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Caesar may be the nominal protagonist of this last novel in a series of six chronicling the demise of the Roman Republic, but the presiding spirit is that of Octavian (later Augustus), Caesar's successor and Rome's first emperor. McCullough's Octavian is as complex and gifted as her Caesar, but far less moral, just or merciful-a fitting ruler for a Rome grown too unwieldy for republican government. Blessed with the same immediacy and breezy style that made the tumultuous first century B.C. come alive in previous volumes (The First Man of Rome; Caesar: Let the Dice Fly; etc.), McCullough's heady novel begins with Caesar as dictator of Rome.