

Caesar Short Guide

Caesar by Irwin Isenberg

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Overview

Julius Caesar's life was so full of excitement and achievements that this book about him can be read as a thriller.

It keeps the reader wondering what extraordinary thing Caesar will do next.

The times in which he lived provide added color and interest, as Isenberg recreates Rome, the bustling and intrigue-filled center of Mediterranean civilization.

Beyond the stirring plot line, Caesar illuminates crucial historical events.

Rome has shaped modern Western culture in many ways, and Caesar's life had enormous impact upon Roman history.

Caesar brings an important historical period to life, offering insights into the modern world as well as ancient Rome.

About the Author

Irwin M. Isenberg was born on September 30, 1931, in Boston, Massachusetts. He graduated from Boston University in 1953 and received a master's degree in East European studies from Harvard University in 1955.

While Caesar is the only book he wrote specifically for young people, Isenberg's other works show the same involvement with political matters that underlies this biography. From 1959 until 1965, he was a writer and editor, first with Scholastic Magazines, and later for the Foreign Policy Association. During these years, he wrote Caesar and The Soviet Satellites of Eastern Europe (1963), and he co-authored or edited several other books on public policy topics.

He then joined the staff of the United Nations, where he carried out assignments in India and Indonesia. He also continued to produce books on topics related to his expertise and interests, writing Indian Subcontinent (1972) and editing reference volumes on geographical areas and on social problems. At the time of Isenberg's death, he was a senior area officer for the United Nations Development Program.

Setting

The events of this book take place in the late Roman Republic during the years of Caesar's life, from 100 to 44 B.C.

At this time, Rome is the pre-eminent power in the Mediterranean area. The city enjoys luxuries and entertainments from many lands and a hitherto unknown degree of material comforts. Yet the strains accompanying its transition from city-state to world power have racked Rome with social and political turmoil for years before Julius Caesar's birth.



Social Sensitivity

Some features of Roman society seem quite strange today. Many represent nothing more than colorful differences in customs, but others carry definite moral implications. Depictions of slavery, the gladiatorial games, and violence and assassination in political life will not shock anyone vaguely familiar with Roman history, but a parent or teacher may wish to further explore some of the issues involved.

Such exploration could serve to stimulate further reflection about the role of force and violence in all societies, including our own, and to counteract the popular view of ancient Rome as an incredibly cruel and violent place. It is particularly important that students see Roman society from a balanced, historical perspective because the values of contemporary society reflect Roman values. Indeed, so many contemporary Western political and social ideals derive from those of Rome that in the recent past every educated person studied classical history and literature.

Roman attitudes about slavery should be considered in historical context.

Slavery was widespread in virtually all ancient lands. It originated as a giant advance over the previous practice of simply executing defeated enemies. In Rome, at least, slaves participated in a wide range of occupations, ranging from brutal labor in mines and ships' galleys to serving as physicians and teachers.

These slaves had certain legal protections, and neither a racial basis for slavery nor racial discrimination existed in Rome. Many slaves kept some of their own earnings and eventually bought their freedom. None of this excuses slavery, but an accurate picture of the institution helps one understand how it could exist in a civilization as advanced as that of Rome. Another point worth pondering is that the Romans, who were exceptional engineers and inventors, did not develop many labor-saving machines. This was probably due to a lack of motivation because of the availability of so much slave labor.

The gladiatorial games were a popular and bloody form of entertainment. Although to contemporary readers they are a horrifying aspect of Roman life, they still exert some fascination. Otherwise, so many contemporary historical novels and movies would not feature climactic gladiatorial scenes. Other types of entertainment also flourished in every Roman city: chariot races, public religious ceremonies, the theater, and private dinner parties with good food and conversation. A comparison of popular Roman culture with our own might yield some interesting insights.

Roman history is studded with assassinations and civil strife that contrast sharply with the Roman genius for civility under law. Caesar's time saw gang violence erupt in the streets and battles fought between the armies of opposing politicians. A century of rapid expansion and social change and the resulting turmoil had destabilized the Roman Republic. The political career ladder that gave ambitious men armies personally loyal to them was an additional provocation. Historians frequently compare the problems and events of Caesar's era to those of the modern world, and this exercise can be



productive for students as well, bringing up philosophical questions about the legitimate and illegitimate use of force in maintaining government and in settling political conflicts.

One further issue deserves mention.

Roman expansion is often perceived as simply a quest for glory and empire, but any competent historian will point out that the reasons were more complex.

Economic motives, appeals to Rome to serve as a powerful ally or mediator in intertribal warfare, and the Roman belief in the benefits of civilization were all at work. Again, a comparison with the "empires" and responsibilities of modern-day great powers is thought-provoking.

