

'The cage of my moment': a conversation with Emma Donoghue about history and fiction

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***Abstract:** This conversation with the Irish author Emma Donoghue is focused on her relationship with history and fiction. Topics discussed include the relationship between scholarly research and the writing of historical fiction, the author's sense of duty to the past. We talked about the process of writing historical fiction, and the importance (or lack of importance) of having an 'authentic' link to the moment, or the material that one works with. It is in this context that the author speaks of historical fiction as something that has helped her to open the 'cage of her moment'. The conversation took place in front of a large audience at Boston College on 1 December 2018. It was held at the end of a one-day symposium on History and Fiction at Connolly House, a renowned centre for Irish Studies in the United States, and for this reason the interview concludes with a wider consideration of the author's Irish identity and how living outside of Ireland has effected it in recent decades.*

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While historical fiction has burgeoned in the last decade or so globally, Irish readers have reacted somewhat ambivalently to this booming market. This is, in part, due to a growth in the market for children's literature and non-fiction for adults (Farmer 2018, 243), but also because most emerging Irish writers such as Sally Rooney, Donal Ryan, and Liz Nugent seem to shy away from historical themes. The prime beneficiaries, then, have been experienced authors who have a long track record in producing high quality historical fiction. Irish authors such as Emma Donoghue, Colm Toibín and Sebastian Barry can now address historical phenomena with the expectation that their readers will buy their books and engage with them. What impact does this public recalibration of history in fiction mean for Ireland, so obsessed for so long with its contentious past? How faithful are contemporary Irish novelists to the historical record, and how ethical or experimental can we expect them to be?

To answer some of these questions, and to pose others, I decided to interview one of Ireland's most famous authors, Emma Donoghue. Now based in London, Ontario, and globally famous in the wake of her bestselling novel *Room* (2010), Donoghue is also one of the most prolific contemporary Irish writers of historical fiction. She has published ten novels for adults so far, five of which might

be classed as contemporary, and five which are unambiguously historical fiction. To this can be added five short story collections, four of which are historically themed, and a considerable back catalogue of drama, screenplays, and children's literature. Donoghue also has a very impressive academic background, having completed a D.Phil in Literary History at Cambridge in 1996 (Donoghue 1996). From this work some related non-fiction works have also emerged, including a survey of lesbian-themed works in early modern England, a double biography of Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, and an award-winning study of passion and desire in lesbian fiction in western literature (Donoghue 1993, 1998, 2010).

This conversation took place in front of a large audience at Boston College on 1 December 2018. It was held at the end of a one-day symposium on History and Fiction at Connolly House, a renowned centre for Irish Studies in the United States, where I was based for the Fall semester on a Visiting Fellowship with the Burns Library. The symposium sought to pose specific questions about the relationship between history and fiction within Irish Studies as a field, an area that is understudied relative to its reading public (see further Cahalan 1983; Dunne 1987; Kreilkamp 1998; Garratt 2011 and Costello-Sullivan 2018). This Irish element figured occasionally in our conversation, but the ground we ranged across was much wider than that. Donoghue has given multiple interviews in both popular and academic contexts, and so I made some effort to avoid topics that she has covered exhaustively elsewhere, such as motherhood, lesbian themes, feminist perspectives, and biography (see for example Bensyl 2000; Donoghue 2002; Grassi and Fantaccini 2011; Ue 2012; Donoghue and Palko 2017 and Lackey 2018). Instead, we aimed at the intersections of history, research, and literature when possible. We talked about the process of writing historical fiction, and the importance (or lack of importance) of having an 'authentic' link to the moment, or the material that one works with. That Emma speaks of historical fiction as something that helped her to open the 'cage of her moment' is something that might interest readers of this journal. The conversation below was recorded in audio, and is lightly edited in the transcript, for flow. Where possible I have tried to retain both the sense of an audience and of Emma's own exuberant personality.

Interview

CON: Before the global success of *Room* (2010) you were known to all of us in Irish Studies as one of the finest purveyors of historical fiction, and that is a trend that you haven't since abandoned. I have just finished re-reading *Slammerkin* (2000) after many years, and it is so interesting to talk to you about how your historical fiction has developed in the intervening years, and how some of the threads in that earlier work have come to life in more recent collections like *Astray* (2012) and your novel *The Wonder* (2016). Why do you think you turn

so often to the past for inspiration or as a resource, and do you see yourself primarily as a writer of historical fiction?

