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Emma in Borderlands: Q&A with Emma Donoghue

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Having enjoyed considerable success and admiration among audiences and critics for more than a decade, Emma Donoghue is by now one of the most renowned female voices of contemporary Irish culture. The daughter of acclaimed academic critic Denis Donoghue and Frances, a former Aer Lingus flight attendant, she graduated at University College, Dublin and then left for Cambridge, where she took her PhD in English. She has since proven a very talented novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and literary historian, frequently enjoying the shift from one activity to one other.

Back in Dublin in the early 1990s, Donoghue started her productive cooperation with the feminist theatre company Glasshouse Productions. For them, she wrote her first play, *I Know My Own Heart* (1993) which draws extensively on the life of Fred-‘Gentleman Jack’-Anne Lister (1791–1840), a Yorkshire landowner considered the first modern lesbian. Donoghue takes Lister’s diaries and recounts her secret love relationships in eighteenth-century England. The actual, documented sources are conveniently used as tool, as an expedient to claim a space for lesbians in contemporary culture, and in that they demonstrate Donoghue’s contribution to the rise of queer culture in and out of Ireland. Following the success of this first play, and due to the increasing respectability of Glasshouse Productions, the company went on to commission her a second play *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1996), a witty exploration of cross-dressing and gender trouble based on the life of male impersonator Annie Hindle (1847-19?). In 1993, Donoghue also published *Passion Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801*, a compelling archival record of printed texts containing lesbian themes and issues from Restoration England up until the nineteenth-century. However, to tell that she has an obvious fascination with the past is to oversimplify her keen ear for recovering lost stories of real women.

Like many women artists of her generation, Donoghue sees the power in getting neglected works by women back from the hidden corners of official *History*. Like most contemporary Irish artists, she works in liminal spaces which lull between the past and the present, yet with the future always in mind – hence, our choice of the term ‘borderlands’ to render the fluidity, the sense of movement and chance that permeates her writing. So, what is it that

makes Donoghue exceptionally Irish? And, above all, how can the border – in a material as well as a metaphorical sense – affect her and her creativity as writer? These are all issues taken up by the following interview, where Donoghue moves throughout her career, in particular its early years, and ends making some considerations on the future of women's and lesbian writing in Ireland. The fact that she emigrated to Canada towards the end of the 1990s somehow complicates the thread of the journeys undertaken by her characters, at the same time as it responds to a customary feature of many Irish artists.

Donoghue's debut-novel *Stir-Fry* (1994) is more than simply a coming-of-age story. She follows seventeen-year-old, country girl Mária and her sudden discovery of her own sexuality in contemporary Dublin. Its follow-up, *Hood* (1995) is about an Irish woman trying to cope with the aftermath of her partner's death. Lesbian subjectivity, desire for women, and coming-out are the shared background upon which the two novels seek to challenge heteronormative representations of women in Irish literature. Donoghue was seen one of those writers for whom the bubbling cultural context of 1990s Ireland provided an opportunity to depart from the legacy of a colonial past and finally enter a time 'new'. *Stir-Fry* and *Hood* were enough to bring the writer to international attention, and earned her translations into several languages.

There are stories that long to be told, and archived. There are names that demand to be called back again, or even for the very first time. Sometimes, dealing with the past is the best way to talk about the present. All this Donoghue knows too well and shows in her later works. *Slammerkin* (2000) is her first historical novel. Mary Saunders was a working-class girl in eighteenth-century London who passed from prostitution to the murder of her mistress only because she demanded a better life, which she saw in the ribbons and laces typical of the dress-code of the time. *Life Mask* (2005) is also set in eighteenth-century England. The unproven love triangle among comedy actress Elizabeth Farren, aristocratic Whig sculptor Anne Seymour Damer, and Edward Smith-Stanley is imagined in the backdrop of the French Revolution and how it influenced the minds of nobility in England. And again, *The Sealed Letter* (2008) is inspired by the true story of British feminist-spinster Emily Faithfull and her getting entrenched in the divorce of her long-lost friend Helen Codrington upon the latter's return to England. The story is enriched by the hidden secrets and grim details of Helen and Vice-Admiral Codrington's marriage, including the really insidious letter which gives the book its title.

