

The Sunday Business Post, 24 Dec 2006

My favourite book of 2006 is *The Emperor's Children* by Claire Messud. The novel is set in Manhattan between March and November 2001 so naturally the events of 9/11 loom on the horizon during much of the story and play a dramatic part in its climax and resolution. For me, it is the finest novel yet to be published which explores the events surrounding that day. (I read two others this year, Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* but neither match the storytelling majesty that Messud reaches in this masterpiece.)

At the heart of the novel lies the Thwaite family, headed by the ageing intellectual Murray Thwaite, a wonderfully narcissistic character whose random thoughts and opinions have been fodder for American intellectual magazines for years but who is growing increasingly lazy and egotistical, traits which are exposed in dramatic fashion by his obnoxious nephew Bootie Tubb. His daughter Marina is floundering as she tries to establish a separate identity and career, while her best friend Danielle makes a series of romantic choices that prove costly to their friendship.

I've always loved novels of New York and this is probably the finest since McInerney's *Brightness Falls*. The characters are thoroughly flawed, often despicable, utterly selfish, but not without redeeming qualities. Despite their behaviour the reader becomes invested in their successes and failures and as the pages turn and August turns to September, one hopes for a touch of heroism and survival when a bright morning turns the city to chaos. A truly great novel.