ED: It could be poverty of imagination, you know? Sometimes I think if I was just better at making things up I wouldn't need to rely so much on what *has* happened. But it's more that I get hooked. I come across these things in everyday life and I just get compulsively interested in them and it seems as if only writing a novel will solve the puzzle to my satisfaction. It certainly doesn't make life easier, for all that it is handy to have something to write about, it actually doubles your work because you have to be a historian first and then you have to offend yourself as a historian because you end up saying to yourself, 'actually, never mind if there was no newspaper edition on a Sunday, you know? There will be in my book!'. The reader may not even notice, but when you change the facts you are always aware of it. Often I have to telescope the facts. Any time I have ever written about a court case, for instance. Court cases take so long, so I always have to find some way to shunt it into a smaller space. So, yes, I would say that I am primarily a historical fiction novelist. It just so happens that *Room* was contemporary, and that it hit the big time, but most of what I write is in some way inspired by history. I think doing a degree in English, and doing a PhD in eighteenth century literature set me on this course. I might have ended up a very different kind of novelist. I think it freed me from my own cultural moment. I'm always hearing Irving Welsh on the radio blabbing on about how you can only authentically write a book about your own time. That to me is just such a narrow vision of what a novelist does. My own father is always irritating me by quoting Henry James on historical fiction and how it's all a cod! But doing a PhD helped me to open the cage of my moment and let me step out and let me realise I could write about anything at all.

CON: Penelope Lively once wrote that 'fiction can seem more enduring than reality. Pierre on the field of battle, the Bennet girls at their sewing, Tess on the threshing machine - all these are nailed down forever, on the page and in a million heads' (Lively 1987, 6). As a historian it often pains me that novelists are so much more adept at making the past come to life for others. Why do you think those images that Lively mentions resonate so strongly, and why are historical novelists so much better at building these worlds in a way that historians just don't seem to be?

ED: Well, historians are playing by very specific rules. Any time I have written literary history or biography, it's a good discipline because it reminds me of what it means to stick to what – so far as you can tell – is *true*. It's *so* freeing when you are writing fiction then, you can fiddle with the ingredients in the

recipe. Whether you are writing a biography of Charles Dickens, or a short story about a young woman whom Charles Dickens helped to emigrate, those are similar *ingredients*. In fiction you can stick closely to fact and on the same page using the same words as a historian would – for instance if you are quoting a real letter by Dickens, at that moment your text overlaps perfectly – and on the same page you can write an entire conversation that never happened and that you are just making up.

I find when I am writing historical fiction I find I really like the factual bits, and I stick very closely to what we know about my subject's lives, but then I come to a point where we don't know what they do for the next three years and I can just make it up! And I really enjoy those moments. I remember spending an entire day in the Bodleian library when I was researching my novel *The Sealed Letter* which is about a Victorian divorce case (Codrington v Codrington, 1864). There was a reference in the court case (as reported in the newspapers) that talked about this packet that one of the lawyers kept brandishing and saying 'if this were opened it would give my client reasons for asking Ms Faithful to leave his wife's house'. And I thought 'what's in the packet?!'. I remember thinking I should make a real effort to find what was in that packet. So I went to the Bodleian, and went through his papers, and didn't find it. And I was so happy! Because I could make it up! And I *knew* it wouldn't say whatever I wanted it to say. So it's a bit perverse, my historian self and my novelist self.

CON: So it's about exploiting the gaps between what you can verify? That's where you can do your best work?

ED: Yes, it is. And there are lots of things that people don't record. Things they were ashamed of. Deeply private things. Their sex lives. So you'll often have quite a lot of fact about their public lives, but not about their private lives. You can take advantage of that.

When I write about the poor, just to generalise, I have to make up a lot more than I do about the rich. The poor obviously didn't get leisure to write diaries and letters. But on the other hand, the poor sometimes came up against the state, so you have lots of hard evidence about their pregnancies and crimes and diseases and so on. The one time I wrote about the rich in my novel *Life Mask*, which was about aristocrats at the end of the eighteenth century, I was just overwhelmed. I just don't know how Hilary Mantel manages it, you know, to write about famous people who have left so many records. It just means you have to cut your way through this dense undergrowth of texts. So I would highly recommend writing about the poor and obscure (*laughter*).

