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INTRODUCTION

Julius Caesar lived in Rome more than 2,000 years ago. He is remembered as a brilliant military leader who expanded Rome’s territories. We remember him, however, not only for his extraordinary life, but also for the manner of his death.

Caesar was so powerful that some of his fellow Romans saw him as a threat to the Roman Republic. They worried that he wanted to make himself a godlike king of Rome. To prevent this, they assassinated him in the Roman Senate House on the fifteenth of March in the year 44 BCE.

More than 1,600 years later, the great English poet and playwright William Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Shakespeare focused his drama on the small group of Romans who plotted to kill Caesar—in particular, on two of the leading conspirators, Caius Cassius and Marcus Brutus.

Because Shakespeare’s play is a tragedy, you know it will not end happily. A tragedy usually presents a heroic but flawed central character.
whose actions lead to unforeseen and sorrowful consequences. You might think that the central character of a play titled *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* would be Caesar himself. But that is not the case. In Shakespeare’s play, Brutus emerges as the central tragic figure.

Brutus is drawn into the murderous conspiracy by his friend, Cassius. Although Brutus has long been a friend of Caesar, when the terrible moment comes, he thrusts his dagger into Caesar’s body. If you were to ask why he killed his friend, Brutus would answer, “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more.”

In the mid-19th century, an American actor, John Wilkes Booth, was obsessed by the character of Brutus. Booth saw Brutus as Brutus saw himself—as a defender of freedom against tyranny. In April 1865, Booth shot and killed President Abraham Lincoln, while the president was watching a play at Ford’s Theater in Washington, D.C. Booth thought of himself as another Brutus, and of Lincoln as another tyrannical Caesar who had to be stopped.

To see Brutus as a hero of liberty against
tyranny is to see only part of the more complex picture that Shakespeare puts before us. In the play, Brutus’s honor and patriotism are mixed with self-righteousness and self-deluding idealism. At the end of the play, we are left with no real hero, no clear winner or loser. Through the character of Brutus, Shakespeare shows us how political violence, even if undertaken for noble reasons, can lead to tragic results.

Keep in mind that while Shakespeare uses real historical figures as characters in his play, the play is fiction. Shakespeare invents elements of the action because he wants to tell a good story. Building on historical accounts of Caesar’s assassination, Shakespeare uses his imagination to explore the complexities of human nature, to consider ideas about power and politics, and to dramatize the tensions in relationships, especially the complicated relationship between Brutus and Cassius.

This book presents a shortened version of Shakespeare’s play that can be performed in a little more than an hour. While condensed, with some words changed and a few lines moved, this version of *Julius Caesar* remains true to Shakespeare,
generally using the original language. In this book, you will also find a brief account of Caesar’s place in the history of ancient Rome, as well as helpful information on Shakespeare’s theatre and language. Moreover, to help prepare you for both enjoying and understanding the play, this book first presents Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in the form of a brief story, following the long tradition of introducing young people to Shakespeare by re-telling his plays as stories.

Shakespeare didn’t write his plays for silent reading from a book. He wrote them to be seen and heard. *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* will come to life when you gather with classmates, friends, or family members to read it aloud, or, even better, to act it out. You don’t need fancy costumes or high-tech special effects. Just heed the advice of Hamlet, one of Shakespeare’s greatest characters, who says that you only need to “speak the speech” naturally, letting the words help you express the emotions.

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