



# Reading between the Lions

## The Art Institute's Book Club

[www.artic.edu/bookclub](http://www.artic.edu/bookclub)

### DISCUSSION GUIDE

#### *I, Claudius*

1. Who are the major proponents of a Roman republic throughout the novel, and which characters are more in favor of an empire? How does this affect their leadership and their favor among the populace?
2. Who is the “real” emperor of Rome? Although the men in the novel hold the prominent titles, who else can be considered the brains behind much of the Roman government?
3. What pieces in the galleries best reflect both the domestic role of women in Rome, and, conversely, the political power of women in *I, Claudius*? How do these portrayals compare with those of their male counterparts?
4. How did women such as Livia wield power in ancient Rome?
5. What role do fate, superstitions, and omens play in the decisions characters make throughout the novel?
6. How does Claudius reconcile himself to his fate from the beginning of the book to the point at which he becomes emperor?
7. How has Robert Graves foreshadowed the events that will follow in the aftermath of the Roman Empire?
8. At the beginning of the novel, Claudius swears to tell the tale as an objective, unbiased history. Does he do this successfully?
9. How is love portrayed, if at all, throughout the novel and in the museum's Roman and Byzantine galleries?
10. *I, Claudius* is very much an underdog story. Graves creates a sympathetic character in Claudius, yet the novel takes place in a time when physically weak or disabled people were dismissed as liabilities or idiots. In the galleries, does the artwork idealize the figures to create an image of masculinity and leadership, or do the statues and depictions retain true-to-life imperfections? What does this say about ancient Rome's expectations of its citizens?
11. Was the decision to give Augustus the status of a god after his death a political or spiritual choice by the people of Rome? Was it motivated by a desire to secure Livia's influence, or could turning him into a deity have had purely religious grounds?
12. *I, Claudius* was written in 1934. Can the politics and culture of the 1930s be read between the lines of *I, Claudius*?
13. As far as historical fiction goes, how much of the book do you think is factual and how much is fictionalized by Graves?

#### Suggested further reading and viewing:

*I, Claudius* (PBS miniseries)

*Claudius, The God* by Robert Graves

*Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar

*Everyday Life in Ancient Rome* by Lionel Casson