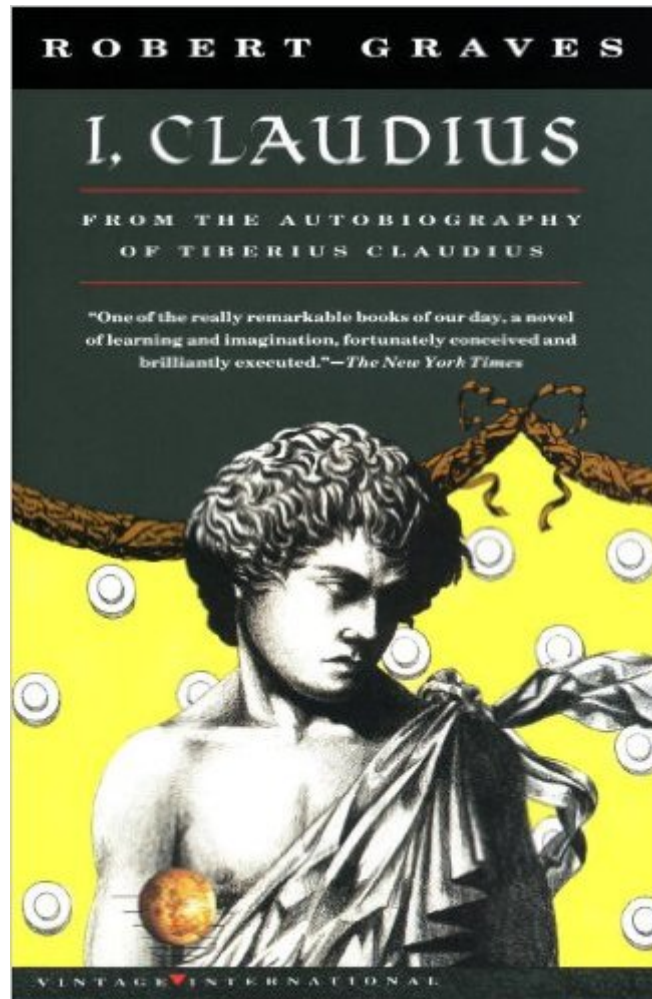


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I, Claudius (Turtleback School & Library Binding Edition)



Synopsis

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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Instead of going into gory detail about the particulars of this text, as I'm sure you've read a few summaries already, I will merely say that this book changed my reading habits forever. I read this book, simply out of curiosity, because the title was familiar and from the first page of Graves' novel I was gripped. Written in an excellent, half-comic, half-tragic style, the novel flows, and keeps you reading until it abruptly (and I'd say quite cruelly ends). The moment which will stick in my mind forever is when I first read the scene when Claudius is called into the chamber of Caligula. Caligula mad intends to kill Claudius, but Claudius quickly picks up on the emperor's madness...and well read the book. This book changed it all for me, the next book I read was Tacitus, Annals of Imperial Rome, then The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire..and so on. This book lit a passionate flame of curiosity about Roman History and then eventually world history, ever since reading this book 3 years ago, I have read only ancient classics, greek, roman and world histories, at the pace of at least one a month. For that reason alone I must rate this book highly and maybe it will light that curiosity in you too.

This novel by Robert Graves represents the supreme instance in the twentieth century to write a literarily serious historical novel. There has, of course, been no shortage of historical novels during the past century, but for the most part "historical" fiction has become a species of genre fiction, like

