



## The First Man in Rome

*Colleen McCullough*

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## **The First Man in Rome** Colleen McCullough

From the bestselling author of *The Thorn Birds* comes a masterpiece of historical fiction that is fascinating, moving, and gloriously heroic. The reader is swept into the whirlpool of pageantry, passion, splendor, chaos and earth-shattering upheaval that was ancient Rome. Here is the story of Marius, wealthy but lowborn, and Sulla, aristocratic but penniless and debauched -- extraordinary men of vision whose ruthless ambition will lay the foundations of the most awesome and enduring empire known to humankind.

A towering saga of great events and mortal frailties, it is peopled with a vast, and vivid cast of unforgettable men and women -- soldiers and senators, mistresses and wives, kings and commoners -- combined in a richly embroidered human tapestry to bring a remarkable era to bold and breathtaking life.

## **The First Man in Rome Details**

Date : Published August 1st 1991 by Avon (first published 1990)

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Author : Colleen McCullough

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## From Reader Review The First Man in Rome for online ebook

### Xabi1990 says

Conste que lo he intentado. 650 pags leídas (57%), pero tiro la toalla.

Está muy, muy bien ambientado. Demasiado bien para mi gusto en novela. Porque yo busco una novela, no una profusión asfixiante de detalles de la época.

En novela histórica suelo tirar de búsquedas en la Red por curiosidad, pero con esta novela no me quedaban ganas. Cantidad de nombres parecidos me hacían releer varias veces para aclararme, páginas dedicadas a costumbres y ropajes, comidas y organización política. Y lo peor : más que novela obre acontecimientos de la época es una descripción de las luchas internas del poder político del momento.

Las “batallas” se resuelven en dos líneas y ¡hale!, sigamos con la política. Los personajes poco atractivos. Se salvaba Augusta que ha salido poco pero tenía tirón.

Resumen : Posteguillo, please, saca tú otra de Romanos!!

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### Megan says

This wasn't originally on my list, but I've now made it my March read for my year-long Tome Topple challenge, because... #yolo.

This book is slow, highly-political, extremely intense, and *loooooong*. It's clearly not for everyone. But I, for one, loved it.

Keep in mind that I went into this novel knowing nothing about this period of Rome – the rise of the general Gaius Marius, who was consul a record seven times – with back-to-back terms, and even some performed in absentia. Keep in mind that there was originally a law in Rome that you had to wait at least ten years between consular terms, and although this had been broken prior to Marius, he was the one who *really* bent this law and set a dangerous precedent – not just for politicians, but also for Roman generals.

Marius is also famous for being a ‘New Man’, that is, he came from a family that didn’t have an ancestor who had held the position of consul, and as such, was a highly divisive figure in Roman politics of the time (the novel spans the period from the 110s to the 90s). With Gaius Marius, we also start to see the rise of the power that Roman generals accumulate in the late republic, which of course culminates in Julius Caesar (who is, coincidentally, Marius’ nephew).

Not just focusing on Marius, ‘First Man in Rome’ also concentrates on the rise of Lucius Cornelius Sulla – again, an unknown figure to me prior to reading this novel – another powerful figure during this period of Rome. Sulla actually plays a much bigger political role in the sequel to ‘First Man’, ‘The Grass Crown’, but that doesn’t mean that his character is downplayed in any way in this novel. McCullough writes his character extremely well – a highly complicated character, who engages in some incredibly shady activity (\*coughcough\* murdering family members) without batting an eyelid, but yet you still somehow end up really liking the guy?

As well as Marius and Sulla, there are also a number of other characters that frequently recur – senators, and

other highly prominent political figures of the day – and if you're a newbie to this period like me, then I highly recommend keeping a pen and paper on hand to make notes of who people are and what their offices and roles are. McCullough does her best to distinguish her characters in some way that makes them individualised, but with so many prominent families who all have the same – if not similar names – it can still make your head spin and result in a bit of confusion in the early stages of the novel.

