Charles Lambert (author)

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Charles Lambert (born October 1953) is an English novelist and short-story writer.

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Biography [edit]

Charles Lambert was born in October 1953 in Lichfield, England.[1] He went to a number of schools in central England before winning a scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to read English in 1972.[2] During his time at Cambridge, he was involved with Blue Room, a poetry society founded by John Wilkinson and Charlie Bulbeck. His first publication, *Of Western Limits*, was a poetic collaboration with John Wilkinson following a walking holiday in Scotland.

In 1976 he moved to Milan and, apart from brief spells in Ireland, Portugal and London, he has lived and worked in Italy since then. His occupations have included academic translator, university language teacher, journalist and editor for international organizations.

Fiction [edit]

His first novel, *Little Monsters*, a Good Housekeepingselection and described by John Harding of the Daily Mail as "beautifully written and crafted, and more compelling than many thrillers",[3] was published in 2008, the same year as his collection of prize-winning stories, *The Scent of Cinnamon and Other Stories*; the title story won an O. Henry Prize.[4]

Any Human Face, his second novel and the first in a trilogy set in modern-day Rome, was welcomed as "a sophisticated literary thriller"[5] by The Guardian and as "a wonderful book, beautifully written"[6] by Eurocrime.co.uk., while for The Daily Telegraph it is "a slow-burning, beautifully written crime story that brings to life the Rome that tourists don't see – luckily for them".[7]

The second novel in the trilogy, *The View from the Tower*, came out in February 2014. Mystery Scenecalled it "a superb, deeply thought-out book".[8] For Crime Review it was "intriguing and exquisitely written".[9] The novel was subsequently published in Italian, with the title *Occasioni di Morte* .

Later that year, he published a memoir/fictional autobiography composed of 241 120-word sections and entitled *With a Zero at its Heart* . Selected as one of the best books of the year by the Guardian, which described the book as "elegantly written and with considerable emotional clout...poetic, tender and funny",[10] the cover and page design was the work of Vaughan Oliver

His most recent novel, *The Children's Home*, was published in 2016. Described by The New York Timesas "disquieting",[11] the novel received starred reviews from Kirkus Reviews[12] and Booklist, which called it "a magical,

mesmerizing tale about the courage it takes to confront the unknown".[13] The novel has been translated into French, as *La Maison des Enfants* . He has also published a novella, *The Slave House*, based on his experiences in post-war Portugal.

The Children's Home

By Charles Lambert

Reading Group Guide

This reading group guide for **The Children's Home** *includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

In a sprawling, secluded estate lives Morgan Fletcher, the disfigured heir to a mysterious fortune. Morgan spends his days in quiet study, avoiding his reflection. One day, two children, Moira and David, appear. Morgan takes them in, giving them free reign of the mansion he shares with his housekeeper Engel. Then more children arrive.

The children behave strangely. They have an uncanny understanding of Morgan's past, and their bizarre discoveries in the mansion are disturbing. Every day the children seem to disappear into hidden rooms, if not into thin air.

As time goes by, Morgan suspects that the children are there with a purpose, which they refuse to share, though it involves the fates of more than just those in the mansion. Ultimately, Morgan must confront his past, his family, and the source of his fortune.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Engel call the first child, Moira, a living daylight? Why do you think the "living daylights" are the part of the soul most susceptible to fear? How does this set the tone for the book?

2. When David appears, he's described as wearing a "cardboard tag" and stands like "a little soldier" (page 4). Where did this make you think David had come from?

3. How is the Doctor able to accept Morgan so easily? What does he mean when he says, "I might be no more than a family doctor, but I haven't stopped *wondering*" (page 70)?

4. What fairytale characters does Morgan's mother remind you of? In what ways?

5. The children seem to be on a quest almost as soon as they arrive. Some of the elements of a classic quest include the call, acquiring companions and help, obstacles, a journey, attaining the goal, and returning home. How do we see these elements play out in the children's quest? In Morgan's quest?

6. Morgan "wanted to see what the mask would look like that had no face beneath it; the mask that had become

the face" (page 22). Why is Morgan so fascinated with masks? What does his ultimate rejection of the wax mask signify? Why does the wax mask represent the danger of superiority?

7. What does the burning dream at the end of chapter nineteen mean (page 120)? What are the "hundreds, thousands" that Morgan is one of?

8. When David asks about the factory, Morgan can only say that "it makes power" (page 86). Is Morgan responsible for the factory? Should he have known more about it?

9. Why do the children write "I AM ONLY A CHILD BUT ALREADY I HAVE UNDERSTOOD THE WICKEDNESS OF THE WORLD" (page 106)? Are the children better able to understand wickedness somehow? Why or why not?

