# The October Horse

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A SWEEPING EPIC OF ANCIENT ROME FROM THE #1 BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE THORN BIRDSWith her renowned storytelling gifts in full force, Colleen McCullough delivers a breathtaking novel that is both grand in scope and vivid in detail -- and proves once again why she is the top historical novelist of our time.

In the last days of the Roman Republic, Gaius Julius Caesar is both adored and despised -- but his rule is unshakable. Forced by civil war to leave his beguiling mistress Cleopatra, Caesar turns his eye to the future: who is to inherit the throne of Roman power? But in the shadows of the empire, the talk is of murder. Who among his associates has the cunning and skill to fell the fierce leader -- and brave the dangerous consequences of that cataclysmic act?

## The October Horse Details

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# From Reader Review The October Horse for online ebook

### David Elkin says

Highly recommended. I am thrilled so got the chance to write one more volume. She explains some of her decisions and certainly is not following "the Bard" in the end of Caesar. You really should read the Masters of Rome in sequence, but the book will stand by its own merits as well. Colleen was certainly one of the great novelist of the late 20th century, and she will be missed.

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### James says

Romans, despite their claim to civilization, had their own weird superstitions and rituals. The October Horse was the off-horse (or the one who ran on the outside track and thus had to run faster) of the winning chariot team from the annual Ides of October race. This horse---arguably the best horse in Rome in the prime of its life---was ritually sacrificed to Jupiter Optimus Maximus at the end of the race, and its head became a prize during the public scramble after the killing.

This was the title chosen by Colleen McCullough’s for the final book of her brilliant Masters of Rome series. The series chronicles the fall of the Roman Republic from the advent of the General Gaius Marius to the Dictatorship of Cornelius Sulla and then the life and death of Julius Caesar. Like the previous books in the series, the events in the books closely track general historical reconstructions of the records of this time. The details and characters are fleshed out from the imagination of the author and the narratives are changed to a more gossipy reader-friendly style.

Plot Details
Caesar, in this book, visits Egypt in pursuit of the “boni” the group of trouble making senators behind his rival Pompeii. While arbitrating the Egyptian succession dispute, he falls in love---in a manner of speaking---with Cleopatra. After dallying in Egypt and Africa ostensibly for rounding up the final remnants of the boni, Caesar returns to Rome as dictator for life.
During a visit to Rome by Cleopatra, a cabal of jealous Senators murders Caesar in the Senate forum. But in a surprise move, Caesar adopts nephew Octavian as his son and heir instead of Marcus Antonius (or more popularly Mark Anthony), setting off a new round of civil intrigues, including the forming of the Second Triumvirate (Antonius, Octavius, and Lepidus) against the murderers. The book finishes with the defeat of Cassius and Brutus, Octavian perched on the verge of power (despite his cowardice in battle), opposed by a martial brutish Marcus Antonius (with no hint yet of a romance with Cleopatra).

In the course of 700 pages (in the hard cover edition), indeed over the course of 6 books of 700 pages each, McCollough has brought to life the petty jealousies, power struggles, ideals, superstitions, crises, and frustrations of life at the end of the Roman Republic: At a period in history just as the Roman culture started to struggle with the problems related to the beginning of the Empire.

The Review
This novel could have just as easily been titled “Caesar and Cleopatra” or “The Ides of March” if the author intended to end her series at the end of Caesar’s life. But this novel is actually about Octavian (later Octavius Caesar Augustus) since Julius Caesar dies half way into the book. But of the four main protagonists in the series, I seemed to like Octavius the least. Probably because, while undoubtedly politically brilliant (consul

at 21!), he did not really have any hurdles to overcome on his rise to the top. (Incidentally, Octavian is a more casual way of refer to Octavius, like Johnny to John. In the book, Antonius also refers to his rival as Octavianus, which both mocks his rival's name's ending and reinforces Antonius's view of him as a minor).

From amongst the huge diversity of threads running through the previous five novels, a consistent theme seems to be the rags to riches rise of its main characters: Marius had to overcome his "hayseed" image to become Patrician, Sulla had to overcome poverty and psychopathic tendencies, Caesar had to overcome poverty, wars, and political structures---such as his relegation to flamens dialis---erected by jealous enemies. While history records that Octavius would overcome his share of political enemies and win a few wars of his own on his way to founding the Empire, these stories are not contained in this book.

The physician McCullough gives Octavius asthma (not confirmed in the historical record) to probably enhance his character with something to overcome and perhaps also to explain his cowardice in battle. But this weakness fails to accomplish what McCollough did so brilliantly with her three previous characters: that is, to give a glimpse of the character's steel inner core, to distinguish these men so as to validate their rise to power.

In Octavian's case, we have ambition, an ability to pick out good men (we are tantalized by his partnership with Agrippa), astute political insight, and skill with negotiations (witness the way he set up the Triumvirate). But this doesn't make him great so that the core we see is more marble than steel. And it's not just because historical events give the author little to work with, in building up Marius she worked with even less. In this sense, Octavian is the least satisfying "hero" that this series has portrayed up to this point.

Critics have derided McCollough's style as historical soap opera---like it was a bad thing. Actually, the soap operatic sequencing of well known historical events (such as the union of Caesar and Cleopatra) coupled with thoroughly researched speculation (on such topics as Marc Anthony's role in the assassination) lend realism to the novel. It is soap opera in a very Frank Herbert's Dune kind of way.

I applaud this kind of historical story telling because the realism brings Ancient Roman history to life far more convincingly than dry historical commentary from Plutarch or Suetonius, or even modern accessible writers like Michael Grant.

