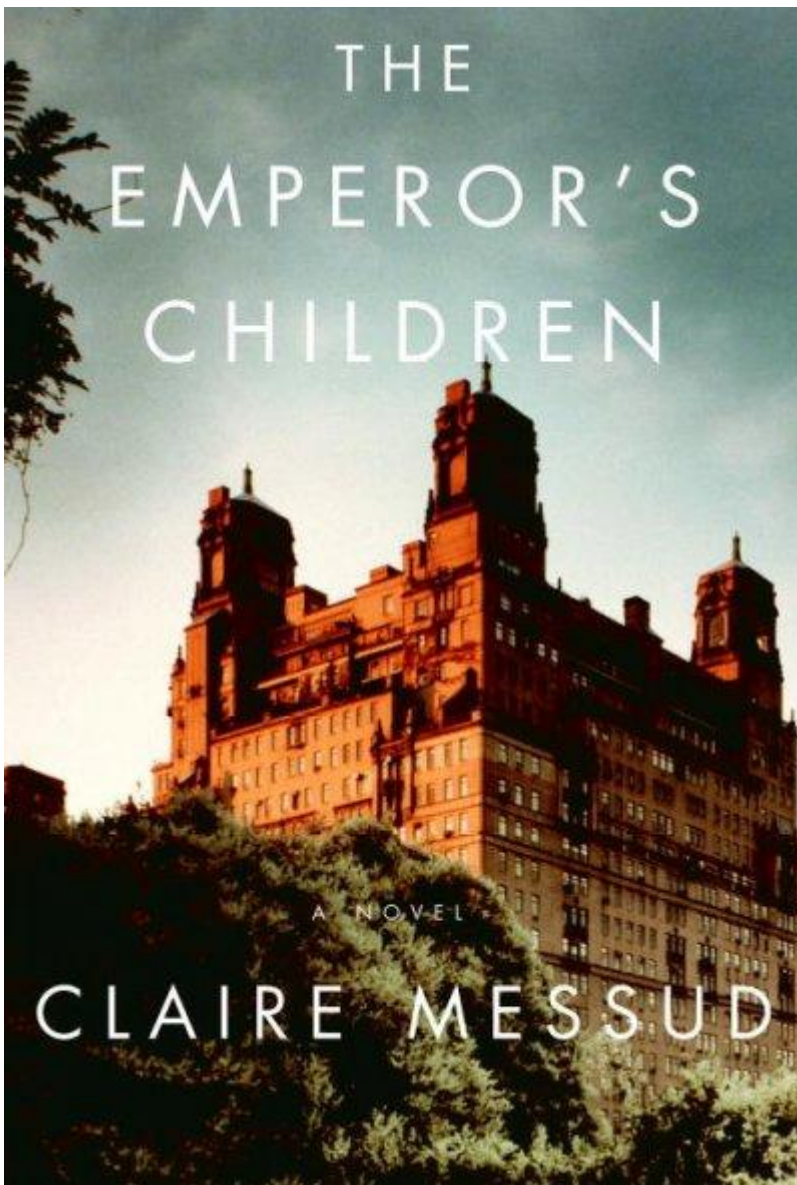


## About the book...



*The Emperor's Children* is a richly drawn, brilliantly observed novel of fate and fortune—about the intersections in the lives of three friends, now on the cusp of their thirties, making their way--and not--in New York City. In this tour de force, the celebrated author Claire Messud brings to life a city, a generation, and the way we live in this moment.

## About the author...

Claire Messud was educated at Cambridge and Yale. Her first novel, *When the World Was Steady*, and her most recent book, *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 of her 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.

## Reviews

### *BookPage*: **The End of Innocence**

The main characters in Claire Messud's new novel are awful people, but such is the writer's skill and empathy in presenting them that you stick with them anyway. The setting is mostly Manhattan in the months before September 11, 2001—an era that seems a lifetime ago—and a malaise has settled over the lives of TV producer Danielle Minkoff and her friends. Danielle is 30, and in a rut; as are Marina, the daughter of a famous writer/critic, who's moved back into her parents' sprawling Central Park apartment and is trying to write a book; and Julius, a self-destructive freelance writer. Complicating their lives is the arrival of Marina's repulsive cousin Frederick, called Bootie, who wants to become a luminary like his uncle Murray, despite being self-obsessed (to the point of what feels like mild autism), untalented and in the end, treacherous. Also in the mix is Ludovic Seeley, an ambitious Australian who comes to New York to start a magazine.

Striding over all, like a colossus, is the tall, handsome, wildly charming, chain-smoking, hard-drinking "Emperor," Murray Thwaite, who, though benevolent enough to tolerate the intrusions of his spoiled daughter and viper of a nephew, has just enough dishonor in him to start an adulterous affair with Danielle. One of Messud's tricks for keeping us engaged is focusing largely on Danielle, who's the least awful of the bunch: She has enough discipline to keep a serious, if frustrating job, and she's capable of thinking of other folks besides herself. Moreover, Messud's writing is luminous—consider her description of a summer storm at the Thwaites' vacation place, or of Julius' boyfriend beating him up in a men's room. The short chapters rush the narrative toward what the reader knows is coming and the characters can't. Something horrible is going to happen to at least one of them on September 11, and thanks to Messud's compassion, you're surprised to feel that none of them deserves it. *The Emperor's Children* works as a snapshot of an anxious time in the life of the country.

