



Antony and Cleopatra

Colleen McCullough

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A sweeping epic of ancient Rome from the #1 bestselling author of "The Thorn Birds" In this breathtaking follow-up to "The October Horse," Colleen McCullough turns her attention to the legendary romance of Antony and Cleopatra, and in this timeless tale of love, politics, and power, proves once again that she is the best historical novelist of our time.

Caesar is dead, and Rome is, again, divided. Lepidus has retreated to Africa, while Antony rules the opulent East, and Octavian claims the West, the heart of Rome, as his domain. Though this tense truce holds civil war at bay, Rome seems ripe for an emperor -- a true Julian heir to lay claim to Caesar's legacy. With the bearing of a hero, and the riches of the East at his disposal, Antony seems poised to take the prize. Like a true warrior-king, he is a seasoned general whose lust for power burns alongside a passion for women, feasts, and Chian wine. His rival, Octavian, seems a less convincing candidate: the slight, golden-haired boy is as controlled as Antony is indulgent and as cool-headed and clear-eyed as Antony is impulsive. Indeed, the two are well matched only in ambition.

And though politics and war are decidedly the provinces of men in ancient Rome, women are adept at using their wits and charms to gain influence outside their traditional sphere. Cleopatra, the ruthless, golden-eyed queen, welcomes Antony to her court and her bed but keeps her heart well guarded. A ruler first and a woman second, Cleopatra has but one desire: to place her child on his father, Julius Caesar's, vacant throne. Octavian, too, has a strong woman by his side: his exquisite wife, raven-haired Livia Drusilla, who learns to wield quiet power to help her husband in his quest for ascendancy. As the plot races toward its inevitable conclusion -- with battles on land and sea -- conspiracy and murder, love and politics become irrevocably entwined.

McCullough's knowledge of Roman history is detailed and extensive. Her masterful and meticulously researched narrative is filled with a cast of historical characters whose motives, passions, flaws, and insecurities are vividly imagined and expertly drawn. The grandeur of ancient Rome comes to life as a timeless human drama plays out against the dramatic backdrop of the Republic's final days.

Antony and Cleopatra Details

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From Reader Review Antony and Cleopatra for online ebook

Tom Landry says

This was actually a pretty good book I almost never finished. The problem I had with it was that when she was describing the overview of what was going on at the time there were so many locations and people I could not keep track of what was going on and became a bit frustrated. I needed a map and a character log or something. She also tended to use words I have never heard of (they call them \$100 words or something like that) but I was able to figure out what she was talking about. After about 20 pages I put the book down and decided not to read it. But then my desire to learn the story got the better of me so I started over and I'm glad I did. Once I got into the story and it focused on the key characters I really started to enjoy the book. at times she would give broad descriptions of what was happening and I still had trouble keeping everything straight but that didn't hurt the core story. Once I got into the book I had a hard time putting it down. I really started to care about the characters and wanted to find out what happened next. In the end I was left very satisfied with this book and I think anyone interested in this subject would enjoy reading it.

Carolynne says

First let me say, I own all the books in this series and excluding "The October Horse" have read the first five several times. And enjoyed them all immensely. I am sure this might be a good book if it might be a stand alone. But unfortunately, it is the last book in a series which, over the course of several books, developed characters I cared deeply. We grow up with Caesar, and with Sulla, Marius, Servillia, Marcus Brutus, Aurelia; We get to know them, even though we first meet them as adults. And we do this over several books.

However, in those books, Anthony is an unlikeable buffoon. No redeeming qualities. We spend half a book with Cleopatra and sorta get to know Octavian. Now, I am supposed to read a whole book about a brat, a buffoon, and a cold fish. It was just too hard to do. I understand that Collen McCullough had to end this somewhere. But, I think she set herself up to fail in letting us see only faults in characters we will have to care about, regardless of what we know through history, in the last book and a half of her series. But, it is a hard endeavour. She brought one of the most amazing humans to walk the earth alive. Caesar took on a living personality in her books. And then he was killed. How can I care about these people when the one I have been reading about for almost 3000 pages is now dead?! Lol, it was a challenge. What would make an interesting book is seeing the conflict, politics, and scheming of Octavian, Cleopatra, and Anthony through the eyes of Agrippa and Caesarion. However, this in just one book. The series itself, regardless of these thoughts, is still a five star series.

