

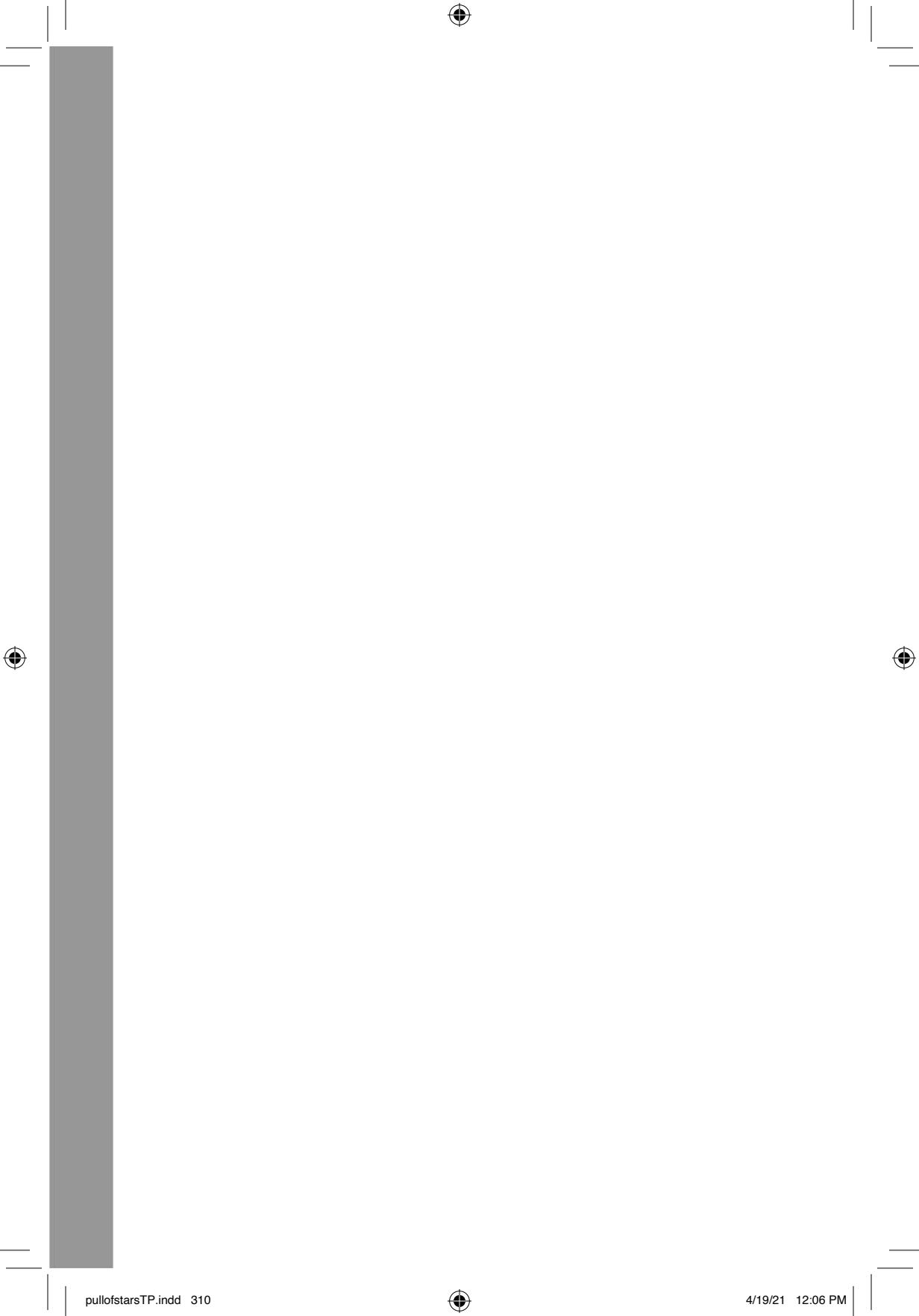
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE
PULL
OF THE
STARS

A novel
by

EMMA DONOGHUE



AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA DONOGHUE

Emma Donoghue and Thomas Gebremedhin, a senior editor at *The Atlantic*, discussed the novel ahead of its publication.

Thomas Gebremedhin: “The Blood Tax” is taken from your forthcoming novel, *The Pull of the Stars*, which is set during the 1918 Spanish-flu pandemic. You wrote the novel long before COVID-19 started to dominate global headlines, and the story has since taken on an unexpected congruity with our current moment. What has it been like for you to revisit the book these past few weeks? Were there any particular scenes that took on new meaning?

