

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

ROOM

A NOVEL BY

EMMA DONOGHUE

An Interview with Emma Donoghue

Jack is such a unique narrator. At what point did you decide to tell the story from his perspective?

I never considered any other perspective: letting Jack tell this story *was* my idea in a nutshell. I hoped having a small child narrator would make such a horrifying premise original, involving, but also more bearable: his innocence would at least partly shield readers on their descent into the abyss. I also knew that Jack would have some interesting things to say about our world, as a newcomer to it; the book's satire of modern mores and media, and interrogations of the nature of reality, grew out of Jack's perspective rather than being part of my initial plan. I did have some technical worries about having such a young narrator: I knew the prospect of being stuck in a little kid's head might turn some readers off. But I never feared that Jack would be unable to tell the whole story.

How did you manage to get so thoroughly into the mind-set of a five-year-old boy?

It was a help that my own son was five, but it's not like Finn and Jack have much in common: Finn has been as shaped by sociability and freedom as Jack has by routine and one-to-one time with his mother. I tried to isolate elements of my son's behavior and mind-set and speech that any five-year-old would share, but then I thought of all the ways in which Jack's limited experience has shaped him. So I sat there doing a constant nature-versus-nurture debate in my head. Jack knows a lot of things, but in other ways he hasn't a clue.

Which books were influences on Room? This book seems so different from your other novels. Some people have even classified Room as a thriller—would you agree?

My main concern was to avoid the “true crime” genre. From the start I saw this novel as having elements of fairy tale, horror, science fiction, and those wonderful eighteenth-century novels with wide-eyed traveler narrators (*Gulliver’s Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Candide*). I designed *Room* to work on several levels. First and foremost to be a clean book: straightforward, clearly and linearly narrated, realistic. But also with lots of extras smuggled in for readers (like my professor partner) who relish that kind of thing: echoes of texts from Plato, to the King James Version of the Bible, to *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to *The Catcher in the Rye*. Although I never thought of *Room* as a thriller, exactly, I’m rather thrilled whenever somebody finds it page-turning enough to call it that! Another genre I kept in mind was children’s / young adult: although *Room* was not published specifically for young readers, I always thought they might find it.

The character of Ma is just as compelling as that of Jack, and the bond between them is intense. How did you conceive of their relationship as you were writing?

Let me start by saying that *Room* is not one of those horror stories in which family members confined together (remember *Flowers in the Attic* or *The Blue Lagoon*) turn to incest. Ma and Jack have a strangely intense relationship, but I always meant it to be a healthy one. It’s got lingering elements of the mother-baby bond (for instance, in the breastfeeding) as well as aspects of alliance and friendship. I tried to slide it along that developmental range, so there are times when he’s her buddy or her peer and times when he’s a toddler boy.

For me *Room* is a universal story of parenthood and childhood, and in Jack and Ma’s relationship I wanted to dramatize the full range of extraordinary emotions parents and children feel for each other: to put mothering in a weird spotlight and test it to its limits. Because it does have limits. Yes, *Room* celebrates mother-love,

but it also painfully calculates those moments when Ma has to recognize that Jack needs something other than her protection. Those moments all parents come to when love takes the form of stepping back, letting go.

Do you think of Jack and Ma as being fundamentally different from people “Outside”?

In the second half of the book, Ma and Jack are made to feel like freaks, but I always wanted to treasure them on their own terms. I sometimes thought of them tribally: a lost tribe of two. They’ve got things in their heads like Kylie Minogue songs, which Ma has brought from the old civilization, but what they’ve come up with is a strange kind of island culture, island religion, and a peculiar (occasionally pidgin) form of English. I found that if I used these anthropological concepts, it stopped me from seeing Jack and Ma as being stunted versions of modern Americans.

Jack and Ma frequently give thanks to Baby Jesus. Did you originally think that faith would be important to them in their situation?