Literary Qualities

Isenberg writes in a clear and lively style, presenting Caesar's life and deeds in chronological order. He frequently supplies background information to help the reader understand events. For example, the biography describes the Roman army's organization and structure in the section on Caesar's conquest of Gaul. The author deftly weaves this information into the narrative so that the story keeps moving while the reader learns a good bit about Roman life.

The author does an excellent job of distinguishing historical fact from legend. He mentions the myths surrounding Caesar's life—such as the story that he was born by the first "Caesarian" surgery and the tale in which he morosely compares his own achievements to those of Alexander at the same age—and points out which are uncertain and which are almost certainly false.

In the course of a 150-page book, it is impossible to explain all aspects of Roman society thoroughly enough to fully evaluate Caesar's role in it. But Isenberg neglects to explain a few key details that could have easily been included. The book refers to Caesar becoming a "dictator" at two different times in his later career, but fails to mention that in ancient Rome "dictator" was a legitimate, if unusual, government office in which one person was temporarily allowed extraordinary powers in order to deal with crisis conditions. Without this knowledge, a reader may be led to make harsh judgments about Caesar that are not justified. Likewise, the close connection between religious and political appointments remains unexplained.

Finally, Isenberg discusses Roman political events in terms of parties. Although people with similar social views or with mutual interests did form alliances, scholars disagree about whether these can be considered political parties in the modern sense.

One actual inaccuracy appears. According to the text, "the same end awaited all [gladiators]—death on the sandy floor of the arena." Most gladiators did die in the arena sooner or later, but former gladiators who have bought their freedom appear in Plautus's plays, which were the "situation comedies" of the era. Their incidental presence in these plays suggests that this happier end to a gladiator's career was not all that rare. Also, a few accounts exist of presiding officials granting gladiators their freedom for splendid displays of bravery.

Overall, Caesar offers a concise and objective account of its subject's life and times. The outstanding illustrations scattered throughout the book enhance the text. Many depict artwork from Caesar's time or soon afterwards, showing statues of Caesar and his contemporaries, floor mosaics and wall murals of scenes from daily Roman life, and even ancient manuscripts and election posters. Small photographs and drawings show material objects of the time, ranging from legionary standards (the famous "eagles") to coins and tables.



These visual details augment the reader's understanding of Rome's richly textured civilization. In addition, Isenberg includes useful charts and diagrams. One outlines the officers of the Roman Republic and how they were chosen, and others detail the crucial siege of Alesia and the battle of Pharsalia.

Long after Caesar's death, themes drawn from his life continued to inspire writers and artists. William Shakespeare's drama *Julius Caesar* depicts the great playwright's vision of Caesar's downfall. Interestingly, this tragedy focuses more on Brutus, one of the conspirators against Caesar, than it does on Caesar. Shakespeare's play has inspired two films, both titled *Julius Caesar*. The 1953 version starred Marlon Brando; the 1970 version starred Charlton Heston.



Themes and Characters

Gaius Julius Caesar remains a towering figure from an age crowded with talented and ambitious men. Any biography of him deals—at least on some level—with the question of what made this man so extraordinary. A master politician and a great general, Julius Caesar also authored books still read for their historical value and clear prose.

Isenberg addresses all these aspects of his life in *Caesar*.

Caesar the public man is an endlessly intriguing figure. The few fragmentary historical glimpses of his private life and personality available to biographers include tales circulated by Roman gossips. Unfortunately these originally sprang from such mixed motives, and now are so encrusted with legend, that they are almost useless for a true understanding of the man.

Of Caesar's ambition there can be no doubt. Every step he takes is partly calculated to advance his own political fortunes, a trait not unusual for men of his social class and era. He demonstrates his cool confidence and grace under pressure while still in his early twenties. When captured by pirates, he entertains them with speeches and poems and insists that they raise the amount of his ransom because he is worth more. When released, he proceeds to capture and hang them, proving his courage and decisiveness as well. His very success in staying alive and advancing in a deadly political arena shows his understanding of human motives and of the exercise of power.

Caesar spends a large portion of his life commanding armies. If Isenberg's biography has a defect, it is in the many pages devoted to his subject's military successes, to the relative neglect of political accomplishments that illuminate Caesar's complex character and purposes. Granted, biographies depicting the military campaigns have an advantage because they can draw on Caesar's own words in his books *The Gallic Wars* and *The Civil Wars*. These works show his strategic planning, his sharp powers of observation, his curiosity about the world around him, and his straightforward style of thinking and writing.