Emma Donoghue: Yes, it’s been rather eerie to reread the text, especially as I’ve been lucky enough to have both a midwife (currently quarantined) vet it for the labor-and-delivery scenes and an emergency-medicine doctor (working part-time through this pandemic) copyedit it; discussing fictional medical matters with these two frontline health workers, at a time when battling a virus couldn’t be more real, has filled me with a sense of urgency to get it right. Not just the symptoms and the procedures, but the psychology of nurses and doctors in desperate

times. Despite the horror of the present moment, I've found myself reflecting on how much worse things were in 1918, when they really had no idea what they were battling—their microscopes weren't yet powerful enough for them to isolate and identify the flu virus. High doses of aspirin and quinine were proving toxic, so many doctors ordered whiskey for patients instead—that's how primitive the treatment was.

Gebremedhin: Your 2014 novel, *Frog Music*, takes place in 1876 San Francisco, which was in the grip of a smallpox epidemic. Why did you decide to build *The Pull of the Stars* around another viral outbreak?

Donoghue: It might sound rather callous to say, but an epidemic is a narrative gold mine: It ups the stakes for the most everyday interaction between characters, because every kiss becomes a gamble. It also creates a powerful atmosphere of creeping, unlocalized dread. Am I the source of contagion or a potential victim? Is what is happening to me my fault, or someone else's, or nobody's, or everybody's? Are politicians going to save us or are they taking advantage of this moment to spy on, scapegoat, or persecute us, or write us off as collateral damage? Also, we're all asking ourselves the big emotional and ethical questions these days: Who do I want to be with, and what would I risk for them?

Gebremedhin: In reading *The Pull of the Stars*, I was struck by the abundance of historical detail. How do you go about researching your novels? Do you find yourself drawing from real-life accounts?

Donoghue: I research all my novels very fully, partly because my memory isn't good enough to write anything "out of my

head.” Even when I used a flight attendant as a protagonist, I had to read dozens of blogs about how they actually spend those long hours in the air. For my historical novels the research will always be more, I suppose, but still, my rule is that if anything sounds like a footnote—stuck in to educate the reader or because it’s an interesting detail—I cut it. For *The Pull of the Stars*, I was able to draw on wonderful sources, from newspaper articles that mentioned odd details (such as, say, a paper being printed with blank pages during power outages), to harried doctors’ diaries, to the dying words of a volunteer nurse who said this had been the best week of her life. The Great Flu has been described as the first photographically documented pandemic, and I built up a huge collection of photos. Of course, I want to get the sensory details right (the war bread with all its dubious bulking ingredients), but above all the psychology is key; I was out to capture that particular “Keep calm and carry on” tone.

Gebremedhin: Do you feel more at home writing historical novels rather than something set in the present? What challenges does a historical novel present?

Donoghue: I love doing both; I find it easier to be funny in stories set now (I suppose because humor is so based on shared cultural references), but it’s easier to create high drama in those set in the past (because before the welfare state, one mistake could put you quite literally in the gutter). Yes, the need to research every little thing for historical fiction can be grueling. Some mornings it seems like I can’t get through a single sentence without filling it with queries in brackets: [true?] [check price] [had this been invented?]. On the other hand, setting a novel in the past is a fabulous defamiliarization device: It lets

you combine timeless things the reader will easily nod along to with era-specific details and attitudes that may make the reader recoil. So it keeps both writer and reader on their toes.

Gebremedhin: “The Blood Tax” moves seamlessly between Julia’s—our narrator’s—interior monologue and her conversations with family and friends. Yet you manage to avoid using quotation marks throughout. Why did the story require this structure?

Donoghue: Oddly enough, this is the first novel which I’ve done without quotation marks. (This is an example of the kind of thing that writers sweat over; readers seem to think we’re always worrying about the fate of our characters, while actually we’re waking up in the night going, “Past tense or present? Should my narrator be semi-omniscient?”) I know what you might call the no-quote-marks Cormac McCarthy mode—though really it dates back to Joyce, if not earlier—can madden some readers. But for this novel, about a nurse worked off her feet, it felt crucial to me to have the dialogue swim in a sea of thought, to almost hallucinatory effect. Doing without quotation marks means you have to mark the speech out more by its flavor, too. The reader has to pay more attention if they’re to stay oriented, but I went out of my way not to leave them bewildered, as having to go back over a page to work out who’s saying what does rather burst the bubble.