Like a would-be inspector, Donoghue craves a desire to investigate sexual liaisons and affairs at times when it was unthinkable for lesbian love to speak its name, and especially when it had to be concealed behind the facade of respectability and honour, as in Victorian England. Morality and tradition are like beasts, Donoghue seems to say; they eat you alive and can go as far as to ruin the most human of feelings. It is with the same greedy appetites that readers are thrown into the challenges posed by Donoghue's rewritings of official history. This is a

creative thread begun with *Passion Between Women...* and resumed in her later works as literary critic. Yet, 'literary critic' is a category that hardly suits her, one which she fits seemingly uncomfortably, tightened as it is in the grip of issues like faithfulness, and taste. Donoghue performs the skilled cultural historian. She retrieves historical sources, documents them, brings them back to life and again expands them in order to show more of ourselves and the times and places we live in. She charts a sort of geography of feeling through which to hand back the memory of desires long lost, erased or strategically deprived of a voice of their own. So for instance, *We are Michael Field* (1998) is a biography of the late-Victorian Katherine Bradley and her niece and lover Edith Cooper, poets and writers of verse drama disguised under the one and same name Michael Field. In Donoghue's world, things (and people) seldom are what they seem. Furthermore, it is this ongoing play of reality and fiction, truth and fantasy which allows her to move freely within the 'here and now' of the bodily presence and desire for lesbians.

The metaphor of tradition leads to consider her first collection of short-stories, *Kissing the Witch* (1997). Here, she revises postmodern-style the genre of fables and fairy-tales – Cinderella, White Snow, the Mermaid Story, The Beauty and the Beast and many others – from a decidedly lesbian perspective. In a similar way to this greatly entertaining collection, *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) is a collage of impressive short-stories built on historical facts and folklore in the England and Ireland of seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. Donoghue's latest collection to date, *Touchy Subjects* (2006), instead, sees her return to matters of contemporary life. In particular, motherhood and childrearing are contemplated from the standpoint of a linear development on five different stages of life (Babies, Domesticity, Strangers, Desire and Death), and along multiple journeys, from Ireland to the United States and Canada. Often in Donoghue's works, border crossing is functional to finding a strategic location, or perspective, no longer conceived of as a metaphorical, in-between land, a space of indefinableness and uncertainty; rather, a constant undoing of the rootedness demanded by the very notion of 'space'. Different layers of experience accumulate and give way to the richness conveyed by inquiring constantly into individual and social changes and experiences, historical facts and fictional landscapes. In 2007, the novel *Landing* followed closely the long-distance love story of an Irish flight attendant – perhaps, a reference to Donoghue's mother – and a Canadian historian into a stable relationship with another woman. Their differences in age, background and aspirations in life were metaphorically representative of the cultural clash Ireland-Canada. What makes Donoghue's writing so fascinating is also this on-going shift from one culture to another, as if to stress the purely Irish *habitus* to migrate.

An indefatigable writer, Donoghue has recently come back with two, new works. Published in May, 2010 *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* is a daring attempt to catalogue 'passions between women' in English, French, German, Italian, Latin, and Spanish literatures since the Middle Ages.

Donoghue speaks of this major effort as «a sort of map. It charts a territory of literature that, like all undiscovered countries, has been there all along»¹. Her comment discloses the captivating nature of every single work she has written. It seems impossible for Irish writers to depart from geography, as much as it would be inconceivable to recede permanently from the past. They may seem to reject it – and indeed most of them do, including Donoghue herself – but they do so only as a primary requirement to shape alternatives and hopes for the future. *Room* (2010) is her latest, much acclaimed novel. Told from the point of view of a five-year-old, Jack, the book is the complex story of the love between him and his mother, a theme decidedly new to Donoghue. One of the best lines by the histrionic writer is given to Annie, in *Ladies and Gentlemen*. Discussing her love relationship with Ryanny she realizes that, in spite of her success as male impersonator, «There aren't any songs about things like *this*»². And yet, Donoghue always gives us the lyrics. We are to find the tune, and make it our own.

Emma Donoghue currently lives in London, Ontario, with her Canadian partner and their two children.

The following interview has been carried out through e-mail communication. The first complete draft was later submitted to Donoghue in July 2010. Our gratitude to Emma Donoghue for her constant support and interest in our work.

Go raibh maith agat

Q: You were born and brought up in Ireland. How did the country's political and religious divisions influence your life and work?

A: I grew up in Dublin, the capital of the Republic, a country which was a rather extraordinarily homogeneous society compared with others in the West. Pretty much everyone I knew was white, had two Irish parents, and was a practising Catholic. I had no objection to all this until, at about fourteen, I realized I was a lesbian, and therefore, in my society's terms, a freak. This theme – not just homosexuality but the clash between individual and community, norm and 'other' – has marked many of my published works. As for the countries political divisions, I feel sheepish in admitting that they affected me much less; I was aware of anxiety about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, but never felt them to have much direct connection with my life. The country was partitioned in the 1920s, the era my parents were born in, and that fundamental split was just one of the realities I was born into. I would describe myself as only mildly Nationalist.