For example, she describes how Caesar's murderer's fled to the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus in panic, and then how the common people set up a shrine to deify Julius Caesar, and how a comet showed itself during the games held in his honor. And then she links all these events together into a continuous sequence showing the love that Rome felt for its dictator, and how Octavius rode these sentiments as the divi filius to power. This works for me way better than studying the classics at school.

McCollough does not claim that her version of history is the only correct take. She even provides contact information at the end of the book for readers who want to refer to her bibliography. But it was by reading this series that I developed an interest in Classical Rome. I know that I am not the only reader that got hooked this way.

McCollough's strength is the way that she portrays the personal motivations behind the events, and then spikes it full of titillating details.

For example, anyone who's read or watched Shakespeare remembers Marc Anthony's defense of Caesar speech (you know, "Friends, Romans, Countrymen: Lend me your ears!"). But McCollough has imagined a historically more controversial story by adding Anthony as a willing accomplice to the murders. Anthony

had fallen out of Caesar’s grace and needed money to fund his lavish lifestyle. Believing that he was Caesar’s heir, he quietly assented to the murder so that he could get his hands on the money.

As another example, Caesar fathered a son---Caeserian (yes, as in the procedure)---by Cleopatra. But McCollough spices up the romance by describing how Caesar withheld his orgasm from Cleopatra so that she would not give birth to Caesarian’s sister and then marry them together.
Incidentally, Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra do not come out particularly well in this novel. Anthony is a brutal despot with delusions of oriental grandeur. Instead of Richard Burton, think Herman Goering. Cleopatra is a flawed beauty weedy wisp of a girl barely out of her teens. Instead of Elizabeth Taylor, think Kate Moss with Barbra Streisand’s nose.

This series started five books and twelve years ago with the First Man in Rome in October, 1990. This sixth book is separated from the fifth by almost 5 years. Having set the new standard for historical novel writing in the previous books, this is probably the weakest book in the series: Octavian is not that likeable, the affair with Cleopatra is not fully explored, the battle descriptions are more cursory, and the politics have lost their multi-dimensional texture (this last gripe is historical and not the fault of the author). Still, this book is still far far better than any pure historical novel printed in the last couple of years.

From what I’ve read in interviews with the author, this series was always meant to end at five books. But she had had so much fun in the writing that she could not manage to end her 3,500th page with the death of Caesar. So she needed this book. And so introduced us to Octavian. Perhaps this means that there is hope that she will continue this series with a seventh book!

Loyal readers of this series will need no encouragement to buy this book. New readers can start the series with this book, because with introduction of so many new characters, very little of this story requires reference to what happened in prior books. Buy this if you like historical novels or if you like talkative narrative stories. This book will keep you engaged on a plane ride back and forth across the Pacific.

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### Vicki Cline says

This sixth book in the **Masters of Rome** series covers the period from just after Pompey's defeat at Pharsalus and death in Egypt, through the end of the civil war, Caesar's assassination, Octavian's adoption as Caesar's son, the formation of the Second Triumvirate, and ending with the defeat and death of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. The section on Cato's trek along the North African coast was especially interesting, although I was disappointed at the lack of a map to accompany the text. The demise of Cato, Caesar and Cicero removes some of the most interesting characters of this era, and the focus on Mark Antony, Octavian and Agrippa don't quite make up for their loss.

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### Julia says

There is very little that hasn't already been said about McCullough's phenomenal "Masters of Rome" series. Meticulously researched and detailed, each is an entertaining, engaging and educational experience. *The October Horse* spans Caesar's time in Egypt and his murder (sob!), through the warring and deaths of most,

if not all, of his assassins in 42 BC. Just one tome remains to complete the series, and I'm already quite sad about it. The amount of anxiety I felt in the pages leading up to Caesar's death was an unsettling and new experience for me -- I wonder whether any other readers had a similar reaction. I've read many other historical works in which the reader knows disaster is coming and aches to change history before it is revealed in terrible detail on the page, but I was nevertheless surprised at how affecting it was.

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### Deborah Pickstone says

Caesar has dominated most of this series. His death way before the end of this volume would have seemed a disaster if it weren't for the story racing onward with such vigour that I was fast caught up in the aftermath. My only real sadness is that there is only one more volume to go. Ms McCullough had intended to end here but was apparently chivvied by her readers to go on with the story of Antony and Cleopatra.

I found her theories, especially the medical ones, most interesting and pretty compelling. The whole series with its convoluted politicking and power plays has been riveting.

That game of a book to take with you to a desert island? I think I would take this series. There's a lot of meat in it to make me think.

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### Ozymandias says

Story: 10 (Every important event in a focused narrative)
Characters: 9 (Hail Caesars. Nay Antony)
Accuracy: 10 (Basically perfect even if I sometimes disagree)

The book starts with an awkward “Previously on Masters of Rome...” moment when Caesar, exhausted on the road from Tarsus to Alexandria, decides to go through all the events of the previous book to remind us all of what happened and where everyone is. It’s a poor start to a book that, unlike the previous volumes, picks up right where the last one ended. It would have been better if this had been relegated to an optional prologue. Fortunately, things do quickly pick up. It’s even a bit rushed at times. The book frequently gets ahead of itself and begins to feature characters responding to facts that aren’t detailed until future chapters. The divide between East and West is strong.