CON: That seems very wise! I have a question about language – such a site of contestation in historical fiction. The novelist David Mitchell has talked about the problem of dialogue, language, and historical fiction. He says ‘to a degree, the historical novelist must create a sort of dialect. I call it ‘Bygonese’, which is inaccurate but plausible. Like a coat of antique-effect varnish on a pine new dresser, it is both synthetic and the least-worst solution’ (Mitchell 2010, Stocker 2012, 313). Do you embrace Bygonese as an author, or do you suffer it?

ED: I love him. If David Mitchell is writing about seventeenth century Japan, the fact that he is writing it in English frees him. It’s a translation anyway. If you are writing about the 1950s in your own language, you will probably try to write in the language that you think they might have used. If you are writing about the 1150s, well it’s a bit of a foreign language, and you are going to have to come up with something different. So for me that bargain with the reader depends on the where and when of what I have set. I avoid deliberate anachronism, but if you actually use the grammatical structures of the day it will all feel very wooden, and far away from the reader. And I don’t want that. So, it can be a struggle to find the correct Bygonese if you like. It’s a compromise, but all dialogue is. When I was writing *Room* I was trying to come up with a plausible language for a child which is really far more like adult speech. But if I actually wrote like a 5 year old nobody would understand it.

CON: Quite a lot of your work has come out in short story form. I wonder if you find a big difference when you work out some history in a short story or a novel? How do you choose which one becomes a novel and which one comes out in shorter form?

ED: It makes my publishers groan. They say I am throwing away the good effect of *Room!* (*laughter*). But I love them [short stories], so what can you say?! I like to think that the length is intrinsic to the story. However big a canvas it needs. When I was planning the collection called *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) one of the cases involved a girl who killed her employer with a meat cleaver on the Welsh border. And I quickly realised that to explain this murder was going to take a novel. I couldn’t get people to sympathise with her in five pages, so it became my novel *Slammerkin* (2000). Sometimes though, it is based on more pragmatic factors. How long I can bear to spend in this world, in this space? Another of the short stories in that same collection, called ‘Revelations’, is about an eighteenth century cult where a women of considerable character managed to gather her congregation in a barn on a mountain to wait for Jesus. And to not eat in the meantime. And for weeks they all fasted. And the reason that was a short story was that I just couldn’t face being in that locked barn for

several years of my life with these people as all those people got hungry. I remember thinking 'this is good material and I could easily squeeze a novel out of it', but I just couldn't face it. Whereas with *The Wonder* I was writing about somebody who was fasting, but was a much more likeable kid. And that made all the difference. Short stories allow you to be experimental. A short story is an affair not a marriage (*laughter*). Literary adultery is a useful way to spend your time!

CON: I notice that very few people ever bring up your PhD topic in interviews, and yet it seems obvious that it might be an important entry point to your work. The title was 'Male-Female friendship in the eighteenth century'. How important was writing your PhD to the development of your historical fiction?

ED: Oh it caused it! If I hadn't written my PhD I suspect I would have ended up writing contemporary novels. My first two novels were Dublin novels set before and during the boom. That was my territory. And the identity politics of the early '90s would have encouraged that. Most writers stick with what they know. I was a new Irish 'lesbian voice' and so I did that for a while. My first short story collection was composed of fairy tales, which was the first time I stepped away from the present to the pre-modern world. But then when I started writing my first historical fiction novel, *Slammerkin*, I had a feeling that I could write about anything, and I feel I've really broadened out from that. I may have started out writing about women but I have spread all over the place now. And I never would have done any of that without the comfort and ease with history and with research as a process that doing a PhD over many years in Cambridge gave me. So with PhDs, it's not about who reads them, it is about who you become when you are writing them. It's very precious to me, that period of time. I look back on those years with real affection. Just that feeling of plunging into sources and doing way more work than you needed to out of sheer intellectual curiosity. And it's never wasted.

CON: Authors sometimes say that they don't read criticism of their work, but you actually engage with your readers, and especially academic work on your novels. Do you ever resent or reject that work?

ED: I'm pretty laid back about it to be honest. It's usually clever stuff. Each academic tends to see what they are looking for, you know. If a historian of materiality and objects reads *Slammerkin*, it will be all about ribbons and dresses or something. Italian academics often write about my fairy tales, for example.

And academics will often engage with novels that have not received a big readership commercially, for example. So it's a lovely other world in which your work can make ripples. Take my novel *Hood* (1995), for example, which was a commercial failure, but academics have often used it. I'm really a lapsed academic myself. I always thought I might be a professor like my father was, so the least I can say is 'I loved your essay', for example.

