of the Roman republic during those years has to be detailed.

We think of Caesar in Gaul, crossing the Rubicon, involved with Cleopatra, and being assassinated on the Ides of March. Those events filled only the last 12 years of his life. Goldsworthy shows us that he had a successful and eventful earlier life. Like other Romans of his class he was active in politics. Caesar's career was more personally rewarding than most, however. And he was especially adept at seizing opportunity and shaping it to his own ends. The same is true of his military career. Roman nobles were expected to combine their military and political careers. Caesar proved to be the best military mind and leader of his time.

Goldsworthy's achievement in organizing all this material is impressive. He parts the fog of time to let us peer into the past and, I believe, view it as clearly as can probably be seen. He gives us a heroic Caesar but also, importantly, shows us the vulnerable man who was the product of his times. Through this broad compass of history Goldsworthy lets us see the life Caesar lived and how he fit into his world while at the same time explaining how his ascension to supreme power through civil war and his dramatic assassination are merely episodes in that violent age of transition from republic to empire.

The subtitle is *The Life of a Colossus*. Without a doubt Caesar was a giant presence in his time. This is the big book needed to explain those events and the man and how they were intertwined to impact all of succeeding history. This is a satisfying, memorable, and instructive read.

Tudor Ciocarlie says

Masterful!

Szplug says

I truly enjoyed this book, and find that I'm actually rueful that I no longer have Goldsworthy's excellent biography to look forward to when I arrive home after work. I came to this six-hundred-plus page behemoth with a fair understanding of all the events, names, and places, and thus had originally planned to read it in installments scattered here and there whilst other books, long demanding my attention, received the majority of my time; however, damned if the erudite, illuminative, and fluid prose of the British author didn't suck me in completely, to such a degree that I eventually refused to fight against it anymore and plunged into *Caesar* in full.

Really, Caesar's is a story that can only get better in the retelling, an astounding tale of a man who combined immense personal charm, a gifted and practical intelligence, astute political sensitivity, a genius for military command, and an effective, demagogic oratory into a whole that, combined with the incredible fortune that seemed to dog his steps throughout the course his eventful life - save for the very end - inexorably propelled him from a shaky start as a youth from a politically average branch of a patrician tribe forced to live by his wits, on the run from the bounty hunters of the dictator Sulla, to the undisputed master of the Roman Republic, without peer after crushing or pardoning all of his enemies and seemingly poised to lead his invincible legions upon another round of conquest against the eastern impertinence of the Parthians. Unwilling to take the ruthless and bloody steps of a Sulla in cleansing the Republic of dangerous malcontents, Caesar - *our clement old master* in the words of one of the leaders amongst his assassins, Cassius - made the fatal error of trusting too much in the efficacy of his charismatic aura and not enough in the necessity of maintaining republican forms - while damaging too many already bruised egos in the process - and was cut down just prior to embarking upon his eastern campaign. His adopted son Octavian would learn from his forebear's mistakes and successfully orchestrate the illusion (one gratefully embraced by a war-weary citizenry) of a republican restoration whilst crafting the core of an absolute monarchy beneath the *principate* trappings.

Although the tale of Caesar is a familiar one, I must say that the author provided some fresh insights and analyses to various points in his life, being especially good at making clear to me details from Caesar's youth and early career, including his Asian service under Isauricus. Goldsworthy also brings the Gallic campaigns into a modern light, and his coverage of the underlying causes and colliding personalities that sparked the Civil War is very informative and helpful; plus, the cat-and-mouse maneuvering between Pompey and Caesar leading to the dramatic clash at Pharsalus is told in taut and gripping prose - when the cavalry under Labienus break against Caesar's concealed *fourth wall* of infantry angled on the right, it's a cathartic release of the tension, even though everyone knows who emerged victorious. What's more, important personages like Cicero and Pompey are given fair and considered judgement, whilst the aristocratic *party* of Cato, the self-proclaimed *Good Men*, receive their share of blame for the petty vindictiveness and unyielding principle - which so often butted heads with the underlying reality of the political situation and Caesar's *dignitas* - that contributed to the inability of Proconsul and Senate to reach some manner of compromise. Then, of course, there are the bizarre events of the Alexandrian War, a surreal episode that, fresh upon the heels of the cinematic Pharsalus, seems more the material of imaginative fiction than the likely actions of a Roman general who had just achieved a monumental victory over his enemies. Sadly, the author has no compunction about presenting the entire fable of sexy-Cleopatra-in-the-rug as being just that - some sleeping dogs should just be let to *lie*.

