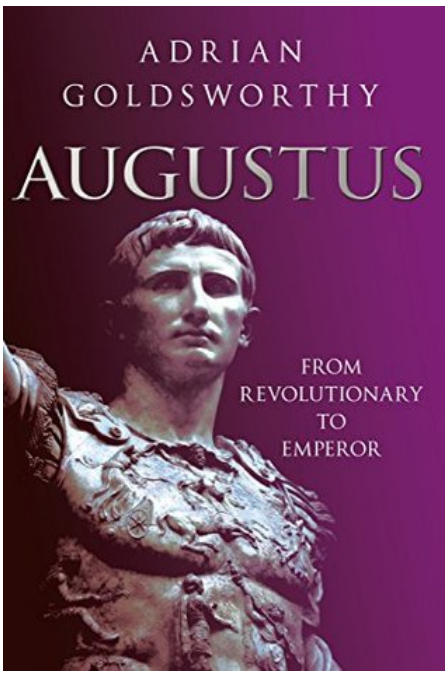

Augustus: From Revolutionary to Emperor

Adrian Goldsworthy

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Augustus: From Revolutionary to Emperor Adrian Goldsworthy
In the year 44 BC, when Julius Caesar was killed, Augustus was a mere teenager who had been adopted into Caesar's household. His reaction to Caesar's death was to step forward and proclaim himself Caesar's rightful successor. The Senate did not take him seriously, but over the following months he raised his own army and, after defeating Mark Antony in battle, became one of the three most powerful men in Rome. He was not yet 20 years old.

Over the next ten years he consolidated his power in Rome, and finally overthrew the last of his rivals in 31 BC. From that moment on Rome became an empire, and Augustus its first emperor.

This is the story of how one man rose to become the most powerful man in the world, and stabilised an empire that had been racked by decades of civil war. Augustus's achievements, and his legacy, are almost unparalleled. Like Julius Caesar, he presided over a huge expansion in wealth and territory. Like Caesar he was honoured by having a month of the year named after him. But unlike Caesar he was able to keep hold of power for over 40 years, and bequeath the empire, whole, to his successors.

Augustus: From Revolutionary to Emperor Details

Date	:	Published August 14th 2014 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson (first published 2014)
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From Reader Review Augustus: From Revolutionary to Emperor for online ebook

Stijn says

Heel uitgebreid gedocumenteerd werk dat een helder beeld schetst van een van de grootste leiders uit de wereldgeschiedenis. Zowel zijn positieve kanten als de negatieve, denk maar aan de proscripties onder andere, worden belicht. Bij deze een welgemeend applaus voor zijn rol in de komedie van het leven.

Tudor Ciocarlie says

Goldsworthy is in my opinion, the best non-fiction writer about the Roman Empire living today and Augustus is another excelent book by him.

Alison says

A gift from a friend (who knows I am a confirmed ‘Roman nut’), ‘Augustus’ was a treat to read. Densely packed with information and analysis, written in a clear style and a consistent narrative pace, I found the whole account balanced and eminently readable.

Augustus is such an important figure; a ruthless warlord who brought peace, a clever political operator, propagandist, but energetic and dedicated, a writer, wit, autocrat, a family man, but as unfaithful as any Roman man of the period. He was blessed in having the highly intelligent Livia as his wife and Agrippa as his staunch supporter. I do wonder if his reign would have been so successful without them.

One impression that came through was he chose to live a reasonably modest life and did not seek honours; on the contrary he seemed refuse them at every step. Perhaps he was just being clever, or perhaps he was genuine, but there was no doubt of the level of commanding power he exerted for a remarkable number of years.

Goldsworthy’s book reminded me of some things I’d forgotten; others were new, whether information or interpretation. The family trees and maps were well integrated into the book. I had seen many of the places and artefacts in the plates, but they were a very welcome reminder.

I’d recommend this for the lay reader, ‘Roman nut’ or the history student. You will all be satisfied.

Ray says

Augustus was the nephew and adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar. As such he led one of the factions in the civil war that followed Caesar's murder and emerged as sole ruler from 27BC, ruling the empire for forty years.

Augustus skilfully developed the role of emperor, co-opting the major families and politicians of Rome into a system that proved stable for the four decades of his rule. He expanded the empire, reformed the state and encouraged massive investment and huge public works to make Rome an imperial city.

He operated with skill and bravery, was lucky at times and extremely ruthless when it was necessary. Augustus exploited the desperate need for order following the deprivation of the civil war, refashioning the political system as sole ruler whilst outwardly following many of the traditions of the Roman republic. He was lucky in that he had excellent associates such as Agrippa and Maecenas - he was in truth not the best general -who ably assisted him in his task of ruling a massive state.