Being such a long novel (my kindle edition clocks in at over 1100 pages, although admittedly around 200 of these are glossaries, character lists and explanations of ancient sources), this novel is extremely slow paced. While there are a few battles – eg. the Jugurthine War in North Africa, the expulsion of the Germanic tribes who tried to invade northern Italy – the main part of the novel deals with Roman politics and the social situations during the decades that the novel covers. There is a *lot* of information that McCullough packs into her book, and those who are familiar with the Late Republic Period may find it very info-dump and many descriptions lengthy and unnecessary. While initially I felt similarly very early on, once I settled into the novel I really appreciated all the extra information that was added. Plus, McCullough tries to do all her really info-dumpy stuff in letters sent between characters. The character of Publius Rutilius Rufus, for one, a great friend of Gaius Marius, is often used by McCullough as a letter writer, informing both Marius and the reader about important events that have taken place in Rome and the Senate simultaneously to the campaigns against North Africans and the German tribes – events that we would not otherwise be privy to. The method does work for the most part, considering that the events are told by Publius Rutilius Rufus in an informal and somewhat gossipy manner, and also works to break up the text, however these letters can sometimes be pretty long, and I can definitely see how some readers might find them annoying – or even unnecessary.

Nevertheless, despite the length of this novel and the extremely intense subject material that it covers, I still found this highly enjoyable, and (while I can't speak to the exact level of accuracy of McCullough's Ancient Rome and her main characters of Marius and Sulla) I learnt an incredible amount from my reading experience. It's so richly immersive, that you can't help but be drawn in to the world that has been created. Immediately after I finished 'First Man' I downloaded its sequel, 'The Grass Crown' (which I'm currently reading at the time of writing this review), and this is definitely a series that I think will become one of my favourites as it develops throughout the rest of the installments.

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## Tea Jovanovi? says

Upravo sam juce na FB-u pisala o ovom serijalu... zato sto se tek sada pojavio prvi deo u Hrvatskoj... komentar je na FB stranici Povijesni romani... prevod srpskog izdanja je zastao - prevodilica je stigla do dela gde treba da ubije Cezara a to joj se nikako ne da... :) Prevodi su dobri, Zermen je veliki poznavalac Starog Rima :)

I detalj nepoznat široj javnosti... Srpski ?itaoci mogu da zahvale direktno meni i mojoj neiscrpoj upornosti da dobru knjigu doteram do ?itaoca... 5 godina sam molila i kumila i ubedjivala vlasnika Narodne knjige da radimo ovaj serijal... Odbijao je to zbog obima knjige, više od hiljadu strana... Govorila sam mu da svaki naslov podeli na tri dela i tako ga objavi... Bezuspešno... Onda smo se vlasnik Lagune i ja družili tokom jednog snimanja za TV i u pauzama ?askali o knjigama... I onda sam njega po?ela da ube?ujem s istom argumentacijom... Bogu hvala te me je poslušao posle kra?eg razmišljanja (a pre nego što sam omatorila i osedela)... :) Tako da je prve delove objavio pre nego što sam ja došla u Lagunu za glavnog urednika :)

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## April says

The First Man In Rome by Colleen McCullough is a door-stopper of a book. Without the 100 page glossary, it clocks in at 931 pages. The premise of the book is that it details the rise to power of Gaius Marius, also known as the third founder of Rome. There's politics, sex, and war. Really, you would think the First Man in Rome would be right up my alley and take a short time for me to read. Eh, wrong.

Read the rest of my review here

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## Karla says

If I could have sex with this book, I would.

Nothing I write can really do justice to why I love this book so much. I've just finished it for at least the 4th time (most likely the 5th), and the series will probably serve as my comfort read whenever I'm in a book slump. They're great and awesome and a guaranteed satisfying read. They've spoiled me for pretty much all other HF out there, no matter the time period. Apart from Patrick O'Brian, no other author has seemed to capture an era so brilliantly with mere words.

The setup is rather simple: Gaius Marius is a very rich man from the Italian provinces with political ambition and military experience. But he lacks one thing: he's not a patrician, and in the very snobbish political circles of Rome, it's not enough to have the citizenship. You have to have the right blood in your veins. Marius sets out to best them at their own game. He marries well in blood (if not in money), he slowly accrues undeniable success in foreign wars, and he never gives up. By the end, he has been elected consul an unprecedented six times (a 7th term looms in the future) and rocked the established order to its foundations. From this point on, the later autocracy of the Roman Empire is inevitable. The immense size of their territory makes the contained ideals of earlier centuries impractical and unpracticable. Marius' willful prominence in a society that prides itself that no one in the Senate stand above his peers opens the door to other men with singular gifts. Cue Julius Caesar....