Q: You completed your PhD in Cambridge. How much of an impact was it moving to another country, with a culture characterized by difference, yet also contact zones with Ireland?

A: To be honest, the culture wasn't that entirely different. Being a middleclass Dubliner who had grown up reading many British books and newspapers, and watching British television, in my experience the cultures of Ireland and Britain overlapped. If I had been an Irish (Gaelic) speaker from the rural West of Ireland, my experience might have been much more of a shock. As it was, I found the move to Cambridge, England simple enough, especially as I continued to visit Ireland every few months. My graduate school days there were rather liberating, on one level, because I found England a bigger, rather more diverse society that was more tolerant of difference, and I tapped into a strong feminist and LGBT movement.

Q: *You have since crossed another border and met another culture. How did you find the move to Canada and why did you decide to live there?*

A: Yes, I've now emigrated twice! (It is an Irish habit, after all.) My partner is Canadian, and after several years of commuting between England and Canada I became a Canadian permanent resident in 1998. This has been a much bigger move – because so much of the texture of everyday life, from the size of roads and meals to the idioms of speech, is different on this side of the Atlantic – but a happy one, especially because I've had such a concrete reason for it: I can work anywhere, whereas my partner's job ties us to Canada.

Q: *You've been living abroad for quite a long time now. Ireland's turn to globalisation and its shift towards new conceptions often contradicting or rejecting the past have been developing throughout the island. How do you feel about the Irish cultural scene of today?*

A: Fascinated, bewildered, nostalgic, irritated, thrilled ... It puts my head in a spin to walk the streets of Dublin. I thought the film *Once* (2007) was particularly smart in its combining the shabby informality and authenticity I remember from pre-Boom Ireland with the ethnic diversity of today. Roddy Doyle's story collection *The Deportees* (2008) is a great example of an Irish writer embracing all the changes instead of defending his stake in a changed culture.

Q: *Did you find it a difficult "border" to cross when you realized you were a lesbian? What impact did it have in finding your identity as a woman and as writer? Does your own experience of marginality/liminality add an extra dimension to the way a lesbian writer deals with identity and subjectivity? Is marginality/liminality an essential and/or stimulating condition?*

A: Yes, that was the trickiest border I've ever crossed; it took me most of my teenage years to come to terms with it. I wasn't bothered by religious guilt, only social shame; I found it hard to accept being socially abnormal. And yes, as you suggest, I think marginality/liminality is a stimulating condition; I recognise the same wry humour and fresh insights in many other writers,

for example First Nations or Indian writers here in Canada. To know yourself to be the Other is very educational.

Q: Critics have often stressed the fact that, for Irish women, writing novels is a much more rewarding activity than playwriting. Much more than literature, Irish theatre is marked by such imagery as that associated with Nationalist ideology which dates back to Yeats's Revival at the beginning of the twentieth century. You have always been openly lesbian. What difficulties did you find given your position as an openly lesbian playwright?

A: Perhaps that limited the audience for my first two plays, but actually I don't think this is an issue of being excluded from Irish theatre for being a lesbian; many novelists I know, female and male, have had a few theatre productions but not built a career on that side of their work. I have had some great experiences in American theatre too, with the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and others, and there I think the lesbian factor has really helped me get noticed by the companies. I have also written a lot of radio drama for BBC Radio 3 and 4, which is in some ways an easier means of finding a wide audience.

Q: Your first book Passion Between Women: British Lesbian Culture 1668-1801 (1993) was a cultural history. Since then, you have always seemed quite at ease in crossing borders between different literary genres. Why do you think this is? And, how did you come to this path?

A: I think it's quite common for writers of my generation to define themselves that broadly – as writers – rather than as poets, playwrights or novelists. We are eclectic and highly professionalised, on the whole; we sell our words in a variety of forms and markets. The Internet has made this easier. If I, in particular, am a literary border-crosser, I suppose it's because my interests are diverse (I have no one landscape, or ethnic group, or theme that I build all my work on) and because I have enormous reservoirs of personal confidence. It has always seemed obvious to me that I can write in any genre I like. I chose to write a history of this “marginal” community because it needed doing. The main book in the field, Lilian Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1982), had been published at the end of the 1970s, and there had been many new texts discovered and ideas hammered out since then. As a young lesbian scholar, I felt as equipped to write that book as anyone else

Q: What do you recall of your co-operation with Glasshouse Productions Company? How did it influence your first experience as a writer/playwright, and has it also somehow informed either your later works and/or your views on (the condition of) Irish women in “the Arts”?