10. Why does the Doctor become more childlike as David becomes more grown-up and authoritative? Why does Morgan see the "man David might have become" (page 210) in the Doctor?

11. While his mother lived, Morgan was "referred to as Master. Master Morgan, the child of the house" (page 44). Why was he a child? At the end of the book, how has Morgan changed?

12. From the children's fascination with where they've come from and the pregnant figure in the attic (page 195) to the roots of the children in the field at the factory (page 177), why is it so important to know the origin of things in *The Children's Home*?

13. When David tells Morgan "What's happened to you is you" (page 201), what does he mean? And why does he ultimately heal some of Morgan's injuries but not all?

14. How does the Doctor's statement, "All these worlds we know nothing of...They're all connected under the surface...What doesn't happen in one place happens somewhere else," reflect *The Children's Home* as a whole?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Read *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson and discuss the parallels among these plots. How do they each present the dualities of human nature, in adults and children?

2. Watch *Pan's Labyrinth,* which blends elements of fantasy, history, and the realities of war into a single narrative. Discuss how the elements of fantasy in the movie contrast with and underline the realities it depicts. Does *The Children's Home* use fantasy in a similar way?

3. Choose a classic fairy tale to share with the group. Discuss what you think its meanings are to both adults and children, and how and why those meanings vary.

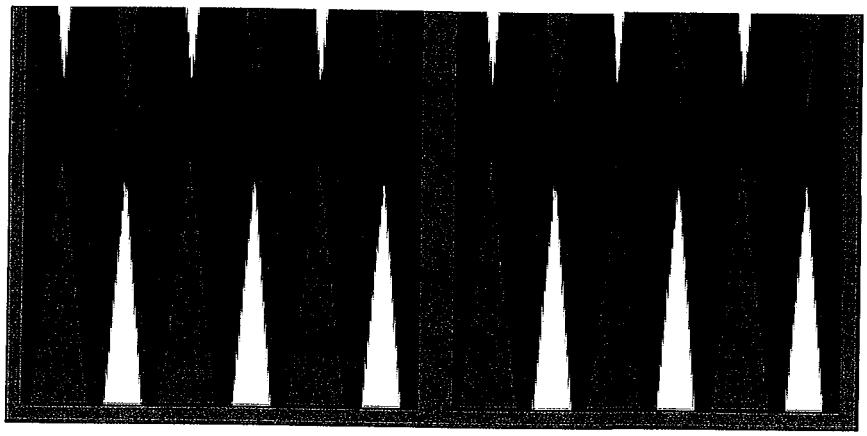
The Children's Home by Charles Lambert

I had a somewhat alarming experience when reading "The Children's Home" where I felt increasingly anxious as the story progresses. It's a novel that accumulates a tremendous power in its surreal tone over time when reading it. I felt a shift in perspective as I became immersed in the dark fictional world Charles Lambert created in the story and this carried on into how I see the world around me. It inspires that special kind of disquiet where you start to question everything around you and these are uncomfortable questions that you aren't sure you want answered.

The novel focuses on Morgan Fletcher who has barely ever ventured out from living in a palatial estate he's inherited from his family. Morgan exists in virtual solitude except for a group of unseen servants who he has virtually no contact with because of his horrendous facial disfigurements which he's ashamed of. He isn't entirely sure where his family's wealth came from, but he's content to spend his days cataloguing the huge array of books stored in the property. Even though he claims not to read them his conception of himself is highly literary: "He imagined himself the dirty secret at the heart of the world, the overlooked madwoman raving in the attic of a house that occupied everything there was, each brick and pane and board, the wondering prince in the hair-filled mask of iron he had dreamt of as a boy." In this way he comes to represent a sort of everyman, but one who is entirely estranged from a mysterious world which functions independently around him.

A new servant arrives named Engel who cooks for Morgan, but she eventually also takes on the role of child-minder as soon as young children start arriving at the house from unknown sources. Morgan takes them all in gladly because "It has never been a house that welcomed love… Not until now." There are soon so many children he isn't even certain how many there are. Their presence is welcome at first, but the intelligent children seem to have a mysterious purpose of their own and they lead Morgan into facing uncomfortable problems about this world that's been consumed by war and greed. Together with Doctor Crane who first comes to treat a sick child and eventually lives at the house semi-permanently, Morgan is shown the secrets which dwell within his own house and the sinister factory managed by his domineering estranged sister.