It might sound heavy and complicated, but it's really not. Learning about the evolution of Rome from republic to empire has never been so much fun. There is red meat drama with backbiting, dysfunction, cutthroat ambition, and soap opera passions. People harangue each other, commit suicide, are brave or cowardly, lead armies into certain slaughter or save them through cunning, and exhibit the ideals of Roman behavior or plumb the depths of immorality. I want to hug them, slap them, strangle them, lick them, and keep them in a special box with a fancy little bow to pull out and play with whenever I want a grand old time.

Why I Re-Read This Book Over And Over:

1) **The Style.** It's really hard to describe it, but I would liken it to Roman farce. They were a rude and bawdy folk, those Romans, yet also insufferably smug and pious about their lineages and onerous duty to be a shining beacon of light for the rest of the world. McCullough obviously holds these people in great affection for their strengths as well as their weaknesses. It all comes through in a style that is accessible while at the same time being illuminating. The characters seem impossibly unreal and all too human at the same time.

2) **Publius Rutilius Rufus' Letters.** This is partly related to the Style issue, but these really are a highlight of the book. A patrician with a grudging respect and love for Gaius Marius, he takes it upon himself to keep the perpetually-abroad-on-campaign Marius informed of events in Rome in witty, long letters written from the peanut gallery. He has opinions about everything and everybody, goes off on tangents, and keeps warning Marius that Rome's established order can only be pushed so far so fast. It's through his letters that lots of the "infodumpy" material gets conveyed in a way that's both entertaining and easy to consume. (Wish

more authors would learn how to do the infodump so well.)

3) **The Scope.** The story covers Roman life from the heights of power in the Senate to the stews of the Subura, where Julius Caesar's mother is resident landlady of a tenement building (her dowry). Sometimes it seems there are more layers to the Roman social and political strata than stars, but McCullough follows characters from different backgrounds (from ossified aristocrats to back alley assassins) to paint a canvas of Rome in all its infinite variety.

4) **The Arc & Theme.** Marius begins as a man trying to distinguish himself by working within the existing system. When that proves nearly impossible because of solid opposition to him from the Old Guard, he upends the system to favor himself and what he believes is the best interest of Rome. At the end of the book, when the tribune of the plebs Saturninus demagogues a popular revolt, Marius sides with his old enemies because mob rule is not in Rome's interest. While he has fought endlessly for years to earn fame and recognition for his own feats, in the end Rome is supreme and must be preserved at all costs. No one man is worth more than Rome, because Rome isn't about people and buildings, material things. It is about ideals and a state of being. Try reconciling that with the need to feed the grumbling belly that is Rome while staving off restless, wandering barbarian tribes 800,000 strong. The theme of the book is ideals vs. pragmatism, and the men who adhered to one school of thought or the other, and the successes or disasters that resulted from those decisions.

5) **Lucius ("Call Me Luscious") Cornelius Sulla.** Saving the fangirlish for last. There's no other way to say it: Sulla's a sexy bastard.

\*liiiiiiiiiiiiick\*

While not quite fitting the alpha hero mold in the bodice rippers I read (you know, *committing murder and all*), he is a take-charge guy with that attractive evil/darkness about him. His very red-gold/pale complexion is a stark contrast to the demons that gnaw on him. He has no scruples about anything if he thinks it'll get him closer to his perceived destiny. His ability to do some pretty awful things without getting caught only convinces him that Fortune has got his back. He's acutely aware of his flaws when working close with Marius, but he also sees the Great Man's weaknesses and is determined to succeed where Marius fails since he has the blood and family ties that Marius lacks. The two men work together for the good of Rome, but a submerged rivalry is born that plays itself out bitterly in the next book. As this book ends, Marius's sun is setting while Sulla's is on the rise and eventual success is in the hopeful offing. After all, he learned from a master.

And if the stick-up-the-ass blue bloods in Rome think they had trouble with Marius, just wait until Sulla's in charge. But that's for the next two books. I really shouldn't look forward to another book slump because they really suck and are a downer, but I can't help but hope the next several books piss me off so I can eagerly grab *The Grass Crown*. Oh, when Sulla wins that crown on the battlefield, bloody and weary and riding a high of triumph and finally realizing his destiny... \*fans self\*

Ahem. I've gone on and on, but I really haven't scratched the surface of why this book is one of the best novels ever written about the era. Make that ever written. Period. If you have even a remote interest in the time period, you should pick this up and lose yourself in an unbelievable drama over 2100 years old. McCullough does the reader the huge favor of putting a wiki and pronunciation guide in the back of the book, which includes everything from geography to Latin slang, so no need to interrupt your reading to run to the internet. It's all there.