Elaine says

I have been waiting for this book since I finished McCullough's previous book from this august series (no pun intended)The October Horse. It has been years. So my expectations were high, but the actual experience was not.

Have I changed in my reading tastes or was this book labored? I slogged through endless lists of names and details that were sometimes only tangential to the plot. I suppose that is part of the author's gift, but the

actual historical events were so exciting I was impatient to see what happened next, even though I knew that these two lovers would die in defeat.

I did love, however, the characters McCullough drew of the three main people of the story: Octavian, Marcus Antonius, and Cleopatra. Their egos, drive for power, and their devious strategies that caused them to be trapped or to triumph were fascinating. I found myself mentally screaming at Cleopatra that if she didn't back off her precious son would die. But did she listen to me? No more than she did to anybody else! So the fated Ceasarion met his inevitable death. And Caesar Augustus, who I've never liked, will remain on my shit list for all time.

Timons Esaiias says

I put off reading this last volume of the First Man in Rome series (which later became known as the Masters of Rome series, once it outran the original purpose) for a long time, as I took years to get around to The October Horse before it (back when we were assured that it was to be the last one), because I didn't want the series to end. Despite a few quibbles, this is a worthy finish to the series, which was originally supposed to end after the death of Gaius Marius, and was again supposed to finish with the Battle of Philippi.

This covers the period starting after the Battle of Philippi, when each of the triumvirs was setting up his part of the Roman world: Lepidus in Africa, Octavian in Italy and Spain, Antony in Gaul (except he didn't go there) and the East. It ends in the aftermath of the deaths of the title characters.

McCullough plays with the facts in interesting ways, which I don't see as historical fudging. She simply allows that some of what the winners wrote in the histories wasn't exactly true. She has a famous battle prove to be a minor affair with a quick surrender, turned into a Huge Deal for propaganda purposes. She has a bribe given a Roman general turn out to be a surrender tribute, misremembered in history. I found these moves clever and amusing. They support a theme of the later books of the series, that autocrats increasingly falsify history.

There are a few weaknesses, in addition to the seven grimaces I detected. I suspect that she was already not in the best of health at the writing of this book, because it has some editing and polishing flaws that previous volumes notably lacked. [Which is an opportunity to explain that a key reason I read all 4,966 pages of its 7 volumes is that the research was detailed and marvelous, that I found very few errors, and that she especially had the military elements correct, clear, and insightfully presented.] For instance, she portrays some mental decline in Antony, and I won't give away the details, but she intends us to discover that it has more than one cause. This can be a tricky thing to pull off, especially when using Antony POV to portray parts of it, and she would have had to go back through each scene that involved his mental lapses and make sure they added up to the right answer. Alas, it doesn't. The text ends up contradicting itself (at least in this reader's reading of the text). There are some summary paragraphs of passing events that are confusing, and a couple of which I could make no sense. There are some paragraphs of Cleopatra thinking that are repeated somewhat verbatim, and which I suspect are multiple uses of the same 3"x5" card, not edited out at the end.

There were repeated errors regarding the oared warships of the era, and part of that will be that she was poorly served by her reference books; but she also seems to have simply misunderstood elements of it. [There was a long stretch of time when modern naval historians had given themselves permission to ignore the very specific information given by classic authors about how things worked; and also ignoring what archeologists could tell them. We know a lot about Athenian naval vessels, for example, because we still

have the shipyards and drydocks, with the measurements marked out. But naval historians ignored it all, and started generating theories about how the ships must REALLY have looked, and how the bigger ships must have been stupidly slow, and on and on. Then the Greek Navy commissioned a trireme in 1985, built in 1987, and took it out for a spin. Lo and behold, it did what Thucydides said it would do, and that turned a lot of the existing reference books back into the bullshit they really were. But if you get your hands on those old books...] McCullough doesn't understand the basic truth of polyremes: more rowers means more speed; the bigger the faster. She also doesn't seem to understand that the "number" in the ship's name has to do only with the number of rowers per position on one side. (And that's something old references screwed up, as well.) Thus a bireme can have two banks of oars per side, with one guy per oar; or it can have one bank of oars with two guys on each oar. The monster ships, say a forty, would have two or three banks of very long oars, with forty guys per position. (Like two banks of oars with 20 guys on each oar.) You can immediately see that the "bigger" ships would have to be wider, rather than taller. She also appears to suggest that Octavian burned a bunch of galley rams at the end, but they were mostly bronze, so I suspect that was a detail that was forgotten and not caught. So, yes, I found myself having to ignore parts of the naval descriptions.