This book, for all its similar length, has a lot more going on than its predecessors. The book is divided into fourteen parts and each part is brimming with significance. We get Caesar in Alexandria, Cato’s march to Utica, Caesar in Pontus (veni vidi vici), Caesar and Antony in Rome, the African War, Caesar back in Rome, the Spanish War, the assassination, Octavian’s inheritance, Antony’s civil war, the formation of the second triumvirate, the Liberators acquiring provinces, the Liberators raising an army, and the battle of Philippi. As you can see, there’s enough here to fill two books easy. In fact, given that this book is half again as long as some of the other ones, I don’t quite see why she didn’t. Having the death of Caesar happen a little more than halfway through the novel and then handing the story over to a cast of new and minor characters seems an odd way of doing it. It’s rather like she did with Sulla in *Fortune’s Favorites*, only here Caesar dominates the whole first half and by his death we’ve seen the climax of every other plot.

To be honest, I was glad when Caesar died. I’ve gotten more than a little tired of her awestruck worship of

him, or at least his abilities. Not a chapter can go by in the lives of his enemies without an authorial reminder that they just aren't as good as he is. Or they can't see as well as he does. At least with young Octavian such hero worship makes sense. To see it in Cicero and Cato is frustrating.

And his death means the rise of wunderkid Octavian, which is always fascinating. I think he was Caesar's better honestly, though McCullough keeps reminding us of his limitations compared to the great man. And if we're talking versatility sure, Caesar was skilled in a much wider range of areas (Octavian was no general for a start), but if you look at what Octavian could do well there's no comparison. He was a political and administrative genius. He started off with a weak hand (just a name in a will) and managed to play it so craftily that he was co-ruling Rome within two years and sole ruler a decade later. I can't see Caesar pulling that off, and even if he could have he lacked Octavian's ability to be all things to all people. Caesar made enemies though his highhandedness, while Octavian managed to rule as an even more uncontested autocrat while still seeming humble and acceptable. And better still he was able to surround himself with loyal and capable subordinates who both complemented and enhanced his considerable abilities.

I'm less fond of Antony. After what I thought was a good piece of development in the last book which saw him move from hopeless hedonist to hopeless hedonist who could turn off his hedonism when he needed to, this book saw him go back a step. Antony's lost favor with Caesar and only his close familial ties with Caesar have kept him in his inner circle. But the part I really object to is that Antony is depicted attempting to murder Caesar and is aware of the successful conspiracy. This seems to be doing an injustice to the sources. While I find the idea that Antony's amnesty was sincere and he wasn't secretly plotting the destruction of the conspirators (which all the sources claim, potentially in hindsight) interesting, I have a hard time believing that he was actively involved in assassinations himself. That seems like a line that Caesar would not have tolerated him crossing. Similarly, the idea that Antony wanted some sort of restoration of the Republic (albeit with him in Caesar's place as its head citizen) but was forced by Octavian's intense desire for revenge into a civil war that destroyed all possibility of future democratic competition seems a bit much. It seems all too close to the useless drunken wretch of the Philippics and doesn't leave him much room for any type of forethought.

I'm rather fond of Cato. He's an easy man to admire and a hard man to love, but McCullough has found a way into his miserable, tormented soul. I've felt before that she can be too harsh on him (of which Cato would approve), particularly in her comments on his inadequacies and failings compared to Caesar. But here he finally gets a chance to shine as only Cato can. Not the suicide bit, but the intense dedication to duty and Republican values. Organizing a march of 10,000 men across the African desert is not something to be taken lightly, and as Cato never takes anything lightly he's the perfect man for the job. It helps that he's paired up with Sextus Pompeius, who should have a much bigger part to play in *Antony and Cleopatra*, but is currently just a cheerful sprog following adoringly alongside the man who holds the fate of the Republic.

Honestly, all Caesar's opponents are a pretty ineffectual bunch. The "Liberators" are even less impressive than the Republicans. There's very little noble about Brutus. He acts through no selfish motive, aye, but assassinating Caesar is more an intellectual exercise for him than any sort of grand quest. What does one do to tyrants? Kills them. Caesar is a tyrant. Therefore Caesar must die. QED. While it was nice to see him come into himself a bit more in Macedonia, he still remains that hopelessly unrealistic man. Cassius is even more odd. He has no reason to oppose Caesar beyond the desire to achieve success on his own abilities rather than being granted it through an autocrat. Yet while this motive was treated as noble when it was Caesar, it's ignoble when coming from Cassius. Because he's not good enough I suppose. I don't entirely disagree of course, though I suspect she's overstating Brutus' moneylending ties and understating his determination, but it seems to tie in again to the worship of genius over mediocrity that irritated me in the last books.

A better aspect is the way she shows the unsustainability of civil war and reminds us of the failings of the Republic. Both sides have severe cashflow problems since their armies are absurdly expensive and everyone's bidding against everyone else. The triumvirate solve this the Sullan way: through proscriptions of everyone who opposes them and a few who just have too much money to live. The Republicans solve this the even more traditional way: by raping and pillaging their own provinces. It was sickening to see Cassius and Brutus going from town to town and slaughtering people for nothing but their wealth. A pleasant reminder that for all the talk of liberties within Rome itself, Republican governors are nothing more than bloodsucking leaches. This has been commented on before, but we've rarely seen it done so ruthlessly. It's not a surprise that most people outside Rome rejoiced at the creation of the Empire since this meant better treatment for their cities under closely monitored imperially-appointed governors. And with both sides now so radicalized and cruel the days of Caesar start to look positively idyllic. The constant round of civil wars need to end. At any cost.