And believe it or not, you'll see that superpower governing hijinks haven't changed much over the millennia.

They no longer wear those snazzy togas and orate so marvelously, but the players are still a bunch of preening, self-important, bickering pricks who need to be slapped with the Big Picture every so often. It's truly timeless.

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### **Allison (The Allure of Books) says**

This book is just...a colossal achievement. The Thornbirds is just "eh" for me, her take on P&P made me really appreciate her as a skilled author and storyteller...but THIS book makes me revere and idolize her as one of the best authors in existence.

This is an almost 1000 page book about the ancient Roman senate, and I was addicted to every single word. How awesome is that? I was terrified to start it, when I glanced over the almost 300 page glossary, all I could think was "man, what if I'm not smart enough to read this?" I shouldn't have worried! All you have to do is trustingly place yourself in McCullough's hands, and her book will entertain as well as inform. She made this story so captivating that I was on the edge of my seat more than once-over such things as a massive grain shortage and the passing of a bill to grant basic Roman citizens (the 'Head Count') land.

These people with their 3 and 4 word ridiculous names will quickly become real people, and by the end you'll feel like you've been reading about them for years.

Totally awesome.

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### **PDXReader says**

This novel was highly recommended to me by a co-worker who knew I'd liked I, Claudius and Imperium: A Novel of Ancient Rome. He said that although Colleen McCullough is best known for The Thorn Birds, she is actually a well-respected authority on ancient Rome.

I have to admit that I approached The First Man in Rome with a lot of skepticism. It sat on my shelf for two years before circumstances compelled me to start it... and within 10 pages I was hooked. I found it to be a compelling read, so much so that it's the first book I've read in a long time that has interrupted my normal routine (skipped exercise to read, stayed up late, ignored the TV...). I can't wait to read the next book in the series.

Now, this book won't be for everyone. In fact, I'd be hard-pressed to recommend it to most of the readers I know. While there's certainly a lot of action and intrigue, much of it concerns political wrangling and debate. I enjoyed these sections immensely, but I believe many people would find them dull. Still, I loved this novel and have high hopes for the others in the series, and sincerely hope other Goodreads members will give it a shot.

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### **Jean-marcel says**

This book blew my mind in the mid-90s. It's long, but extremely addictive reading. Until the moment I started this tome, which was recommended to me by my highschool latin and classical civilisations teacher in the ninth grade, I never fancied myself a reader of historical fiction. But this is just a grate novel in every

respect. McCullough can write with equal confidence and arresting zeal about domestic, familial conflicts, or huge military campaigns involving the great Legions of Rome, and make them both seem utterly grand. I must say that I was completely glued to this novel for about a week and it was one of those experiences that made me really understand and feel the power of just how strong a novel could be, both in its vivid capturing of the Roman Republic setting and a portrayal of very dangerous but sometimes eminently likeable individuals.

And I never knew whether to love or hate some of these characters, and that was part of what made it all so fascinating. Gaius Marius seemed more noble and good-natured but there was an underlying ruthlessness about him. Sulla was somehow both alluring and repellent all at once. he and Marius seemed at their best together but at times Sulla was so devious that I got a serious case of the chills. But that's a good thing here; the bit where Sulla slowly and covertly poisons an unwanted family member was amazing.

On a personal note that might just be TMI for some, (view spoiler)

I'm not going to bother reviewing the second book, *The Grass Crown*, just yet, but although I liked it almost as much, it was a real downer how unpleasant my favourite characters became in that one. Marius in particular was pretty much insane by the end and was cold-bloodedly killing people for no reason. The battle scenes in that book are remarkable though. I would challenge any male renowned for his historical war fiction like Bernard Cornwell to write battle scenes that good, and I bet they would fail.

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## Juan-Pablo says

I'll keep this brief, a lot has already been said in the other reviews. The book does a decent job if you're interested in this fascinating period of the roman revolution. However, summarizing; it's over-long, the beginning (100+ pages) it's very disorganized, the narrative tricks get really old (the use of letters to cover historical and plot gaps is extremely annoying), the coverage of battles is minimal, the ending stretches far too long. On the upside, the senate scenes are good and convincing, some of the characters are well developed, specially Sulla, and the Glossary is helpful (although better would have been a prose that doesn't require one). At some point in the novel one feels that the author is tired and just wants to get the job done.

