

The Emperor's Children by Claire Messud  
Picador 2006

This is the first novel by Claire Messud that I have read and having completed it I am determined to catch up on her previous three.

The Emperor's Children is set in New York, both before and immediately after the terrible events of 9/11; yet the latter, in a subtle and respectful way, is almost a postscript to the story as a whole because this is a novel about individual human lives rather than great events.

The principle characters are three thirty-somethings, Danielle, Marina and Julius, and Marina's younger cousin Fred, aka Bootie. Marina is the daughter of Murray Thwaite, a Chomsky-esque intellectual and writer who is quickly established as the eponymous Emperor. As the novel unfolds, as well as the interplay between the friends, and their struggles with work, love and play, the all-pervasive presence of Murray Thwaite, his massive personality, his rages and needs, dominates them all.

Claire Messud has produced a wonderful contemporary tale in the Emperor's Children, but one that is also replete with some timeless themes not the least of which is the assertion of independence, or the failure to do so, by the children of powerful parents.

Strongly recommended.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh