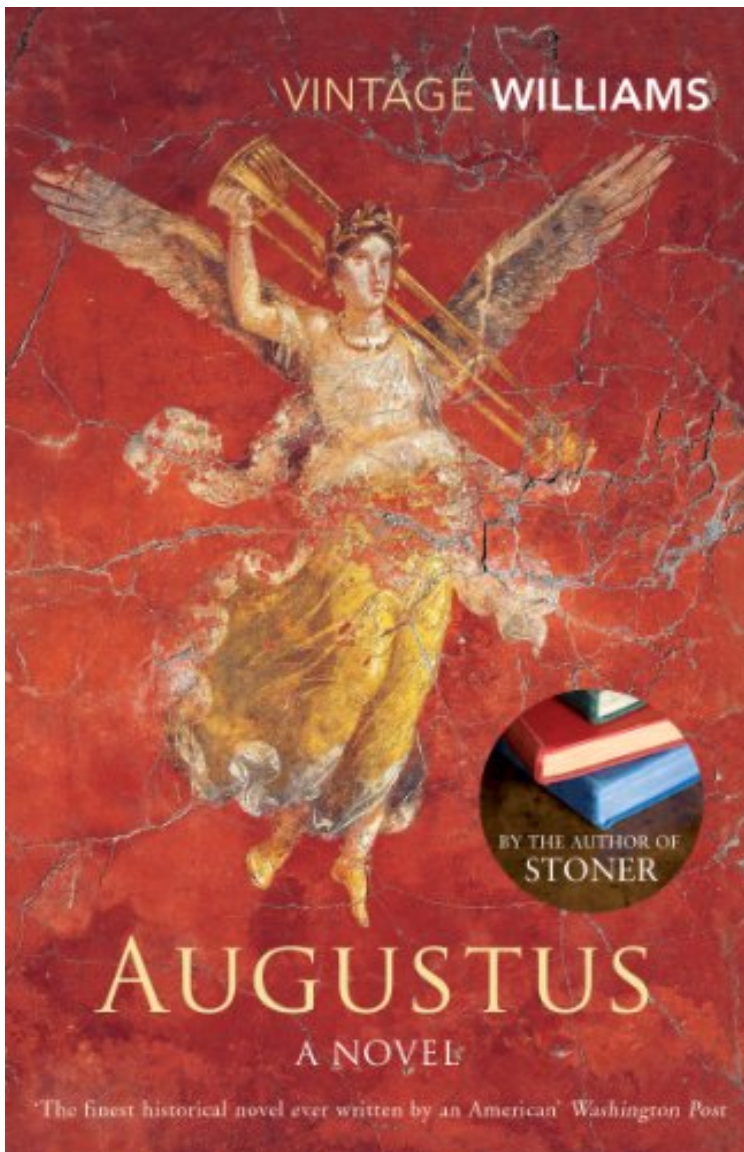


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Augustus: A Novel



Par John Williams
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBy the author of Stoner, the surprise international bestsellerAfter the brutal murder of his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, Octavian, a shy and scholarly youth of nineteen, suddenly finds himself heir to the vast power of Rome. He is destined, despite vicious power struggles, bloody wars and family strife, to transform his realm and become the greatest ruler the western world had ever seen: Augustus Caesar, the first Roman Emperor.Building on impeccable research, John Williams brings the legendary figure of Augustus vividly to life, and invests his characters with such profound humanity that we enter completely into the heat and danger of their lives and times.ExtraitBOOK ICHAPTER ONEI. The memoirs of Marcus Agrippa: Fragments (13 B.C.). . . I was with him at Actium, when the sword struck fire from metal, and the

blood of soldiers was awash on deck and stained the blue Ionian Sea, and the javelin whistled in the air, and the burning hulls hissed upon the water, and the day was loud with the screams of men whose flesh roasted in the armor they could not fling off; and earlier I was with him at Mutina, where that same Marcus Antonius overran our camp and the sword was thrust into the empty bed where Caesar Augustus had lain, and where we persevered and earned the first power that was to give us the world; and at Philippi, where he traveled so ill he could not stand and yet made himself to be carried among his troops in a litter, and came near death again by the murderer of his father, and where he fought until the murderers of the mortal Julius, who became a god, were destroyed by their own hands. I am Marcus Agrippa, sometimes called Vipsanius, tribune to the people and consul to the Senate, soldier and general to the Empire of Rome, and friend of Gaius Octavius Caesar, now Augustus. I write these memories in the fiftieth year of my life so that posterity may record the time when Octavius discovered Rome bleeding in the jaws of faction, when Octavius Caesar slew the factious beat and removed the almost lifeless body, and when Augustus healed the wounds of Rome and made it whole again, to walk with vigor upon the boundaries of the world. Of this triumph I have, within my abilities, been a part; and of that part these memories will be a record, so that the historians of the ages may understand their wonder at Augustus and Rome. Under the command of Caesar Augustus I performed several functions for the restoration of Rome, for which duty Rome amply rewarded me. I was three times consul, once aedile and tribune, and twice governor of Syria; and twice I received the seal of the Sphinx from Augustus himself during his grave illnesses. Against Lucius Antonius at Perusia I led the victorious Roman legions, and against the Aquitanians at Gaul, and against the German tribes at the Rhine, for which service I refused a Triumph in Rome; and in Spain and Pannonia, too, were rebellious tribes and factions put down. By Augustus I was given title as commander in chief of our navy, and we saved our ships from the pirate Sextus Pompeius by our construction of the harbor west of the Bay of Naples, which ships later defeated and destroyed Pompeius at Mylae and Naulochus on the coast of Sicily; and for that action the Senate awarded me the naval crown. At Actium we defeated the traitor Marcus Antonius, and so restored life to the body of Rome. In celebration of Rome's delivery from the Egyptian treason, I had erected the Temple now called the Pantheon and other public buildings. As chief administrator of the city under Augustus and the Senate, I had repaired the old aqueducts of the city and installed new ones, so that the citizens and populace of Rome might have water and be free of disease; and when peace came to Rome, I assisted in the survey and mapping of the world, begun during the dictatorship of Julius Caesar and made at last possible