The strengths of the series, and this volume, are the multiple points of view used to describe the characters and the story. Yes, we know what Antony is thinking much of the time. But we also learn, from inside, how Octavian sees him, how Cleopatra sees him, how each of his generals sees him, how Herod sees him, how Caesarion sees him, and so forth. She makes these views different, so the reader will see him in their own way, based on lots of input. (A lot of the issues have to do with being in the inner circle of a leader who is malfunctioning, and what you do about that. Which echoes the evening news, these days.) Ditto for Cleopatra, ditto for Caesar Divi Filius Augustus. The whole series is about what it takes to be a citizen, especially a citizen who intends to lead, or even rule, others. That, for those of us living in republics, is a darned important theme and subject.

My one caveat about reading this series is that you shouldn't start with any book but the first. Though divided into volumes, this is about characters and is essentially a 5,000-page novel. If you start in the middle you won't have half the information you really need, and there's no way she can fill you in. And, knowing that, she didn't try.

Manu says

The seventh book of the Masters of Rome series. Unfortunately, I skipped the three before this (just couldn't find them at my regular places!) but the book thankfully works stand alone too.

This book marks the transition of Rome from a republic to an empire with the principal character, despite the book title, being Octavian, heir to Caesar's name and fortune, over the other hopeful Mark Antony.

The book spans the period from 41-27 BC, beginning with the aftermath of the Battle of Philippi and the formation of the second triumvirate with Antony, Octavian and Lepidus. The uneasy alliance between Mark Antony and Octavian is short-lived as both long to be the sole power in Rome.

Antony soon falls in love with Cleopatra, perhaps more because of the power and wealth she commands than her beauty, which is practically non-existent in this version. Her dreams for her son fathered by Caesar - Caesarion override everything else and most of the book has Antony as a mere means to Cleopatra's desire of Caesarion becoming the ruler of the world. Caesarion not just bears a striking resemblance to his father, but

is also shown as his father's equal in mental prowess, but is a far more easily contented soul.

Standing against her is Octavian, portrayed as an astute, calculating individual supported in battle by his best friend Marcus Agrippa and off the field by his devoted wife Livia Drusilla. Ruthless as a description wouldn't be off the mark.

The book follows the intrigue between these characters though the author has populated the book with a host of strong and reasonably well established secondary characters.

The pace ensures that you don't lose interest despite a few meandering interludes. Though the characterisation of Cleopatra, Antony and Octavian might seem biased and polarised, they appear to be well researched. The attention to detail is worth a mention too. In essence, quite a good read, especially if you're a history buff.

Shawn says

I have now completed all of the Master's of Rome series! That is quite an accomplishment for anyone who is aware of the size of each volume. McCullough consistently portrays Julius Caesar as too brilliant, too farsighted, too modern for my tastes although I have stuck with reading the series because of the portrayal of Rome and the epic nature of her works. She is a amazing writer and while I was truly annoyed by many of her characterizations of Caesar, Cicero, et al. I stuck with the series because I felt I was transported in time. Her view of Cleopatra was interesting and, at times, it seemed as if she was arguing that the battle of Actium could have been won had Antony's marshals not been such sexist boneheads. Really? It wasn't because Antony was a wine-sotted slug? If you put up with her unique perceptions of historical figures the chronology of the events are spot on and this book is worth a read.

Gumble's Yard says

Effectively the sequel to the “Masters of Rome” series – following on immediately after the series ends and written in an almost identical style (although with few maps, very few drawings of characters and a very short glossary).

The story concentrates on Antony/Cleopatra and Caesarion (Cleopatra's son by Caesar and his spitting image) and equally on Octavian. As usual with McCullough heavy emphasis is given to the role of women – not just Cleopatra (who is portrayed as desperately ambitious to use the stumbling and increasingly confused Antony make Caesarion King of Rome in excess of his own wishes), but Octavian's sister and Antony's wife Octavia and Octavian's third wife Livia Drussila – and on the sheer force of personality of Caesar (as seen in his chosen and true heirs Octavian and Caesarion).

