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Emma Donoghue , Kathleen Anderson

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Emma Donoghue, celebrated author of *SlammerSkin*, vividly animates hidden scraps of the past in this remarkable collection. An engraving of a woman giving birth to rabbits, a plague ballad, theological pamphlets, and an articulated skeleton are ingeniously fleshed out into rollicking tales. Whether she's spinning the tale of a soldier tricked into marrying a dowdy spinster, or a Victorian surgeon's attempts to "improve" women, Donoghue fills us with the sights and smells of the period as she summons the ghosts of ordinary people, bringing them to unforgettable life in fiction.

The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits: Stories Details

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teavious says

Shoutout to my fellow virgo, Pucca, for getting me this wonderful, wonderful book.

The Woman Who Gave Birth To Rabbits is a short story collection based on various, interesting history facts from England and Ireland. From cross-dressing contesses to desperate hoaxes, this book is pouring life into fun facts that might have came into your life, bring a passing smile on your face and then disappear forever from your mind. From amusing, little reminiscenses to goose-bumping fervour, this book stands as a testament of a world that has once been. The nerd in me screamed in delight; give me history and good writing and I'm yours.

What I liked especially about this collection is that at the end of each short story, there is a note, where Emma Donoghue talks about the sources of inspiration for her story, adding recommended reads on each topic. I'm pretty sure I will check out some of those.

Overall, a very good collection, with too little weaker stories to even be mentioned and I am so glad to know about so many weird, interesting and creepy things that happened throughout history.

Carly says

3.5 stars. Truly fascinating premise for a collection of short stories. The execution could've been better, however. I still really enjoyed it.

Stand-outs: "The Last Rabbit"; "Cured"; "Figures of Speech"

Julai says

After reading Room, I had to go back and remind myself just how much Emma Donoghue's prose has changed direction, and this little book of medieval-inspired tales certainly couldn't be any farther from her recent "ripped from today's headlines" novel.

The title tale concerns the first in a rash of 14th century women to pretend to give birth to rabbits, mostly seeking to exhibit themselves in order to escape starvation. And in my expert opinion, you'd have to be pretty hungry to stuff a bunny up your cooter, amirite, ladies? The conceit of this little book is that each tale is inspired by a real woman in history--usually one who has received only the glancingest blow from the History Stick. Each story is wrapped up in a nice little package, with the final page telling you more about the "real" woman who inspired it.

One thing that hasn't changed from Donoghue's medieval-inspired work to "Room" is that she is an author who finds her inspiration exclusively in the world around her and in the work of others. Luckily, what she lacks in imagination and somewhat one-dimensional characterization, she makes up for in rich description

and an excellent ability to choose her source material.

Kathleen says

I'm a fan of Emma Donoghue. She wrote *Kissing the Witch*, a book of female-centric fairy tale retellings that came around at just the right time for baby lesbian me (not that I figured *that* out for like eight more years but you know), and which I still love, after my friend Isana directed me back to it (thanks Isana!). She wrote *Astray*, which I loved too, and *The Wonder*, which I reviewed a little while ago. I got to meet her in person at this year's National Book Festival, at which I sincerely hope I wasn't too creepy-fangirl but my lord was she ever awesome.

And she also wrote *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, a book of largely female-oriented short historical fiction. Which, unsurprisingly, I love.

The stories are based off actual historical incidents, like the titular story (okay, actually called *The Last Rabbit* but it's about the titular woman), about Mary Toft. *Come, Gentle Night* is about the wedding night of John Ruskin and Euphemia Gray, which is completely accurate, very Shakespearian, and still must be read to be believed. *Account* is a *really* neat story told entirely in statistics (ie, "year in which the King rode to Drummond Castle, "number of hours the king could stay in the saddle without a rest," etc) about the poisoning of King James IV's mistress and two of her sisters. And that's only three of them: there are so many stories in this book, so many scraps of history brought to life, and they're all so good.

Now, there are some fucked-up things that occur in the book, but they're fucked-up things that happened in real life. So, you know. If this sounds interesting to you, let me know and I'll put together a full list of trigger warnings, because there's a lot. But it's great, I love it, and if you like historical fiction, I highly recommend it.

Emily says

A mixed bag of short stories based on 18-19th-c (with a smattering of other eras) British history. Since many of the stories are in the first person, one of the treats of the book is figuring out who and when before you get to the endnotes.

The stories themselves range from okay to wonderful. Stories such as "Revelations," "Words for Things," "The Necessity of Burning," and "Looking for Petronilla" are well-paced page-turners. Others fell a bit flat. The most disappointing (perhaps because it had the most potential) was "Dido." It starts out as a critique of the Zoffany portrait of Mansfield's great nieces: Dido Elizabeth Belle, in this interpretation of the portrait, exists to accentuate the pale beauty of her cousin, Lady Elizabeth Murray. Yet the story soon begins rushing around. It complains that Dido is objectified by those around her, but ultimately the story too can see her as nothing more than a symbol for a vaguely referenced abolition movement. It is a bit depressing that the one protagonist the book fails to fully flesh out is its only non-white character. In "Dido," she is only what the story sees in its superficial reading of the Zoffany portrait: a symbol of European privilege and oppression that runs around being symbolic. How much more interesting she could have been if the book allowed her the same humanity it gives to the other historical figures.

Overall, it's a fast read with some real high points, so just skip the mediocre ones. I'm going to read some of Donoghue's novels during the holidays and hope the sustained plotline will help even out the quality of writing.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This was one of the books I speed-dated to try to weed my to-read list a bit. I would rate this as just not for me - it reminds me of another Donoghue book I tried to read once, *Slammerkin*, which received that same verdict. I just don't like the forced period writing, it feels too inauthentic the way she does it. I liked *Room* very much and would still try a future novel, but these stories will be passed on elsewhere.

Eduardo says

Donoghue uses Irish and English historical events, anecdotes, to imagine situations (her stories) that would justify or illustrate them.

At the end of each story she gives us her references (books, letters, documents) on which she based her recreations. It is not clear what is her purpose, what is Donoghue trying to tell us: That she knows how to research her sources? That she is not inventing too much? That she has this special ability to fill the gaps of history with her imagination? That history reads like literature (we know that) or that literature complements and supplements history (we also know that)? Or is it because of what she writes on page 228: "History always becomes a cartoon, where it survives at all. Your best hope for a ride towards posterity is the bandwagon of folklore"?

She does not need those erudite notes at the end to validate her stories, which should stand on their own. Her editor should have convinced her of eliminating all those references to factual reality. Or place them at the beginning of the story, at least, so the reader assumes her/his task from the start, with less subterfuges.

Donoghue's style does not convince me either. In some stories she experiments with the narration and that only adds to the reader's confusion and frustration.

There are some inexcusable mistakes: spelling Raskin for Ruskin, the British art critic, for example (page 110)...

Heather(Gibby) says

This is a wonderful collection of short stories which are all based on snippets the author found while doing research for other novels. There is a little bit of fact or at least folklore in each of these stories, and they are a fascinating collection of historical fiction.

Lily C says

Emma Donoghue never disappoints. There is a delightful breadth to this collection of historically-inspired tales: some reminded me of her historical novel "The Wonder," while some had a different feel that reminded me of another of my favorite short story collections, "Almost Famous Women" by Megan Mayhew Bergman. Some tales are tragic, some are life-affirming, and the last ends on a spine-tingling note. All are

powerful.

Amy Norris says

This short story collection had a great concept and was written by a great author but to be honest it was completely boring and forgettable. Not one story sticks out to me as worth mentioning and I couldn't wait for it to be over.