CON: That brings me to my next question, which is about being the daughter of a very prominent cultural figure in Ireland – your father Denis Donoghue is a leading critic. Was that an advantage or a disadvantage to you as a young writer?

ED: Yes, well, I have seven siblings and not all of them are interested in fiction. My parents always spoke a lot about literature and the arts. I suspect my seven older siblings would get away from the table very quickly and I would stay there and ask questions about *Finnegan's Wake*! I feel I was very favoured in a way because I would go on long walks with my father, and for much of my upbringing he was only working (teaching at NYU) for about half the year. So I would get these long leisurely walks with him on piers where he would talk to me about literature and so on. He writes beautifully, and it strikes me now that although I didn't end up an academic like him he has a very similar approach to writing. He will write about English or Irish or American literature, or he'll mention *The Simpsons* if it happens to come up. In fact we joke that if we ever mention something about pop culture to him it invariably ends up in his writing. I remember showing him a Lady Gaga video, and up it popped in his next review. Nothing is wasted! So, I think his feeling of being an intellectual who can address anything he wants to is something that has stayed with me. I think that has probably affected me very much in my approach to fiction.

CON: I'd like to take us up sequentially through some of your early historical fiction, if I may. You published *Slammerkin* back in 2000, and both it and *Life Mask* (2004) seem to me both novels that emerge in some sense from your comfort zone historically, in that they are both based on eighteenth century British subject matter. Looking back on this – do you think you had to begin in that comfort zone?

ED: I think so. At the same time I was doing my PhD I was doing a book called *Passions Between Women* (1993) with a small press in London, which was about representations of love between women. That was a parallel project to my PhD and I read a huge amount in preparation for both. I was asked for a short story for an anthology at that time, and I was doing a bit on Mary Wollstonecraft

in my PhD, and the education of girls, and so that was my very first piece of historical fiction I think. And it came straight out of the PhD really. So, yeah, it all began in the eighteenth century for me. Everyone is biased about their own century, but I do think that in many ways the eighteenth century is the wellspring of our culture. Ideas about democracy, women's rights, human rights, civil rights. They all sprang up there. The idea of the mobile individual escaping their background. These are all eighteenth century ideas, and so it was a great place for me to start.

CON: Will you ever return to the elite world in your historical fiction, or will you likely continue to write the marginalised?

ED: My ideal literary source is one sentence, really. In the case of *Slammerkin* the story came out of two words. The girl said that she committed the murder for 'fine clothes'. And I just got obsessed with that phrase. I mean, I like dresses myself but I don't think I could kill for them. That idea of what clothes could have meant to a girl, that's what drew me in.

CON: Your next historical work was *The Sealed Letter* (2008), a novel that focuses on a real divorce case, *Codrington v Codrington* (1864). This is the novel that includes perhaps the most historical evidence within the text itself, something you integrate into the novel a great deal. Why did you do that?

ED: Yes, there were daily reports in the press, and since my subjects were reading them at the time it seemed right to include those reports. The people in the court case were self-conscious and in the spotlight. The husband and wife at the centre of the case couldn't speak in court as they were just assumed to be biased. They were trapped in the wings while servants spilled the beans, and their lawyers spoke, and their enemies spoke. They just had to grit their teeth, so I thought that put them in a fascinating position. They were just readers of their own story.

CON: The novel of yours that most people will have read is *Room* (2010), which you have called elsewhere both a career peak and an aberration. It is a novel in your oeuvre that seems to come out of nowhere. A brilliant book, and an attempt to explain the inexplicable. It's also the first work of yours to reach the silver screen. How did you find the experience of transformation and adaptation? You retained full authorial control, but what was it like to re-excavate that text and reimagine it on to the screen?