Goldsworthy does a great job in setting out the life of one of the greatest Romans. He shows us how a callow youth rose from one of several competing warlords through a combination of luck, skill and guile to become supreme leader of Rome. He also shows us how Augustus managed to stay in control for forty years, and how he mellowed and adapted to rule the state whilst masking the brutal fact that he was essentially a military dictator - allowing the other Roman clans a stake in the system.

Worth a read

David says

A few months back I read Goldsworthy's biography of Julius Caesar, so it made sense to continue the story by reading the biography of Augustus Caesar. Simply put, this book is a fantastic account of the first Roman Emperor.

What I most appreciated was the story after Augustus had won the battle of Actium and the civil wars. Most overviews of history I've read go on to simply note that Augustus reigned until his death at 14 AD. But that's 45 years, a long reign in any era! Goldsworthy does not diminish the fact that Augustus had thousands of people killed and was as violent as any other military dictator. But as dictators go, Augustus is about as good as you can get and after the wars he set about to reforming and rebuilding the Empire. He left it in 14 AD much better then he found it.

Beyond Augustus' story, I was impressed with the character of Marcus Agrippa. Agrippa achieved great things in his own right and it is doubtful Augustus could have been so successful with Agrippa next to him. In a time of everyone competing for the top, it was amazing to me Agrippa remained loyal his entire life. He had no problem doing great things and giving credit to Augustus. I think we all could use an Agrippa by our sides throughout life.

It was also interesting to learn about how Augustus would have been referred. I always heard him as "Octavian" until he became "Caesar Augustus". But after Julius Caesar's death, when Octavian was adopted as his son, he went by "Caesar." So Goldsworthy calls him Caesar at this time, and when he has to mention the older Caesar he calls him Julius Caesar.

Finally, for those interested in Christian faith, there is an interesting appendix on the birth of Jesus. It was refreshing to read a historian with no skin in the game write on this. I have no idea what Goldsworthy's faith is, but he clearly is not trying to prove anything, like most Christians and skeptics who approach this text. He notes difficulties and probabilities and moves on.

Overall, a very interesting and engaging piece of historical biography.

Charles says

This review will combine something very old with something very new. The very old, of course, is the title character, the Emperor Augustus, and his times. The very new is a continuation of my thoughts on reaction as a modern political movement. You will see how these things fit together, and in fact are much the same thing, for today, more than ever, everything old is new again. And I will begin to distinguish “conservatives” from “reactionaries,” as I recently promised I would.

Adrian Goldsworthy is one of those British historians, of whom the late John Keegan was probably the first modern example, who are tremendously erudite and deeply familiar with the latest scholarship, but whose own writings are directed to the educated popular market, often with an emphasis on military history. Goldsworthy’s particular focus is Rome and his earlier books cover the very famous: Julius Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, and so on. This book, “Augustus,” if you think about it, is a departure. It focuses on a cipher—the most important man in Rome’s history, perhaps, the hinge around which that history turns, but not one whom people really discuss, other than pro forma nods to his role as “First Emperor of Rome” and as the ruler during whose reign Jesus was born. We all recognize his statues, which were ubiquitous (if idealized—you have never seen a statue of an old Augustus, though he lived to 75). But what other details can you remember? Probably none (unless you watched and can remember the second season of the HBO series “Rome,” which was excellent, though very much not for children, and in any case only covered the early parts of Augustus’s career). As Goldsworthy points out, there exists no biography purely of the man—rather there are books on his times in which he appears dimly or even as a mere spectator, and usually most of his reign is almost wholly ignored.

The author therefore offers a straightforward chronological history focusing on the man, beginning with Augustus’s birth in 63 B.C.—the birth itself being less immediately important than what was happening then, namely the Catilinarian conspiracy and the ongoing rise of Julius Caesar, the maternal great-uncle of Augustus. Very quickly Goldsworthy cuts to Julius Caesar’s death and subsequent events. We get an excellent summary of a confused time. We are shown the ambition of the nineteen-year-old Gaius Octavius, known as Octavian to us, made the heir of Julius Caesar but lacking experience of both war and command, and without an army compelled to make his way back to Rome from Macedonia not knowing what to expect when he got there. We review the Second Triumvirate; the battle of Philippi (where Brutus and Cassius died); and the growing appreciation, or apprehension, of relevant men (most especially Cicero) for the Octavian they had under-rated or ignored, figuring they could control him (something that usually seems to turn out poorly for would-be puppet masters). Finally, in this time period, we get the defeats of Sextus Pompeius, as well as of Antony and Cleopatra, with Octavian then immediately assuming supreme power (sidelining, but not killing, Lepidus, the third member of the Triumvirate, who in fact lived to a ripe old age).