### *Kirkus*:/\*Starred Review\*/

A stinging portrait of life among Manhattan's junior glitterati. In March 2001, a decade after they met at Brown, three best friends are finding it hard to be 30. Danielle Minkoff is the most established, although her job in TV news largely entails cranking out puff pieces on the dangers of, say, liposuction. Freelance critic Julius Clarke wonders how much longer a hip social life can substitute for a regular income. They're both strivers from the Midwest, while Marina Thwaite was born into the liberal elite: Father Murray is a crusading journalist, mom Annabel a dedicated social worker. But beautiful Marina is floundering, at sea in the book she's supposedly writing, about children's clothing, living with her parents after the breakup of a long-time romance. Their uneasy stasis is disrupted by two new arrivals. Australian Ludovic Seeley, funded by a Murdoch-like mogul to edit a new magazine, *The Monitor*, latches onto Marina, giving her the confidence to finish her manuscript as well as its glib title, *The Emperor's*

*Children Have No Clothes*. College dropout Bootie Tubb, the 19-year-old son of Murray's sister, arrives from Watertown, N.Y., hoping to learn from his famous uncle how to be an intellectual. Bootie is swiftly disillusioned-unsurprisingly, since Murray's self-absorption is surpassed only by that of his daughter, one of the most narcissistic characters in recent fiction. Messud (*The Hunters*, 2001, etc.) deftly paints the neurotic uncertainties of people who know they're privileged and feel sorry for themselves anyway; she makes her characters human enough so we don't entirely detest them, but overall, they're a distasteful bunch. In this shallow world, the enigmatic but clearly malevolent Ludovic is bound to succeed, even though *The Monitor's* launch is scuttled by the attack on the World Trade Center. It's a bit disconcerting to find 9/11 so smoothly integrated into the author's thematic concerns and plot development-it believably motivates the breakup of Murray's affair with Danielle-but five years on, perhaps it's time for this catastrophe to enter the realm of worthy fictional material. Intelligent, evocative and unsparing.

*Library Journal:*

Beautiful, Ivy League-educated, and the daughter of a renowned journalist, Marina Thwaite lives in New York City along with two close friends from Brown: television producer Danielle and freelance writer Julius, who is gay. All three are just barely 30 and making their way into adulthood. Marina has recently broken up with a longtime lover she thought she might marry and is struggling to finish a book whose advance is long spent. Meanwhile, Danielle is returning from an investigative trip to Australia, and Julius is trying to figure out how to make ends meet without admitting to his friends that he's flat broke. Enter Marina's young cousin, Bootie, a college dropout who's decided that life in New York City has got to be better than life in upstate New York. Bootie's arrival in the city is a catalyst for events that will change all their lives forever. Messud's (*The Hunters*) comedy of manners is extremely well written and features characters that come alive. The reader will be tugged in many directions as these characters' lives intersect in the realms of love, family, friendship, and tragedy. This wonderful read is an insightful look at our time and the decisions people make. Highly recommended.

*Publishers Weekly:*

Marina Thwaite, Danielle Minkoff and Julian Clarke were buddies at Brown, certain that they would soon do something important in the world. But as all near 30, Danielle is struggling as a TV documentary maker, and Julius is barely surviving financially as a freelance critic. Marina, the startlingly beautiful daughter of celebrated social activist, journalist and hob-nobber Murray Thwaite, is living with her parents on the Upper West Side, unable to finish her book--titled *The Emperor's Children Have No Clothes* (on how changing fashions in children's clothes mirror changes in society). Two arrivals upset the group stasis: Ludovic, a fiercely ambitious Aussie who woos Marina to gain entrée into society (meanwhile planning to destroy Murray's reputation), and Murray's nephew, Frederick "Bootie" Tubb, an immature, idealistic college dropout and autodidact who is determined to live the life of a New York intellectual. The group orbits

around the post-September 11 city with disconcerting entitlement--and around Murray, who is, in a sense, the emperor. Messud, in her fourth novel, remains wickedly observant of pretensions--intellectual, sexual, class and gender. Her writing is so fluid, and her plot so cleverly constructed, that events seem inevitable, yet the narrative is ultimately surprising and masterful as a contemporary comedy of manners.

