

# MASTER CLASS

*A Novel*



CHRISTINA  
DALCHER

AUTHOR OF *VOX*

*Book Club Kit*





## Questions for Discussion

- 1 The author discusses the use of numbers to judge ourselves and others. Can you think of any other numerical standards that we use today for evaluation? Do you think they are effective or do more harm?
- 2 The schools and buses are all labeled as colors. Why do you think the author chose to use colors? Do you think they symbolize anything or have any meaning?
- 3 Children in a household can grow up to be very different people, as evidenced by the household in *Master Class*. Yet the expression "blood is thicker than water" is prevalent and true in many cases. Did you feel that way when you read about each child in this household and how they evolved throughout the book?
- 4 There are obvious stereotypes in the book, from the geeks in school being ostracized to the jocks being the most popular kids in school. Can you relate to the stereotypes? Could you imagine a world where Qs would be useful?
- 5 The love between a child and a mother is an unbreakable bond. Could you have done what Elena did and sacrifice everything to be with your child?
- 6 Government intervention is a major theme in the book. Do you agree the government should play a role in education? To what extent?





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Q&A WITH AUTHOR

Christina  
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### What inspired *Master Class*?

A few years ago, I read Michael D'Antonio's *The State Boys Rebellion*, a piece of nonfiction I don't think I'll ever forget. The book spurred me to write a middle-grade adventure novel centered around the state school system that had been part of the 20th-century eugenics movement. The more I researched eugenics, the more shocked I was at how this culture developed and spread in the United States.

And yet . . .

I had never heard of it.

The rampant IQ testing, the institutionalization of adults and children deemed to be “feeble-minded,” the forced sterilizations beginning with Carrie Buck (and continuing through the late 1970s), and the link between American eugenicists and what would become Hitler's Final Solution all hit me hard.

This was a part of American history that needed to be talked about.

### What was it like to live in Elena's head while writing *Master Class*?

Terrifying and frustrating. Elena is trapped in a hopeless situation—actually a few different hopeless situations—over the course of the story. What made writing her character emotionally difficult was that, in many ways, she is the cause of her own problem. The younger version of Elena made a bed, and the more mature version now has to lie in it.

*Master Class* and *Vox* share many common themes, including the idea of a frog in a slow boil—that change happens one degree at a time, and it's easy to miss until you're cooked to death. Was that intentional, and why has this been a recurring theme for you?

It was completely intentional and is very much a recurring theme for me because this kind of unnoticed change is a constant fear. I think our tendency is to take the status quo—whether political, economic, environmental, or social—for granted. We wake up each day with the expectation that nothing will have altered, but if history teaches us anything, it's that our world is always in flux, and it can devolve into a nightmarish dystopia without us realizing.



**Are there any other common themes between both books that you feel are important to address as a writer of dystopian fiction?**

Absolutely! Both *Vox* and *Master Class* examine the effects of a broken society through a very personal, intimate lens. In each book, we experience the reality of a “brave new world” from the perspective of a woman, a wife, a mother. We see how early choices affect one’s future, how younger generations can be all too easily indoctrinated into extremist ways of thinking, and how history has a nasty habit of repeating itself (in *Vox*, the culture of domesticity experiences a renaissance; in *Master Class*, I resurrect the American eugenics movement). And, of course, the danger of governmental power going far beyond reasonable limits is key in both books.

**In *Master Class*, children’s testing for their quotient (Q) determines the path of their entire life. Readers will, of course, see parallels to the new realities of standardized testing. Was that intentional?**

Yes. It’s only part of the story, but we do seem to be living in a culture of constant assessment. From my conversations with educators, I’ve learned that this culture can be counterproductive to learning. Undoubtedly, readers will have different thoughts, but that’s what books and reading groups are for—to discuss ideas!

**What role does Elena’s grandmother play in the novel?**

Maria Fischer is a character who came late to my drafts of *Master Class*, but in a way she’s as important as the protagonist. Maria has witnessed (and participated in) exactly the kind of world in which Elena now lives. She’s the character who can tell us what lies at the bottom of the slippery slope, and her choices as a younger woman parallel those of Elena’s.

Also, she’s one hundred years old, so her age adds another layer of complication. On the one hand, Maria possesses a wisdom and insight the other characters lack, but I think it’s easy to see how the younger characters might dismiss her. I love Maria—like all of our older relatives, she carries stories with her that we absolutely must hear, and consider, and treasure, before those stories die with the people who can pass them on.

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**How did your background in education, as a professor of linguistics, influence *Master Class*?**

I think anyone who has ever stood at the front of a classroom—whether in the primary grades or at the postgraduate level—has been exposed to a broad spectrum of talents and capabilities. As teachers, we’ve also experienced limits on time and funds, and we’ve perhaps faced the difficult question of where to focus our energy. The easy way out (but, as we see in *Master Class*, a dangerous way out) is to teach to the top X percent, the overachievers. My book explores that option and pushes the concept to a frightening limit.

**How was the experience of writing *Master Class* different from writing *Vox*?**

First of all, *Vox* happened fast. And I mean speed-of-light fast, as I had a hard deadline to meet. With *Master Class*, I took my time, and the rewrite process was much more involved; the book changed significantly from first draft to final version.

The other difference—and I think every writer will relate—was a nagging fear that I wouldn’t be able to pull off a second book!

**What do you want readers to take away from the book?**

Let’s go back to the beginning, to what inspired me to write *Master Class* in the first place:

For much of the first half of the 20th century, there was a healthy and influential eugenics movement in the United States of America. I don’t think many people are aware of this. I don’t think the average American knows just how far we pushed the envelope in an effort to create a master race. I hope readers enjoy *Master Class* as what it is: a thriller. But I also hope my book invites people to explore this dark era of history.