by his adopted son. Of these things, I shall write more at length as these memories progress. But I must now tell of the time when these events were set into motion, the year after Julius Caesar's triumphant return from Spain, of which campaign Gaius Octavius and Salvidienus Rufus and I were members. For I was with him at Apollonia when the news came of Caesar's death. . . . II. Letter: Gaius Gilnius Maecenas to Titus Livius (13 B.C.) You must forgive me, my dear Livy, for having so long delayed my reply. The usual complaints: retirement seems not to have improved the state of my health at all. The doctors shake their heads wisely, mutter mysteriously, and collect their fees. Nothing seems to help--not the vile medicines I am fed, nor even the abstinence from those pleasures which (as you know) I once enjoyed. The gout has made it impossible for me to hold my pen in hand these last few days, though I know how diligently you pursue your work and what need you have of my assistance in the matter of which you have written me. And along with my other infirmities, I have for the past few weeks been afflicted by an insomnia, so that my days are spent in weariness and lassitude. But my friends do not desert me, and life stays; for those two things I must be grateful. You ask me about the early days of my association with our Emperor. You ought to know that only three days ago he was good enough to visit my house, inquiring after my illnesses, and I felt it politic to inform him of your request. He smiled and asked me whether or not I felt it proper to aid such an unregenerate Republican as yourself; and then we fell to talking about the old days, as men who feel the encroachment of age will do. He remembers things--little things--even more vividly than I, whose profession it has been to forget nothing. At last I asked him if he would prefer to have sent to you his own account of that time. He looked away into the distance for a moment and smiled again and said, "No--Emperors may let their memories lie even more readily than poets and historians." He asked me to send you his warm regards, and gave me permission to write to you with whatever freedom I could find. But what freedom can I find to speak to you of those days? We were young; and though Gaius Octavius, as he was called then, knew that he was favored by his destiny and that Julius Caesar intended his adoption, neither he nor I nor Marcus Agrippa nor Salvidienus Rufus, who were his friends, could truly imagine where we would be led. I do not have the freedom of the historian, my friend; you may recount the movements of men and armies, trace the intricate

course of state intrigues, balance victories and defeats, relate births and deaths--and yet still be free, in the wise simplicity of your task, from the awful weight of a kind of knowledge that I cannot name but that I more and more nearly apprehend as the years draw on. I know what you want; and you are no doubt impatient with me because I do not get on with it and give you the facts that you need. But you must remember that despite my services to the state, I am a poet, and incapable of approaching anything very directly. It may surprise you to learn that I had not known Octavius until I met him at Brindisi, where I had been sent to join him and his group of friends on the way to Apollonia. The reasons for my being there remain obscure to me; it was through the intercession of Julius Caesar, I am sure. My father, Lucius, had once done Julius some service; and a few years before, he had visited us at our villa in Arezzo. I argued with him about something (I was, I believe, asserting the superiority of Callimachus's poems to Catullus's), and I became arrogant, abusive, and (I thought) witty. I was very young. At any rate, he seemed amused by me, and we talked for some time. Two years later, he ordered my father to send me to Apollonia in the company of his nephew. My friend, I must confess to you (though you may not use it) that I was in no profound way impressed with Octavius upon that occasion of our first meeting. I had