Goldsworthy embodies those infamous British qualities as a historical biographer: an understated wit, a scholastic understanding and academic enthusiasm for his subject, and a *slightly* dry writing style that doesn't actually detract from the enjoyable readability of the entire affair; indeed, for all of its exhaustive

comprehensibility in detailing or exploring the events of Caesar's life, the text is compulsive and absorbing, moving along like a political thriller even though virtually everyone knows how this story will end. Whilst not *quite* as fun a romp as Tom Holland's smashing *Rubicon*, its sober tone held more appeal for me whilst imparting a wealth of information; what's more, he dispenses completely with Holland's occasionally irritating modernisms. Indeed, it strikes me that Goldsworthy's examination of the final period of the Roman Republic through the life of its greatest man makes a perfect companion to Holland's journey through the same era looking through the eyes of many - it's a thoroughly readable and enjoyable one-two punch that, in providing depth of coverage in differing-but-complimentary areas, would be difficult to better.

Throughout it all, Goldsworthy earnestly strives for the rigid impartiality of the objective observer, endeavoring to bring the myriad faults and merits, the follies and successes of the oversized egos abutting each other and the Eternal City clearly into the light of our hindsight-blessed day. In particular, he proves reliably thoughtful when called upon to analyze the more infamous amongst Caesar's actions, combing through the sources and considering their intent before applying the lens of logic to deduce the most likely interpretation. He makes every effort to criticize Caesar when such is called for; despite this, however, he cannot but reveal the fact that he greatly admires the subject of his biography and is inclined to view the latter's more questionable actions through as charitable a lens as possible. No matter to this reader, for I must admit to feeling precisely the same way: he possessed a sort of Midas touch, improving any situation merely through his presence, able to instill his followers with a measure of his potent self-confidence and inspire from them a fierce loyalty that was remarkably enduring; a man of such effortless competence that one cannot but marvel at how he consistently achieved what must have seemed, at the outset, beyond the realm of the possible. I have usually held Augustus in a greater esteem due to his political genius in bringing the civil wars to an end and crafting an imperial structure that would hold for centuries; however, Goldsworthy has succeeded in giving the venerable adoptive father a further boost - how can you forget Caesar at the Sambre, or his unheard of mercy towards the defeated Pompeians? - such that I can no longer determine *whose* form tops the other's, or stands taller on that lofty Roman perch.

Joe says

An exceptional biography. Gripping yet scholarly.

Helga Cohen says

"Caesar" is a very well written reconstruction of the life of Caesar. Goldsworthy does an excellent job in tracing the life of this extraordinary Roman leader from his early life until his assassination. His life is so well known, as everyone has heard of something about this extraordinary man, including Cleopatra and the Ides of March. Goldsworthy gives a vivid portrait of the times in which he lived.

We see Caesar in the daily lives of the Romans and the continuity of Roman culture and politics. He explores the rise of power, the politics in which he lived and his death. His treatment of the many campaigns and especially the Civil War is lively and entertaining. These campaigns are brought to life in the telling and explained with descriptive maps. Some of the main characters are Sulla, Pompey, Cicero and Cato who were contemporaries of his and more brutal in their ways. With the campaign in Egypt, we are reintroduced to his seduction of Cleopatra and their affair. We learn of his consuls, namely Brutus, Cassius and others and how they conspired to assassinate him on the Ides of March, 3 days before his next campaign which would have

kept him out of Rome for the next 3 years. Mark Antony a loyal follower of Caesar is depicted but not with a lot of detail so we don't learn much about him. Octavius Augustus his adopted son who follows Caesar and becomes Emperor is introduced but not extensively explored.