If this series had ~300 pages, I would probably keep going despite its many defects, because it's still an entertaining way to get acquainted with this history. At ~1000 pages each volume, I doubt it.

It surprises me that lots of reviewers have called this the best historical novel they have read. Robert Graves' "I, Claudius" comes to mind as a much better example of a great one. Now I look forward to read Santiago Posteguillo's "Africanus, el hijo del consul" which according to most reviews is a fantastic historical novel.

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## A.J. says

At long last.

Whenever I decide to give a new author a shot, I tend to stay away from the doorstoppers. Nothing against long novels, but the possibility of a very long mediocrity isn't appealing with my to-read list bobbing at 60. That said, I have a deep fascination for late Republic/early Empire Roman material, fact or fiction, and so I was willing to throw the dice on this one, and the results as you can see were mixed.

From a story perspective, this is a tough review. Parts of the novel were terrific and others were more boring

than church. Problem is, the characters like Sulla who were dynamic and interesting in the beginning shriveled and soured as chunks of pages flew by, resulting in wildly inconsistent execution. There were long stretches where it was difficult to discern what if anything the scene before us had to do with anything. And sure enough, after awhile, it became painfully clear that Colleen McCullough had zero idea what was necessary for the story and what wasn't. There are only so many ten-page letters an author can insert detailing the monotonous dealings of the Roman senate which don't so much as budge the cast one way or the other before the reader is skipping lines. And to my horror—my absolute dismay—I found that there was not a single solitary (real) battle sequence in this book, or any of the kind of historical detail and attention Ms. McCullough gave the personal and political aspects. The history of the world is written by the edge of a sword; had I known that this oversight was going to happen, I wouldn't have bothered.

Technically speaking, there were a couple of issues. First, McCullough could be charged with a felony for reckless overuse of the exclamation point. If there were a vote on it, I would cast mine for its removal from all American keyboards. Even relegating it to the Shift-1 position is too kind. Nothing turns ancient Rome into Leave it to Beaver faster, and there are plenty of effective ways to add emotion to dialogue without resorting to this. See? See? SEE. SEE!!!

As another reviewer pointed out, the dialogue is, I dare say, rather a little Victorian. None of the characters exhibit anything that sets them apart from one another, and aided by names like Marcus Metellus Numidicus Flavius Africanus Macedonicus, the secondary cast is especially indiscernible.

But the bottom line is simple. The book is long and after five hundred pages the word 'slogging' will suddenly be in vogue in your vocabulary. For a work so massive, there's far too little immediacy, and it takes on the characteristics of a novel more concerned with historical accuracy than storytelling. A hard balance to strike, yes, but you know it when you see it, and the results are typically as exciting as they are informative. I had a hard time rating this book. At times it was a four and others a one. But because I did feel as though I learned something, I can't be too harsh. Three stars.

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## **Ana says**

1154 pages...

This book was a true test of willpower. But I made it... In the words of Caesar, 'Veni, vidi, vici.'

Politics. Love. Lust. Murder.

Ancient Romans knew how to live it up at a meal.

The sequel:

I am here for the drama.

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## **Marilyn Ware says**

I've read the entire Man in Rome series - TWICE. 900 plus pages per book. My all-time-favorite books. I'd read them all yet again should I feel so compelled. I tried to get them all in hard-bound so I could keep them for my grandson to read. I'm only missing the one I loaned out. (Dang, I shouldn't do that!)

In my opinion there is not a more definitive, comprehensive, and well researched set of novels written about the Roman Empire, Caesar in particular. Love history? Read, read, read!

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## **Ashley \*Hufflepuff Kitten\* says**

### **Monthly group read with Historical Fictionistas!**

A solid four stars, which will probably get bumped up to five once I get a chance to reread this in its entirety rather than listening to the abridged audiobook. Don't get me wrong, the audiobook is fantastic, but... abridged. \*shrugs\* DOS did a fantastic job reading, as I knew he would, and McCullough's research shines through each of these characters. I don't know how much of each character was made up and how much was historical fact (aside from Gaius Marius ruling for six unprecedented terms), and to be honest I really didn't care because that's how good the story was. Excited to reread this, and I've already got book two on the shelf at home! :)

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DAVID OGDEN STIERS READS THE AUDIO? HELL YES.