This history is the history we tend to know of Augustus, and as I say, he’s the cipher in the mix. We thrill to Cleopatra and her asp, the death of Cicero, and other such episodes, not to the growing, consolidating, yet unspectacular power that Octavian held (Augustus, after 27 B.C.). Nobody makes movies in which Augustus is the central figure. At this point, most people studying Rome gloss over the rest of his reign and begin focusing on his successors. Here, the remaining three-fifths of the book covers the forty years of his reign as Augustus, where less exciting things happened and nearly everyone was grateful for the return to boredom, or at least the disappearance of uncertainty and terror, combined with economic and cultural flourishing.

Augustus began by reforming the Senate, along with the consulship and the other magistracies, reducing their number, restoring their prestige, and making various structural changes while retaining the outward forms—at the same time still permitting the upper classes to achieve real power and prestige not solely dependent on his favor. He restored and enhanced religious rites (some of which were embellished or reinvented for the new age, such as closing both doors of the Temple of Janus when Rome was at peace, thereby increasing piety while highlighting his own successes). The rule of law generally prevailed, even as against Caesar in small things, although everyone knew and functionally acknowledged that the ultimate power was Caesar's, so there was not rule of law in precisely the sense we would use it.

Goldsworthy further covers many other aspects of the early Empire, from colonies to roads, as well as extensive details about Augustus's family, where, most importantly, his succession plans were frustrated by the deaths of the men and the bad behavior of the women. The Emperor implemented a building program that allowed him to say at his death that "Behold, I found Rome of clay, and leave her to you of marble." Some of this was decorative; some practical, as in fixing and building new aqueducts and fountains from which the people got fresh water. Naturally, all of this was devoted to strengthening his prominence, as well as the civil society of the city and the fibers of empire. It's not that Augustus had a grand plan, but he incrementally followed basic principles, and stuck to them whenever possible. At the same time, of course, he particularly rewarded the soldiers who had put him into and kept him in power. As Goldsworthy repeatedly notes, Augustus was a military dictator. No military, no power. He did not make the mistake that Julius Caesar had made, of going around unarmed by himself; nor did he make the mistake Pompey had made, of disbanding his army at the height of his power and trying to rely on his auctoritas (roughly, status and respect due to position, power, and charisma). Augustus had massive amounts of auctoritas—and plenty of soldiers to keep his auctoritas fresh. And he kept his soldiers busy, no longer fighting other Romans, but expanding the empire into more of Spain and Germany, and keeping Rome's ancient enemies, such as the Parthians, at bay.

From this narrative, a clear portrait of the character of Augustus emerges. Unlike Julius Caesar, he was not a particularly impressive military leader. In fact, with at least some justice he was accused of being conveniently ill or otherwise incapacitated at crucial and dangerous moments, such as Philippi, where he was accused of hiding in a marsh, and by his own admission he absented himself because of a warning dream his physician had. Still, he was wildly ambitious, yet cautious enough to not be constantly risking everything on a throw of the dice, as Antony did, or to do stupid things like allow himself to be cast as a drunk bewitched by a foreign queen, as Antony also did. "Hurry slowly" was one of his watchwords. At the same time, like nearly all warlords, he could be bloodthirsty—Augustus, along with the other members of the Second Triumvirate, used proscriptions extensively, both to eliminate their opponents (Julius Caesar's policy of aggressive clemency was one of the reasons he got killed, because nobody likes to be beholden in that way) and to get land and money to reward their supporters. It was said in making these proscriptions that Augustus was both callow and vicious, traits that later left him, or were subsumed, but which Goldsworthy notes are part of the balance of the man. On the other hand, he was fond of humor, even at his own expense, as when after Antony was defeated at Actium he paid a man in Rome 5,000 denarii for a bird that was trained to cry "Hail Caesar, victor imperator!"—and when told there was a second bird, paid the same for that one, even when he discovered its cry was "Hail Antony, victor imperator!" He was also reportedly amused when "he encountered a man who looked uncannily like him, prompting the princeps to ask the man whether his mother had ever spent time in Rome. The man said no, before adding that his father was a frequent visitor."

