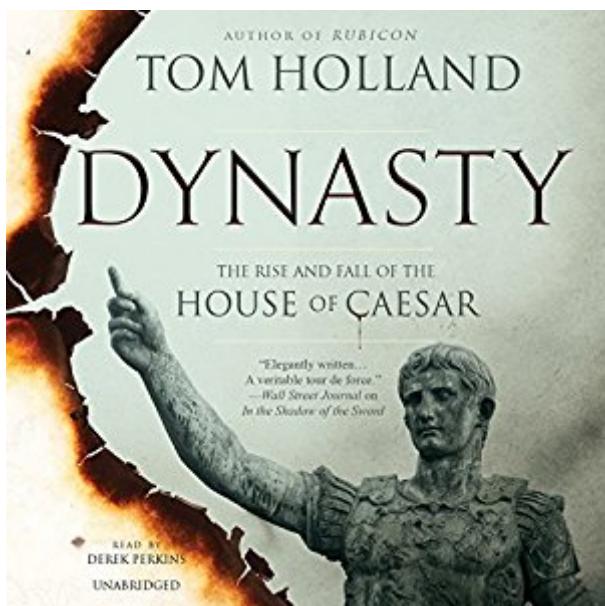


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Dynasty: The Rise And Fall Of The House Of Caesar



Synopsis

Author and historian Tom Holland returns to his roots in Roman history and the audience he cultivated with *Rubicon* - his masterful, witty, brilliantly researched popular history of the fall of the Roman republic - with *Dynasty*, a luridly fascinating history of the reign of the first five Roman emperors. *Dynasty* continues *Rubicon*'s story, opening where that book ended: with the murder of Julius Caesar. This is the period of the first and perhaps greatest Roman emperors. It's a colorful story of rule and ruination, from the rise of Augustus to the death of Nero. Holland's expansive history also has distinct shades of I, Claudius, with five wonderfully vivid (and, in three cases, thoroughly depraved) emperors - Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero - featured, along with numerous fascinating secondary characters. Intrigue, murder, naked ambition and treachery, greed, gluttony, lust, incest, pageantry, decadence - the tale of these five Caesars continues to cast a mesmerizing spell across the millennia.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

(Review based on the UK edition, purchased from .co.uk) Tom Holland's new book, *Dynasty*, presents a detailed history of the Caesar Dynasty (the Julio-Claudians) and their rise and fall from power. The story is well-told and reads more like a novel than a traditional history book. While the book is not an academic work, it is well researched and Holland is a professional historian. I would recommend to anybody interested in Roman history, ranging from the general reader to the Roman history fanatic. *Dynasty* is a direct sequel of Tom Holland's successful and well-written *Rubicon*-- the story of the fall of the Republic and the rise of Julius Caesar. Holland provides enough background