just come down to Brindisi from Arezzo and after more than ten days of traveling, I was weary to the bone, filthy with the dust of the road, and irritable. I came upon them at the pier from which we were to embark. Agrippa and Salvidienus were talking together, and Octavius stood somewhat apart from them, gazing at a small ship that was anchored nearby. They had given no sign of noticing my approach. I said, somewhat too loudly, I imagine: "I am the Maecenas who was to meet you here. Which of you is which?" Agrippa and Salvidienus looked at me amusedly and gave me their names; Octavius did not turn; and thinking that I saw arrogance and disdain in his back, I said: "And you must be the other, whom they call Octavius." Then he turned, and I knew that I was foolish; for there was an almost desperate shyness on his face. He said: "Yes, I am Gaius Octavius. My uncle has spoken of you." Then he smiled and offered me his hand and raised his eyes and looked at me for the first time. As you know, much has been said about those eyes, more often than not in bad meter and worse prose; I think by now he must be sick of hearing the metaphors and whatnot describing them, though he may have been vain about them at one time. But they were, even then, extraordinarily clear and piercing and sharp--more blue than gray, perhaps, though one thought of light, not color. . . . There, you see? I have started doing it myself; I have been reading too many of my friends' poems. I may have stepped back a pace; I do not know. At any rate, I was startled, and so I looked away, and my eyes fell upon the ship at which Octavius had been gazing. "Is that the scow that's going to take us across?" I asked. I was feeling a little more cheerful. It was a small merchant ship, not more than fifty feet in length, with rotting timbers at the prow and patched sails. A stench rose from it. Agrippa spoke to me. "We are told that it is the only one available." He was smiling at me a little; I imagine that he thought me fastidious, for I was wearing my toga and had on several rings, while they wore only tunics and carried no ornaments. "The stench will be unendurable," I said. Octavius said gravely, "I believe it is going to Apollonia for a load of pickled fish." I was silent for a moment; and then I laughed, and we all laughed, and we were friends. Perhaps we are wiser when we are young, though the philosopher would dispute with me. But I swear to you, we were friends from that moment onward; and that moment of foolish laughter was a bond stronger than anything that came between us later--victories or defeats, loyalties or betrayals, griefs or joys. But the days of youth go, and part of us goes with them, not to return. Thus it was that we crossed to Apollonia, in a stinking fish boat that groaned with the gentlest wave, that listed so perilously to its side that we had to brace ourselves so that we would not tumble across the deck, and that carried us to a destiny we could not then imagine. . . . I resume the writing of this letter after an interruption of two days; I shall not trouble you with a detailing of the maladies that occasioned that interruption; it is all too depressing. In any event, I have seen that I do not give you the kind of thing that will be of much use to you, so I have had my secretary go through some of my papers in search of matters more helpful to your task. You may remember that some ten years ago I spoke at the dedication of our friend Marcus Agrippa's Temple of Venus and Mars, now popularly called the Pantheon. In the beginning I had the idea, later discarded, of doing a rather fanciful oration, almost a poem, if I may say so, which made some odd connections between the state of Rome as we had found it as young men and the state of Rome as this temple now represents it. At any rate, as an aid to my own solution to the problem that the form of this projected oration raised, I made some notes about those early days, which I now draw upon in an effort to aid you in the completion of your history of our world. Picture, if you can, four youths (they are strangers to me now), ignorant of their future and of themselves, ignorant indeed of that very world in which they are beginning to live. One (that is Marcus Agrippa) is tall and heavy-muscled,

