

Room

by Emma Donoghue

About the Book

To five-year-old-Jack, Room is the world. . . . It's where he was born, it's where he and his Ma eat and sleep and play and learn. At night, his Ma shuts him safely in the wardrobe, where he is meant to be asleep when Old Nick visits.

Room is home to Jack, but to Ma it's the prison where she has been held for seven years. Through her fierce love for her son, she has created a life for him in this eleven-by-eleven-foot space. But with Jack's curiosity building alongside her own desperation, she knows that Room cannot contain either much longer.

Room is a tale at once shocking, riveting, exhilarating--a story of unconquerable love in harrowing circumstances, and of the diamond-hard bond between a mother and her child.

Praise for the Book

“An astounding, terrifying novel. . . . It’s a testament to Donoghue’s imagination and empathy that she is able to fashion radiance from such horror.”

— *The New Yorker*

“Room is one of the most profoundly affecting books I’ve read in a long time. Jack moved me greatly. His voice, his story, his innocence, his love for Ma, combine to create something very unusual and, I think, something very important. I read the book over two days, desperate to know how their story would end. . . . Room deserves to reach the widest possible audience.”

— **John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas***

“Gripping, riveting, and close to the bone, this story grabs you and doesn’t let go. Donoghue skillfully builds a suspenseful narrative evoking fear and hate and hope—but, most of all, the triumph of a mother’s ferocious love. Highly recommended for readers of popular fiction.”

— **Susanne Wells, *Library Journal***

Courtesy of Little, Brown and Company

About the Author

Title: Emma Donoghue

Canadian Novelist (1969 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born October 24, 1969, in Dublin, Ireland; daughter of Denis (a literary critic) and Frances (a teacher) Donoghue; lives with her Partner, Chris Roulston; children: Finn and Una. Education: University College, Dublin, B.A. (with first-class honors), 1990; University of Cambridge, Ph.D., 1997. Politics: "Left-wing liberal feminist." Religion: "Prayer without a church." Memberships: Society of Authors, Writers Union of Canada. Addresses: Home: London, Ontario, Canada. Agent: Caroline Davidson, Caroline Davidson Literary Agency, 5 Queen Anne's Gardens, London W4 1TU, England; Kathleen Anderson, Anderson/Grinberg Literary Management, 244 5th Ave., 11th Fl., New York, NY 10001. E-mail: emma@emmadonoghue.com.

CAREER:

Writer and educator. Host of Irish television series about books, 1994; judge for *Irish Times* literary prize, 1997; occasional creative writing instructor at Cheltenham Literary Festival and Arvon Foundation; writer-in-residence, University of Western Ontario and University of York, 1999-2000.

AWARDS:

Robert Gardner Memorial Studentship, University of Cambridge, 1990-93; Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Book Award, American Library Association, 1997, for *Hood*; Ferro-Grumley Award for Lesbian Fiction, 2002, for *Slammerkin*; Golden Crown Literary Award for Lesbian Dramatic General Fiction, 2007, for *Landing*; Hughes & Hughes Irish Novel of the Year, and Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, both 2010, for *Room*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *Stir-fry*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Hood*, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1995, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1996.
- (With others) *Ladies Night at Finbar's Hotel*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Slammerkin*, Virago (London, England), 2000, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Life Mask*, Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 2004.
- *Landing*, Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 2007.
- *The Sealed Letter*, Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 2008.
- *Room*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2010.

PLAYS

- *I Know My Own Heart: A Lesbian Regency Romance*, produced by Glasshouse Theatre, Dublin, Ireland, 1994.
- *Ladies and Gentleman* (produced by Glass House Theatre, Dublin, Ireland, 1996), New Island Press (Dublin, Ireland), 1998.
- *Don't Die Wondering* (one-act play), produced at the Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, 2005.

OTHER

- *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668-1801* (nonfiction), Scarlet Press (London, England), 1993, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 1995.
- *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (stories), Joanna Cotler Books (New York, NY), 1997.
- (Editor) *Poems between Women: Four Centuries of Love, Romantic Friendship, and Desire*, Columbia University Press (New York, NY), 1997, published as *What Sappho Would Have Said: Four Centuries of Love Poems between Women*, Hamish Hamilton (London, England), 1997.
- (Editor) *The Mammoth Book of Modern Lesbian Short Stories*, Carroll & Graf (New York, NY), 1999.
- *We Are Michael Field* (biography), Stuart, Tabori and Chang (New York, NY), 1999.
- *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits: Stories*, Harcourt (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Touchy Subjects: Stories*, Harcourt (Orlando, FL), 2006.
- *Inseparable: Desire between Women in Literature*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, NY), 2010.