to allow the reader to follow the story without having read *Rubicon*. The book also tells the story of the creation of a monarchy that replaced the Roman Republic. Augustus formed a new form of government, built on the wreck of the Republic after many years political violence and civil war, interspersed with periods of relative stability. The book starts out with an introduction to Roman history, from its foundation to the assassination of Julius Caesar. It provides a lot of good background and allows the reader to jump in without reading *Rubicon* or its equivalent. The typical chapter outlines the personality/mental health of each Emperor, his political conflicts in Rome, and his actions and military campaigns. Although the book mostly focuses on Rome and Romans, it does discuss the general state of the empire. Each Emperor receives his chapter. At the time that Augustus took the undisputed leadership of the state, there was no guarantee that his regime would survive in some form for nearly 500 years in Rome or 1,500 years including the Byzantine Empire (Constantinople). The establishment of this new state set the stage for the monarchies that succeeded the Western Roman Empire. I felt in my "comfort zone" in the chapter on Augustus. While Holland had many insightful hypotheses about what happened and why it happened, I was quite familiar with the broad outline. This is not surprising given the large number of books (both fiction and non-fiction) dealing with the first Emperor. I positively impressed by the coverage of the later Emperors of the dynasty. Holland provides an excellent history of Tiberius and Caligula, something that is often missing in broader histories of Rome. Likewise his interpretation of the rise of Claudius was quite intriguing and some different from what you might find in *I, Claudius*. The book goes into great detail about the various conflicts (battles?) within the Dynasty. This started with the perhaps prudent of exile of more difficult members, but quickly devolved into murder. So why four stars? One weakness in the narrative was Holland's use of strong assertions for what is essentially conjecture. For example (chosen more or less at random), in describing Sejanus (Tiberius' deputy in Rome) he states "the prefect could feel confident that all his schemes, all of his maneuverings, all of his ambitious were close to fruition." Perhaps, but different scholars have had different views of the Sejanus affairs. These differences reflect rather different views on the reign of Tiberius. While these conjectures are certainly possible, they may not be the probable description of the events or interpretations. Holland does not necessarily take the most scandalous interpretations, mixing different approaches. Holland definitely knows his stuff, but he presents his own views without much discussion of alternatives. If you are familiar with Roman history, this will be apparent and don't in any way take away from the book. If you are new to Roman history, just be aware that there are other versions of the story and other interpretations. *Caveat Emptor*. I would have also liked a longer epilogue that summed up Holland's thinking about the period. This is a relatively minor

criticism. I would give this book a rating of R, for strong language and mature scenes.

I've read *Rubicon* and *Persian Fire* prior to this. As was the case with those two books, this is "popular history" in that Holland hasn't done original research or otherwise attempt novel theories; it's a book that presents a synthesis of the known history and provides a compelling narrative. His writing style is sometimes peculiar but generally elegant and pretty readable. I find as I get older that what I value in works of history is readability. Almost any historical subject can be written in a way that is dry and draggy or interesting. Holland does a fine job in bringing the subject to life.

Holland's style has energy and sweep and the "story" is compelling. On that basis, I thought this an enjoyable run through of fascinating but mostly familiar tales. It is very difficult to prove much that is asserted about the characters and behaviors of the Julian emperors. Could Caligula really have been so horrific? Could Nero have been so crazy? Are the sexual excesses attributed to Tiberius' during his reign verifiable? Could Livia, Augustus' wife and Tiberius' mother, have been an early version of *Murder Incorporated* or was it mostly luck that favored the rise of her gifted but unbeguiling son against more popular rivals? "History" of the time and somewhat later was written by those with axes to grind who made little distinction between outrageous gossip, outlandish rumor, and outright lies if they served to show these men and their allies (many of whom met bad ends) to be utterly monstrous, rather than powerful thus extremely self-indulgent, sufferers from paranoia (an understandable reaction to a world filled with complex and murderous intrigues) or disordered in flamboyant but finally standard ways. Holland doesn't always succeed in keeping the complicated kinship relationships between characters clear, and sometimes writes as though treading water to the next outrageous anecdote. There is something infectious in the glee with which he writes about Nero, always fun to read about, if again one suspects these are tall tales spun by enemies of a ruler who wooed the plebs, snubbed those in power and certainly had a sense of perverse fun. Not a bad introduction in a general way to the death of the Republic and the rise of absolute rulers in Rome but less focused, absorbing and more credulous than one might have hoped.

Tom Holland continues where he left off in *RUBICON* with this insightful, well-sourced, and addictive read about the five emperors from Augustus to Nero. It is in much the same vein as its predecessor, but is much longer and therefore contains more of the "juicy" stuff. Of course, he doesn't always take the primary sources at their word (as many of the notes attest), but he is also keen enough to understand that people don't usually make stuff up out of whole cloth. There were so many different

interesting episodes, it was hard to keep track. It was also hard while reading this book to not think in some way of contemporary politics. In a way, ancient Roman history has become newly relevant. Not because we're necessarily headed down an identical path, but recognizing the personalities involved here can inform one of the possibilities inherent in human nature. Regardless of whether or not you see value in this personally, though, doesn't matter. Modern applicability or not, this was a great book: a real page-turner from start to finish.

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