with the face almost of a peasant--strong nose, big bones, and a skin like new leather; dry, brownish hair, and a coarse red stubble of beard; he is nineteen. He walks heavily, like a bullock, but there is an odd grace about him. He speaks plainly, slowly, and calmly, and does not show what he feels. Except for his beard, one would not know that he is so young. Another (this is Salvidienus Rufus) is as thin and agile as Agrippa is heavy and stalwart, as quick and volatile as Agrippa is slow and reserved. His face is lean, his skin fair, his eyes dark; he laughs readily, and lightens the gravity which the rest of us affect. He is older than any of us, but we love him as if he were our younger brother. And a third (is it myself?) whom I see even more dimly than the others. No man may know himself, nor how he must appear even to his friends; but I imagine they must have thought me a bit of a fool, that day, and even for some time afterward. I was a bit luxuriant then, and fancied that a poet must play the part. I dressed richly, my manner was affected, and I had brought along with me from Arezzo a servant whose sole duty it was to care for my hair--until my friends derided me so mercilessly that I had him returned to Italy. And at last he who was then Gaius Octavius. How may I tell you of him? I do not know the truth; only my memories. I can say again that he seemed to me a boy, though I was a scant two years older. You know his appearance now; it has not changed much. But now he is Emperor of the world, and I must look beyond that to see him as he was then; and I swear to you that I, whose service to him has been my knowledge of the hearts of both his friends and enemies, could not have foreseen what he was to become. I thought him a pleasant stripling, no more, with a face too delicate to receive the blows of fate, with a manner too diffident to achieve purpose, and with a voice too gentle to utter the ruthless words that a leader of men must utter. I thought that he might become a scholar of leisure, or a man of letters; I did not think that he had the energy to become even a senator, to which his name and wealth entitled him.

*Revue de presse*The finest historical novel ever written by an American. The Washington Post [In Augustus] John Williams re-creates the Roman Empire from the death of Julius Caesar to the last days of Augustus, the machinations of the court, the Senate, and the people, from the sickly boy to the sickly man who almost dies during expeditions to what would seem to be the ruthless ruler. He uses an epistolary format, and in the end all these voices, like a collage, meld together around the main character . . . Read it in conjunction with Robert Graves's more flamboyant *I, Claudius* and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. Harold Augenbraum, Executive Director of the National Book Foundation A novel of extraordinary range, yet of extraordinary minuteness, that manages never to sacrifice one quality for the other. Financial Times Williams has fashioned an always engaging, psychologically convincing work of fiction: a consistent and well-realized portrait. Thomas Lask, The New York Times "Readers of both *Stoner* and *Butchers Crossing* will here encounter an altogether new version of the John Williams they've come to know: Augustus is an epistolary novel set in classical Rome. It's a rare genius who can reinvent himself in his final work and earn high praise for doing so." The Millions "Augustus is gripping, brimming with life." Dan Piepenbring, The Paris Daily This novel of an aged emperor will be intensely illuminating to anyone who is ready to put modern morality aside for a moment in order to acquire a little knowledge of himself or herself. The genius of this astonishing American writer is that he shows how lives that seem utterly strange can be very like our own. John Gray, New Statesman