A: I remember it very warmly as an extremely nurturing relationship that turned me into a real playwright. They took *I Know My Own Heart* (1993), which I had written and produced only at student level, and gave it profes-

sional productions in both a short and later a full-length version; then they commissioned *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1996), which put me in the luxurious position of not only being paid to write a play, but having feedback from the company who were committed to putting it on. I am not sure how the relationship informed my later works or views, but for a young writer it was a wonderful way to enter the world of theatre. I think the Dublin rehearsal period of *Ladies and Gentlemen* was the most thrillingly collaborative three weeks of my generally solitary working life: I remember it like a love affair!

Q: In the 'Afterword' to the published version of your first play, I Know My Own Heart, you claim it is a play on women living in "a society based on codes and conventions", that is eighteenth-century England. Did it enclose a veiled reference to the Irish situation? In your opinion, what are the perspectives for feminist and lesbian drama and, more broadly, for women theatre practitioners in Ireland?

A: Not a veiled reference, no – but of course I was drawn to Anne Lister's story, her sense of being the only one in the world, because I felt much the same in 1980s Ireland. As for women and theatre in Ireland now, I'm afraid I'm very out of touch so I couldn't say, but certainly there have been some prominent successes, such as Marina Carr, so I'm hoping 'women's issues' are more part of mainstream nowadays.

Q: In Ladies and Gentlemen, you made extensive use of songs throughout the play. It is a strategy shared by many contemporary women playwrights (the most noteworthy example, perhaps, is Caryl Churchill). How would you comment on your own choice of songs in plays? Did it have for you any connection with the revision of dramatic structure(s) operated by women in contemporary theatre(s)?

A: I'm afraid it was less a Churchillian/Brechtian device than a consequence of the fact that I was writing about vaudeville stars; not to show them singing would have seemed a waste! But certainly I relished the chance to rework some obscure Victorian songs, and in the show some of the most playful gender-bending happened at those moments.

Q: The reported article from «The New York Sun» at the end of the same play tells about your frequent concern with the issue of retrieving the lost work of women-artists in general. This is also demonstrated by some of your works published so far. Both of your plays have as their core reported/real facts and portray real women. Can you say something about this?

A: Yes, I don't know quite why it is, but I've never written anything purely fictional set in the past; I never get a chance to, because I always find myself hooked by a true story, whether in the case of my plays or historical novels. I suppose it's the academic researcher in me, but it also offers thrills I can only describe as forensic: the detective as much as the professor. Perhaps because of my background in lesbian history, I have a particular stake in the idea of

digging up what has been buried, giving voice to what has been censored – which is an attitude that stays with me even when I’m writing about things which have nothing to do with lesbian history.

Q: *Characters in your novels (such as Maria, Pen O’Grady and Mary Saunders) fight against marginal psychological states. What draws you to characters on the edge?*

A: It’s a taste I share with many writers. If a character is a calm person who is having a very ordinary day, it’s hard to make up a story about them! Readers like to experience all emotions vicariously; they only want the ordinary if it provides with a marvellous contrast with novelty or disaster.

Q: *Maria, the main character in your 1994 novel Stir Fry, moves from the country to Dublin, where she discovers her sexuality. Is there a link between the crossing of these two boundaries? Do you think that the ideological divide between rural and urban Ireland still exists?*

A: It’s a very familiar structure for a coming-of-age novel, the move from country to city, which brings with it many puzzling new discoveries; I think it’s found in many countries, not just Ireland. It might have been more original to have a Dublin woman move to the countryside and discover herself there! – but I was a Dublin woman, and I wanted to make Maria clearly distinct from me.

Q: *In Stir Fry and Hood (1995) you suggest that Catholic education hinders or limits subjectivity and creates a religious border. What is your opinion and your own experience of religion as a “border”?*

A: The Catholicism I was brought up in combined basic, wholesome ethical and spiritual education (God loves you, love your neighbor, etc) with a peculiarly obsessive insistence on Catholic theological details, particularly sexual roles. So it was better than nothing, but it left me with a lot of demons to fight off.

Q: *Kissing the Witch (1997) is a beautifully realized Postmodern experiment in genre contamination. Does literary hybridation fascinate you, and if so, how?*

A: Yes, I’d say *Kissing the witch* and *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), are both hybrids. The Mermaid story (the *Tale of the Voice*) in *Kissing the Witch* touched me particularly, because of its painful symbolism to do with becoming a hybrid. Emigration does similar things; emigrants soon become half-and-half, not fully at home in either place.