One of the things that makes this book interesting, and also suggests routes of further inquiry for the interested reader, is that quite frequently Goldsworthy will, without going into detail, refer to scholarly controversies surrounding a particular point. This often happens, for example, when he is discussing possible or putative resistance by the senatorial class to the dominance of Augustus. As is well known, records of

events and their motivation tend to become less reliable in authoritarian societies, not so much because of fear of punishment as because the real decisions are taken informally, behind closed doors, by groups of the powerful. Thus, scholars must tease the facts out of relatively little evidence. Goldsworthy rejects what appears to be, from his comments, the common scholarly idea that this or that event showed a strong undercurrent of opposition to Augustus. For the most part, Goldsworthy believes that the upper classes (and all the other classes) were much happier with Augustus than with the previous disorders, and while they jockeyed for position, wealth and power, both with respect to obtaining those from Augustus and purely among themselves, there was no coherent set of individuals who had any actual desire or plan to restore the true Republic. Apparently others (whom he cites) disagree, though what Goldsworthy describes certainly seems likely, given nearly a century of civil war. Throughout the book, there are numerous other interesting points. For example, everyone knows that much of the writing of the ancient world is lost—but it seems odd, and sad, that even Augustus's own voluminous memoirs (written early in his reign) are wholly lost. Other facts add flavor and depth: "Centurions were men of some property and often came from the aristocracies of the country towns of Italy. The old view of them as sergeant majors promoted from the ranks is a sadly persistent myth." And, finally, we get fashion tips. One sometimes opponent, sometimes ally was the Germanic tribe of Suebi, "who were famous for wearing their hair tied in a knot on the top or side of their heads—the Suebian knot." So the man-bun has respectable antecedents. I'm pretty sure, though, that today's wearers of man-buns lack the masculinity of the Suebi.

Augustus allowed a modest amount of criticism of himself, and generally free discourse. He also patronized the greatest artists, not for propaganda, but because he "prided himself on association with only the finest writers. This was a matter of self-respect, but also good politics. Alexander the Great's reputation had suffered through accepting overblown praise from mediocre poets." Goldsworthy rejects "the modern prejudice [that assumes] that all great artists must by nature be dissidents, especially if they live under a leader who has fought his way to power. As a comparison, we would do well to think of the many great works of music and art produced under the rule of, and often with direct patronage of, absolute monarchs in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries." To this I would add every single great work of art created prior to the modern era, all of which (other than some in ancient Athens) were produced under some form of government other than democracy—not to mention that most "great works" of modern art, mostly created under democracy by artists eager to undermine and destroy their own societies, often funded by those they viciously attack, aren't great at all. The causative linkage among great art and forms of governance, though, if any, I will leave to another day.

This is not a Christian or religious book in any way, but Goldsworthy elsewhere has identified himself as Christian, and perhaps that shows in his intermittent focus on Herod the Great's client kingdom. Among other things, he notes that Herod rebuilt the capital of Samaria and renamed it Sebastos, and settled it largely with veterans, whose sons often served in the Roman army under the governor's command—hence, "the soldiers who executed Jesus were almost certainly Sebasteni." And in an appendix, Goldsworthy evaluates the dating of Jesus's birth, in particular as relates to the census of Cyrenius [i.e., Publius Sulpicius Qurinius] mentioned in Luke 2 as the reason for Jesus being born in Bethlehem. Although Goldsworthy doesn't mention it, very frequently simplistic attacks on Christianity are made claiming that "Augustus never ordered an empire-wide census." That may be true—or it may not, given that so much of the records are lost, and Goldsworthy says it's "perfectly possible," since it would just be formally ordering and organizing what already happened in practice in an ad hoc manner. But it's not relevant to or probative of the truth of Jesus's birth, since as Goldsworthy says, "There was no reason for Luke to be careful in precisely describing the administrative methods of taxation within the Roman Empire, even assuming that he understood such things, given how few people really understand today all aspects of the taxation system in their own countries. . . . What is clear is that under Augustus . . . most—perhaps all—provinces were subjected to one or more censuses which assessed liability for taxation." "The Gospel writing may merely reflect the perspective of a

provincial, for whom census and taxation were imposed by the Roman authorities with a regularity that must have seemed as if it was a system imposed by a single decision." And given that the taxation census of Qurinius (the first one imposed directly by the Romans) was in A.D. 6, and Herod died in 4 B.C., it was probably not actually this census that was the one mentioned, but an earlier one carried out by Herod, who would have been perceived as acting for Augustus—and which very well may have required registration in one's home community. "The Gospel writers were not providing fully detailed historical contexts for the events they described, but telling their readers what they felt was important." Thus, the precise contours of the Nativity census or taxation are not known, but what is known is wholly consistent with the Biblical account.

So much for history. What of today? It is an obvious and fair question what, if any, lessons or warnings there are for us in the Augustan transition to a new form of governance. In the unsettled modern age, facile parallels to Rome are constantly drawn. Most of them are ignorant and foolish—as with using any historical parallel, great caution is needed, both in order that false conclusions not be drawn and in order to avoid excessively constraining thought and action by believing, even if only implicitly, that past performance dictates future results. But if the Augustan transition tells us anything, it is that all systems end, and that there is no magic to the republican form of government, whatever we may viscerally feel. When Augustus died, there was no serious movement to return to the Republic. "The acknowledgement that the principate worked was universal and only a little grudging." The key word there is "worked." What works today may not be what worked yesterday, but usually people are trapped into existing frames of thought, until one day, they aren't, and something new works. The trick is to figure out where we are in that cycle and what actions to take in response.