This is an enigmatic novel imbued with haunting imagery that accumulates meaning over the course of the story. For instance, in an attic room there is a model of a pregnant woman in a box who is strangely life-like and was presumably used as a tool for medical research. She comes to represent issues of fertility, beauty and the future of civilization. This unnerving figure also makes an alarming counterpart to Morgan's own vain and horrifically tyrannical mother who was plagued by a debilitating illness.



Morgan and Dr Crane engage in endless games of backgammon which Morgan always wins

It's clever how the book embeds you so firmly in Morgan's perspective of the world where he feels like a guilty participant, but also he's utterly confused by what's really happening and impotent to make any substantial change for the better. Isn't this how most of us feel in the world? If we're living in a middle class first-world society we're bombarded by news stories of far-off tragedies and feel like we're inextricably a part of damaging systems in which we benefit by receiving privilege and comfort. There is a guilt attached to this and a nibbling unconscious knowledge that we resist. It's described of Morgan how "He'd never wanted to know, which is also a sort of knowing." Morgan remarks to an eerily sophisticated boy named David how his family's wealth came from dealing in power. He means in energy like oil and electricity, but it also takes on the meaning of power as influence and domination over society. Charles Lambert seems to be making sly critiques of capitalism in a subtly artistic way where lives are being crushed in a consumer system. There are also small nods to Marxism such as the female servant named Engel.

Reading this book I was reminded strongly of Paraic O'Donnell's recent novel "The Maker of Swans" because of similarities in its setting, dreamlike logic and linguistic inventiveness. The experience of reading "The Children's Home" is like watching a David Lynch film or staring at a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Everything is seductively peaceful but has a sinister edge so that when you investigate it closely you see the unfathomable pain that was always there in plain view. In truth, Charles Lambert's novel is entirely original and I'm just drawing upon references to other art works to give a sense of the journey you're in for. This is highly compelling and invigorating writing.

Have you ever felt like you're are just too dumb to understand a book? The Children's Home by Charles Lambert made me feel like that. The first half was interesting. A disfigured recluse, Morgan, suddenly finds his home full of mysterious children, who come to him in ways he can't quite figure out. They offer Morgan acceptance through their innocence and a connection to the world beyond his estate and the high walls that surround it. But the children are peculiar and seem to have an objective that Morgan cannot figure out. They do not act as he thinks children should act and have an uncanny ability to know when their noise is not wanted and when danger is near. Then the story takes a sharp left into weirdville and lost me.

The Children's Home had a lot of elements that I enjoyed. I really loved Morgan. He is an interesting main character. He drifts through the house like a ghost until events force him to reattach to the world. The kids are creepy. We're not sure if they are or aren't a product of Morgan's lonely imagination. It has a gothic setting in a world apparently ravaged by some disaster or war, a world we're not sure still exists outside the estate's walls. There was a period where I thought the world had ended and Morgan was the last person alive, everyone in the manor a product of his mind. The tense and eerie atmosphere is chilling and a delight. But the second half is incomprehensible.

For the life of me, I can't figure out what the second half is supposed to mean. Is there a wider meaning to the vague World War 2 gas chamber reference? Is it commentary on how we are (literally in this case) sucking the life out of the younger generations just to keep functioning as a society? Is there something with parallel universes going on that is in no way explained at all? Is David some sort of messiah? Are the children some work of a magical source? As Morgan asked himself many times in the story, who are these children?

The Children's Home by Charles Lambert has some compelling and violent imagery. The events are unsettling and memorable. It is a sinister gothic horror but lacks resolution into a satisfying whole. The reader becomes impatient with the children's evasiveness and we have no resolution by the end. We are left just as clueless as we started. We are given no context during the story and learn no details of the state of the world or the source or purpose of the puzzling children. In all, The Children's Home by Charles Lambert left me confused and unsettled, wondering, like the characters, if I had somehow missed the point.

Charles Lambert

Author of THE CHILDREN'S HOME
Interviewed by Benjamin Rybeck on January 5, 2016

Let us assume that you are in the same position I was a couple weeks ago when I received a copy of *The Children's Home* by Charles Lambert. You have likely never heard this name before, for Lambert, born in England but now living, somewhat mysteriously, "near Rome, Italy" (as his biography puts it), has yet to publish a book in the United States. Opening *The Children's Home*, you will find a story about a disfigured recluse living in a spooky estate, an abusive mother, ghostly children, and grotesque discoveries involving, in one case, a sort of fetus. This seems, perhaps, like the territory of a demented mind—a man who has internalized the gothic and the violent, who may be a bit like his disturbing characters (we tend to read autobiography into debut works of fiction, after all). Then imagine your surprise when this author, Lambert, answers the phone garrulously, exclaiming your name, sounding like he's in mid-laugh.