Sci-Fi, detective fiction, spy fiction, and Westerns. I, CLAUDIUS, on the other hand, is a historical novel composed by someone otherwise regarded as a serious writer. This relationship between serious writers and the genre of historical fiction has not always been the case. Until the mid-19th century, a host of novels attempted to recreate a historical era, not least Dickens in A TALE OF TWO CITIES, William Thackeray in HENRY ESMOND, Flaubert in SALAMBO, Tolstoy in WAR AND PEACE, and Pynchon's GRAVITY'S RAINBOW. But for the most part, writers in the latter half of the nineteenth century and all of the twentieth century have forsaken historical fiction to write in the present tense, or at the latest of their childhood, as with Marcel Proust or Anthony Powell or Harper Lee. Because of his success in the writing of I, CLAUDIUS and its sequel CLAUDIUS THE GOD, many today think of Robert Graves as primarily a novelist, but in fact most of his writing falls into the nonfiction realm, much of that with a historical bent. Graves was a passionate student of antiquity, both the Greeks and the Romans, and his goal in writing I, CLAUDIUS was to chronicle the period in Roman history immediately after the collapse of the republic and near the beginning of the rule of the Caesars. On the one hand, he wanted to adhere as closely to the documentary evidence for the events in the period as is compatible with a work of fiction, and on the other produced a first rate historical novel. He succeeds splendidly on both counts. His history is not pristine, but it is very close, with imaginative additions only for the sake of making sense of the narrative. The historical details are sufficiently solid and comprehensive for this novel to serve an excellent introduction to the early days of Imperial Rome. In order to tell his story of Imperial Rome, Graves chooses as his narrator and eyewitnesses none other than the future emperor Claudius, once considered to be one of the weakest and most inept of the early Roman emperors, if also the least corrupt and ruthless. In the early 20th century several historians of Ancient Rome began revising their assessment of Claudius, not least the great Italian classicist (who relocated to England and America) Arnaldo Momigliano. Following the lead of these scholars, Graves presents Claudius as a cautious, sagacious, humble, unambitious, and scholarly soul, one who is simultaneously a gifted survivor and a closeted adherent to republican values. Though a stutterer and physically deficient, Graves's Claudius is a highly eloquent and intelligent observer of his world, a sage analyst of the personalities populating his Rome, and a gifted student of human nature. He also emerges as a highly likable and even admirable soul. One of the great achievements of Graves's novel has been to re-enforce on the popular level that reassessment of Claudius undertaken by the scholars mentioned above. The precise period covered by Graves's novel begins roughly midway through Augustus's (formerly Octavian) career, the reign of Tiberius, and the shorter but extraordinarily horrid (though immensely entertaining) rule by Caligula. A host of other characters populate the

story, but two above all others. One is, not surprisingly, Claudius himself, but the other is in many ways the dominant personality in the entire book, Claudius's grandmother, Tiberius's mother, and Augustus's wife Livia. She emerges as one of the great villains in modern literature, larger than life and exceptionally vile. One of the most brilliant moments in the novel is when Livia confesses to Claudius what motivates and drives her wretched behavior. I, CLAUDIUS did not inspire a host of imitations among the other top fictional writers in the past century, but Graves did prove that it is a genre that still has potential to inspire, entertain, and educate. It also graphically illustrates the fact that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The world of Claudius may be long past, but the motives driving the actions of novel's characters are as alive now as then, and though the events of the novel took place two thousand years ago, Claudius feels very much our contemporary.

Roman history, with its conquests, technical advancements, and impact on our modern world can be one of the most fascinating subjects known to man. Roman politics, however, is usually one of the most boring. What Graves does with "I, Claudius" is present all the complex political intrigues of the early empire and make them not only bearable, but extremely involving. Told through the eyes of Tiberius Claudius, the intellectually gifted but physically deformed relation to a series of emperors, the book winds from the last half of Augustus' (the first emperor after Julius Caesar) reign through the notorious times of Caligula, all the while keeping the reader enthralled. The most remarkable thing about this book is simply that so much HAPPENS. Unlike most works of fiction, Graves' work does not busy itself with flowing descriptions of scenery, beautiful women, or romantic philosophy. Instead, the plot moves from event to event in a fast-paced but still rich combination of history and literary skill. Graves is able to strike an impressive balance between massive amounts of raw information (the history part) and uniquely adept storytelling prowess. Never have I read a book so full of historical fact and yet so utterly enjoyable. You need NO prior knowledge of Roman history to appreciate this novel. Highly recommended.

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