Writer of *Immaculate Conception: Inside a Lesbian Baby Boom* (documentary film); author of the radio plays *Trespases*, produced in 1996; *Don't Die Wondering*, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio 4, 2000; *Exes*, BBC Radio 4, 2001; *Humans and Other Animals*, BBC Radio 4, 2003; and *Mix*, BBC Radio 3; writer of screenplay for the short film *Pluck*. Work represented in anthologies, including *Seen and Heard: Six New Plays by Irish Women*, edited by Cathy Leeney, and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror Eleventh Annual Collection*, 1998.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins was adapted by Donoghue as a stage play titled *Kissing the Witch*, produced by Magic Theatre, San Francisco, CA, 2000.

“Sidelights”

Emma Donoghue is an openly lesbian novelist who has also written and edited several books that explore the lesbian experience. Hailing from a literary family, Donoghue had several books completed by the time she was in her mid-twenties.

In *Passions between Women: British Lesbian Culture, 1668-1801*, Donoghue explores the role of lesbianism in early society, a trend difficult to uncover because of the fact that the word "lesbian" was used infrequently before the twentieth century. Her rereading of history, which used words like "Sapphic" and "hermaphroditical" to define lesbianism, reveals much more information on the subject. R.L. Widmann, writing in *Washington Post Book World*, praised the book for its depth and contended that many readers "may find much in this book to delight and inform them."

In a later book, *Inseparable: Desire between Women in Literature*, Donoghue examines relationships between women in literature from Chaucer to the post-modern age. The author's expertise as a scholar, literary critic, novelist, and enthusiastic reader, wrote *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* contributor Heather L. Seggel, makes Donoghue "the perfect tour guide" through this engaging material.

Donoghue's first work of fiction, *Stir-fry*, is a semi-autobiographical novel about three young women attending college in Dublin. Maria takes a room with two other women during her first year, at first not realizing that her roommates are lesbian lovers. Maria searches for a boyfriend but is thwarted at every turn. She finally realizes that she is in love with her roommate Ruth, but the situation is awkward because Ruth's lover, Jael, is still living there.

Natasha Walter, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, commented that *Stir-fry* is "competent, compact and occasionally funny." However, she took exception to the neatness of the plot: "You can judge how sloppily the love story has been executed if you transpose it to a heterosexual model, where its sweetie-pie easiness becomes more obvious." Mary Scott in *New Statesman and Society* contended that Maria's naïveté in not knowing that her roommates are lesbians and her overreaction to finding out is surprising. "I found this so hard to believe that it ruined my appreciation of an accomplished book," she stated.

Donoghue's second novel, *Hood*, tells the story of a thirty-year-old teacher in Dublin named Pen O'Grady, who has just lost her lover of thirteen years, Cara Wall, in a violent

car crash. The story is told in Pen's diary excerpts, written over the course of seven days, while she is deep in grief. Pen must deal with many issues other than her own grief--such as whether she should reveal the nature of their relationship to Cara's family or to the nuns at the academy where she works. Sheena Joughin, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, complained of what she saw as the novel's exclusively lesbian setting. "By setting her work so squarely in an exclusive milieu," she wrote, Donoghue "does risk alienating the general reader--particularly in a novel that is reflective, rather than action-packed." With this in mind, Joughin contended that "Donoghue's narrative becomes wearily formulaic." Catherine Lockerbie commented in the *New York Times Book Review* that the book is "utterly charming. ... Ms. Donoghue displays her confidence by avoiding the grandiose and showy, and dipping into the ordinary with control and the occasional sustaining descriptive flashes of a born writer." Lockerbie felt that this novel shows only a portion of the talent that Donoghue is capable of, claiming that the author "might produce something rather more out of the ordinary altogether" in the years to come.