This is what happens when I call him early one rainy morning from Houston. I tell him I found his book—what's the word—*strange*, and he chuckles. "It *is* strange!" he exclaims. It's afternoon his time, and from his voice, it sounds sunny all around him.

Sunny and garrulous are not words to associate with *The Children's Home*, where the sprawling estate of its main character, Morgan Fletcher, seems gloomy and obscure, its corners filled with secrets, all made even more mysterious when, one morning, children begin arriving out of nowhere—children who begin to terrorize Fletcher in ways at first quiet, and not so quiet later; but is it all in Fletcher's head? It's a story that feels old-fashioned, written in prose that Lambert calls "buttoned-up, prim, and Victorian." Early on, he writes that "[no] waste was allowed" in this fictional world, and the book's language suggest a similar economy, with every word precise and pulverizing.

Perhaps this is the product of many years of work on the project—one that Lambert began "a long time ago." This attention to environment also speaks to Lambert's animating principle as a writer. "I started with image," he says, "a lonely man in a tower room, overlooking an estate with nobody else there. I started investigating that, thinking about that. Early on, I came across a quote from Clarice Lispector, about being a monster and how, perhaps, being a monster is what it means to be human." In this case, the monster is the disfigured Fletcher, who cannot even look at himself in the mirror without revisiting the horrific circumstances that led to his physical condition. He has stowed himself away, but as the children arrive without explanation, they push Fletcher farther and farther into the world around him—with unsettling results.

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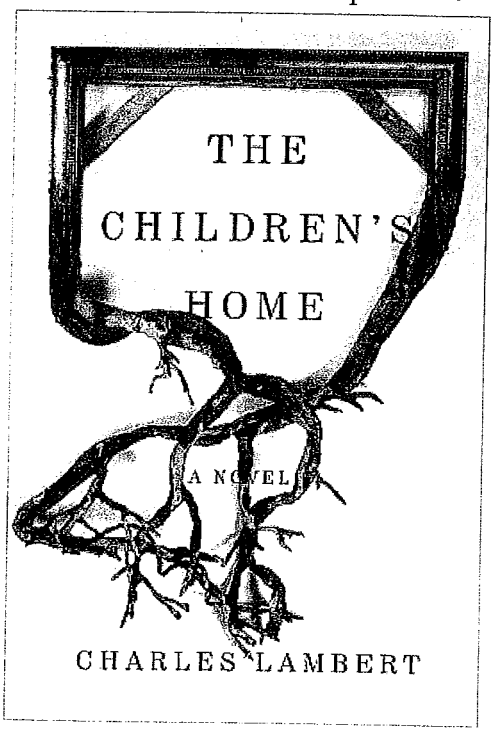
This feels like the stuff of horror, but Lambert isn't sure how much of a fan of "genre fiction" he is. Not that he has any particular issues with it: "I was a great fan of [a particular] kind of children's literature," he tells me, citing the warped worlds of Garner, Lewis, and Tolkien. As for the "nasty images" in the book, Lambert mentions George R.R. Martin: "He's probably partly responsible." The marketing for *The Children's Home*name-checks Shirley Jackson and Neil Gaiman: about the former, Lambert relates to her

"feeling of things going very, very wrong"; about the latter, Lambert laughs and confesses, "I haven't read [him], I'm ashamed to say!"

Lambert is aware that his introduction to U.S. readers might be rough, especially for those who pick up *The Children's Home* expecting a run-of-the-mill haunted house story. He cites earlier novels of his that looked like detective stories but were much deeper than that. "People who bought them [thinking they're] literary fiction, they deal with it. But people who bought them as thrillers got pissed off." After a pause, he asks me, "Do you have Marmite in the states?" Maybe we do, but I've never heard of it. He explains that it's an English food spread. "Some people love it, some people hate it. It creates a polarized reaction." This, he suggests in good humor, might be the same response to his novel.