Another excellent book in this extended series, particularly as always insightful as to the motivations, fears and plans of the main characters.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Antony and Cleopatra (Masters of Rome, #7), Colleen McCullough (1937)

Antony and Cleopatra is the seventh and purposely last novel in Colleen McCullough's Masters of Rome series, published in 2007. McCullough continues her Masters of Rome series with the seventh and final installment, Antony and Cleopatra. The novel spans the years 41 BC to 27 BC, from the aftermath of the Battle of Philippi and the suicide of Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus until the downfall of the second triumvirate, the final war of the Roman Republic and the renaming of Octavian to Augustus in 27 BC. The novel, which was McCullough's last in the series, focuses mainly on the famous love story between Mark Antony, victor at Philippi, and queen Cleopatra, earlier the lover of Julius Caesar.

Notable historical figures: Octavian (Gaius Julius Caesar, later called Augustus), adoptive son of Julius Caesar; Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius), Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, Cleopatra, Caesarion, son of Cleopatra, Octavia Minor, sister of Octavianus; Livia Drusilla, wife of Octavianus; Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa; Publius Ventidius Bassus; Sextus Pompeius Magnus Pius; Herod; Titus Pomponius Atticus; Quintus Dellius; Publius Canidius Crassus; Gnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus; Quintus Salvidienus Rufus; Tiberius Nero; and Maecenas.

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Brian says

By itself it is a very good book, but because to is in the Masters of Rome series, it can only recive 4 stars. It would have been five stars, except the Mrs. McCullough did not put an explanation at the conclusion of the novel like she normally has in the rest of the series. It may seem trival but I thought it was very important to these books.

Charlotte May says

So, this was a good book. Well researched, intricate, detailed and vivid...it was almost too much so. There was so much information and history to absorb that there wasn't an exciting story to capture or follow. I love Ancient Rome, and I love Augustus - so anything centered around this time period appeals to me, but at nearly 600 hundred pages, there was just so much excess information, that while relevant to the time, was just not fun to read. It ended up reading more like a text book than a novel, which I am sad to say, but there it is.

If you've got a lot of time on your hands, and love in depth, detailed histories then this is for you. If you want a quick, snappy, exciting historical drama - you may, like me, have to skim quite a bit.

Whitney St-Marseille says

Let me start by saying that I am normally not a fan of historical fiction; but this book may have just changed my mind. It was fantastic. Intelligently written and precise; I continuously marvelled how McCullough was

able to keep all of the names and places of Ancient Greece, Italy and Egypt straight. I mean, as the reader, I found it difficult so I can only imagine what trying to write it must have been like. I would have liked an epilogue describing her research; I'm curious how much of the story is fiction versus fact. Obviously, the major events would be facts, but I wonder at the individual personalities of all the characters. Was this the true depiction of Antony and Cleopatra?

One of the things I love about this story is that there are no inherently good or inherently evil characters; they all act the way real people act. Sometimes they do good things and act generously, while other times they act greedy and selfish. The characters are very conflicted and complex. Tentatively, you could cast Cleopatra and Antony in the shadow of the villain. It's not often that stories allow the perception of the "villain" (I am using the word loosely in this case), but it definitely adds depth. This is because, we can see that from their perspective, their actions are not "evil."

I had bipolar feelings towards the characters as the story progressed. At times, I liked and respected them and at others I wanted nothing short of their humiliation and murder. Initially, I preferred Antony over Octavius, but eventually it switched and I was better able to understand Octavius' plight over Antony's. For me, I think that critical moment occurred when he took Dellius' word (without proof) that he had been betrayed by someone close to him. In my mind, that was the turning point of the odds. Initially, the entire power struggle favoured Antony over Octavius. When this event occurred, I think the odds shifted and he started crashing down from his high. He did have one chance to recover, but ultimately, he blew it. After his victory, when he has option of donating his winnings to Rome and going on a victory tour of sorts which would make the people of Rome rejoice in him. Unfortunately, thanks to Cleopatra, he misses his opportunity and his Roman reputation suffers.

