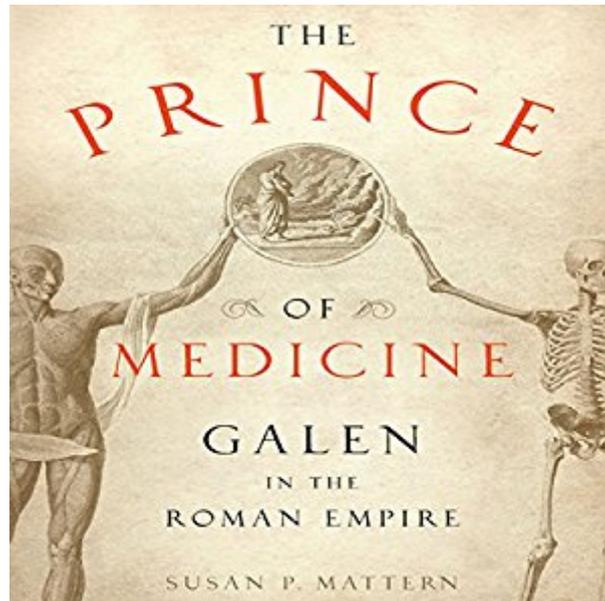


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The Prince Of Medicine: Galen In The Roman Empire



Synopsis

Galen of Pergamum (A.D. 129-ca. 216) began his remarkable career tending to wounded gladiators in provincial Asia Minor. Later in life he achieved great distinction as one of a small circle of court physicians to the family of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, at the very heart of Roman society. Susan Mattern's *The Prince of Medicine* offers the first authoritative biography in English of this brilliant, audacious, and profoundly influential figure. Like many Greek intellectuals living in the high Roman Empire, Galen was a prodigious polymath, writing on subjects as varied as ethics and eczema, grammar and gout. Indeed, he was (as he claimed) as highly regarded in his lifetime for his philosophical works as for his medical treatises. However, it is for medicine that he is most remembered today, and from the later Roman Empire through the Renaissance, medical education was based largely on his works. Even up to the 20th century, he remained the single most influential figure in Western medicine. Yet he was a complicated individual, full of breathtaking arrogance, shameless self-promotion, and lacerating wit. He was fiercely competitive, once disemboweling a live monkey and challenging the physicians in attendance to correctly replace its organs. Relentless in his pursuit of anything that would cure the patient, he insisted on rigorous observation and, sometimes, daring experimentation. Even confronting one of history's most horrific events - a devastating outbreak of smallpox - he persevered, bearing patient witness to its predations, year after year. *The Prince of Medicine* gives us Galen as he lived his life, in the city of Rome at its apex of power and decadence, among his friends, his rivals, and his patients. It offers a deeply human and long-overdue portrait of one of ancient history's most significant and engaging figures.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 10 hours and 46 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: June 6, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00KTGJ3R6

Best Sellers Rank: #194 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient #211 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > Rome #595 in Books > Audible Audiobooks >

Customer Reviews

The reader will smile with satisfaction at the arsenal of information Susan Mattern brings to the life of Galen. Whether biographical, cultural, or professional, she animates a recognizable name and converts it into a reachable personality. We see the physician Galen as a workaholic devoted to medicine. We see him as a committed scholar, frequent lecturer, and prolific author whose work, according to Mattern, accounts for "one-eighth of all the classical Greek literature that survives." He is presented as the premier anatomist of his day (and many thousands of days to follow). And Mattern describes him as a showman reminiscent, perhaps, of some mix of Houdini and Jonathan Winters in his ability to improvise and dazzle in front of a fascinated audience watching him at work with his knife. Galen was remarkable in many other ways, including the fact that he did not accept fees but did make house calls. A physician to gladiators and to the household of Marcus Aurelius, he also ministered to the broad range of people in the street. Galen's treatments of more than 1,800 years ago naturally puzzle today, such as directing patients to urinate on their own wounds, or using dove dung, snake flesh and other exotic substances. One wonders what specific link Galen perceived between the rub of a bug and the cure of a rash, but that was a brand of reasoning centuries down the road. Mattern says Galen's "most relevant contribution" is his "clinical practice" and that he "never lost sight of the idea that medicine is about treating patients." This, then is a very good book. But it comes with a "tax" attached. At least 140 times, the author uses variants of the phrases "see below," "see before," or most annoying of all, "as I have mentioned."

This biography of Galen takes an often misunderstood figure and makes him a real human being. That sounds silly to say but I cannot count the number of times I have read where early modern medicine had to "overcome" Galen. There is a sense of course in which that is true. But "Galen" became synonymous in the popular mind with an image of entrenched dogmatism and wrong-headed theories in medicine. In some ways Galen has the same problem that Aristotle has. Both were wrong in many fundamental ways but, for their times, they laid the foundation for techniques that later would become standard, especially the technique of close observation of nature. What makes the cases of Galen and Aristotle especially ironic is that both these early thinkers who emphasized empirical observation became themselves the objects of stultified theories. Their most positive contributions - the technique of close attention to actual details and continuing to learn from observation - were ignored while their often wrong theories about what they

saw and how to deal with it became deified. Susan Mattern brings Galen and all his strengths and weaknesses to life in a way that gets the modern reader to appreciate the historical facts about him. The book strikes a strong blow against the popular negative image of "Galen." It fleshes out the man, not what he became as an object of either worship or scorn from the Middle Ages into the modern world. Mattern is a gifted writer. Her prose flows easily and her ability to combine biographical information with the environment in which Galen lived is superb. This is a rare commodity - a highly readable book about an ancient figure that both keeps close to the data and reads as smoothly as the biography of a modern figure.

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