The Augustan transition is usually thought of as the change from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire, but that is not really true. The Republic was already dead as a doornail when Augustus was born; the only question was what was going to replace it. Certainly, we can argue why the Republic had run its course, but no educated person would disagree that it had run its course. That wasn't obvious to all at the time—for example, the assassins of Julius Caesar hoped to return to the days of republican virtue. Whether because it was actually virtue, or because those days privileged men of their class, is irrelevant. The point is that their hope was always pitiful. Revolutions seeking to wholly return to the past are merely embarkations on the proverbial ship of fools. They never restore the past and rarely result in achieving any of the goals of those who create them. Our view of the end result of revolutions is distorted by the primacy in our thought given to the American Revolution and the Glorious Revolution, which are viewed as having positive, largely cost-free results in accord with their movers. But essentially all other revolutions have left most people worse off, usually including most of the revolution's instigators, and have accomplished few, if any, of their supposed goals. And none have restored the past, because you can't restore the past, which after all is necessarily prologue.

The return to Rome of monarchy, the default form of human government, was probably inevitable, given the circumstances of constant disorder, that no person will tolerate if he can avoid it at nearly any cost. Really, the ascension of Augustus was socially Pareto optimal—nobody was worse off, and many people were better off. The traditional rebuttal to this is to point to either the nasty later Emperors (Caligula, Commodus) or to the eventual breakdown of the Empire. Neither suggests that Augustus was not an improvement to the first century B.C. If we, in the United States, had for decades been swept from coast to coast by war, tanks swarming across Nebraska cornfields, mass confiscations of money and goods, destruction of hundreds or thousands of towns, with each party as it captured a city posting lists of thousands of civilians to be immediately hunted down and killed, we would be not unhappy if someone stopped all this by grasping the reins of power permanently, especially if republican forms were maintained (a particular focus of Machiavelli in his Discourses on Livy, the subject of a forthcoming review of mine), considerable freedom

was maintained for all people (more than under civil war, certainly), the rule of law was restored, the economy boomed and national prestige was reborn. In fact, I would bet that almost nobody would miss democracy. I certainly wouldn't, in those circumstances. Democracy, or republicanism, is overrated, probably because we associate the (fading) glory of the modern West with democracy, likely overstating the connection, or even seeing one where none exists.

[Review continues as first comment.]

Jasmeet Matharoo says

this book is for anyone interested in the transition of roman republic to roman empire and the life and power struggle of first roman emperor Augustus.this book gives detailed information about the working of roman elite or nobles.as its history book one can feel the book becoming long and tedious at some points but overall its a really good.

Leah says

When in Rome...

"…as military dictators go, Caesar Augustus was not such a bad one."

Great-nephew and principal heir to Julius Caesar, Augustus was just nineteen when Caesar was murdered, but it seems he was never in doubt of his right to take over the honours of the older man. His early career was as a warlord, using the wealth he had inherited and borrowing extensively to ensure that he had the largest army as the Roman republic descended into civil war. He was also helped by the loyalty of Julius Caesar's troops – a loyalty they were willing, on the whole, to extend to his heir. Having at length achieved internal peace, Augustus' later career was as a (fairly) benevolent military dictator who brought stability to Rome and enabled it to extend and, to some degree, pacify the empire.

Adrian Goldsworthy is a recognised scholar of ancient Rome and has a doctorate from Oxford University in ancient military history. Although this is a period I know nothing about, it quickly becomes clear that the book has been thoroughly researched. While concentrating on Augustus himself, Goldsworthy takes time to set his story well into the period, giving plenty of information about the period before Augustus rose to prominence, so that the newcomer gets a real feeling for the society that he was operating within. As always with histories of so long ago, the source documents are limited and often even they were written a considerable time after the events. Goldsworthy acknowledges this and reminds the reader of the effect of contemporary and later propaganda on the picture left behind of such a prominent figure as Augustus. As he says *"As always with the ancient world, it is easier to say what he did than it is to understand the man's inner thoughts and character."* He also remembers that not all of his readers will have a grounding in Roman history, so takes the time to explain things that can be confusing, like the naming conventions for both men and women or the structure of the army. This meant that I found the book very accessible and only very rarely felt that I was floundering a bit.