In *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins*, Donoghue retells traditional fairy tales for children from a lesbian perspective. In her version of *Cinderella*, for example, the princess falls in love with the fairy godmother instead of the prince, while in another retelling, Gretel teams up with the witch of the gingerbread house to punish Hansel for trying to rape her. "Sophisticated teenagers (and adults too) will be mesmerized by the powerful voices and intricate structure, while the lesbian endings promise controversy," wrote a contributor to *Publishers Weekly*. Debbie Carton in *Booklist* found *Kissing the Witch* to be written in a "distinctive, powerful, finely honed voice."

Donoghue turned to literary biography with *We Are Michael Field*, the story of two nineteenth-century women who used the pseudonym Michael Field for the many plays and poems they wrote. Katherine Bradley and her niece Edith Cooper were not only literary collaborators but lovers as well. The name Michael Field was only gradually revealed to the public as a pseudonym for the two women, a fact that led to some controversy. Donoghue's account of their lives and careers is "an engaging, informal overview of their history," according to Kimberly L. Clarke in *Library Journal*. A contributor to *Publishers Weekly* described the biography as "brief but absorbing."

For the novel *Slammerkin*, Donoghue drew inspiration from the true story of the short, tragic life of Mary Saunders, an eighteenth-century English prostitute and servant. The title of the book, which is taken from a period term meaning both "loose gown" and "loose woman," alludes to the fetish and the profession of the protagonist. As rendered by Donoghue, Mary emerges as a fiercely determined, aspiring clotheshorse, who turns to prostitution in an effort to satisfy her sartorial desires and avoid the poverty and squalor in which she was raised by her seamstress mother. Mary is introduced to her new trade by Doll Higgins, a prostitute with eye-catching fashion sense. Of their friendship *New York Times Book Review* contributor Laura Jamison observed that "[Mary] and Doll could be any modern-day bad girls, getting wasted and cracking bawdy jokes. But of course they're not, and that accounts for the real fun in reading about them." Upon Doll's death, Mary retreats to her mother's hometown of Monmouth, where she finds work as an

apprentice to a seamstress, and, according to *Washington Post Book World* contributor Zofia Smardz, "for the first time in her life, begins to feel truly loved." Eventually, however, Mary begins to chafe at her lowly social position, and longs for the finery she wore as a London prostitute. When her past intersects with her present life, disaster results. While Jamison felt that "Mary's tragic flaw"--a lust for fine clothing--"is perhaps a bit overdetermined," she nevertheless concluded that Donoghue's characterization of her protagonist is one of "the reasons that many will find *Slammerkin* a more accessible and boisterous read than its classic forebears." Smardz noted that while the novel "is pulpy at heart ... Donoghue is a real writer, and she's elevated her racy story ... close to art and laced it with impressive but lightly presented erudition." Alev Adil, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, called *Slammerkin* "an exhilarating dialogue with the literature of the period and an imaginative attempt to capture the climate of change in the 1760s." He also noted that "Donoghue has produced an absorbing, moving and intelligent work of fiction."

Donoghue followed *Slammerkin* with her collection *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits: Stories* and her novel *Life Mask*. The main characters in this story are patterned after real historical figures, including Eliza Farren, a London actress who, although born a commoner, is pursued by the unhappily wed Edward Earl of Derby toward the end of the eighteenth century. Derby, wealthy but ugly, resembling a "Velazquez dwarf," is fond of betting on the horses; in fact his surname is the origin of the term "derbies." Secondary characters include writer Horace Walpole, theater owner and politician Richard Sheridan, and actress Mrs. Siddons.

The member of the House of Lords introduces Eliza to London's genteel community, members of which refer to themselves as "the World." Susan Stinson noted in *Lambda Book Report* that in this novel "the World is far removed from the impoverished Eighteenth Century prostitutes that Donoghue brought to such vivid life in *Slammerkin*, although that distance can be bridged by a hurled brick or the gentlemen's interest in an evening's entertainment." Sculptor Anne Damer, a widow, is an admirer of Eliza, whose performances she has seen for years. The two form a friendship that ends when rumors of Anne's lesbianism reach Eliza. They reconcile, but part again when the rumors resurface.

Donoghue's *Touchy Subjects: Stories* features nineteen short stories that are "without a hint of pretension but with wisdom extending far beyond the placidness of her prose style," according to Brad Hooper in *Booklist*. The author deals with a wide range of sensitive subjects, such as homelessness and death, in stories that span the world. For example, in "The Man Who Wrote on Beaches," a woman's husband finds God and wants to have a family, but his wife is beyond her childbearing years. The author also tackles more humorous subjects, such as her story about an academic husband and wife and their devotion to their dogs in the story "Do They Know It's Christmas?" Referring to the stories as "engaging," a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote that they are "delightful examples of Donoghue's all-encompassing talent that should be read by fans of her period pieces as well as her gay audience--indeed, by anyone who cherishes thoughtful, warm-hearted fiction."

In *Landing*, Donoghue tells the story of twenty-five-year-old Jude Turner, a historian from small-town Canadian Town, and Sile, a sexy flight attendant Jude meets while making her first trip overseas to London. The worldly Sile and Jude become friends and begin a long-distance relationship that promises to become more but is hindered by other people in both of the women's lives. Caroline Mann, writing in *Library Journal*, noted that the author "excels at getting to the heart of her two main characters." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor referred to *Landing* as "warmhearted, readable and entertaining."

Donoghue's *The Sealed Letter* is another of her novels based on fact and is about divorce in the 1800s, not nearly as common as it has become in contemporary times. Helen Codrington has long refused her older husband Harry, an admiral, the right to her bed, and when they return to London from Malta, where Harry has been posted, she renews her friendship with a woman with whom she had once had a relationship. Emily Faithfull, known as Fido, owns a print shop in which all of the typesetters are female, and which produces feminist pamphlets. She belongs to the Langham Place group, one of the first feminist movements in Britain, and Donoghue researched letters from members of the group in establishing the environment of the time. Fido doesn't believe in adultery and is upset when Helen uses Fido's home to meet with her lover, Colonel Anderson. Harry initiates divorce proceedings in 1864, but as of 1857, although divorce laws had relaxed somewhat with the Matrimonial Causes Act, cases were tried and decided based entirely on the testimony of witnesses and circumstantial evidence. The petitioners and respondents were not allowed to speak on their own behalf. While a man could obtain a divorce solely on the grounds of adultery, a woman would have to prove other offenses, including cruelty, rape, desertion, bestiality, and sodomy. In Harry's case, he presents evidence that includes a telegram, a stained dress, and Helen's presence in Fido's house and in a hotel.

"The characters don't speechify for the sake of an authorial political agenda, and there's no fact-filled waffle," wrote Alice Lawlor in *Herizons*. "Instead, the reader is an unselfconscious fly on the wall, privy to internal monologues, intimate conversations and public declarations. There's a subtle contrast between the claustrophobic interior spaces inhabited by the women and the vast public sphere of the men. Even the language of the courtroom--much of which doesn't seem to have changed in 150 years--is cold, cruel and misogynist."

Helen, who all the while has been manipulating Fido, will not give up without a fight. She reminds Fido that one night when they were together in bed, Harry attempted to rape Fido. The memory is unclear to Fido, who often took medication for her asthma, which could be rendering it cloudy. The "sealed letter" of the title holds the key to the outcome. It expresses Harry's concerns about the relationship between his wife and Fido. The idea of exposure is enough to make Fido take the witness stand, but torn as to who she will favor with her testimony. Her involvement in the divorce tears her life apart. The press print shop is vandalized, and other women in the suffrage movement begin to distance themselves from her.

"Good lines there are in abundance," wrote Susann Cokal in the *New York Times Book Review*. "And in the end, *The Sealed Letter* provides both the titillating entertainment readers like Helen and Fido crave and the more sober exploration of truth, commitment and betrayal Harry might appreciate. Donoghue's sympathy for all three of her central characters emerges through intimate narration and lifts the novel out of the tabloid muck, despite the public shaming Harry, Helen and Fido experience. There is, as Fido puts it, 'so much to say, and little of it speakable.'"

Winner of the Hughes Irish Novel of the Year award and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, *Room* won numerous rave reviews. Told from the perspective of Jack, a five-year-old who has lived his entire life in a sealed-off room with his mother, the book imagines the lives of a parent and child living in captivity. It was inspired in part by the infamous Fritzl case in Austria, in which it was discovered in 2008 that Josef Fritzl had secretly imprisoned his daughter Elisabeth for twenty-four years, assaulted and raped her, and forced her to give birth to several of his children. Jack has never seen the outside world, but he watches television and has access to some books and toys. He spends his days with Ma, who nurtures his intelligence with stories and games; when Old Nick appears in the evenings, Jack hides in Wardrobe and counts the squeaks of the mattress springs until the captor leaves and the boy has Ma to himself once again. It is a comfortable and secure life for Jack, but a nightmare for Ma, who eventually decides that she and the boy must escape. But the outside world is confusing and overwhelming for the boy, as he copes with the onslaught of media attention, inane responses, and other challenges that threaten his once-complete bond with his mother.

Though the book was hailed as a masterful treatment of its chilling theme, it also provoked controversy. Kathy Hunt, for example, writing in the *Australian*, found the novel "contrived, exploitive and opportunistic," especially because its focus Jack's relationships with his mother deflects attention away from the "actual horror of kidnap, rape and incarceration." But *Maclean's* contributor Brian Bethune wrote that this view misses the novel's central theme: the intensity of the parent-child bond, and the ways in which, as Bethune quoted the author, "every parent ... "swings between captor and nurturer.'" Indeed, Donoghue told London *Guardian* writer Sarah Crown that "everything in *Room* is just a defamiliarisation of ordinary parenthood. ... I was trying to capture that strange, bipolar quality of parenthood. For all that being a parent is normal statistically, it's not normal psychologically. It produces some of the most extreme emotions you'll ever have."

The book's mother-child dynamic, in fact, is what many reviewers found most compelling about the novel. "What saves this beautifully nuanced book from being in any way a voyeuristic reaction to true crime," observed London *Telegraph* contributor Catherine Taylor, "is less the descriptions of captivity than the inevitably changing nature of the child/parent relationship, which Donoghue explores here so minutely, recognizably, and exultantly." In particular, Donoghue's choice to tell the story from Jack's viewpoint won extravagant praise. "Jack's voice is one of the pure triumphs of the novel," stated *New York Times Book Review* contributor Aimee Bender. "The reader

learns as Jack learns, ... [but] the gap between his understanding and ours is a territory of emotional power."

Though he also noted the importance of Jack's voice in *Room*, *Los Angeles Times* writer David Ulin felt that this narrative device "doesn't always work." At times, readers are drawn completely into the boy's thinking, wrote Ulin, but at other times "things unfold too quickly, without sufficient context, inconsistent with how the characters behave." Bender made a similar point, observing that Donoghue glides too superficially over some material. "The inner claustrophobia, the blurry and often complicated area between closeness and autonomy," noted the reviewer, "is acknowledged but moved through quickly, in favor of managing the joys and terrors of the outside world." Still, said Bender, *Room* is an extraordinary and multi-dimensional story that offers "an utterly unique way to talk about love, all the while giving us a fresh, expansive eye on the world in which we live."

Donoghue once told *CA*: "I have been writing since early childhood, but only in the past few years have I taken it seriously enough, and determined to make a living from it. I grew up in a house full of books in a country full of writers--Ireland; it was an ideal environment. Discovery at the age of fourteen that I was a lesbian certainly gave me plenty to write about, and researching lesbian history has left me with a feeling of having so many unknown stories to tell, but sexuality is not a motive exactly; I write because I need and love to. All writing has a political impact, and I am aware that doing interviews, etc., is my form of lesbian activism, but the motive for writing is not propaganda: I just want to tell stories in a language as powerful as I can make it.

"I work on many different projects at once--too many! Perhaps on a typical day I might answer letters in the morning, do some research for an essay in the afternoon, make notes for a short story while on a train, edit a scene of a play in the evening. ... I have not needed a routine so far, because my passion for the work spurs me on. A laptop computer makes all this much easier--the best investment an aspiring writer can make. I would also advise new writers not to limit themselves to any one genre, but to let the material dictate the form it will appear in. I want to try new genres myself, including adapting my work for the screen."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

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- *Booklist*, May 15, 1994, review of *Stir-fry*, p. 1663; March 1, 1996, review of *Hood*, p. 1120; June 1, 1997, Debbie Carton, review of *Kissing the Witch*, p. 1684; June 1, 1999, Whitney Scott, review of *The Mammoth Book of Modern*

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Author Interview

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.

Courtesy of Little, Brown and Company

Discussion Questions

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 Sunday treat, 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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