This book represents the true end of the Republic. We saw a similar circumstances in *Fortune's Favorites*, but Sulla at least left behind a functional (if shrunken) Senate and a coherent faction in charge. After Caesar where are people supposed to turn? The Liberators? Not really a faction, just assassins. Caesar's men? Does that mean the potentially disloyal Antony, the unknown and inexperienced Octavian, Plancus, Lepidus, Dolabella, or the host of other minor generals pulling in every direction? The Senate? With what army? There's nobody of sufficient clout to keep the whole thing running. And who's going to keep the armies under control? With the ultraconservatives dead and all sides fighting for superiority using unconstitutional means, there's nobody left to stand up for the Republic.

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### Zachary Taylor says

The period of the Late Roman Republic was no doubt one of the most dramatic in European history, with men such as Caesar, Pompey, Cicero, Antony, Brutus, and Octavian, and women such as Porcia, Servilia, and the Pharaoh Cleopatra all prominent movers and shakers at the same time, in relation to one another. The events between 48 BCE—and indeed, well before that fateful year—and 42 BCE—and of course, well after *that* consequential year—would shape the course of Roman history forever. It was truly a watershed moment. Nevertheless, prior to the brilliant *Masters of Rome* series of historical novels by Colleen McCullough, neither a trained classicist nor creative fiction writer, the Late Republic had been more or less overlooked by serious authors. Whereas John Williams and Robert Graves had famously treated the first years of the Roman imperial era and the machinations of the Julio-Claudians, literature was devoid of well-researched and well-written historical fiction that explored the cultural *ethos* of the Republic as it slowly fell apart. The *Masters of Rome* series filled that void, and *The October Horse*, at first intended to conclude the series—now its penultimate novel—is perhaps the most enjoyable work of historical fiction that I have ever read.

As a classicist myself, my enjoyment stems in no small part from the comprehensiveness of *The October Horse*. McCullough has read, it seems, nearly every ancient author who in some way chronicles the period—Plutarch, Suetonius, Appian, Cassius Dio, Cicero, Sallust, and many others—and she by no means shies away from the sometimes-mundane details that these authors provide in their historical and epistolary accounts. So, for instance, when Caesar moves across Anatolia just prior to his famous *veni, vidi, vici* proclamation, after he has left Cleopatra in Alexandria, she describes every military maneuver, each relevant political development, and the totality of the Dictator's financial fortunes and misfortunes. No stone is left unturned. Sometimes, this commitment to historical veracity becomes tedious and arduous for the reader. Yet, when interpreted from a much broader perspective—that is, when one apprehends the entire novel and

reflects on the consequential events that have taken place—this exhaustiveness is much appreciated, at least in my view. For the quotidian military tactics and political machinations ultimately add to an extraordinarily rich picture of ancient life for the noblemen and women of the Late Republic, whose minds we so seldom have the chance to enter into and study. The fullness of this historical portraiture is unmatched in academic volumes.

There are a number of narrative elements and characterizations of note that set *The October Horse* apart from other fictitious treatments of the years 48-42 BCE, such as Shakespeare's famous *Julius Caesar*. Perhaps most plainly, Caesar says not a word as his assassins stab him twenty-three times, in accordance with most of the ancient sources yet contrary to Shakespeare. In addition to his silence, the death of Caesar is rendered rather uniquely, especially for the fact that the *liberatores* panic after their vicious attack and flee to the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Brutus offers no speech, Antony misses the chance to provide an evocative funeral oration, and the potent uncertainty in the aftermath of the assassination is appropriately drawn out over several months, as it certainly was in truth. Likewise, in terms of characterization, Brutus and Antony are a far cry from their Shakespearean selves. Cowardly, miserly, and politically apathetic until the end of the novel, Brutus is driven to tyrannicide by his wife, Porcia, far more than an intense desire to restore the Republic, for which Brutus initially cares little. His scruples about the assassination, moreover, are the product of fear and cowardice, and do not at all derive from his friendship with Caesar, to whom he was a mere secretary while Caesar conquered Anatolia. Antony, on the other hand, is quite the brute, more so than I envision when I read the ancient sources. He seems to lack the sharp wit and intellect that I believe he *must* have possessed in order to have positioned himself so well after the death of Caesar. Yet in *The October Horse*, Antony seems dimwitted and hyperbolically unscrupulous, save for the end of the novel, when he treats the body of Brutus with far more reverence than his fellow Triumvir.

Then, of course, there is Octavian, the most inexperienced Triumvir, yet its most essential member, not least of all for his adopted title, *Divi Filius*. In my view, Octavian is rendered perfectly, and it is quite the literary and historical adventure to enter into his Ulyssesean mind. Calm yet cruel, refined yet wily, ostensibly trustworthy yet clandestinely deceitful, he is the one Roman other than Cicero whom I truly wanted to achieve his ambitions, however abhorrent I sometimes found his methods. While I take issue with the notion that Octavian anticipated his rise to ascendency and ultimate plan to eliminate Antony as early as Philippi, as *The October Horse* implies—there were simply too many political variables in 42 BCE for Octavian to have envisioned his later supremacy over the Roman empire—I nevertheless believe that he must have been inordinately calculative in order to have marched on Rome twice, won the consulship by force, defeated Antony at Mutina, and formed the Second Triumvirate. With respect to this aspect of his characterization, McCullough hits the mark. Given that we know so little about Octavian the man—even his busts proffer a cold, steely front—the inner deliberations and premeditated plans crafted by Caesar's fresh-faced heir spellbind the curious reader.