Personally there was a bit too much concentration on the military side of things for me. Obviously as a military dictator, the army was an important part of Augustus' story, as were the various rebellions, battles

and conquests. It certainly isn't a criticism of the book, therefore, since I can't see how Goldsworthy could really have left any of it out, but I did find it all got a little tedious after a while. He shows Augustus as a slick political operator rather than a heroic warrior – in fact, there is a clear suggestion that Augustus tended to fall conveniently ill and retreat to the rear whenever the fighting hotted up. However he seems to have been ruthless in pursuit of his aims, willing to change allegiance whenever he thought it would benefit him and displaying a high degree of brutality towards his defeated enemies - behaviour all the more remarkable, perhaps, given his youth. Goldsworthy covers the Cleopatra/Mark Anthony episode in some depth, but rather suggests that Cleopatra has been given more importance by later historians than she really deserved.

I found Augustus' later life of more interest, especially his attempts to ensure that he had 'trained' heirs to take over after his death – attempts that were constantly thwarted by the tragedy of early deaths within his extended family. Names familiar to anyone who watched the BBC's *I, Claudius* (or, indeed, who read the original book by Robert Graves) have their context and importance thoroughly explained, and Goldsworthy weighs up the evidence for and against the suggestions of Livia (Augustus' wife) as murderer of more than one of her relations – and tends to come down in her favour on the whole. Considering the difficulties of lack of source material, I felt Goldsworthy gave a fairly rounded picture of Augustus – a man whose behaviour seemed, as Goldsworthy says, to improve as he got older. The man who in his youth cheerfully proscribed his enemies and had them killed seemed willing to show a little more tolerance in his old age – though not always to his own family. I got the distinct impression that Goldsworthy was being kinder to Augustus than some of his critics may have been over the years.

Overall, this is a well written book, accessible enough for a casual reader with little or no pre-existing knowledge of the period; but with enough depth and detail to be interesting to people more familiar with this part of history too.

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Yale University Press.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Carol Storm says

Passable biography but if you're looking for entertainment THE TWELVE CAESARS by Suetonius is actually a lot more fun. The original is still the greatest!

Mark Gray says

A wonderful take on the life of Augustus presented in a fresh way. I thought I knew about his life but soon realised the gaps that the author skilfully filled. I really like his style and have just downloaded all his other books

Well recommended

Ross Cohen says

Adrian Goldsworthy's "Augustus" completes a trilogy that began with "Julius Caesar" and "Antony and Cleopatra." Of these three excellent books, "Augustus" is the best. This is mostly due to the nature of Goldsworthy's subject and to the duration for which he ruled. Caesar embodies dynamism, Antony and Cleopatra embody passion, Augustus embodies Rome. And, like Rome, he is complex: Augustus possessed mercy and ruthlessness, ambition and service, cowardice and audacity. Goldsworthy's triumphant biography presents as full an Augustus as a twenty-first century reader is bound to find.

Hadrian says

While in my thirteenth consulship, the Senate and the equestrian order and the Roman people as a whole called me the father of my country.
-Deeds of the Divine Augustus

Who is Augustus? Who is the man behind this stone face? His adoptive father, Julius Caesar, is a household name thanks to television and to Shakespeare, and some of Augustus' contemporaries have reached a more enduring fame. There is the story of Marc Anthony and Cleopatra, but also Jesus of Nazareth, who was born in the first decade of Augustus' reign. But Augustus, another important figure, remains as blank and expressionless as his whitewashed statues.

Goldsworthy's aim in this new biography is to treat Augustus as a modern statesman. This means using primary sources, Roman (Plutarch, Suetonius, Appian, Cicero, Cassius Dio) and contemporary historians and also to disentangle what his own propaganda has made of him. Augustus was a political animal, and knew how to maneuver the complicated alliances and patronage networks which dominated Roman politics.

There was little that was inevitable about Augustus' own rise to power. His road from minor noble to god-Emperor is not certain. If Julius Caesar had not adopted him, if Caesar had not been stabbed to death, if the young Augustus (then Octavian) had succumbed to one of his many illnesses or lost one of his many battles, then his path would have diverged from what we know as history, and it would be so far removed from ours as to be beyond speculation.

The main turning point in Augustus' life is the end of the Roman Republic and its replacement by an military dictatorship with a monarchical succession. Goldsworthy damns Augustus with faint praise, saying that as far as military dictators go, Augustus was not that bad. Of course, he was still responsible for the deaths of many thousands of people, but Goldsworthy balances that with storybook benevolence. Then again, this is also parcel with a dictator's image - make your presence so valuable and your accomplishments so enduring to the people that life without you is unimaginable. Goldsworthy's claim is that Augustus was not walking in his father's steps, but was the first emperor in his own right, with all that entails.