Gebremedhin: Julia is a caretaker. She is surrounded by people burdened by their pasts. Her brother has not said a word since he returned from war; her friend Bridie has no ties to her family; and then there are the women she cares for in the maternity

ward. What are the effects on her of constantly caring for others? Is that a fundamental aspect of her nature, or is this what's expected of her by the society in which she lives?

Donoghue: Good question. Yes, you could say that Julia Power doesn't just happen to be a nurse; as an unmarried Irishwoman turning thirty in 1918, she has few options, and nursing is one of the only respectable ones. But Julia is no victim; as a highly motivated nurse who's specialized in midwifery, she has a real sense of vocation about helping her patients (both women and newborns) through the most dangerous day of life. This is my second novel about a nurse (after *The Wonder*), and I've also written two about sex workers (*Slammerkin* and *Frog Music*); I suppose these were the ur-jobs for women before modern times, the madonna-whore dichotomy. Working on the final edits of *The Pull of the Stars* during the coronavirus crisis, I must say I'm glad that the novel focuses on one of the unglamorous, low-paid, but enormously demanding jobs that are responsible for saving so many lives during a global disaster. In 1918 in particular, the treatments the doctors could offer flu patients were so few and generally useless, it was well known that the "tender loving care" (the phrase dates back to Shakespeare) offered by nurses who were risking their own lives was the only thing likely to get you through.

Reprinted with permission, copyright © 2020, *The Atlantic*

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. During the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, many people referred to the 1918 Spanish flu as a touchpoint. What was your awareness of the 1918 flu before the 2020 pandemic? How important is an understanding of history when we deal with similar crises in the present?
2. Julia and the other health workers face many challenges, including lack of supplies, misinformation, and sexism. Which of those challenges were unique to Julia's time and place? To what extent do our health-care workers face the same challenges today?
3. Throughout *The Pull of the Stars*, Julia notices government placards with public health warnings and advice. Why do you think Emma Donoghue included them in the novel? Were your government's efforts to communicate with the general public during the coronavirus pandemic similar to those in the novel, or different?

4. War in several senses—the First World War in which Tim Power served, and the Irish revolutionary struggle in which Dr. Lynn is a leader—is the context to *The Pull of the Stars*. What effect do these distant conflicts have on the story and atmosphere of the novel? Why is war kept mostly in the background rather than in the foreground?
5. Julia argues that women pay “the blood tax” just as much as soldiers. What did you think about the detailed scenes that depicted childbirth and its complications? How do you think birth functions as a source of plot compared with the flu?
6. In the novel, the expectant mothers have very different family situations and relationships with their children. Which patient did you identify with the most? Which patient’s story was the most surprising to you?
7. How does the status of “immunity” function in the novel?
8. What does Bridie Sweeney bring into Julia’s life? Into the novel as a whole? What effect does the slow revelation of her background have on your sense of other characters, institutions, and Ireland’s history?
9. How does it change your response to a character in a novel such as Kathleen Lynn when you learn that she was a historical figure? What does an author owe to a real person when fictionalizing them?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*

Ida Milne, *Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War and Revolution in Ireland, 1918–19*

Caitriona Foley, *The Last Irish Plague: The Great Flu Epidemic in Ireland, 1918–19*

Padraig Yeates, *A City in Wartime: Dublin 1914–1918*

Anne Mac Lellan, *Dorothy Stopford Price: Rebel Doctor*

Brian Goldman, *The Secret Language of Doctors: Cracking the Code of Hospital Slang*

ALSO BY EMMA DONOGHUE

ROOM

“Remarkable . . . A truly memorable novel, one that can be read through myriad lenses—psychological, sociological, political. It presents an utterly unique way to talk about love, all the while giving us a fresh, expansive eye on the world in which we live.” —Aimee Bender, *New York Times Book Review*

ASTRAY

“There is such a deep and compassionate imagination at work in every story in this collection that *Astray* feels almost like an act of clairvoyance.” —Ann Patchett, author of *The Dutch House*



BACK BAY BOOKS

Available wherever books are sold

ALSO BY EMMA DONOGHUE

FROG MUSIC

“Call it a mind-bendingly original crime novel, or a dazzling historical mystery, but in the end, this is really a book about love—a mother’s love for a strange child, for an exotic friend, and finally, for herself.” —Caroline Leavitt, *San Francisco Chronicle*

THE WONDER

“Deliciously gothic . . . Dark and vivid, with complicated characters, this is a novel that lodges itself deep.” —Steph Cha, *USA Today*

AKIN

“A subtle, entertaining portrait of the relationship—and friction—between age and youth.” —*The Economist*



BACK BAY BOOKS

Available wherever books are sold