While my love for Rome has never wavered these past four years as a classics major, *The October Horse* set fire to my ardor for the ancient world in a way that academic study has not. Here, Caesar, Antony, Octavian—they are all truly *alive*, and not merely disembodied characters whom I know performed remarkable deeds. To be sure, *The October Horse* embraces Great Men History in a manner that, as a responsible classicist and student of history, I cannot condone. Yet in a work of historical fiction, I enthusiastically commend this approach, warts and all, even more since the narrative cleaves so faithfully to real events. As I read *The October Horse*, I realized that there was still so much about the Late Republican period about which I do not know, so much that I need to learn. I also realized how infinitely pleasurable it is to contemplate, armed with reliable historical evidence, even when rendered in fiction, the reasons for the demise of the Republic, the vision Caesar had for the restoration of peace and political order in his new Rome, and the way in which Octavian artfully accrued power and *auctoritas* in the wake of utter political

chaos. These questions fascinate me, no matter how many times I return to well-worn solutions offered by reputable historians. Unlike professional classicists, *The October Horse* rarely tries to answer such questions. While it may have a thesis—that Rome could not possibly rule its empire with recourse to archaic Republican bureaucracy, and needed an innovative autocrat in order to survive—it nevertheless invites the reader to provide answers of her own. So seldom does a work of historical fiction stimulate the academic mind with such verve and vivacity.

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### Roman Clodia says

After the brilliance and sheer storytelling magnificence of the previous five books, this one comes as a disappointment. Caesar is getting older and while he's reached the pinnacle of Roman politics, he finds himself disillusioned with what that means, frequently frustrated and increasingly short-tempered. And as her hero runs out of energy so, too, does McCullough.

For me, this is a book of two parts: the run up to Caesar's assassination, and then the aftermath. McCullough who's always had a romantic view of Caesar, now switches her allegiances to Octavia (later Augustus) and herein lies one of the problems: for while Caesar does genuinely tower over the period and combine intelligence, charm, ruthless focus and wit, Octavian is a much smaller man in lots of ways, and one whose brutal propaganda has been increasingly deconstructed in academic history - I guess what I'm saying is that I couldn't follow McCullough's emotional trajectory and abandon Caesar for Octavia. This left the book decentred for me.

Stylistically, too, this flags: we're increasingly 'told' things instead of them being dramatised as was the case in the earlier books. So, this is still worth reading: and if you've been following the series, it's a must - but it lacks the energy and perhaps the emotional commitment of the earlier books.

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### Rusty says

In the first portion of the book McCullough helps us know Caesar at the height of his career as the man he might have been. McCullough's take on the romance between Cleopatra and Caesar differs from Shakespeare's as she devles into Plutarch and other sources. Her explanation for Octavian's actions is that he may have had asthma which is more consistent with his personality. Caesar is later murdered by 23 conspirators and the story switches to following the assassians, Mark Antony, and Octavian's actions among others. When Caesar's will is read his nephew Octavian is the key heir, to the chagrin of Mark Antony. The resulting chaos and political upheaval nearly bankrupts Rome. As the assassians flee, Octavian vows to bring the murderers to justice. I found it difficult to get into this read and when I checked Amazon reviews found that others did, too, but some fans believe that this is the least well written in the series. I have more of them to read which I look forward to tackling. I continue to marvel at McCullough's attention to detail, historical accuracy and ability to make the Romans come alive again and again.

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### Arcadius says

This sixth volume covers the tail end of the Pompeian war and Caesar’s brief period of unchallenged power

in Rome. I enjoyed it more than the previous three in the series, mainly because McCullough eases up a bit on Caesar as the cocky golden boy surrounded by malignant idiots. They get him here, right enough, but first she finally succeeds in humanising her hero and making him sympathetic. There's a nice sense of weary futility catching up with a supremely talented man who has finally achieved the pinnacle of power only to find that what he sought just isn't there.

Cato was always one of the most successful of McCullough's characters – just about the only major opponent of Caesar we are allowed to take seriously – and she sends him off with a bang here. His march through the Libyan desert and subsequent command at Utica are among the best things in the entire series. The disarray of the conspirators after Caesar's assassination is also very well handled.

She takes the story down to Philippi, where she had originally intended to call a halt. I'm looking forward to the belated coda *Antony and Cleopatra* with some curiosity, because I'm not sure that her Antony and (especially) Octavian have been particularly convincing characters thus far. Putting such cavils in context, I felt this particular volume was as successful as the first two - which is praise indeed.

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### Nikhil says

With the end of Gaius Julius Caesar came the end of Rome's idea of Republic. Caesar bore the last vestiges of Roman Republic, governed by Roman patricians. It has been more than 2,000 years since Caesar walked this earth and even after that the man remained an enigma for historians. For centuries, his war tactics, his shrewd mind, his foresightedness baffled historians and the writers the like of William Shakespeare and Dante Alighieri.

Colleen McCullough did an exceptional job at destroying the mythical things about Caesar and made him into a human who walked with us who was just a touch above our understanding.

Caesar was royal and he proved it so even in his death. The author, with the display of her extremely brilliant prose writing, wrote it aptly - *How can twenty-two sheep kill a lion like Caesar?*
But more so, the below phrases explains a lot about Caesar and what entailed after his assassination. Caesar was Rome and Rome had never belonged to one person as much as it belonged to Caesar. The meticulousness of author's grip on the historical events to follow, highlights cleverly what Caesar meant for the world.

Few quotes that I absolutely loved from Colleen McCullough about Caesar. It is not a surprise that just like hundreds of rulers and greats, I too have admired Caesar greatly. And I am not the only one, the list includes *Napoleon Bonaparte* too.

