

The Emperor's Children

by Claire Messud

Alfred A. Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY

Three long-time, thirty-ish New York City friends are at loose ends. Marina, a writer, is struggling to finish her first book; Julius, a critic, must temp to make ends meet; and Danielle, a television producer, has returned from Australia only to learn that the project she researched there won't fly. Each longs for a satisfying romantic relationship. As things start looking up for them, Marina's cousin Bootie, a college dropout bent on becoming someone important, arrives in New York and changes each of their lives forever. Central to this web of complicated relationships is Murray Thwaite, Marina's father, an intellectual and successful journalist. Claire Messud skillfully probes ambition, especially literary ambition, persona and self-invention, and conflict between myth and fact; in a humorous and complex satire of New York, its intellectualism and class distinctions.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the "emperor's children?" Why did the author choose this title for the book? How does it relate to the book's theme(s)?
2. The General that Powell mentions in the book's epitaph stresses the importance of maintaining one's "personal myth." Do you agree with the General? Which of the book's characters are vigilant in maintaining their personal myths? How does the epitaph's sentiment play out in the novel?
3. The author focuses each chapter on a particular character, alternating among them. How does this approach impact the reader's view of the characters? Does it affect the way you see the relationships between/among them?
- 4.
5. As the book opens we learn of the close friendship of Julius, Danielle, and Marina. Each of them then drifts into romantic relationships with others. Why do you think Danielle and Julius keep the details of their relationships from Marina? How does Marina react to their secrecy? What is the impact on their lives of each of their romantic relationships?
6. Murray feels that he has control over the lives of those close to him. In what ways does he try to control Annabel, Marina, Danielle, and Bootie? Is he successful? Why or why not?

7. What purpose does the character of Frederick (Bootie) serve? Whose lives are changed irrevocably by his arrival in New York? How?
8. Danielle describes Ludovic Seeley's Napoleonic world view: "To get everyone to see his way, his way, and then to make that way the standard. Then to have them, all of society's little Napoleons...under his sway." Describe the relationship between Ludovic and Murray. How is Seeley's Napoleonic world view reflected in Murray's behavior?
9. It could be argued that the two people whom Murray dislikes most, Ludovic Seeley and Bootie, have been the most honest with him. How does their directness threaten him? Are there other reasons for his antipathy toward them?
10. How does Marina's book about children's clothing reflecting the desires of family and society underscore the book's examination of personal myth?
11. Why do the events of 9/11 preclude the launch of the *Monitor*, Ludovic's new "cultural expose'" magazine? Given what you know about what happened after the World Trade Center was destroyed, does this make sense?
12. What do you think it is about Murray's leaving her apartment on 9/11 that sends Danielle into a tailspin? Is her prolonged depression believable?
13. Compare and contrast the mothers: Judy, Annabel, and Randy. How does each of their children reflect their mother's wishes, desires, and upbringing? Or do they?
14. The book is set in New York City. How does the city serve as a character in its own right? Discuss whether or not this story would work if set in another location.
15. Consider the treatment of New York's upper crust intelligentsia in this book. How is it satirized? How are New York City class distinctions treated in the story? Give examples.
16. What ulterior motive(s) might Ludovic Seeley have for marrying Marina? Danielle (p.110) and Murray (p.246) briefly entertain the thought that Ludo might be gay. What do you think? If he were gay, would he want to marry Marina?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

“Claire Messud was educated at Cambridge and Yale. Her first novel, *When the World Was Steady*, and ... *The Hunters*, were both finalists for the PEN/Faulkner Award; her second novel, *The Last Life*, was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year and Editor's Choice at *The Village Voice*. All three ... books were *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year. She has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Radcliffe Fellowship, and is the current recipient of the Straus Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts, with her husband and children.”

The information above is excerpted from Random House:
http://www.randomhouse.com/author/results.pperl?authorid=70464&view=full_splght

MESSUD BIBLIOGRAPHY

- *When the World Was Steady*, Granta Books (New York, NY), 1994.
- *The Last Life*, Harcourt Brace (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Hunters: Two Short Novels*, Harcourt Brace (New York, NY), 2001.
- *The Emperor's Children*, Knopf (New York, NY), 2006.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

If you liked *The Emperor's Children*, you may want to read other books set in New York City:

Bonfire of the Vanities by Tom Wolfe
Breakfast at Tiffany's by Truman Capote
Bright Lights, Big City by Jay McInerney
The Hours by Michael Cunningham
New York Trilogy by Paul Auster
Washington Square by Henry James



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