The book is a fair read for the layman and for the established scholar, with maps, family trees, glossaries of titles, and an extensive bibliography (I note many references to Syme's The Roman Revolution here as well). This is in many ways a fascinating book about an enigma, though the fierce debates over his life will certainly continue.

Andrew says

Augustus: First Emperor of Rome, by Adrian Goldsworthy, is an excellent biographical account of Caesar Octavian's rise to power and his subsequent creation of the Roman Empire. The work chronicles his life from his birth to death. He was born Caius Octavian Thurinus of a fairly well off but relatively unknown aristocratic family from an Italian city outside of Rome. His great grandfather had become an important politician in the area, and the subsequent generations were important politicians, bankers etc. Octavian's father was a senator in Rome, and although not a big-wig during the civil war years in the 50 BC era, was an important and crafty senator who often took a neutral path in conflicts such as these. Octavian's father died when he was young, and he went to live with his grand-father, also a Roman politician, and finally was adopted by Julius Caesar - who was related to the boy through marriage.

The book then goes on to look at the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey, the Ides of March assassination and subsequently, Octavian Caesar's entry into the political world. As a boy in a patrician family, Octavian grew up attending Senatorial meetings, studying Greek, philosophy, history and the arts of war. When adopted by Julius Caesar, he was given elevated status, and important introductory functions to build his political acumen. After Julius Caesar's assassination, he sought justice against his Republican murderers, and came back to Rome from his place of study in Greece. He petitioned to have money Julius Caesar had promised to the people of Rome paid out by the Senate, and became an interesting political tool by competitors for power, including Mark Antony, the "Liberators" (Brutus, Casseus etc.) and Pompey Magnus' sons. These political squabbles allowed Octavian Caesar an opportunity to explore power himself, and he utilized his given name (Caesar) and the death of his adopted father, as well as political machinations and public appeal, to eventually gain status. He recruited former soldiers from Julius Caesar's veterans, and was able to form enough legions to be a thorn in the side of the various contenders for power, although not yet the main player. He was able to occupy Rome covertly, and allied with Antony and Lepidus to eventually for a Triumvirate of power - turning against the Pompey's and the Republican forces. Once the Republicans were dealt with, Octavian (here on called Caesar) gained immense power and influence, was voted titles by a cowed Senate, and fell out with his fellow rulers, eventually defeating Antony in open combat at Actium.

This marked the beginning of Caesar as "Augustus." Although not voted the title until later on, at this point Augustus Caesar had no equal in power. He took great pains to maintain the appearance of an independent Senate, going so far as to welcome criticism's and gentle rebuking and teasing, but not the outright abuse and mud-slinging that characterized later Republican politics. He frequently rejected politically voted honours in his name, as a sign of humility, and of course as a way of maintaining his appearance to the public. He also avoided the mistakes of his adopted father, avoiding the title "dictator" and abhorring any mention of monarchy. He kept his house near other aristocrats in Rome, and was careful to balance his image with his predecessors, frequently honouring his adopted father, and even Pompey Magnus, Sulla and other great men of Rome's past. He worked to expand the borders of Rome, campaigning (often through subordinates) in Cantabria in Spain, across the Rhine into Germany, in modern Switzerland and in Africa and Asia. He built many public works, repaired important buildings, and frequently gave gifts of games, cash, grain and holidays to the people or Rome. He was also careful to ensure a political outlet for young and ambitious aristocratic men, frequently promoting people to positions of power, forgiving those who questioned his rule (although not to the extent of his adopted father) and building a base of talented subordinates among his family and close comrades.

Augustus' reign was also marked with tragedy. Many of his potential heirs and closest comrades, from

Agrippa, to Lucius Caesar, to Drasus, died before their patron. He survived all of his grandchildren, and his only daughter, Julia, was estranged due to her public extravagance and flaunting of her marriage with his close associate and eventual successor, Tiberius. Tiberius himself could not take the stress of his position, and retired to Rhodes for five years, much to Augustus' disappointment. However, as the list of family members grew thin, due to scandal, disease or death in battle, Augustus again turned to Tiberius. Augustus died of illness, aged 75 (an extremely old age at this time).

Goldsworthy has done a fabulous job chronicling the life and times of Augustus Caesar, the first Emperor of Rome. Although Julius Caesar is sometimes given the credit, the dictator did not survive to pass on his lineage, and Augustus was the one who built the legislative and political framework of the early Roman Empire. As a character, Augustus is fascinating. He was a sickly child, and suffered from fits of illness throughout his long life, with death scares multiple times. He was also a fairly mediocre general, losing a handful of the battles he fought, and later delegating campaigns to his subordinates (namely Agrippa and Tiberius, as well as his grandsons). He balanced his quick temper with a thoughtful and wise knowledge of Roman politics, and was often able to achieve public relations coups from many of his mistakes and attacks from political opponents.