ED: I loved it. The last thing your film company will want is for the author to do that work. Many are the novelists that are actively discouraged in fact. They are told that (typically a she) doesn't have the skillset, and to leave it to the experts (typically a he). 87% of films are written by men, so it's completely unlike novel-writing in that way. So, nowadays whenever I meet an author whose work is being considered for adaptation I always tell them 'Do it yourself! It's not rocket science!'. I think because I have always enjoyed the interplay between history and fiction in my work I really relish the question and process of adaptation. It really reveals the good aspects of both mediums, really. It's a bit like being an immigrant, in some ways, it makes you savour both places even if you feel a little caught in the middle. When I had finished *Room* it seemed obvious to me that it could work as a film, and so I thought that since it would be hard to get that gig as a newcomer to film I had better just go ahead and write the screenplay without telling anyone I was doing it. I thought 'I'll write it myself, and then refuse to sell the novel to anyone that doesn't want to use my script.' If they had *all* come back to me and said the script is rubbish I might have been overwhelmed, but that didn't happen. What I found really interesting about the adaptation was that it gave me a chance to play to the strengths of this new medium. I thought about film and what it does, and the grammar is light, and angles, and faces. It's not primarily psychological, though it can of course have psychological effects. A novel is all the words that are going through your character's head. A film is all about what you can read on their face. Totally different. So rather than looking at each page of *Room* and wondering what to keep, it was about telling the story again in light. The movie begins with Ma flashing light and trying to attract the attention of a neighbour or a passer-by, in fact, quite unlike the book, because *light* is what film is good at. The movie is far more compact, and moves far more quickly, and all these things come out of the differences inherent in the medium. Books are so long and slow, and accommodately formed, allowing many changes of mood. Sitting in the editing room with Lenny [Abrahamson, our director] it became obvious that film was about rhythm, and we cut out lots of things because of that. I had a really direct and intimate relationship with my director, and beautiful films can come out of that.

CON: Since *Room*, you published *Frog Music*: a novel that centres on a person whose every action seems to be an event. The book is based on Jenny Bonnet, a real-life cross-dressing, frog-catching Parisian who was tried for murder in San Francisco in 1876 (Sears 2015, 64-74). Was it fun to write? It sure seems like it must have been.

ED: Great fun. It's more of a detective novel than anything I have written so it was a new genre, and I wanted to get it right. I felt self-conscious about trying

to make it a literary novel, and yet satisfy the crime readers. Crime readers are very sophisticated about their genre. They want there to be enough hints, but they don't want the ending to be obvious. You only want the cleverest of them to guess the ending, not a majority. They get enraged if you mess with the genre, particularly if you are new to it. So I wanted to get it right, and I think comfort zones are bad for a writer, and I wanted to try something new. It was my first one set in America, and I just enjoyed that new idiom. But I still brought in stuff from home in a way. At one point I found out that Bonnet was sent off to an industrial school, and as an Irish novelist that fascinated me, of course, since locking up our young is a key part of our history in a way. Since *Room* I am much more interested in plot, I would say. Plot wasn't something that I was really all that natural at, I have always been much more character driven, and interested in psychology and so on. But since *The Sealed Letter* I have worked a lot on plot, and developed a new technique of charting in advance what will happen in each chapter as well as what would be revealed, and then take out all the bits that seemed unnecessary. I tried to make my structure more lean. And it is thrilling to see that people can become gripped by your story. I think that plotting is evident in *Frog Music*, and probably in *The Wonder* (2016) too.

CON: Your most recent book for adults, *The Wonder*, is also the first of your historical fictions to be set in Ireland. The novel is set in about 1859 in the midlands of Ireland and focuses on a so-called fasting girl who becomes a sort of lightning rod for political and religious tensions in the locality and further afield. The other main character is a Nightingale nurse – Lib Wright – who comes to care for the little girl at the centre of the story. Lib seems to stand as a proxy for English ideologies on Famine-era Ireland and she is resentful of the traditional way of life that she rejects as a modern and scientific rational medical professional. She seems to quote from Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing* (1859) as if it were a bible. What are you doing with Lib in the novel?

ED: Yes, Lib sometimes stands for modern views of the past. Sometimes, when she is scorning the past and the filthy peasants and their lazy ways, she is being a modern person, and sometimes she is being an English person, and sometimes she is just wrong. A stranger come to town is the classic set up for a novel, and it allows you to ask questions of the environment that locals wouldn't ever ask. If you want to reveal a world quite fast then you have a stranger turn up and ask lots of questions. I did think that the girl's case would be likely to raise lots of issues. *The Wonder* is a first for me in that it doesn't deal with an actual historical case as such. I was so wedded to my method ever since *Slammerkin*. I usually write historical fiction about real cases, and I was quite proud of that. But with *The Wonder* I wanted to write about fasting girls, and there was this Welsh case that intrigued me, but it was just so sad because the girl starved to death.