Q: *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits is a collection of historically based stories which combines “the historian’s question ‘What really happened?’ with the novelist’s ‘What if?’”. Have you crossed another border in writing this book?*

A: I suppose I have. *Slammerkin* (2002) was a big story extrapolated from a tiny source, whereas in many cases the stories in *The Woman Who...* are woven around the known facts, and could be considered history as well as fiction, especially as my source notes are included, to insist on the reality of the stories. Publishing this book was a great satisfaction to me, because I feel it drew all my skills – for research as well as fiction-writing – and stretched me to try many different styles.

Q: *A collection of critical essays on Irish women's writing (Border Crossing. Irish Women Writers and National Identities, 2000) explores "the connections between personal and national identities, politics and literary style, and gender and artistic vocation". What is your opinion of this premise? Do you think any of those connections are particularly revealing and, if so, in what way?*

A: Hmm, I can't tell how revealing those links in the abstract, I'd need some examples. I think Irish literature – or rather, its canon – is strongly patriarchal, and really only recently this thing has begun to change. Even now, I think truly innovative talents like Anne Enright have finally been given credit; I think her style is seen as female quirkiness rather than a pushing back of the boundaries of language.

Q: *Will you ever go back to writing for the theatre? And, what is your attitude towards writing for the stage, as compared to other genres you've been experimenting with throughout your career?*

A: Oh, certainly, I haven't renounced it. But I suspect you have to commit yourself body and soul to theatre to really succeed at it. Publishing novels is in my own experience easier than putting on plays: it's not about the writing, it's about the circumstances of cultural production. Publishers don't care where you live, whereas theatre tends to be about personal contact and live collaboration. Another factor is that a book sits on the shelves for years, for instance, awaiting its buyers, whereas a play might be all over in a week). All this – and the fact that my income depends on my fiction, specifically on American sales of my novels, actually – means that I have put far more of my time into fiction than theatre. Especially now I have small children, the precious daycare-hours can only fit so much, so I'm choosing to focus on fiction, which is the most satisfying genre for me anyway, and I suspect my best form. (I write good dialogue for theatre, I would say, but I am less strong at construction and physicality). But I do miss theatre; just answering these questions makes me want to rush off and write my next play!

Q: *In your later works, you have tended to focus more on the past. I am thinking of Like Mask (2005), The Sealed Letter (2008), and your very recent Inseparable (2010). Has that come to you as a sort of phase of work, like a particular urge, or rather as something you just felt compelled to or wanted to write?*

A: I don't see it as a phase – I think I wrote my first historical story, *Words for Things*, in 1992 when I was writing *Passion Between Women*, so I've been doing it all along. I suppose my career is a two-forked stream; I seem to be drawn to the past and the present about equally.

Q: *Dublin has changed a lot over the past few decades. I [SG] remember being there last year during the Gay Theatre Festival, and everywhere in town you could see posters depicting Oscar Wilde advertised just above Smirnoff vodka, which I found too funny and awkward. In a way, I think that picture captured the inherent contradictions related to the upsurge of "queer" in Ireland. How would you comment on this?*

A: Oh, I'm afraid it happens everywhere queers get a few civil rights; alcohol companies are always the first to jump on the band-wagon and co-opt our perceived trendiness!

Q: *Also, what do you think of your witnessing all these changes as an Irish woman in Canada, where you have now been living for a long time?*

A: It is a little odd to fly into Dublin roughly twice a year and encounter all these changes, but still, emigration has a long history as part of the condition of Irishness... so my feelings of confusion and sentimentality at Dublin Airport make feel thoroughly Irish.

Q: *When you think of "borderlands" as a term to refer to your writing fiction and criticism/cultural histories, do you think of it as something partially inherent in Irish culture, or as something to which you feel closer given your own personal background and experiences?*

A: I suspect writers always feel like border-walkers.

Q: *The connection of past and present, tradition and modernity has always been at the core of Irish cultural criticism and the artists' scene. In your opinion, can it be used to shape a possible way forward, in terms of a politics ahead of globalization and the current economic crisis investing all Europe?*

A: Sorry, you two, my daughter is having a hysterical fit on my office floor and I have to pack our bags to head off to Ireland tomorrow, so I can't manage any more coherent thoughts today!

Endnotes

¹The quotation is taken from Donoghue's introduction to the eBook version of the work, available in the *Reader Store* section at <<http://www.ebookstore.sony.com>> (accessed 05/2010).

²Emma Donoghue, *Ladies and Gentlemen*, New Island Books, Dublin 1996.