



The Philosopher's Apprentice

By James Morrow
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Introduction

A brilliant philosopher with a talent for self-destruction, Mason Ambrose has torpedoed a promising academic career and now faces a dead-end future. Before joining the ranks of the unemployed, however, he's approached by a representative of billionaire geneticist Dr. Edwina Sabacthani, who makes him an offer no starving ethicist could refuse. Born and bred on Isla de Sangre, a private island off the Florida coast, Edwina's beautiful and intelligent adolescent daughter, Londa, has recently survived a freak accident that destroyed both her memory and her sense of right and wrong. Londa's soul, in short, is an empty vessel—and it will be Mason's job to fill it. But all is not as it seems on Isla de Sangre. Londa's soul is in fact a blank slate, and she takes Mason's morality curriculum rather more seriously than anyone imagined. Her head crammed with lofty ideals, her heart brimming with fearsome benevolence, and her bank account filled to bursting, Londa undertakes to remake our fallen world in her own image—by any and all means necessary.

Questions for Discussion

1. From the first sentence onward, *The Philosopher's Apprentice* is filled with butterfly imagery. How does the life cycle of this insect resonate with the themes of the novel?
2. Mason Ambrose attempts to install a conscience in his pupil, Londa Sabacthani, by compelling her to act out several famous moral dilemmas. One such problem—Jean-Paul Sartre's parable of the war-bereaved mother who cannot abide the thought of losing her last child—that has no obvious answer. What other seemingly irresolvable ethical issues occur to your book group? To what standards should a person appeal in sorting out an impossible dilemma: reason, instinct, conscience, religious authority?
3. To satisfy her desire for children, Londa's "mother" has come up with the strangest scheme imaginable: genetically duplicating herself three times, then maturing the infants to three different ages. What does your book group think of Edwina Sabacthani's audacity? Henry Cushing calls her ambition "unsavory, unseemly, and self-centered," but will anyone make a case for this extreme use of cloning technology?
4. In the P.S. section of the paperback edition of *The Philosopher's Apprentice*, James Morrow says that a touchstone for the novel was *Frankenstein*. The author writes, "My Londa is indeed a kind of monster: a 'moral monster,' that is, cursed with an outsized conscience. And, of course, *Frankenstein* is one of the great novels about the teacher-student relationship." Has anyone in your group read Mary Shelley's gothic masterpiece, or seen one of the better film adaptations? In what ways does Victor Frankenstein's creature resemble Londa Sabacthani? How is Victor like Mason?
5. Among the many weird and ambiguous creatures who populate *The Philosopher's Apprentice*, none are weirder or more ambiguous than the immaculoids: "adult fetuses" cloned from discarded tissue and sent forth to torment their "unfeeling quasiparents." What does your book club make of the immaculoids? The author seems to be satirizing their exploitation by religious conservatives, but might they also fuel the anti-abortion side of the debate?
6. James Morrow has remarked that he sees Londa Sabacthani as "a kind of Shakespearean figure—that is, a character who is at once a hero and a villain." What aspects of Londa's personality are noble and admirable? When she becomes like those she hates, exploiting the helpless plutocrats aboard the *Titanic Redux*, do we still retain a shred of sympathy for her project?
7. Near the end of the novel, Mason faces a terrible moral dilemma of his own. He can allow Edwina 0004 to murder Londa, or he can cancel her pseudo-mother's program—with the possible unintended consequence of allowing his beloved former student to continue her reign of terror. Does your book group think that Mason made the right choice? Is there a way to resolve the dilemma that didn't occur to either Mason, Edwina 0004, or the author?
8. Writing in his blog, James Morrow notes, "What most intrigued me about Londa is her refusal—or is it her inability?—to filter out the moral implications of her behavior. When she takes the side of the angels, she knows exactly what she's doing, and later, when her soul begins to rot, she still enjoys an impressive, if chilling, perspective on herself." Morrow then asserts that "Londa is not only a moral monster, she's a *self-aware* moral monster," and he brackets her with Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, the Marquis de Sade in *Quills*, and Sweeney Todd in the Stephen Sondheim musical. Does your book group agree with these comparisons?

About the Author

James Morrow is the author of nine previous novels. He lives in State College, PA.