One of my two favourite characters is Caesarian. He seemed to have honour in a way the others did not. He longed for justice, fairness, and equality. In this way, him and Octavius are alike. Similar to Octavius, but there is one key difference. Octavius is a prude, rigid, and unforgiving. Look at what he did to his own mother just for simply having an affair? Deep down, he's a snob. I think it's his lack of forgiveness that irks me most. He expects everyone else to perfect and act perfectly while at the same time, he wants everyone else to accept his own imperfections like his asthma and weak build and whatnot. I didn't realize it at first, but I think he has a very hypocritical attitude. I prefer Caesarian because he bases his action off the facts. He doesn't care about his own reputation or about expanding an empire. He just wants to govern Ancient Egypt to the best of his ability and solve problems that his predecessors struggled with. Unfortunately, he is surrounded by tunnel-visioned people. His mother, Cleopatra for one, cannot see anything other than her opinion that Caesarian should rule the world. She is so oblivious that she cannot even see that it is not something that he even wants for himself. As a result, Caesarian has many great ideas, but there is no one there to listen to them. One especially important detail about Caesarian is how he treated Cleopatra when she returned to Alexandria with a Roman army in pursuit. Even though he was opposed to her battle in the first place, he stood by her side even though he had opportunity to turn them away or flee himself. His final actions even, were committed in attempt to protect his mother who could not care about anything beyond her own desire. Ultimately, she is the one who caused Caesarian's demise even though she thought her whole mission in life was to protect him. By shielding him from the ways of the world and acting without him, she essentially condemned everyone around her. I wanted to like her character, I really did; but I could not respect her inability to be rational and concede that sometimes others know better than you.

My other favourite character is Marcus Agrippa. I love his selflessness. He is completely and utterly loyal to Octavius. He cannot be bought or bribed. His loyal, bravery, and determination is unwavering. He does not care what others think of him, being lowly born with no noble blood, he is content with just being Caesar's friend. He is the ace that Octavius always has in his back pocket when he can count on no one else (save for

Livia Drusilla). Without Agrippa, I think the story would have turned out much differently. Throughout the story, many people would say that Octavinus has the mind of Julius Cesar, but I disagree. Not to say that he isn't intelligent, for he definitely is. In my opinion, he is a top-notch politician, but no more than that. It is Agrippa's patience, planning, military genius and council that makes up for everything he lacks. Together, they are the mind of Cesar, but alone they are not but ordinarily talented men in their own fields.

I do, however, think that Ceasarian could have possibly had the mind of his father. We catch glimpses of how truly brilliant he is, but unfortunately, we do not for sure by the end of the story. Everything he accomplishes, he does so alone. There is no one he can rely on; especially not his mother. The only things that hinder Ceasarian is his inexperience and naivety. However, had he been given a full life, I think that he would be a genius.

And I suppose that I should make some sort of comment on Cleopatra. The Queen of Beasts, as Rome refers to her. For her time, she is extraordinary. Back then, women were not considered men's equal and were certainly not treated with respect. Cleopatra proves that she can do everything a man can do; and has ruthless ambitions that make surrounding men look like prancing little princesses. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants. She is very intelligent, but I think her flaw is her inability to see things the way they truly are. It is not a woman's world, and while she considers herself their equal, they most certainly do not. By flaunting her power in their face she only serves to antagonize and fracture alliances and friendships. Had she been more subtle in her manipulations, she have had more success. She was also blinded by the love she had for Julius Cesar. He may have loved her, but even in the end he loved Rome more. I think it says a lot that he did not even name his own biological son (whom he loved) to be his heir. And how he also betrayed the secret location of all of Egypt's treasure to Rome. Yet, Cleopatra deifies him like any other common woman. In her eyes, he is a god and can do no wrong. She failed to recognize that his ambitions were very different from hers; and he hardly even confided in her. In this, Julius Cesar and Ceasarian are very much alike. They do their own scheming in their heads because Cleopatra is a bully.

Fantastic novel, I think that I will be looking into what other novels McCoullough has to offer, as this one did not disappoint. I would love to read an equally thrilling tale about another hero like Spartacus or Achilles written by her.