Caesar is fairly portrayed and in this reconstruction of him, he is depicted as a fair ruler and dictator. Caesar implemented many reforms including the calendar which is synchronized with the sun and is used today with minor changes. The author's style is very clear and I liked how he implemented the modern views of Caesar from Shakespeare to the movie versions in the epilogue. Overall, this is a strong and well written biography.

Hadrian says

Eloquent and incredibly well-researched biography of a somewhat familiar historical figure. Provides an astonishing amount of new insights about this multifaceted and absorbing person.

Gary Foss says

This is a very thorough life of Caesar from soup to nuts, as it were. Any history about a figure or events as distant in time as that of the subject of this book is going to necessitate either a certain amount of speculation on the part of the historian, or regular admissions regarding the final unknowability of any number of particulars. In this case, Goldsworthy picks the latter, arguably more truthful path. Where he speculates, he does so cautiously and logically, presenting ideas that are reasonable--if often debatable. However, he is quick to point out that is what he is doing when he goes about it, which in my estimation often makes his own interpretations all the more valid in that, if nothing else, the author is taking even his own ideas with a grain of salt. Lay history readers might find the refrain ("we cannot know for certain" and "we will never know" or words to that effect) repetitive pretty quickly in this account, but whether this is the first book someone will read on the subject or not, that admonition bears repeating. For those who will continue reading, it's worth bearing in mind that other historians may not be so scrupulous detailing the difference between what they think and what they know, and Goldsworthy's example serves as a good road sign for when that kind of thing is happening. If this is the only book one is going to read on the subject then it instructs the reader on how to think about historical facts in the remote past that are, ultimately, impossible to prove.

Goldsworthy doesn't just give us the life of Caesar, but takes pains to locate him in the continuity of Roman culture and politics in which he lived, rose to power and died. I often feel biographies fail to do that, giving the reader the impression that the subject's life was more of a "one-off" than it really was. Caesar's was, of course, an exceptional life in an exceptional time, but his was one of several comparable lives. Goldsworthy does not give those other historical figures short-shrift in his biography which, in the long run, adds to our understanding of the subject by relating him to his time and contemporaries, not just presenting that one figure alone.

The other major recommendation I have regarding this book is a somewhat personal one. I get an undue and maybe even obsessive pleasure from a well composed, annotated bibliography. It acts as a kind of "shopping list" for me, and Goldsworthy's is particularly tantalizing. Aside from pointing out the nature and range of his research, it gives readers a nice place to go for further information. I love finding those texts that a writer

refers to often as they are frequently also worth reading. In this case, I particularly enjoyed that he spent time describing the way Caesar has been portrayed in fiction--from Shakespeare through modern film and television--in an annotated way. That's the kind of thing that many academics might neglect. At least, I've never seen it given much attention in other ancient histories. In the case of someone like Caesar, the contemporary (pop?) understanding of the man is undeniable. To ignore it is to leave a hole in our understanding.

Overall, 4 of 5 stars is well earned, and maybe even a little cheap on my side. I'm deducting a star for what amounts to little more than personal reasons having to do with what Goldsworthy chose to focus on as opposed to what I wanted to read about, and that's not entirely fair. As a biography there's probably not much to beat this installment.

Michele says

This book begins with a description of the politics of late republican Rome in the early first century (BCE.) It details Caesar's rise through the complexities of assorted offices. The main emphasis is on Caesar the military leader including good descriptions (with maps) of most of the crucial battles and the all important logistical issues. There are well balanced characterizations of both Pompey and Caesar (showing the latter as definitely less brutal). The only negative was that there was not enough about Caesar's relations with Mark Antony or Octavian.