I’ve always been religiously inclined, but it doesn’t come up in most of my books. I knew it would be central to *Room* because prisoners cling to whatever tatters of faith they’ve got. Look at those Chilean miners and their daily prayer groups.

Actually, I’m not sure how literally Ma believes in all that, but it certainly makes sense that she would have taken whatever vague Christian framework she had and offered it to Jack as part of her system for making meaning of their days, and keeping hope alive. Kids delight in “magical thinking,” whether in the form of the Tooth Fairy or the saints. Whether you see these as comforting lies or eternal verities, they are part of how we help kids make sense of the world. I think that’s why the religious element of *Room* doesn’t seem to bother nonreligious readers; they can just put it on a par with Santa. But for me, *Room* is a peculiar (and no doubt heretical) battle between Mary and the Devil for young Jesus. If God sounds absent

from that triangle, that's because I think that for a small child, God's love is represented, and proved, by mother-love.

The second half of the book feels very different from the first, for obvious reasons. Did you conceive of this structure early on, or did it come later?

I always saw the novel as having two halves, each of which would shed a different light on the other. As always happens with a book in two halves, reviewers tend to prefer one over another: many find the second half more ordinary, but a few find it a relief after the claustrophobia of the first.

In the first half, Ma has some superhero traits, and even Jack has some larger-than-life qualities. Their strengths are in proportion to the dangers, like in fairy tales. In the second half, I really wanted to let them relax into being human. That's been a controversial element: some readers want Ma to remain Super Ma. Her relationship with Jack is shown as being flawed, too, and some people find that hard, but for me it made the book much more honest. If *Room* had only covered the first half, it would have been far too feel-good, both in its depiction of mother-love and its implication that Outside, the wider society, represents a simple happy ending.

You have mentioned that you drew inspiration from real-life imprisonment cases, such as that of the Fritzl family. Did you worry that in doing so critics might accuse you of sensationalism?

No, because I was naive. I never expected that being upfront about the particular headline that happened to trigger the idea for *Room* would have such consequences. I realize now that if your book gets attached to any notorious names, you can never shake them off. Lazy journalists call *Room* “a book about Josef Fritzl” — which I would have thought anyone skimming the first few pages would realize it isn't. Others, not even bothering to Google it, assert that it's about Jaycee Lee Dugard — who hadn't even been discovered by the time I wrote the novel. The truth is that it's about none of these real people:

all I borrowed from the Fritzl case was the notion of a woman who bears a child to her captor and manages to protect his childhood.

The irony is that I have often written fiction closely based on real people and events, but if it's before 1900, nobody minds.

What sort of research did you do for Room?

I did too much. I don't mean in quantity: like any writer of historical fiction, I go by the principle of digging up a hundred times more than I will actually use on the page. I mean in terms of what I could bear. I pushed myself, for instance, to find out how badly and weirdly children can be raised by adults who hate them, what they can survive and what they can't: I read every case on www.feralchildren.com. But that kind of grim research did end up yielding some very positive elements in *Room*. I thought, above all, that what Ma has given to Jack is language: that's why there's nothing "feral" about him.

I researched births in concentration camps, children conceived through rape, children living in prison. I read up on terrible things that happen to adults too (above all, the mind-breaking solitary confinement of approximately 25,000 American prisoners at any one time). But it's the kids who trouble me most. I always knew that Jack's story would be made bearable by Ma's constant love, but some of the children I read about when planning *Room*... let's just say I can't get them out of my head. I was left with a fierce sense that nothing I do is more important than giving my son and daughter what they—what all kids—deserve.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a novel set in San Francisco in the 1870s. It's another real case (like *Slammerkin*, *Life Mask*, and *The Sealed Letter*), a murder that's never been solved. My characters are mostly French immigrant lowlifes. I've never done a historical novel set in North America before; I'm enjoying the crazy modernity of nineteenth-century San Francisco.