### Discussion questions

(<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307276667&view=rg>)

1. At the novel's onset, most of the characters are outside New York. Why might Messud have chosen to begin in this manner? At what other points in the book do the characters leave the city, and with what results?
2. Which of the novel's characters strikes you as its moral center? Is it Bootie, who comes to New York with such high ideals and easily rankled feelings? Is it Danielle, who has lived there long enough to feel at home but who still sees its pretensions and absurdities? With which of these characters is the reader meant to identify? Whose judgments seem the most reliable? And what flaws or blind spots afflict them?
3. Julius is obsessed with the characters of Pierre and Natasha from *War and Peace*, longing to be the sparkling Natasha but fearing he's really more like the brooding, self-conscious Pierre. Bootie is constantly quoting Emerson. Which of the other characters has an emblematic book, and what role do those books play in their lives, in the way they see the world, and, of course, the way they see themselves? Is Julius anything like Pierre or Natasha? Does Bootie really live up to Emerson's criterion of genius? At what points do they similarly misread other characters?
4. Almost everybody in **The Emperor's Children** envies, and is intimidated by, somebody else. Julius, for instance, is in awe of Marina's self-confidence and envious of her sense of entitlement. Marina is cowed by her father. Poor Bootie is a virtual pressure cooker of indiscriminate awe and resentment. What do Messud's characters feel insecure about? Is there anyone in the book who seems truly comfortable with him or herself or any relationship that seems to be conducted by equals? Would you say that awe and envy are this novel's dominant emotions?
5. Marina, we learn, frequently accompanies Murray to public functions, and is sometimes mistaken for his "trophy wife" [p. 40]. Does their relationship strike you as incestuous [p. 121]? Compare Marina's unfolding relationship with Ludovic to her bond with her father. Do you think that Ludovic—incidentally, the only

major character who is seen entirely from the outside—really loves Marina or is merely using her, and if so for what purpose?

6. Just as Marina has symbolically taken over her mother's role, "Danielle had the peculiar sensation of having usurped her friend's role in the Thwaite family, and more than that, of having usurped it at some moment in the distant past, a decade or more ago: she felt like a teenager, and she was suddenly, powerfully aware of the profound oddity of Marina's present life, a life arrested at, or at least returned to, childhood" [p. 46]. How many of the other characters seem similarly suspended? Which of them seems like a full-grown adult, and what does it mean to be an adult in the scheme of this novel? If Danielle has indeed usurped Marina's place, what is the significance of her affair with Marina's father? Which of the other characters takes on another character's role, and for what reasons?

7. When pressed to take a job, Marina confesses, "I worry that that will make me ordinary, like everybody else" [p. 74]. To what extent are other characters possessed by the same fear, and how do they defend themselves against it? Do they have a common idea of what constitutes ordinariness? Can ordinariness even exist in a social world in which everyone is constantly, feverishly striving to be unique? Is it possible that Marina is just lazy and prevaricating in her charming way?

8. With his high-flown ambitions, his indolence, and his appalling sense of hygiene, Bootie initially seems like a comic character. But in the course of the novel Messud's portrait of him darkens until he comes to seem either sinister or tragic—perhaps both. How does she accomplish this? Which other characters does she gradually reveal in a different light? Compare Messud's shifting portrayal of Bootie to her handling of Julius and Danielle. In what ways do they too evade or defy the reader's initial expectations about them?

9. On similar lines, both Ludovic and Bootie denounce Murray as a fraud while Bootie in particular prides himself on his sincerity. But is such sincerity a good thing? What other characters embrace that virtue, and with what results? Compare Bootie's frank literary assessment of his uncle with Murray's frank critique of his daughter's manuscript, or his even franker response to Bootie's essay. When in this novel does honesty turn out to be a pretext for something else? And when do subterfuge and deception turn out to be acts of kindness?

10. Murray feels that his mother's efforts at improving him succeeded only in "turning her boy into someone, something, she couldn't understand" [p. 135]. By contrast, he thinks, Marina has been paralyzed by the very expansiveness of her upbringing. What does this novel have to say about parents and children? Which of the Emperor's children has proved a disappointment? Does any parent in this novel (Murray, Annabel, Judy, Randy) truly understand his or her offspring? And is it good for said offspring to be understood?

11. Some of Messud's characters begin the novel in a state of happiness and others attain it, but nearly all of them see their happiness threatened or even shattered. How does this come about? Which of them is the victim of outside forces and which is responsible for his or her fall? How would you describe this novel's vision of happiness? Considering that the typical comedy has a happy (or happy-ish) ending, what do you make of the fact that so many of Messud's characters end up bereft or disappointed?

12. Among this novel's many characters, one has to include the character of New York City. How does Messud bring the city to life? Compare Murray's New York with that of Marina, Danielle, Bootie, and Julius. What is it that draws the characters to prove themselves in New York?

13. What role do the events of September 11, 2001, play in **The Emperor's Children**? Are there other points when history—or reality—impinges on the safe and mostly privileged world its characters inhabit? What is the significance of Annabel Thwaite's client DeVaughn or results of Julius and David's affair? Does the ending make sense when compared with the rest of the novel?

### **Suggested Reading**

<http://www.randomhouse.com/vintage/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307276667&view=rg>

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (1975)  
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)  
Henry James, *The Golden Bowl* (1905)  
Diane Johnson, *Le Divorce* (1997)  
Ken Kalfus, *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006)  
Jay McInerney, *Brightness Falls* (1992)  
Dawn Powell, *Angels on Toast* (1940)  
Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (1920)  
Tom Wolfe, *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987)

### **AADL Librarian's Pick**

Galt Niederhoffer, *A Taxonomy of Barnacles* (2006)  
Touchstone Pictures, *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)