

# Dear and Glorious Physician Short Guide

## Dear and Glorious Physician by Taylor Caldwell

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# Characters

Caldwell's Lucanus is tall, fair, handsome and athletic; according to a Biblical reference made to him by Paul, he was a physician. His healing powers are miraculous, and he rebels against the fatalism of ancient medicine, vowing to fight disease among the poverty-stricken masses of the Roman Empire. The descriptions of the operations that he performs are realistic, although one reviewer called them unreadable in their gory detail. Lucanus is introduced to the idea of the Messiah by one of the Magi as a youth, but the existence of ubiquitous pain on earth turns him into a hater of this unjust God. Nonetheless a visit to pagan and sin-ridden Rome marks the beginning of his conversion to the notion of the Messiah, and intermittent meetings with Paul, about whom Caldwell would later write in *Great Lion of Cod* (1970), and interviews with eye witnesses of the crucifixion accomplish his final commitment.

Lucanus does not marry, for he senses his higher calling; but, as a youth, he felt a boundless love for his playmate Rubria, condemned to die, while yet in puberty, of the deadly white sickness.

Stopping short of Lucanus' evangelical career but referring readers to the Bible ("Continued in the Holy Bible, Gospel of St. Luke, and Acts I and II"), the final drama of the book centers on his meeting the Virgin Mary, from whom, according to Caldwell's vision of him as Mary's "first troubadour," he gets the particular facts that are unique to his gospel alone of the four. Not verifiable historically, the visit is based on the appearance in Luke (1:46-55) of the "Magnificat," the Virgin's Hymn.

## Social Concerns

Reviewers faulted Caldwell for her strident political observations in this book, and for loading those observations too heavily with contemporary implications. Luke, some said, is portrayed more like a twentieth-century agnostic than a first-century Greek proto-Christian. That Caldwell takes her mission as social critic seriously is seen in her ironic "disclaimer" to this book: "Any resemblance between ancient Rome and the United States of America and/or Russia is purely historical and not a coincidence." The evils of ancient Rome are all here for their instructive relevance to twentieth-century America: sensual Hollywood-style orgies, Caesars who place themselves above the law, crushing taxes, occupying troops in lands where Romans are detested, cajolery, bribery, and the soft perfumed bodies of men who should be hardened soldiers.

## Techniques

Caldwell spent nearly half a century writing this novel. She began her first version at nine and finished it at twelve. She revised it when she was twenty-two, and at twenty-six she began her third version, this time allotting more emphasis to the medical element. It was not until her visit to the Holy Land in 1956 that she seemed to acquire the spark necessary to ignite the book's success. Even so, critics deplored her heavy-handed reproduction of the Biblical period and her lavish overwriting. She did not use any of the archaic language of the King James Version of the Bible, nor many words of Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, and some critics found this objectionable.

Some claimed to detect the obtrusive evidence of multiple rewritings. Yet for all these apparent flaws, it is her genuine ability as a storyteller, her strength of narrative technique, that prevails and brings Lucanus to life.

## Themes

Since Luke (or Lucanus) is portrayed more as a physician than an evangelist, it is safe to conclude that Caldwell has a strong interest in the theme of medicine itself, an interest that would resurface in *Testimony of Two Men* (1968). In the preface to *Dear and Glorious Physician*, she decries Justinian's destruction of the Library at Alexandria because it shut off forever the knowledge of Babylonian science. The Babylonians, she notes with conviction, used electricity in a very sophisticated manner, used a kind of ore for the cure of cancer and employed hypnotism in psychosomatic medicine. Initially, Lucanus does not know the source of his healing powers, and this, whether directly from God or not, is further indicative of Caldwell's long-standing interest in the occult.

# Adaptations

Although *Dear and Glorious Physician* was purchased by one Hollywood studio, the project was later abandoned.



## Literary Precedents

The first decade of Taylor Caldwell's life coincided with a great resurgence of interest in the historical novel which suited the imperialistic mood of turn-of-the-century America; and the decade of her breakthrough to the literary scene, the 1930s, was precisely when Hervey Allen, Margaret Mitchell, and Kenneth Roberts were enjoying remarkable success with their historical fiction. By nestling comfortably within this tradition for four successful subsequent decades, she has been labeled *retarditaire* and viewed as one of the standard-bearers of the big "old-fashioned" novel of pageantry and setting.

Tackling a Biblical setting, however, is as unusual as it is courageous, for with the exception of *Quo Vadis* (1897), *Ben Hur* (1880), and *The Robe* (1942), novels of Christ have not been popular.

That is why she shied away from depictions of Christ himself in her Biblical fiction. As she readily admitted, no book can tell the story of Jesus as well as has already been done in the Bible.

Although reviewers were reminded of the religious tales of Henry Van Dyke and the novels of Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli, no one has ever accused Caldwell of imitation. The opposite has sometimes been the case: She once cited some material that she claimed to have found at the Vatican Library in Rome, but when an inquiring reader wrote the Vatican for verification of her source, the Vatican responded that the works referred to must be held to be "the fruit of fantasy."



## Related Titles

After her entrance into the realm of Biblical fiction, Caldwell produced *Great Lion of God* (1970), in which Lucanus appears as a character. He also appears in Caldwell's novel with Jess Stearn, *I, Judas* (1977), where Judas is seen as Christ's challenger rather than his betrayer, searching for the militant Messiah to free the Jews from Roman domination and attempting to force Jesus to action.

On the heels of *Dear and Glorious Physician* came the first volume of her metaphysical trilogy, *The Listener* (1960), followed by *No One Hears But Him* (1966), and *Dialogues with the Devil* (1967). In the latter book, where she acknowledges the presence of an alien inspiration which took over the writing midway through, the archangel Lucifer warns man that he cannot escape the fate of Venus and Mercury, once peopled but now destroyed.

Her fascination with Roman times is evident in her 1965 best seller *A Pillar of Iron*, about the life of Cicero. Caldwell makes a proto-Christian of the great orator, and the shadow of the contemporary Messiah looms largely.



# Copyright Information

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