Louise says

There are clues early on that this will be a new twist of an old story. Antony suspected in Caesar's murder? Caesarion, not a brat but a precocious co-regnant with his own ideas on government? Has this been speculated before?

As the book progresses McCullough develops her theme, the reader comes to believe that this is IT: The true interpretation of this variously interpreted story.

Like all McCullough books, this one is an achievement. Because she is always meticulous, I expect every the fact of battle, geography and genealogy is correct. She has grafted a new interpretation onto the record.

One thing, interesting to me, is that both Antony and Octavian, as well as a few other men in this book, cry with tears. Perhaps men cry in the earlier McCullough novels, but it must not have been as prominent or I think I'd have remembered it. While the tears fit well into the characters she creates in this novel, it is interesting that it is the male characters who cry. If this is indeed new, perhaps this is a sign of our times, more than Rome's.

The first book of the series *The First Man in Rome* deserves 6 stars. While this, the last book of this series, is another highly readable achievement it does not reach those heights. Despite this comparison, McCullough's *Antony and Cleopatra* is still a 5 star book.

Deborah Pickstone says

I am left with the impression that CMc didn't much like Cleopatra. Octavian/Caesar Divis/Augustus comes across more positively than I have seen him written before and a close look at Agrippa was most interesting.

Was Marcus Antonius a hero or an anti-hero? Maybe both. Poor Antonius, certainly he was flawed in his lack of self-discipline at inconvenient moments and his impulsiveness. In this story of super-human characters he functions as Everyman.

The unknown fate of Caesarion continues to fascinate modern fiction writers who usually opt for his survival even though he disappeared from the record. It's a bit like the sons of Edward IV of England - did he or didn't he escape? Not only is the mystery a fascinator but, I suspect, Caesarion's reputed close similarity in face and nature to Julius Divus, his father, leads us to *want* him to have survived; making Caesar, a charismatic character even at this historical distance, live 'forever'. Plus, he was so young.

I really missed the usual Author's Note from Ms McCullough. I have to say the last 2 of this series were.....less, somehow than the first five. And this last more so than the penultimate - as if her heart wasn't in it, maybe? The sixth volume picked up beautifully after a shaky start but there was an air of disengagement through much (not all) of this last book.

Well, I have so enjoyed this series that I dismissed as unreadable when the first 2 books were published! I would say more fool me but it simply meant that I saved myself up a treat for now. That I went back to them is thanks to the reviews on GR that encouraged me to try again. One of the reasons I write reviews - apart from my own opinionated nature!

Kandice says

January 2015 -

McCullough's writing slays me because it's so smart. I feel smarter after devouring one of her novels. She researches EVERYTHING so every word and description feels spot on.

I always fall deeply into McCullough's books. Her writing style is so accessible, that even when the story is mired in history, geography, Latin, unfamiliar words, hard to remember names...I still live it as I read!

I love the story of A&C and have read many versions. The uber-romantic ones appealed to me when I was younger (of course), but now that I have "matured" McCullough's version seems so much more realistic. Antony was a boor. By all accounts he was handsome, charming and strong, but at the same time, he was a womanizer, drank to excess and suffered feelings of inadequacy. These are the same faults that kept Gaius Julius Caesar from naming him his successor. This was a blow from which Antony never recovered.

Cleopatra, except in the most romantic versions of her life was not a great beauty. Her appeal lay in her

intelligence, regality and speaking voice. There is no doubt she was an effective ruler. Caesar helped her develop her leadership skills after securing her throne. I find it believable that they shared a true love. Yes, the relationship was mutually beneficial, but only love would account for the longevity of their time as a couple. Antony arrives on the scene when she is already firmly ensconced in her reign. Caesar not only paves the way for Cleopatra's life, but, in essence paved the way to her for Antony.

Cleopatra's wealth was a great way for Antony to further his campaign. He didn't seek her out for an affair of the heart. She was a woman, he liked women, she needed a "godlike" man to father her children. They were infinitely useful to one another. I'm sure they developed real feelings, especially as their children were born, but their's was a relationship of convenience. Out of sight, out of mind seemed to be their approach to separations. It was perfectly acceptable and utterly realistic.

