

**The Irish Times, 2 Dec 2006**

Two novels and a book of short stories stood out for me as the finest fiction offerings of the year. American writer Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* is a profound and moving examination of American lives in the months leading up to and immediately following 9/11, while Jane Harris' debut novel *The Observations* contains the most lively and energetic narrative voice of the year in Bessy Buckley, a young servant girl in 19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. I read Colm Toibin's *Mothers and Sons* slowly, wanting to savour each story and every sentence from our finest prose writer. My favourite non-fiction book was Rudolph Chelminski's *The Perfectionist*, a study of Bernard Loiseau, a French chef who committed suicide when the pressure of losing his precious three Michelin stars overwhelmed him. His passion for food is brought vividly to life in this highly readable but tragic biography.