- *Under no possible circumstances will I entertain the thought of ruling Rome as her king. Rex is a word, nothing more. Caesar does not need to be Rex.* ***To be Caesar is enough.***

- *The titan had fallen, the world was so changed that no Republic could ever spring fully armed from its brow. The death of Caesar was a liberation, but what it had liberated was chaos.*

- *Caesar was, and he had been a natural sovereign. It is not the diadem, it is the spirit.*

- *Octavian*(Later came to be known as Augustus Caesar, the first emperor of Roman Empire after the fall of Caesar) *was cheered for a full quarter of an hour. Though this was immensely satisfying, Octavian well knew that it was not an indication that Rome belonged to him; it was an indication that Rome had belonged to Caesar.*

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### Styler Ribarovic says

This book is a heavy undertaking, but it is lush in scope and a thrilling historical novel.

First off, however, is the subheading of this novel says it is a novel of Caesar & Cleopatra, but it really isn't. That makes up a small part of this huge novel. And secondly, you do not need to have read the previous five novels to grasp this one. I haven't, and I understood this novel quite fine on it's own.

The first 500 pages are brillant historical fiction, detailed to the letter, but still engaging and easy to follow. Her dialogue shines, and the descriptions make you feel as though you really have been transported to this time period. McCullough's attention to detail and the way she has clearly studied her history shows.

The reason it is four stars instead of five, is the final 250 pages do not hold the same allure. Not that it isn't interesting, but after such an interesting character like Caesar is gone, it is almost like whatever follows won't hold up. If the final 250 pages were in the start of book seven, then maybe I would have found them more engaging. However, they are not, and at times it felt a bit plodding to get through.

But the first 500 pages are fantastic, and the final 250 can't take away or ruin such a great historical fiction novel. If you are looking for a heavy read, with fantastic history and detail, this is your novel.

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### Shelly says

The best historical fiction treatment of the turbulent times from the life of Sulla to the ascension of Octavius. One of the best historical fiction series ever, but be prepared to read all of the books once you start, because you won't be able to put them down.

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### Brandt says

The easiest way to become an expert in the end of the roman republic, and later, the end of Ceasar, is to read this series.
Historical novels always walks a line of historical correctness and entertainment, i thought this series managed to provide both, which is an impressive feat considering the extensive amount of information available for this time-period.

This series follows the most important romans and their families for two generations.
The rise to power of the succesful battlecommander Gaius Marius, the following period under Sulla the dictator, the triumvirat between Pompeius Magnus, crassus and Ceasar, Ceasars campaigns in france and germany, his return to rome, and his murder.

Each book ends with an afterword where McCullough explains what she have made up, what is speculation, and what we know.
There are even a lot of authentic drawings based on bustes of the real people in the story.

This is my favorite, non-fantasy, series.
Really fascinating stuff..

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### Ahmad Sharabiani says

The October Horse: A Novel of Caesar and Cleopatra (Masters of Rome, #6), Colleen McCullough
The October Horse is the sixth novel in Colleen McCullough's Masters of Rome series.
The book begins with Gaius Julius Caesar's Egyptian campaign in Alexandria, his final battles with the Republicans led by Metellus Scipio, Cato the Younger, Titus Labienus and the brothers Pompeius in Africa and Spain, and ultimately Caesar's assassination on the Ides of March by Marcus Brutus, Gaius Cassius and the Liberators. The latter stages of The October Horse chronicle the death of Cicero, the emergence of Octavian and his battles with Mark Antony, and conclude with the Battle of Philippi.
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### Gumble's Yard says

Sixth and last in the (original) “Masters of Rome” series.

The book starts in Egypt – with Caesar’s embroilment in the Egyptian civil war and his relationship with Cleopatra and thereafter switches to Rome for the events of Caesar’s dictatorship including the wars against the Republicans in Africa and then Spain. In a rare piece of sympathy for the Boni and especially Cato (who McCullough clearly regards as responsible for destroying through his intransigence the very Republic he claimed to be preserving) she covers in detail a little known march he led of around 10,000 wounded troops to join the Republican army in Africa.

Caesar’s assassination is covered around 2/3rds of the way through the book and the section that follows is as confused as the actual period following the death with various armies on the move (alluded to in the title of one section) and with loyalties and factions shifting. Eventually things coalesce into two uneasy factions – the Second Triumvirate (led by Antony – the boorish man of action but still basically a Republican and Octavian – see below) and the Liberators (led by the increasingly confident Cassius and the man of Philosophy Brutus). This culminates in the two battles of Philippi (this section of the book is called “Everything by Halves” and paints both sides as hopelessly divided between their main leaders) the first ending in the mistaken suicide of Cassius (believing his side lost and unaware of the near victory won by Brutus’s men) and the second in slaughter of Brutus’s army and his own suicide. The book ends with Brutus’s head being demanded by an increasingly compelling and cold-blooded Octavian from a reluctant but overawed Antony so he can send it to the Rostra in Rome but the head being thrown overboard from the ship carrying it as the sailors believe it a curse.

Throughout the book McCullough paints the most favourable possible picture of Caesar in two key areas – his control of events (e.g. Egypt is portrayed as completely under his control and foresight, whereas all non-fiction accounts aqree that his involvement was unwitting, that he was caught by surprise by the Alexandrian hostility to his soldiers and that he fought a desparate and clumsy struggle for survival) and in his genuine good intentions (any historical incidents traditionally taken as describing his increasing megalomania are spun or explained away – eg his wearing of the traditional long red boots of the Alban Kings was to cure varicose veins whereas the attempts to make him a King or God were deliberate acts by Mark Antony as part of his attempts to surreptitiously legitimise the Liberators cause.

The other interesting aspect of the book it its portrayal of the rise of Octavian against all the odds of his health, appearance, age and lack of standing but trading on the deification of Caesar by the ordinary Romans, the devotion of Caesar's soldiers and on his own sheer cold-minded determination and resolution to seize the destiny that his Great-Uncle laid out for him by making him his heir. The book portrays well also his complete lack of clemency for his and Caesar's enemies (in contrast to his Great-Uncle) with even by the time of the Battles of Philippi the Liberators keener to surrender to the hot-blooded and militant Antony (who on a number of occasions led his soldiers to slaughter protestors in the Forum) than the cold-blooded weakling Octavian.

Overall a brilliant series of books – methodically researched but with the novelist licence allowing McCullough to explore the motivations of the main actors in these historical events and in the death of the Republic (which she paints as being finalised with the death of Caesar's main assassins and Octavian's rise to prominence)

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### Rosemary Clark says

Historical fiction can inform of critical past events while entertaining the reader, but it risks the error of focusing one's view on the illusion raised by the author. In this case, Rome's greatest citizen, Gaius Julius Caesar, is presented as an ambiguous and complex human being, whose moods inexplicably run the spectrum from everyman's advocate to divine dictator.
In a tangle of dialog that undertakes the task of attributing motive and reason to the cohorts and events of Caesar's last days, McCullough only succeeds in turning this volume – her sixth and last episode in an ambitious Masters of Rome series – itself into the October horse of legend. In the macabre ritual, the winning steed in a race on the Plain of Mars was annually sacrificed and mutilated to Rome's past glory. The union between Caesar and Cleopatra is also sacrificed to credibility. In the author's imagination, Egypt's queen is endowed with political genius and a homely visage, wavering between admiration and resentment of her lover. In the few chapters that hope to explain the great power struggle between the oriental and occidental cultures they embody, the pair nonchalantly produce the potential heir to the two domains without giving thought to the possibilities. The novel's dearth of action and occasional use of silent dialogue between the two protagonists hardly warrants its subtitle.
Back in Rome, we wade through conversations that sound more like recitations of onomastica than genuine discourse. Indeed, the narrative exploits the author's assiduous research in the martial strategies and political tempests of the time. But while the players act out a spectrum of quixotic sentiments – from pathetic infatuation to patriotic zeal, the story – in spite of its voluminous historical detail – fails to penetrate the designs of its ancient heroes.
Instead, the motivations of Brutus, Marc Antony, and Octavian appear vain and prosaic. Despite the inference of familial loyalties and national fervor, they come off as distant and confused. The tale leads the

reader from the glory days of the Roman Republic to the tentative emergence of an Imperial milieu brought about by Caesar’s unmanageable ego and a host of miscreants who, like the ancient ritual, won by losing the race. The reader is not so lucky.

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### Lisa (Harmonybites) says

This is the sixth novel in McCullough's Masters of Rome series, which has been quite a ride. McCullough's prose isn't particularly distinguished, and I've sometimes felt some judicious, nay extensive, cutting would have done wonders for the pacing of these doorstop novels. And the epic scope of these novels begets confusion--it's hard to keep track of her host of minor recurring characters with these mind-numbing Roman names.

Yet I give the series high marks nevertheless--some of the books I rated as high as five stars. In her "Author's Afterword" McCullough says that the historical novel "is an excellent way to explore a different time" that is, if "the writer can resist the temptation to visit his own modern attitudes, ethics, morals and ideals upon the period and its characters." And this is where McCullough excels as few other historical novelists do. I've read any number of novels set in Roman times by authors such as Robert Graves, Robert Harris, Lindsey Davis, Steven Saylor and Gillian Bradshaw. Not one of them came close to McCullough in creating an Ancient Rome that felt so textured, so at once modern and alien to modern mores. Not even Graves who is by far the superior stylist. Because of this series, when a classicist friend of mine told me she only wanted "*dignitas*" I knew exactly what she meant.

The other thing McCullough is notable for are her characterizations and take on history, which is very different than say, the take in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Everyone in this series is held up to Caesar as a measuring stick and found wanting to the degree they opposed him. McCullough's tyrannicides are petty, cowardly men motivated by spite and envy--not patriotism and love of liberty. Her Cassius left me cold, and her Brutus struck me as pathetic. Their lack of moral grandeur makes it hard to feel moved by their tragic fate. McCullough's Cato is a nearly insane fanatic, her Cicero a pompous poser. McCullough's Cleopatra, whose historical brilliance is suggested by her linguistic gifts--alluded to in the novel--comes across as rather dim here. McCullough's Mark Anthony is a thug without any redeeming quality. And her Octavian, although McCullough gives him his due as a master politician, is absolutely chilling. For me the novel crawled after Caesar's death two-thirds in, because it was hard to care anymore--and all through the other novels, there *were* characters to care about besides Caesar. There was an exception in the closing third of the book--the women's protest under Hortensia, where she demands that if the triumvirate is going to tax women, they better give them the vote. She's awesome. I loved that scene! All too brief though, and so much after the assassination is mired in political and military minutia rather than the human drama behind the history. In a fictional sense, I prefer Shakespeare's conception, while conceding McCullough probably presents a more historically accurate picture. Probably--although at times I suspect she's more than a little in love with her Caesar--and after all, the history of these times were largely written by the victors.

The tedium in the last third, the lack of connection with other characters once Caesar is gone, makes *The October Horse* the weakest book in the series thus far and makes me want to skip the last book in the series, *Anthony and Cleopatra*. McCullough says in her "Afterword" she planned to stop with *The October Horse*, and I think this is where I'll stop too, at least for now. I can't imagine wanting to spend time with her Anthony and her Cleopatra--even though I can't at all regret making my way through the thousands of pages of her Republican Rome.