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## **Alex says**

I started to get more interested in ancient Rome (particularly the Republic) after the HBO series started. I read Tom Holland's excellent *Rubicon* and knew I needed more--especially on Marius and Sulla, two of the most fascinating characters of this or any historical period. When I learned of McCullough's series, I began with this one and was immediately hooked. I've read all seven, but my favorites are the first 3 or 4.

I really appreciated the way she was faithful to the known history but filled in the unknown areas with reasonable and interesting guesses (e.g., Sulla's first wife probably wasn't Julius Caesar's other aunt, if he had more than one, but she *was* a Julia). There are dozens of interpretations that she makes (and usually explains in the notes at the end) that are usually so well thought-out and ring true to the known history. Her take on Caesar's epilepsy was particularly interesting and reflects her expertise as a medical doctor (a perspective most historians can't draw on). Her explanation of how Marius made J.C. the flamen dialis, a priesthood that would have prevented any kind of military or significant political career, was ingenious. It's clear (and she points out as much in her afterwords) that some things may not have happened the way she portrays them. But you never get the sense that, like some historical fiction writers, she's changing the history to fit her story. Instead, she tries to understand sometimes conflicting facts to arrive at a plausible rationale.

But, mainly, it's the characters that give this series life. Gaius Marius, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, and Julius Caesar are living, breathing human beings. She gets inside their heads, and you really get the sense that you know and understand these historical giants, who all were contemporaries of one another and of other legendary figures--Marc Antony, Cicero, Pompey Magnus, Crassus, Spartacus, Brutus, Cassius, and on and on.

I was never that interested in Roman history as a student, with its emphasis on the imperial period. But I think I find something tragic and bittersweet about the end of the republic, which, after all, was a functioning form of democracy more than 2,000 years ago. These men all held the ideal of the republic dear, but they just couldn't help destroying it, blinded as they were by their own hubris, greed, and ambition. It's a fascinating and exhilarating story, and the best way I can think of to understand this important period of Western history.

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### **Justus says**

After 180 pages I put this down in disgust. I just couldn't choke down any more of the flat characters, out-of-place diction, and stupid plotting.

I went into this hesitant because I'm already predisposed to not like historical fiction. I ended up not liking it but largely not for the reasons I thought I wouldn't like it. This book just felt like bad, bad writing.

I realize that part of the problem is that McCullough needs to "educate" her readers. But the explanation, for instance, of Sulla's past is so ham-handed that I couldn't force myself to chug through several hundreds more pages of the like.

I would rather just read a history book about Rome, or a dozen history books about Rome, than more of this.

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### **Checkman says**

First I have to compliment Colleen McCullough on her research. Truly an outstanding effort and very praiseworthy. Her glossary at the end of the book is excellent and one which I have referred back to more than once for just general information. Having said that I now have to state that the entire series has been going down in quality since the second installment *The Grass Crown*. With the first two novels it is apparent that Ms. McCullough wrote them more or less simultaneously over a period of several years while doing her very extensive research. I read that she spent over five years researching and writing the first chapters and it shows. The attention to detail is excellent, her characters come to life, they sound and act like Romans (Silly thing to write actually. Let's go with they don't sound and act like people living in the late Twentieth Century. None of us actually *know* what ancient Romans sounded or acted like do we). There is nothing modern about her dialogue, plot, or characterization. After a short while I felt like I was reading a prequel to Robert Graves classic novels about Claudius. The only thing I felt there wasn't enough of was the biting wit that was so prevalent in Graves work. But I could live with that.

Unfortunately, starting with the third installment, I saw the old Colleen McCullough coming through. The bestselling author who has written *The Thorn Birds* and *Tim*. It was obvious that the research was done and the dramatic stage set was built. Now Ms. McCullough was simply filling in with her trademark writing. Instead of a series of Roman novels there is a soap opera with modern characters running around in togas. Instead of intriguing and fleshed out historical personae there is hero worship of Julius Caesar and two dimensional characters. I made it through the fourth installment and gave up. More tired than disgusted - for

what had been rather unusual was now become typical and could just as easily be set in New York City of today. I recommend the first two novels highly. In my opinion they reach a level higher than the average summertime read, but after that one has mind candy. Read *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* by Robert Graves if you want truly entertaining fiction set in the Roman Empire.