The newspapers funded a sort of watch, and she slowly starved to death in front of them. So I thought, that's just too grim for me, sorry. I got that idea years ago, in the late '90s, and then in about 2013 I was looking back over old ideas and I thought it was really a shame that I never did the fasting girl story. So I decided I would make it up! A different version of that story with a less grim ending. Novelists do that all the time. They write a fictional story that is very soaked in the past. That way you can bring all the historical research but not be so tied to the ending.

CON: Irish historians always think long and hard about looking at the Famine in our work, for good and for ill, and partly because there is very often a strong reaction. Did it give you pause for thought? Is that why you set the action a little after the Famine?

ED: I was squirming a little bit, certainly. These fasting girl cases stretch from the sixteenth century to the present. In fact there was a recent one in India, so I could have set it anywhere. I wanted to choose my own cultural setting, and I wanted to show the sheer range of opinions that could converge on one little girl. So the nineteenth century seemed useful, because earlier it might have been a purely religious interpretation, and any later it would have been more obviously scientific. Doctors began to label things like anorexia nervosa from the 1870s onwards, and I always find it much more interesting to go back before the labels are firmly applied. I thought if I set the novel in the mid nineteenth century then some people will see it in terms of magic or religion and others would see it in terms of neurasthenia. I wanted a maximum range of interpretation, and by setting it in Ireland after the Famine I could place it in the aftermath of an event I've never been able to write about head-on. Perhaps Jewish writers feel the same way about the Holocaust. It's a big brutal subject that they feel guiltily tied to but can't find a way to make it fresh. I feel like that about the Famine, and I thought if I set *The Wonder* in the aftermath I can say some things about the psychological damage done to us by the Famine but it isn't as direct as if the people are rotting in the hedgerows. I was worried that people would think the novel was anti-Irish in some way. Lib says a lot of anti-Irish things, but by the end I have made her eat her words. She gets things wrong or thinks people were stupid. One of the things I tried to do was make the journalist character a Protestant, but I ended up making him a Catholic to show the range of Catholic attitudes.

CON: In the novel you seem to indict everyone. The state lets the girl down, the doctors let her down. And Lib lets her down by letting her get to the point of starvation on her watch?

ED: With my historical fiction I often read around lots of contemporary understandings of a particular issue. In the case of *The Wonder* I read a lot about eating disorders but tried very hard not to allow any twenty-first century attitudes into the novel itself. I tried to have my characters think like people who had never heard of anorexia. One of the things that really struck me from my background reading was the agony for parents on which treatment to choose. There are some schools of thought that emphasise autonomy for the patient, and then there are doctors that will tell parents that their child is hurting themselves and that they need to feed them and make them safe. I wanted to give that dilemma to Lib. She has been hired in bad faith. She has been hired to supervise rather than truly treat. And even when she tries to help the child she doesn't really know how. There are moments where she tries to overrule her, moments where she tries to strengthen her. It's all about parenting really. Everything I have written in the past 15 years has been about parenting. My kids sometimes ask if I ever wrote anything before they were born!

CON: One of the things that we can say when we stand back from your fiction is that there is a persistent focus on the underrepresented, and on women. There seem to be a couple of types that recur. The sexually 'promiscuous' or problematic female, and then the sturdier middle-aged professional woman that you sometimes juxtapose with that 'other' woman.

ED: My PhD was the start of all that. I remember being in some reading group or seminar where we were all talking about revisionism and giving voice to the voiceless. I found that such a thrilling endeavour, and it certainly affected my fiction. I would say it started with women and then I have often written about 'freaks' and about slavery in various ways. I've done two novels about sex work, which is sort of the ur-job that stands for so many aspects of being a woman. It's hard not to come back to it. In *The Sealed Letter*, the reason why I wrote about that case, I think, was that it seemed so incongruous to have such a highly respected professional woman called as a character witness to a divorce case centring on a so-called 'slutty' military wife like Helen Codrington. Fido was a printer, and a spinster, so it was the yoking together of those two women that really drove the novel. When I write about these professional women characters, I notice that I often have them have an antagonistic relationship with the media, or society in general. I'm interested in how women define their own work, and how much to reveal about one's self or one's work. The other recurring trope in my fiction is obviously also that of cross-dresser, or gender bending characters, who are everywhere in my work.

CON: My last question is about how your earlier 1990s work is now passing into history as you watch and how that feels as a writer of historically sensitive fiction. If we think back to *Hood* or *Stir Fry*, do you see them as period pieces and reflective of that early boom-time Ireland?