Ilias says

*******SPOILER ALERT: Caesar DIES*******

Reading books like this make you realize that dictatorships are not so bad as they are often portrayed. Caesar is a clear example of that. It is sometimes better to have a good dictator who knows what he is doing rather than a bunch of corrupt politicians.

But then again... dictatorships tend to go towards tyrannies and a tyrant will lose his head eventually. As it happened with Caesar. To be precise it would have been less painful I think if he had lost his head instead of 100 daggers in his back :<.

Adrian Goldsworthy did an excellent job on his book, which covers almost all aspect of Caesar's life from a lover to an emperor. I really enjoyed Caesar: Life of a Colossus, since it was a better biography of Caesar than my previous read. Caesar was indeed a colossus of his time and this book rightfully portrays him as such.

Jeremy Perron says

In the over two thousand years since Julius Caesar was assassinated, many authors have written books about the great general and statesman trying to understand him. Was he a hero or tyrant? A visionary or a just a practical politician? Caesar is a hard man to nail down despite being one the most written about men in ll history. However, I feel I can say with absolute confidence that Adrian Goldsworthy has truly captured the

essence of Caesar and has succeeded in writing in--what I feel--is the book on Julius Caesar for the twenty-first century. If you want to know about just who Julius Caesar was then this is the only book on him that you will ever really need. You do not have to be a history buff to both understand and enjoy this book*, Goldsworthy writes a smooth narrative that is devoid of any technical history jargon that usually infests most historical works.

Julius Caesar did a great deal in his fifty-six years on this Earth. Goldsworthy covers his childhood, his time aboard, and his political rise. Throughout the book, Goldsworthy avoids any trace of presentism and also continuously reminds the reader to avoid using hindsight to come to conclusions about events. He also is carefully not to judge one side in a conflict more harshly than the other and does his best to maintain a historian's impartial distance.

"Roman rule brought to Gaul and other provinces many advantages. At a most basic level it is not unreasonable to say that more people were better off living under the Roman Empire than they were before it came or after it failed. The faults of Roman society--and there were many--were often shared by other cultures including the Gauls. Slavery is an obvious example. The violent entertainments of the arena, which came alongside literature, art and drama as part of Rome's influence, were less usual. Caesar was not responsible for Roman imperialism or for Roman culture, although he was certainly an enthusiastic agent of the Republic's expansion. His conquest of Gaul was not a fulfillment of a long-term aim or ambition, in any sense other than that he had long craved the chance to win glory. It was chance and opportunity that led to him focusing his attention on Gaul."(p.354-5)

"The benefits of Roman rule are arguable but the grim nature of Roman conquest is not. Caesar was entirely pragmatic--effectively amoral--in his use of clemency or massacre and atrocity. During the course of the conquest of Gaul his soldiers did terrible things, sometimes by order, as when they massacred the Usipetes and Tencteri, and occasionally spontaneously, as when they slaughtered women and children at Avaricum. Other Roman armies under other commanders had done similar things in past and would continue to do so in the future. Indeed atrocities as bad, or even worse, were committed by virtually all armies in the ancient world. This is not to justify what Caesar did, merely to place it into context. Warfare in antiquity was generally an extremely cruel business."(p.355)

After Caesar's conquest of Gaul he comes home to find his enemies have backed him into a corner. He can either back down in humiliating defeat or do what other disgruntled Roman generals had done since he himself was a boy: invade Rome. The Roman Civil War has become a romanticized period of history. Much like World War II, the Roman Civil War is given a story-like narrative filled with the colorful figures of the age. The power struggle between two of Rome's greatest leaders and their allies locked in a bitter conflict where there can only be one winner.

