Lloyd Jones
Hand Me Down World

“A book of great mind and heart.” — ASX

By the author of the multi-award-winning bestseller Mister Pip

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**Lloyd Jones**

**Fiction**  
320 Pages; pub 2010

A woman washes ashore in Sicily. She has come from north Africa to find her son, taken from her when he was just days old by his father and stolen away to Berlin. With nothing but her maid's uniform and a knife stashed in a plastic bag, she relies on strangers—some generous, some exploiting—to guide her passage north. These strangers tell of their encounters with a quiet, mysterious woman in a blue coat—each account a different view of the truth, a different truth. And slowly these fragments of a life piece together to create a spellbinding story of the courage of a mother and the versions of truth we create to accommodate our lives. Haunting and beautiful, Hand Me Down World is simply unforgettable.

**REVIEWS**

Publishers Weekly Review:  
Jones's disturbing but beautifully written account of a wronged mother's long journey to find her son is a near unmitigated downer. An unnamed African woman's story is told by incidental witnesses, beginning with a fellow hotel worker in Tunisia who relates the story of her seduction by a German hotel guest, her pregnancy, and the abduction of the baby by her seducer. He has her sign papers at the hospital and leads her to believe he will take her and the baby with him back to Germany but instead abandons her and takes the baby. The unnamed woman sets out on a harrowing quest a few years later, nearly dying in her attempt to get into Europe. Then, with the cloudily motivated help of various strangers, she finds her way to Berlin, where her son lives with his craven father, whose greed and selfishness are almost a relief when contrasted with the subtler humiliating crimes of the other players. Learning all this history through the perspective of secondary characters has a frustrating effect, further marginalizing an already obscenely oppressed woman. When Ines—an assumed name, the only one the unnamed woman is ever given—at last has her turn to speak, there is little satisfaction. She seems at times simple and goodhearted and at other times, an unintelligent martyr. Even allowing for her being traumatized, her passive reactions to being sexually coerced, arrested, and denied access to her son are not easily justified. For his dedication to moral complexity and his wholly unsentimental portrayal of an outsized tragedy, though, Jones (Mister Pip) deserves praise.
DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. Ines steals, lies, manipulates others and even prostitutes herself for the sake of her weekly visits with her son. Does Jones condemn this behaviour or simply present it for reader judgement? If we see Ines as a devoted mother who turns her life upside down for the chance to be reunited with her child, can we then condemn her? Can the love of a mother for her child transcend morality?

2. Jermayne is a smarmy opportunist, yet Ines is honest about her feelings for him when she refers to the ‘strangely complex feeling I have for Jermayne’. (p.209) How do you understand this man and how do you explain Ines’ response to him?

3. While this is Ines’ story, Jones allows the stories of others to be heard, a device which serves to extend the narrative so that it progresses sideways as well as forwards. To what extent is this then also Ralf’s story? Jermayne’s story? Or the story of Defoe?

4. There are many strangers who take Ines into their homes and into their lives. Look at the Frenchman, the original Ines, the police inspector, etc. Do you find the actions of these people believable or do they serve as a device to advance the plot? Other characters take hideous advantage of Ines’ vulnerability. What is Jones saying about the nature of human beings?

5. Ines regularly takes Ralf to the zoo to observe the animals and she describes their caged movements to him in detail. When in custody, Ines sees herself as the caged animal. ‘I am a small animal in its pen...I am captured, caged.’ Later, Ines says ‘I sat unnoticed whereas the dog drew glances and smiles.’ (p.264) What is Jones saying about our treatment of others? Ralf is obsessed by the photo of the bodies writhing in the pit. What is the role of this element of the story in reflecting on how humans treat each other?

6. Abebi imagines a future when Ines will leave prison. Abebi and Daniel will meet her as do the families of other inmates released on that day. But Abebi is unable to imagine the next part of this encounter. She simply says, ‘I’m getting there. I’m just not there yet.’ What do you believe will be the final episode of this tale?
DISCUSSION STARTERS (CONTINUED)

Construction of the narrative is integral to the telling of this story:

7. What does the usage of multiple narrators contribute to the story?

8. How does the retrospective nature of the narrative work to build, alter and then mould our response to the characters?

9. Why is Ines’ voice heard only in part 4? How does this device affect our reading of the book?

10. Given that this book is essentially a collection of testimonies, how does the device of confession contribute to the story? How does the structure of the book affect our understanding of ‘truth’?

11. How are we to understand the title, Hand Me Down World? Is it that Ines is handed on to others as she engages with her quest to find, meet and connect with her son? Is Jones making a statement about the world we hand on to others or the truth we hand on? Is there another interpretation?