But episodes in the political arena provide more insight into Caesar's complicated purposes. In many decisions he acts not only out of ambition but out of a genuine concern for Rome and its citizens. His willingness to dramatically break tradition in his military maneuvers—such as when he takes his army across the Rubicon River in violation of ancient law—leads to speculation that his political leadership will bring drastic changes to Rome. But Isenberg points out that the legal situation surrounding the crossing of the Rubicon is muddled by moves and countermoves between his opponents and supporters and that had he returned to Rome without enough protection to match Pompey's forces, Caesar probably would not have lived long. Indeed, when he finally comes to power, he does not make the radical changes predicted by his enemies. He institutes a series of moderate reforms, encompassing everything from traffic regulation and calendar correction to essential economic measures, and he plans to continue making similar improvements.



As it turns out, his nephew Augustus (whom he later adopts as his son) actually implements Caesar's plans, thus bringing about a transformation in Roman government from republic to empire. This establishes the theme that Caesar has set a precedent for later Roman leaders by paving the way to political power through military exploits.

Caesar also raises larger questions: What is the influence of great men upon the tide of events? What part does chance play in changing history? Do all complex civilizations develop problems that can be solved only by radical change in their institutions? Isenberg wisely refrains from attempting to answer all these questions, opting to present the facts of Caesar's life for readers to interpret.

The characters in this biography include all of Julius Caesar's important political contemporaries: Pompey, Crassus, Cicero, Cato, and many others. His family and his non-Roman military opponents also appear. Isenberg devotes enough attention to these secondary characters to clarify Caesar's role in a given situation, but the biography's focus never wanders from Caesar.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why did Julius Caesar think that Gaul should be conquered?
2. How did Caesar gain the loyalty of his troops?
3. What other great men of history would you compare with Caesar?
4. What was the attraction of the gladiatorial games to the common people in Rome? Do we have anything like this today? If so, what are the similarities and differences?
5. How did Caesar's family history and background influence his career?
6. Why did so many of the senators think Caesar had to be done away with?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Although Caesar had far fewer soldiers than the Gauls had, he was able to defeat them. How? Consider geographical, political, and military factors.

2. Do you think that Caesar's desire to help the people of Rome was sincere, or was he motivated only by his own drive for power? Support your position with examples drawn from his life.

3. If Caesar were alive today, do you think he would be a Republican or Democrat? Give reasons based on his writings, speeches, and actions.

4. Rome offered many different kinds of amusements. What are some of the things an upper-class Roman might do for entertainment? Describe some of them, and compare them to entertainment we have today.

5. According to legend, both Caesar's wife and a soothsayer warned him not to go to the Senate on the Ides of March.

Why did he disregard these warnings?

Do you think he had any idea of what awaited him there?

6. When Caesar came into power in Rome, he pardoned most of his political enemies. Thus they lived and plotted his assassination. When his nephew Augustus came to power, he followed the usual Roman practice and executed his surviving enemies. What conclusions do you draw from this?

For Further Reference

Caesar, G. Julius. *The Conquest of Gaul*.

Translated by S. A. Handford. New York: Penguin, 1983. Latin students will probably have the chance to read this in the original. Even in translation, it provides a unique opportunity to see one of the great military campaigns of history through the eyes of its victorious general.

Duggan, Alfred. *Julius Caesar*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969. Duggan's book is a clearly written biography for the general reader that provides somewhat more background on Roman institutions and previous history than does Isenberg's.

Evory, Ann, and Linda Metzger, eds.

Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series. Vol. 11. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985. This reference entry gives basic data about Isenberg's career and publications.

"Memorial Rite to Honor I. M. Isenberg, U.N. Aide." *New York Times* (August 15, 1979): 13. A short obituary of Isenberg concentrating on his connection with the United Nations.

Robison, C. A., Jr. "Review." *New York Times Book Review* (November 1, 1964): 24. Although short, this is the longest review of Caesar in a general periodical. It especially commends the many illustrations.

Suetonius. *Twelve Caesars*. Translated by Robert Graves. New York: Penguin, 1957. Suetonius (circa A.D. 69-121+) drew on written sources and personal "interviews" no longer available to biographers. Although he includes a considerable amount of unsubstantiated gossip, his account is invaluable for its glimpses of subjects such as Julius Caesar's appearance and his private life, and also as the view of a Roman chronicler only a few generations removed from Caesar's time.

Treble, H. A., and K. M. King. *Everyday Life in Rome in the Time of Caesar and Cicero*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930.

This gracefully written little book provides a wealth of information about the customs and daily lives of Romans in Caesar's time.



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