As she always does, McCullough brought Egypt and Rome to life for me. Each place Antony or Octavian visited felt very tangible, real, right here, right now, not centuries past. The politics are always the most intriguing aspects of any book on ancient civilization. Here, although the title is Antony and Cleopatra, we learn as much about Octavian's politics and motivations as theirs. No author will make me hate him less, but McC lets me understand him, at least.

It's hard to read the end of any story about these doomed lovers, but here, it's told in a tasteful, understandable way. We expect it, yes, but we can also understand it. Not just for the cruel deaths they suffer, but for the political maneuvering that made their deaths inevitable and unavoidable.

Jim says

This is actually a bit of a letdown from the previous six books. My understanding is that McCullough intended the series to end with The October Horse, and it shows. Although "Antony and Cleopatra" is sprawling with history and is quite entertaining, it does feel more obligatory and less passionate than its predecessors, which felt more like a single, massive tale.

Brief recap: The October Horse ends with Julius Caesar assassinated and many of the conspirators dead, including Brutus and Cassius. Marcus Antonius (Caesar's cousin) and Octavian (Caesar's grand-nephew and adopted heir) form two-thirds of Rome's Second Triumvirate, along with the largely irrelevant Lepidus. Antony and Octavian have essentially carved up the Mediterranean world, with Antony ruling the East like an Alexander, and the still-too-young-for-the-Senate Octavian left to deal with the mess that is Rome proper. Antony seems to have the better of the deal, but his oversized passions and appetites catch up with him as he ages. Octavian, meanwhile, is the underdog with youth, patience, subtlety, and a core of supremely able allies to guide him toward the final confrontation.

Each has his setbacks and triumphs, and the Triumvirs cooperate and undermine each other as they see fit. Antony's tendency to live in the present puts him at the disadvantage to Octavian, who plans years ahead. The real challenge in this book is that McCullough seems to have little affection for Antony, magnifying his flaws to create a deeply unsympathetic portrait of the man. Granted, Antony didn't fare much better in CAESAR and The October horse, where his earlier antics were at least somewhat tempered by the lower body count and youthful, er, charm of the outlandish younger man. The bitterness and self-doubt of the co-ruler of the world, after Caesar's near-complete snubbing in his will in favor of the too-young, asthmatic Octavian, results in a horrific death toll in battlegrounds throughout the East.

Octavian, likewise, isn't a deeply sympathetic character, but at least the qualities that lead him to become the architect of Imperial Rome are showcased believably, and however insidious some of Octavian's manipulations are, one is left at the end of the book with the sense that Rome is far safer in his hands than in Antony's, which was certainly true. Even before Caesar ditched the presumed heir, Antony had committed massacres, insurrections, and instabilities inside Rome, disqualifying him in Caesar's eyes from the right to rule.

Cleopatra, meanwhile, who was fairly sympathetic when connected with Julius Caesar, becomes in many ways everything Octavian's propagandists paint her to be: a deadly threat to Rome. Far from the epic love stories elsewhere, this Cleopatra discovers her love for Antony only near the end of her life; prior to that she is a calculating politician, using Antony to her ends. Though one gets the sense that the two richly deserve each other, even if the rest of the world doesn't deserve them.

As in the other books, McCullough makes the ancient world her canvas, including further Spain and Gaul in the West and the farthest reaches of the East. You feel the scope and the limits of Roman influence. The challenges of ruling Rome are also depicted from a variety of angles: piracy and grain prices, ambitions of those who see the vulnerabilities of the still-young, still unproven Octavian, jealousies and intrigues of the Noble Families, and living up to the Divine image and practical expectations of Caesar when others can carry it off with so much less effort. For centuries Romans had a *cursus honorum*, the course of honor, which decreed at what age a proper Roman politician rose to prominence. The last decades of the Republic saw many breaches of this - from the seven consulships of Marius to the Dictatorship of Sulla, Pompey's early-twenties generalships, the too-young consulship of Young Marius and Pompey, the first Triumvirate, and on and on. By the time Octavian grabbed the brass ring at age 18, the Usual was no longer so common. Even so, Octavian revolutionized Roman politics, and this book gives a good feel for how he went about it - and it's often anything but pretty.

That's the irony of this book. The man who ushered in the decades of Pax Romana had to change his name to begin the new era for a changed Rome. The events in this book walk us through the last nails in the coffin of the Roman Republic.