### SeaShore says

This historical fiction series is worth reading- stick with it. The reader gets the non-fiction, the real characters set in the author's personal creative landscape where she recreates the characters and invents a few fictional ones in a setting that could make this a compelling read. You will meet the young Octavian who changes dramatically into this new person after his adoptive father's (Julius Caesar) death. Octavian grows and rises into the Emperor Augustus Caesar.
The story of Julius Caesar shines through; the plot to kill him and then the actual murder- the death- the reader would have heard several times before but this is the author's adaptation and we are drawn in. Aware of the rivalry between Octavius and Mark Anthony, the reader wonders how will she present this in the shadow of Caesar's death, of suspicion and animosity, and fear that he might be next.
If you know the story of Julius Caesar, you know that his first wife was Cornelia and their daughter was Julia who became the fourth wife of Pompey.
Colleen McCullough's 'fictional' name for Cornelia is Cinnilla. The reader is drawn into the setting with Caesar and Cleopatra lying in bed. Cleopatra is six months pregnant. Caesar says' "I love you as my wife, my daughter, my mother, my aunt."

Then he takes her to see the results of a burned Alexandria. He assures her that all the books destroyed would be replaced. Cleopatra was more distraught over the loss of the books that the heart-wrenching spectacle of all the starving women and children. Vegetation burned, waterfalls dried up but sculptures and paintings were saved.

Caesar wanted Cleopatra to know what was important in the rebuilding Alexandria. ".... Only when Alexandria's people are served can you spend money on public buildings and temples."

He continued, ".... And when I have destroyed what I have left behind will benefit future generations in far greater measure than the damage I did, the lives I ended or ruined."

Such beautiful writing excused the mistakes here and there.

"Do you think, Cleopatra, that I don't see in my mind's eye the sum total of devastation and upheavel I've caused? Do you think I don't grieve?.... I say again, Pharoah rule your subjects with love, and never forget that it is only an accident of birth that makes you different from one of those women picking through the debris of this shattered city. You deem it Amun-Ra who put you in your skin..... I know it was an accident of fate."
What ever Caesar did was out of conscious decision.

Here, the author describes the scene with passion. The beauty of her dialoguing. The reader understands who Caesar is. Cleopatra understands too. The dialogue is sweeping and rich with information that brings the scenes to life, describing the manner in which Caesar delegated as "commander-in-chief", and he made his imprint wherever he went and the people listened and obeyed with respect.

McCullough knows the stories and all the characters seem to be in her head. Some sentences are confusing and clumsy making the paragraph difficult to follow.
Example:
"Brutus was a particularly difficult problem for Caesar, who had taken him under his wing after Parsalus, out

of affection for his mother, Servilia, and out of guilt of breaking Brutus's engagement to Julia in order to ensnare Pompey- it had broken Brutus's heart, as Caesar well knew. But, thought Calvinius, Caesar hadn't the slightest idea what kind of man Brutus is when he took pity on him after Pharsalus. He left a youth. He picked up the relationship twelve years later.
McCullough is trying to tell us that Brutus is a now a wimp. (?)

This sentence:
"Unaware that a pimply youth now a pimply man of thirty-six, was a coward on a battlefield and a lion when it came to defending his staggering fortune."
It disrupted the flow of the narrative for me as I attempted to fix it.
*That night sleepless on Cleopatra's enormous goose-down bed, her warmth tucked against him in the mild chill of Alexandria's so-called winter, Caesar thought about the day, the month, the year..... etc etc.* Then she adds... .....*And a business proposition from a queen determined to save her people in the only way she believed they could be saved, by conceiving the son of a god. Believing that he, Caesar was that god. Bizarre. Alien.*

However McCullough's dialogue is rich and masterful and there lies her strength in storytelling.

Prepare for a very long read and for me personally, I tried to decipher what was real and what wasn't in the midst of the clumsy sentence structure- Was this work a rushed piece? It is a longer wider journey covering so many characters (actually too many) and not as simple to figure out as in Cleopatra's Daughter by Michelle Moran. This historical novel spurred me to study the history behind her writing. I think it all depends on when you read a book and for me, McCullough's book Caesar's Women was a challenge as I've already convinced myself of the history of Caesar. I enjoyed her book, The First Man in Rome but I read it about ten years ago and I was a lot more patient and again this spurred me on to looking for the history, the facts having created an impressive scene in my mind.

McCullough covered Roman politics weaving this within the drama of the day, which makes a good introduction to that era, to Rome for young readers- probably high school. (This was published in 2002).
I commend Colleen McCullough (1937 - 2015) and this production.

A good non-fiction is A J Langguth's A Noise of War: Caesar, Pompey, Octavian & the Struggle for Rome.

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### LemonLinda says

McCullough is a masterful storyteller and her love and mastery of Roman history shines brightly in her Roman fiction. This book in her Masters of Rome series gives us the story of Julius Caesar in his prime, the beginnings of discontent within a faction of the Patricians in Rome, the plot and execution thereof to kill him, the rivalry between Octavius and Mark Anthony following his death and the ultimate rise of Octavian, who would eventually become known as Augustus Caesar, Julius Caesar's legitimate heir.

I learned so much about Roman politics with this book. I also learned the fate of the "liberators", those who had hatched the plot to kill Caesar.

The love betwee Cleopatra and Julius Caesar was a bit cold and calculating for my taste, but possibly that was the way it was in real life.

Just as the Romans sacrificed a winning race horse each October, the great Caesar who was so successful as Roman dictator and worshipped after death as a god was sacrificed by his so-called friends and countrymen thus the title of the book.

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