ED: It's funny, I usually listen to each of my audiobooks in the car once at least. And recently a version of *Stir Fry* came out in audio and I found I just couldn't listen to it, it was too much. I was 17 when I went to university, and I just couldn't bear to inhabit that world again! But I don't feel bad about it, it is just of its moment. *Hood* is about bereavement, so it lasts more strongly for me, and it is based on my own convent school days and being an angst-ridden closeted lesbian and so on. *Landing* – a novel very few have read – wasn't published in Britain at all but is about an Irish woman moving to Canada and is pretty autobiographical as well. So clearly my autobiographical work doesn't tend to sell very well! I really have to transform my own story for it to work, so it's like it should be me and a baby, but in a locked room!

CON: I'm wondering about the mechanics of your historical fiction and your creative process as a writer. How do you stop yourself researching more and more detail, and when do you know you have enough?

ED: It isn't a matter of time usually. I have never felt I should have done less, you just have to be ruthless about what you include in the book. So in the case of *Frog Music*, for example, I hadn't read all that much about the period really and I remember coming across an eccentric photographer called Eadweard Muybridge who happened to be in San Francisco at the time that the novel was set. He was hiring sex workers for his work, and so I thought I would write a few scenes in which my main character would pose for him. So I spent a week or so researching him. But then I thought he was distractingly famous – this guy – and he was involved in a murder case of his own around that time. He was the first to use a defence centred on concussion, in fact, in a case where he was accused of shooting his wife's lover. So his case was getting in my way too much, so I simply excised him from the novel. You don't necessarily have to include something in the book just because you did the research, which I think is just as true for a novel as it is for a PhD. In *Slammerkin* I remember agonising over whether I would include the name of the king at the time the novel was set. But I realised that might not figure very strongly in the world of my sixteen-year-old street prostitute. So I didn't include it, and it was quite freeing really. A ruthless commitment to point of view can really help I think. Only include what the character would care about. If you are going to include an anecdote it really has to fit. I've never thought I can get away without reading extensively

about something. You sometimes need to read six books to get that gem or nugget. But I enjoy that a lot usually, and the internet has made the research process so much easier I think.

CON: How important is your Irishness to your writing?

ED: I do think of myself as an Irish writer, partly because I think if you spend the first twenty years of your life somewhere it inevitably soaks through you somehow. I think I bring not only the gabbiness of the Irish to my writing work but also a great deal of confidence about being a European as well, and about being part of the British Isles, and part of the Atlantic or Anglo world. So I always feel I have a finger in all these pies in a way. And I have been an immigrant twice, which also means I feel I can write about being in different places – something that is almost defining about the Irish experience. When I first moved to Canada I remember speaking to a rather gloomy academic at a party who thought that because I was moving to Canada I could never be famous anywhere. And he used the example of Brian Moore, who he argued had reduced his reputation by moving around so much. I was a bit alarmed by it, and I suppose it might be true in some ways. But I have so benefited from the freedom to write about different places and in different modes, that I try not to worry about it too much really. Your time is limited, get the head down and write the book!

Emma's reflections on her writing of historical fiction help bring into sharp relief some of the thornier aspects of writing from an explicitly feminist point of view. The idea that a writer can escape the 'cage of her moment', only, perhaps, to have to inhabit a cage from another era convincingly is certainly one of the reasons why this author's work continues to compel. This seems to connect to the problem of migration. Donoghue is a writer who seems comfortable addressing historical issues, events, and themes in a number of places, and it is her professional experience of research that frees her to do so. The confidence and sense of expertise that followed her doctoral work in Cambridge provided that original impetus for her historical fiction, and perhaps enables or eases her continued intellectual engagement with scholars who work on her fiction in the academy. This is relatively rare – at least at this depth – so she may be an outlier, but it shows just how overstated that gap between writers of history and fiction can be. Just as Penelope Lively was inspired by her undergraduate education at Oxford at a key moment in new historicism, so too is the historical fiction of Donoghue building out from and expanding on a long and mutually reinforcing research career.

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Emma Donoghue's Fiction

Stir Fry (1994)

Hood (1995)

Kissing the Witch (1997)

Slammerkin (2000)

The Woman Who Gave Birth To Rabbits (2002)

Life Mask (2004)

Touchy Subjects (2006)

Landing (2007)

The Sealed Letter (2008)

Room (2010)

Three and a Half Deaths (2011)

Astray (2012)

Frog Music (2014)

The Wonder (2016)

Akin (2019)