My other main interest is in *Room* making it to the big screen in a way that would capture its magic without veering off in the direction of either schlock or sentimentality. Watch this space.

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Why do you think the entire novel is told in Jack's voice? Do you think this narrative approach is effective?
2. Discuss the ways in which Jack's development has been stunted by growing up in Room. Has he on any level benefited from the seclusion?
3. If you were Ma, what would you miss most about the outside world?
4. What would you do differently if you were Jack's parent? Would you tell Jack about the outside world from the start?
5. If Ma had never given birth to Jack, how might her situation in Room have been different?
6. What would you ask for, for Sundaytreat, if you were Jack? If you were Ma?
7. Describe the dynamic between Old Nick and Ma. Why do you think the author chose not to tell us Old Nick's story?
8. What does joining the outside world do to Jack? To Ma?
9. Discuss the role that the news media play in the novel.

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10. In a comparable situation, how would you teach a child the difference between the real world and what they watch on television?
11. Why do people tend to be so fascinated by stories of long-term confinement?
12. Discuss Grandma's response to Jack and to Ma in the wake of their escape. What are the emotional challenges Grandma faces in the circumstances?
13. Which scenes or developments in the novel affected you most?

Emma Donoghue's recommendations for further reading and viewing

Aurora Leigh by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1856).

The Boy from the Basement by Susan Shaw (2004).

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne (2006). Film directed by Mark Herman entitled *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (2008).

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley (1932).

“Bye, Child” in *Wintering Out* by Seamus Heaney (1972). Short film by Bernard MacLaverty entitled *Bye-Child* (2003).

The Collector by John Fowles (1963). Film directed by William Wyler (1965).

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time by Mark Haddon (2003).

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank (first published in Dutch, 1947).

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly by Jean-Dominique Bauby (first published in French, 1997). Film directed by Julian Schnabel (2007).

E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, directed by Steven Spielberg (1982).

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer (2005).

Fault Lines by Nancy Huston (first published in French, 2006).

Finding Nemo, directed by Andrew Stanton (2003).

Flowers in the Attic by V. C. Andrews (1979).

The Go-Between by L. P. Hartley (1953). Film directed by Joseph Losey (1970).

- Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift (1726).
- Helpless* by Barbara Gowdy (2007).
- I Am David* by Ann Holm (first published in Danish, 1963; U.S. title *North to Freedom*). Film directed by Paul Feig (2003).
- In America*, directed by Jim Sheridan (2002).
- The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* by Albie Sachs (1966).
- Kramer vs. Kramer* by Avery Corman (1977). Film directed by Robert Benton (1979).
- Lamb* by Bernard MacLaverty (1980). Film directed by Colin Gregg (1985).
- Life Is Beautiful*, directed by Roberto Benigni (in Italian, 1997).
- Little Red Flowers*, directed by Zhang Yuan (in Chinese, 2006).
- The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002). Film directed by Peter Jackson (2009).
- Ma Vie en Rose*, directed by Alain Berliner (in French, 1997).
- Millions* by Frank Cottrell Boyce (2004). Film directed by Danny Boyle (2004).
- Nobody Knows*, directed by Hirokazu Koreeda (in Japanese, 2004).
- Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* by Roddy Doyle (1993).
- A Perfect World*, directed by Clint Eastwood (1993).
- Ponette*, directed by Jacques Doillon (in French, 1996).
- Ponyo*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (in Japanese, 2008).
- The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006). Film directed by John Hillcoat (2009).
- Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe (1719).
- The Sixth Sense*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan (1999).
- Spies* by Michael Frayn (2002).
- Spirited Away*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (in Japanese, 2001).
- The Stolen Child* by Keith Donohue (2007).
- Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, directed by James Cameron (1991).
- Walkabout* by James Vance Marshall (1959). Film directed by Nicholas Roeg (1971).
- We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver, (2003).
- The Wild Boy*, directed by François Truffaut (in French, 1970; U.S. title *The Wild Child*).