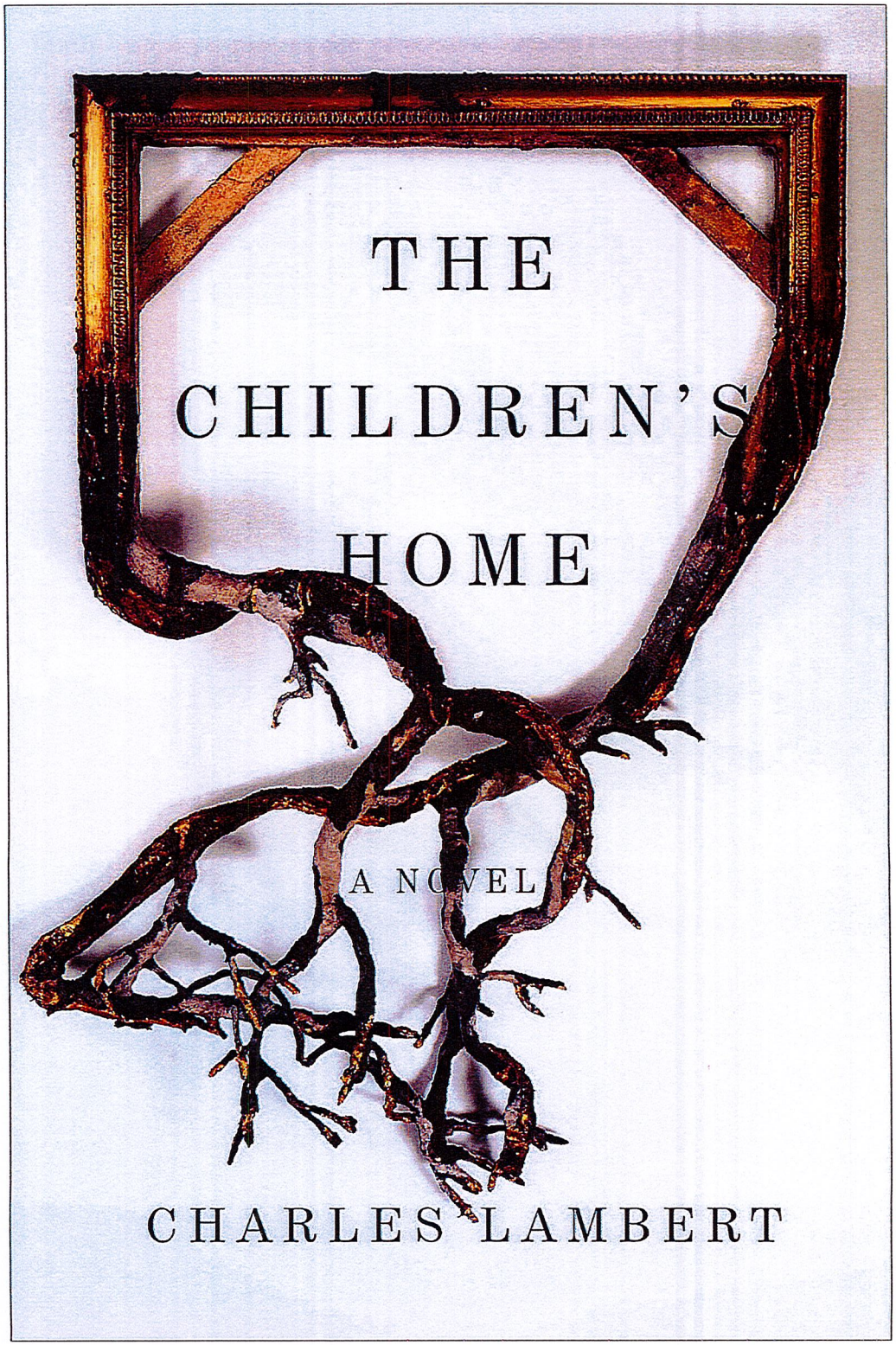
For, yes, there is heaviness here—heaviness a genre crowd may not be expecting. Lambert tells me about another point of inspiration: an installation he saw in Paris by the artist Christian Boltanski. It was a collection of folded children's clothes, which turned out to be the clothes of Jewish children deported during World War II. Of course, popular genres have long been vehicles for artists to sneak in social commentary, and *The Children's Home* is no different. Consider the novel's factory, off in the distance, which Fletcher's sister oversees. Or consider how Fletcher becomes what Lambert calls "a corrupt source of power," complicit in matters whose scope he barely understands. In a way, Fletcher's world—and the milieu of *The Children's Home*—evokes more than a genre; it evokes the historical circumstances of the Holocaust. "I find myself coming back time and time again to power," Lambert tells me, "what we do to have power, what power does to us. We're the creators and victims of power."



"And what about you?" I ask Lambert. "Is writing a way for you to gain power?"

He laughs, seeming delighted by this notion. "When I'm not writing fiction," he tells me, "I teach language, and I enjoy being a teacher. One of the things I enjoy most is being in control of a situation. I wonder whether writing is another way of doing that." He assures me that he does not write as a way of *gaining* power, but he does understand its effects: "Power," he says, "is the raw material of writing."

Certainly it's the raw material of *The Children's Home*, a book about characters taking on positions of strength, only to eventually realize how precarious their situations really are.



Hard cover
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