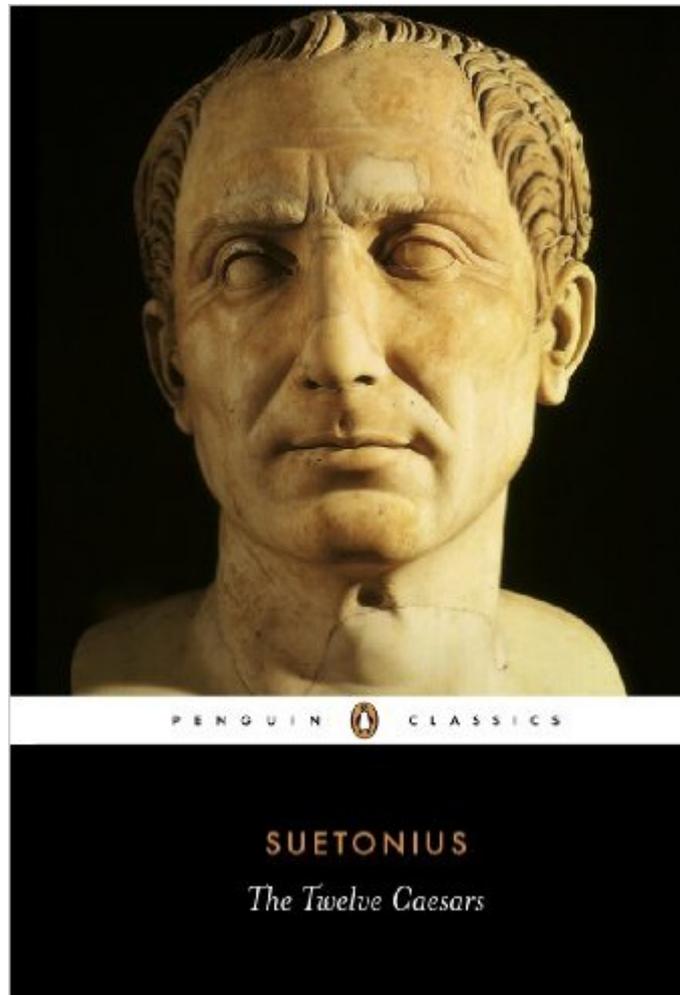


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The Twelve Caesars



Synopsis

An essential primary source on Roman history and a fascinating achievement of scholarship covering a critical period in the Empire's private secretary to the Emperor Hadrian, the scholar Suetonius had access to the imperial archives and used them (along with eyewitness accounts) to produce one of the most colourful 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 observation, anecdote and detailed physical description, The Twelve Caesars presents us with a gallery of vividly drawn and all too human individuals. James B. Rives has sensitively updated Robert Graves's now classic translation, reinstating Latin terms and updating vocabulary while retaining the liveliness of the original. This edition contains a new chronology, further reading, glossaries, maps, notes and an introduction discussing Suetonius' life and works. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

Not much is known about the life of Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus. He was probably born in A.D.

69--the famous 'year of four Emperors'--when his father, a Roman knight, served as a colonel in a regular legion and took part in the Battle of Baetricum. Suetonius became a scribe and noted secretary to the military set, eventually ending up in the service of Hadrian, who was emperor from A.D. 117-138. He was dismissed for 'indiscreet behaviour' with Hadrian's empress, Sabina, but not before doing sufficient research to complete many books of a historical nature. His attempts at philosophy were much less well received, and most of his history has been overlooked by all but classical scholars, but this work, 'The Twelve Caesars' has held the imagination of more than just the scholarly set since it was first written. Suetonius had the good fortune of speaking to eyewitnesses from the time of the early Caesars. Much of his information about Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero in fact comes from those who observed and/or participated in their lives. Suetonius is in many ways more of a reporter than an historian--he would record conflicting statements without worrying about the reconciliation (this set him apart from Tacitus and other classical historians who tried to find a consistency in stories and facts. Suetonius has been described as the tabloid journalist of ancient Rome, because not only did he not appear to check facts (which in fact is not true--he did check, he just didn't try to smooth over the conflicting facts), but he choose to concentrate on the private lives, motivations and personality quirks of his subjects rather than their grand plans, policies and military/political victories. Thus, many details of the lurid scene appear.

This is a collection of essays about the first twelve Roman rulers to bear the name Caesar. It is the definitive collection of eyewitness stories about the early emperors as they were seen by their contemporaries. The rulers covered by this book include Julius Caesar; his adopted son Octavian who ruled as Augustus, and his descendents; the warlords who contended for power in the "Year of Four Caesars" after Nero was overthrown, and the Flavians who came out on top in that struggle. In other words, the full list of twelve is: Julius Caesar Augustus Tiberius Gaius Caligula Claudius Nero Galba Otho Vitellius Vespasian Titus Domitian. If you want to understand the early Roman Empire, you need to read this book. If you are a budding novelist and want to write about the early Empire, you need to read this book. Reading Suetonius is not perhaps a sufficient condition to allow you to understand or write convincingly about the period, but it is a necessary condition. Robert Graves, author of "I Claudius" and "Claudius the God" translated this version: not surprisingly many of the snippets of gossip and fascinating little stories from Suetonius find their way into his novels. They also find their way into every good novel about first century Rome that I have ever read, absolutely without exception. You should not take for granted that every word of

Suetonius's account is accurate. Reading carefully, you will see that where he heard two conflicting accounts of an issue or event he quotes both, usually without attempt to reconcile them.

Mine is a much earlier edition of THE TWELVE CAESARS, but it's still Robert Graves translation of Suetonius' text, so it is what it is. Suetonius was apparently quite a prolific writer, with a wide variety of titles, from LIVES OF FAMOUS WHORES to METHODS OF RECKONING TIME to his credit. Outside of a few isolated fragments, however, THE TWELVE CAESARS is his only surviving work. It begins with Julius Caesar, who was Dictator but never Emperor in the true sense, continues through Nero, who was assassinated around the time of Suetonius' birth and was the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and ends with Domitian, last Emperor of the Flavian dynasty. You also get lots of helpful items included, such as family trees of the imperial families and relevant maps. Altogether, this is a very nice book. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus was a Roman of the equestrian class, born around the year 69. Little is known of his life, but his friend, Pliny the Younger, tells us that he practised law briefly, avoided politics and eventually became chief secretary to the Emperor Hadrian. His prominent position in the palace would have been extremely helpful to his writings, providing him with ready access to imperial and senatorial archives and to people who had first-hand knowledge of the events Suetonius was writing about. He uses this material well by writing more than just a dry accounting of public events. Along with the major occurrences, we are also treated to the private lives of his subjects: personal anecdotes, scandalous details, and amusing incidents that only palace intimates would have known. Suetonius presents this material in an even-handed style, avoiding any obvious personal bias and freely admitting when he tells of something that he is unable to verify.

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