

LOVE KNOWS NO BOUNDARIES

NOW A
MAJOR FILM
STARRING
BRIE LARSON

THE NO. 1 BESTSELLER

ROOM

EMMA DONOGHUE

PICADOR

ROOM

LOVE
KNOWS NO
BOUNDARIES

ROOM

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

READING NOTES

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to five, abracadabra.

Jack lives with his Ma in Room. Room has a single locked door and a skylight, and it measures ten feet by ten feet. Jack loves watching TV but he knows that nothing he sees on the screen is truly real - only him, Ma and the things in Room. Until the day Ma admits there is a world outside.

Devastating yet uplifting, *Room* by Emma Donoghue is a luminous portrait of a boundless maternal love. It has sold more than two million copies, was a number one bestseller and was shortlisted for the Man Booker and Orange prizes. Few books have reached modern classic status so swiftly.

"*Room* is a book to read in one sitting. When it's over you look up: the world looks the same but you are somehow different and that feeling lingers for days" Audrey Niffenegger

"One of the most profoundly affecting books I've read in a long time" John Boyne

"Such incredible imagination, and dazzling use of language . . . *Room* is unlike anything I've ever read before" Anita Shreve

"*Room* is that rarest of entities, an entirely original work of art. I mean it as the highest possible praise when I tell you that I can't compare it to any other book. Suffice to say that it's potent, darkly beautiful, and revelatory" Michael Cunningham

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Although I have often been inspired by real events from previous centuries, this is the first time I've ever felt compelled to tackle a subject from today's headlines. I was taken over by the idea of a child born into captivity, and raised in secret isolation in the middle of a contemporary city, with everything he needs except one of the biggest things – freedom. It struck me as one of those weird situations which can illuminate the human condition: Jack and Ma's story might turn out to be, in some sense, everybody's story.

I suppose the theme drew me irresistibly because I have two small children (a son who was four when I began *Room* in April 2008, and a daughter who was one). In my experience, the bond between mother and newborn is a tiny, cosy world which gradually relaxes its magic to let the rest of the world in. But motherhood – even under ideal circumstances – also has elements of nightmare as well as fairy tale, sci-fi as well as realism: it's a trip like no other, and it can occasionally feel (let's admit it, shall we, mothers of the world?) like a locked room. And so can childhood, as I recall: kids are stuck with the parents they get, just as we are stuck with them. So I suppose I wanted to explore the most bizarre of parent-child situations as a way of shedding a new light on that most everyday, banal experience of raising kids.

Our culture is constantly telling stories about psychos who capture women. I deliberately kept mine out of the spotlight. The more I read and thought about it, the more it seemed to me that there is no comfortably fixed moral distance between a kidnapper and the rest of us. (The existence of entire slave-owning societies reminded me that humans often find it both convenient and pleasurable to own each other.) It was not Old Nick's evil that fascinated me, but the resilience of Ma and Jack: the nitty-gritties of their survival, their trick of more-or-less thriving under apparently unbearable conditions.

Room is a book about the smallest of worlds, and the biggest. Small ones (such as couples, families, workplaces) have their pleasures as well as their irritations; big ones (cities, nations, the Internet) both attract and alienate. Some days we all feel trapped in our particular life circumstances, and other days we find there's more freedom inside their limits, and room inside our heads, than we ever knew.

Strange as it might seem, I found that writing historical fiction was the ideal preparation for *Room*. I decided that, as much as any medieval peasant or eighteenth-century prostitute, Jack should take his peculiar environment for granted. The main difference was that this time I did my research not in archives and libraries but almost entirely online. That made the research pretty visceral – videos of dungeons on YouTube – and also gave it a moment-by-moment, one-headline-followed-by-the-next quality: sad stories gathering a few more dreadful details every day, until they fade from the public view. Many of my sources were not 'expert opinions' but the raw reactions of people all over the world who rush onto message boards. Listening in gave me insight into what such cases mean to those who hear about them: how they trigger empathy as well as voyeurism, judgment as well as revulsion.

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

In the first week I kept bursting into tears, eyes locked in horror on my screen. The story of Jack and Ma is really not that bad compared with many I read; there are cases of children neglected, starved or tortured over long periods, often by their own parents or guardians, that I try not to think about any more because they make me shake.

I forced myself to study the details of many cases of kidnapping-for-sexual-purposes from all over the world. I flinched through every website I could find about children raised in limited or abusive settings – those who are left stunted, and others who are granted miraculous happy endings. I read about mothers and babies in prisons today and in Nazi concentration camps; about unassisted birth and children conceived by rape.

Not all my research was the kind that made me shudder. I drew on the different childrearing experiences of my friends, for instance, one of whom breastfed her child till five. Just as for previous novels I have put together a mini-dictionary of how people spoke in 1788 or 1864, this time I made myself a dictionary of my son's kid-English, then narrowed it down to some classic errors and grammatical oddities that would not seriously confuse readers. I looked up pop hits of the early 2000s to find out what songs would be lingering in Ma's head. I checked out police slang, sexual-assault evidence-collection guidelines, the protocols of expensive psychiatric clinics and treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder.

I found inspiration in some great novels of parents and children in extremis, from *We Need to Talk About Kevin* to *The Road*, as well as fables of strangers moving between different societies, from *Gulliver's Travels* to *Robinson Crusoe* to *Brave New World*. I picked my brother-in-law's brains on the matter of how Old Nick could have created a secure prison from a garden shed, and I designed Room itself on a home-decor website.

Does that sound flippant? My characters taught me that you get your laughs where you can. Jack's magpie spirit – his scavenging of facts, fantasies and sensory stimuli – infected me, and so did his sense of humour. Children are passionate but unsentimental in dealing with whatever life is handed to them, so I tried to be too. I drafted *Room* in six months; this is the easiest book I have ever written, because I knew what I wanted it to be.

Emma Donoghue

READING NOTES

1. Why do you think the entire book is told in Jack's voice? Do you think it is effective?
2. How would the story be different if it were told in Ma's voice?
3. If you were Ma, would you tell Jack about Outside from the start?
4. How would you explain Outside to him? Are there things about Outside that you would not tell him about?
5. How is the relationship between Ma and Jack threatened by the Outside World?
6. Does Jack benefit at all from his time in Room? Are there any positives for Ma?
7. Why are we so fascinated by stories of long-term confinement?
8. What were you most affected by in the novel?

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1856)

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (1932)

Anne Frank, *Diary* (first published in Dutch, 1947)

Albie Sachs, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966)

V. C. Andrews, *Flowers in the Attic* (1979)

Jean-Dominique Bauby, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (first published in French, 1997)

Alice Sebold, *The Lovely Bones* (2002)

Michael Frayn, *Spies* (2002)

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003)

Lionel Shriver, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003)

Susan Shaw, *The Boy from the Basement* (2004)

Frank Cottrell Boyce, *Millions* (2004)

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005)

John Boyne, *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2006)

Nancy Huston, *Fault Lines* (first published in French, 2006)

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (2006)

Barbara Gowdy, *Helpless* (2007)

Keith Donohue, *The Stolen Child* (2007)