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## Roman Clodia says

McCullough is superb on ancient Rome and genuinely does bring it to life without resorting to any spurious and trite fictional claims that the Romans were just like us. She has read all the sources and sticks to them, simply fleshing out the characters and events so that they make narrative sense. This isn't by any means an easy read, since she delves into the intricacies of Senate debates and internal politics, but it is quite unlike anything else that has been published on Rome.

This is the first volume of her massive 7 book series, and probably covers the least-known period of Republican history: the rise of Marius and Sulla, and the transformation of the Roman army, arguably the first steps towards civil war and the fall of the Republic.

There are times where (in this book) the characters slightly tend to soap opera, but they are few. Overall, a superb read. This only lost 1 star because the middle books are even better!

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## BrokenTune says

*There is something terribly reassuring about being in politics to enrich oneself. It's normal. It's human. It's forgivable. It's understandable. The ones to watch are the ones who are in politics to change the world. They do real damage, the power-men and the altruists.*

I've always been hesitant about reading *The First Man in Rome*, Colleen McCullough's magnum opus about the Roman Republic. I just didn't know what to expect, and the size of the book (my very large hardcopy version had 700+ pages) was a little off-putting, too. However, I loved her writing in *The Thornbirds* and I knew that McCullough was a history buff, so I had to check the book out when I saw it in the library.

I'm glad I've read it. It was difficult to get used to the names and find out who is who at first, but ultimately the stories of the main characters develop and interlope and become quite interesting. McCullough goes into a lot of detail in describing life and customs in ancient Rome - some I was familiar with and A LOT that I learned. Her attention to detail is fantastic. And, yet, she does not beat the reader over the head with explanations of the political systems, the structure of the military, or Roman history. McCullough requires some pre-existing knowledge of her readers and it makes the book very engaging - it's like a dialogue between reader and author.

In short, *The First Man in Rome* is a brilliant example of what historical fiction can be.

And, yet, why can I not give the book 5 stars?

Well, in short, some of the story is drawn out way beyond what I was able to pay attention to. Yes, some parts dragged. There, I said it. What drove me nuts more than this, tho, was that there were no chapters! It was difficult at times, especially after putting the book down, where the story was at and which person the particular part was focusing on. Seriously, this structural/editing choice really got to me.

Lastly, though, as much as I admire McCullough's work here, some of the ways that the Roman paranoia of an impending invasion was portrayed almost without comment made me wonder whether McCullough, despite her love of detail, stuck to the classic Roman-is-best narrative for dramatic reasons or whether she truly subscribed to that particular historical perspective. In *Thornbirds*, part of the admiration I have for McCullough's work is that she challenged some of the characters attitudes - or indeed created one of the finest characters in the book to antagonize an entire religion! - whereas this is missing from *The First Man in Rome*. I really missed the gumption of a character of Mary Carson's quality and not even Sulla could make up for this.

*Marius glared. "The worst of you - Sulla! - is that I will never know what makes you work! What makes your legs go up and down, what makes your arms swing, why you smile like a wolf. And what you really think. That I'll never, never know."*

*"If it's any consolation, brother-in-law, now will anyone else. Even me," said Sulla.*

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## **Phoenix2 says**

Okay, to be honest, I didn't finished this one. I was hoping more of a historical focused novel, rather than a fiction-romance with some historical background. So, I guess, 2 out of 5.

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## **maricar says**

a larger-than-life, fascinating novel...

Halfway through this book, I found myself with eyes full of dark circles. That's when I realized that I haven't had a full night's sleep since picking up this novel. Which in turn made me wonder at my reluctance towards reading another Colleen McCullough book (my previous book by her was, unfortunately, less than memorable). Suffice to say, after reading *The First Man in Rome*, I am now more than willing to eat my words and bow at the brilliance of McCullough's writing.

In an attempt to be objective, though, not every part of this story was that engrossing. Some accounts of warfare or political intrigues were too protracted that I just had to skim through it. And the latter part about Saturninus' and Glaucia's machinations just felt like a last-ditch effort by the author to maintain the drama right up to the end. Rome with Marius at the helm of power, proved the most riveting part of the book.

Other than that, I have only good things to say about this novel. The depiction of the Roman Republic was so vivid and gripping. The people, their stories, and the interactions among them were so relatable they can be material for today's soap operas: from the live organism that is the Senate, with all its peculiarities, to the women behind the men, and even the State's enemies – every character of note was given life under the author's succinct prose and witty dialogues. I don't know how she did it, but this gargantuan scope of a lifelike historical fiction is a guaranteed page-tuner.

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