Goldsworthy also does a good job highlighting his flaws. He was no legendary general, and often delegated military matters to subordinates. He was sickly, and succumbed to the pressures of this period of time a few times, often falling into depression that he needed to recover from. He engaged in massacres, executing thousands of opponents in the Triumvirate period, and dealt harshly with insurrection in the provinces. He took sole power of a large empire in turmoil, and eliminated his opponents ruthlessly through political, diplomatic and often violent means. He was quick to temper, and saw his own daughter exiled and shunned from public life.

Goldsworthy does an admirable job in this biography. It is highly readable, well sourced, and organized along temporal lines, with sections listed by the name Augustus would have been referred to during that time period. He does fall into a trap that much ancient historical narratives falls into. His work is opinionated in some ways, as he discounts other works of scholarship or other historical theories on slight pretexts or based on his own thought process. This is not a direct criticism, as ancient history is full of gaps, missing records, altered monuments and biased primary sources. One must fill in the gaps to have a compete narrative. Goldsworthy tries to do this. He utilizes multiple source types, from monuments, to archeological evidence, to primary sources, historical records and even biblical sources. Even so, there are many missing pieces to the interesting puzzle of Augustus Caesar. There is also controversy over the reasons why he did what he did, and to how accurate some of the later historical works used as primary sources (some written a century or more after events, some under political pressure from Augustus himself, some with an axe to grind in the contemporary political landscape etc.). These issues may never be resolved satisfactorily. Even so, Goldsworthy has written an engaging, entertaining and enlightening biography on one of Western histories most important historical figures. So much of our institutions and ideals take a page from Rome's historical precedent. Augustus helped build Rome into an Empire that would last another 14 centuries, right up to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Its trappings continue to this day in our political institutions and even our language. It is immediately recognizable, and yet totally alien all at once. One can mesh with Augustus' decisions in some cases, and see them as enlightening, and at others, recoil at his ferocity. This was a different time, for sure, but the ideals of this Emperor, and the system he set up is recognizable enough to feel familiar and to compare it subconsciously with other Empires and Monarchy's in Western history. Augustus is an all important historical figure, and Goldsworthy's biography is an excellent choice if one wishes to learn more about his life and how he governed.

Peter Mcloughlin says

The first half of Augustus's life was involved in conquest and pursuit of title of first man of Rome and Imperator. The second have is about the less dramatic but probably much more important part of ruling over the Roman Empire and making sure the frontiers were secure, The Aquaducts flowed and the population was tended to for tranquility. In terms of excitement the civil wars and battles is stuff to keep ones interest but of course an ordinary Roman would have appreciated much more the comparative of the Principate. For a Roman the second half of the book would be pleasing but for a remote spectator like myself the first part was more entertaining. Funny about that. Maybe that is why Gibbon observed that we tend to shower more attention on mankind's destroyers than its benefactors.

Steven Peterson says

I am not an expert in Roman history, so I cannot speak to the accuracy of this work. However, I am, in the end, impressed by the work. First, the author has an extensive background in Roman history, having written an excellent biography of Julius Caesar, as well as works on battles and military matters. Second, he does not seem to me to go beyond the evidence. At any number of points, he notes that we cannot know what happened, although he sometimes makes an informed guess (some biographers have gone way too far with these "guesses"; Goldsworthy seems to be more discreet). Third, there are a number of maps, some rather indifferent and others useful. I wonder if there could not have been somewhat more and somewhat better. Fourth, the political structure of Rome is described quite nice3ly, including a confusing array of posts that could be held by leaders.

The unlikely story of Caius Octavius who became Augustus is well told. Goldsworthy begins with what we can gather about his youth--and the extraordinary good luck of having been adopted by his great-uncle Julius Caesar. The background of the first triumvirate--Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar--is discussed and the end of their alliance at the top of the dominance hierarchy of Rome. After Caesar's assassination, the dynamics of Roman politics changed dramatically. How Octavius became Augustus and survived the aftermath is, again, a well told tale. A second triumvirate developed--Marc Antony, Lepidus, and Octavius. There was much tension among them, and a falling out seems to have been inevitable. The process by which Augustus emerged as Roman leader is told in considerable detail.

Then, the long career of Augustus as Princeps is related. This is, again, done nicely. There was much pain in his life, as so many close to him died early. We learned of key figures, such as Agrippa, who helped his leadership and accomplishments. His personal life, as much as can be ascertained, adds a human element to this biography.

This is a fine biography. I am impressed that so many years later, one could assemble as detailed a story as emerges here.