Shaindel says

Emma Donoghue is a fabulous author. I'm not normally a fan of historical fiction because a lot of it tends to be cheesy/romance sort of stuff, but Donoghue has a Ph.D. specializing in 18th Century British literature and history, and her work is always spot on and fascinating!

In *_The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits_*, Donoghue takes actual historical figures and expands on their stories, writing speculative short fiction about their lives. For instance, she writes a story about a girl who was a charge of Mary Wollstonecraft during Wollstonecraft's short career as a nanny.

Just a wonderful book! Highly recommended.

Jacob says

Okay, I admit it: I got this one because of the title. Seemed quirky enough. In this collection, Emma Donoghue fleshed out seventeen stories about real, but obscure and nearly forgotten, people and events from several centuries of British history: the woman in the title story, Mary Toft, managed to convince the 18th century medical profession (albeit briefly) that she had given birth to a vast number of rabbits; in the 1850s and 60s, Dr. Isaac Baker Brown used clitoridectomies as a way to "cure" women of nonexistent ills; Caroline Crachami, possibly the smallest person who ever lived, was exhibited in England in 1823-24; as well as fourteen other small historical tales for the curious reader. Donoghue included notes at the end of each, for those trying to guess the historical figure (I got one right). Interesting stories, though a bit mixed, but worth a read for anyone who likes their trivia.

Kristen Coffin says

"Words have always been my undoing."

It's so weird that I had seen a piece on this woman on *Mysteries at the Museum*, then the next day came across a book with a story about the same legend.

A group of short stories all centered around one central theme: women who may or may not have been real, and stories that may or may not be true. She writes stories around them and tries to explain the circumstances about the event. They're all really interesting and it was cool to learn about periods of time or legends that I

didn't know anything about.

Karen ?✿ says

Emma Donoghue spent years collecting strange facts, anecdotes, stories, poems and songs from over the centuries in England. In this book she takes one of these per chapter and creates a short story around it based on the historical evidence and her own imagination.

There are some pretty wild and wacky tales as the book title attests to! At the end of each chapter she also gives the source material she used.

Donoghue is probably best known these days for writing “Room”, but most of her work is historical fiction and she clearly has an interest in odd stories from the past. This book is best for fans of historical fiction and those who don’t mind reading short stories.

Pixie Dust says

The more I read of Donoghue, the more I am convinced she is a ventriloquist of sorts. In the short stories collected in this book, she gives voice to a whole host of period characters that she had researched and embellished, switching register and tone with graceful ease. Selecting one interesting or defining moment in their lives, she weaves compelling tales about these figures of the past – some more well-known than others.

Most of her stories in this collection are set in eighteenth century England or Scotland. Among my favourites is the first tale about how a simple, uneducated woman is persuaded by an avaricious, small-time crook of a country doctor to create the illusion that she could give birth to rabbits.

Another favourite is “Words for Things”, where Donoghue makes an educated guess at the reason behind Mary Wollstonecraft’s mysterious dismissal from her post as governess. Also “Come, Gentle Night”, where Donoghue describes John Ruskin’s wedding day and the baffling reason for his non-consummation of the marriage. His egoistical nature is illustrated with several snippets of his conversation with his new bride, e.g. when he made her promise never to wear her pink bonnet despite pink being her favourite colour as she ‘must bow to the superior discernment of a man who has made the beauties of Nature and Art his life’s study’. Artful!

A small tidbit that thrilled me was how Donoghue contrived to make mention of rabbits in every story. At least, I think so. By the time I noticed the recurrence of the rabbit, I was already halfway through the book and didn’t go back to check on the earlier stories. At first, I thought it was a coincidence, then I realised that I really was seeing rabbits everywhere - appearing as food, gloves, or a metaphor...

A pity the quality of the stories is rather uneven. Some of the stories are not particularly interesting. I would still give the book four stars – because the great thing about a short story collection is that you don’t need to read all of them, and so I’ll rate this book based on just those I like.