"The greatest battle of the war, fought by armies commanded by the ablest generals of the age, was about to occur and inevitably sources recounted the great omens that foreshadowed this massive shift in fortune." (p.425)

For this book does not just feature Caesar. During his life Caesar encountered incredible people. He was the nephew of the great Maris, the son-in-law of Cinna, and he stood up to Sulla when no one else would. Among his colleges during his career were allies such as Crassus, enemies like Cato, friends such as Cicero, and the most intriguing of all Pompey the Great. Caesar and Pompey were two great friends who would become the greatest of rivals. However his most famous encounter is with the great Queen of Egypt.

"When Caesar arrived in Egypt Cleopatra was nearly twenty-one years old and had been queen for almost

four years. She was highly intelligent and extremely well educated in the Greek tradition. Later, she would be credited with writing books on a very broad range of subjects. Cleopatra was a noted linguist who it was claimed rarely needed an interpreter when conversing with the leaders of neighboring countries." (p.438)

One of the insights Goldsworthy makes that I find the most fascinating, is he compares Caesar's two great errors: miscalculating the mood of the Gallic aristocracy and miscalculating the mood of the Roman aristocracy to be, in fact, the same error. In both cases he felt that since his rule was good and benevolent that those who had opposed him would come to his side. In Gaul, he managed to prevail and conquer but in Rome he lost his life.

"Caesar tried to change this. In 49 BC he feared falling into the hands of his rivals, just as they were terrified of his returning at the head of an army. In each case the fears may have been ungrounded, but that did not make them any less real. Once the war began Caesar paraded his clemency, sparing defeated enemies and in time allowing them to resume their careers. This was calculated policy, intended to win over uncertain and deter the enemy from fighting to the death, but that does not reduce the contrast with his opponents or earlier victors. After he had won, the pardoned Pompeians were allowed back into public life and some treated very well indeed. Once again he clearly felt that this was more likely to persuade them and others to accept his dictatorship. Regardless of his motives, there was a generosity about Caesar's behavior that was matched by no other Roman who came to power in similar circumstances. In the same way, while his lifelong backing for popular causes was intended to win support, at the same time he did implement a number of measures that were in the interest of a wide part of the population." (p.515)

Goldsworthy is right to title this book the life of a Colossus because that is what Caesar was. His life and legacy left a huge impact on the world that very few historical figures can compare. His legacy still looms large even today for both myself and my county celebrates our birthdays (July 3 and 4) in the month that bears his name.

*Although you probably are a history buff if you are going to read this. After all, who else is going to read an over five hundred page book about Julius Caesar?

David says

It's a good introduction but, like many classical biographies, remains highly speculative about the personal life of Gaius and especially his early life...because of this is of limited value in understanding the man. But it remains a good and useful introduction to not only the man but also the age of the civil wars in Roman history and the death of the Republic...important information for the Post-Bush Age.

Jerome says

Goldsworthy writes with flair and with a good command of the subject matter, doing an excellent job of bringing to life one of the most celebrated and vilified characters of ancient and Western history. He paints an excellent portrait of both Caesar and the times he lived in. Goldsworthy's treatment of Caesar's campaigns, especially the Civil War, is engaging and lively. Goldsworthy does a great job of both stripping away the myth of Caesar and conveying the drama of his times.

In some cases, Caesar's career was quite conventional for the time period. He had no grand plans for reforming the republic, but was still incredibly ambitious and talented, a rational statesman and a superb military leader. He was both personally and politically courageous: he stood up to the notorious dictator Sulla, was known for his battlefield heroism, led his troops from the front and spared the lives of Catiline's conspirators. He was a charismatic figure able to compel his troops to legendary loyalty. He was very vain and still very good-humored. He also never shrank from a challenge. He was loyal to his troops and a womanizer of epic proportions. He was willing to fight a civil war to protect his honor, smashing the warring factions and ensuring they answered only to him (except when they were stabbing him to death).

Given the lack of sources on some periods of Caesar's life, Goldsworthy is sometimes forced to speculate, but it is never excessive and always well-argued. A strong and well-written biography.
