

A Conversation with Emma Donoghue

When you wrote Hood, what were you hoping readers would see in it? And how did you envision readers reacting to Pen and Cara?

I was aiming high: I wanted to write a lesbian romance that readers of all stripes would care about. I hoped that the universality of grief would compensate for the specificity of lesbian identity, and that Pen and Cara's flawed but persistent relationship would be interesting even to readers who had never lived anything like it.

It's often been for exactly that reason—the empathy they find with Pen in particular—that our students have loved discussing Hood in Irish literature courses. Authors sometimes have an uneasy relationship with academic readers, but how do you find having your book read in university courses?

As a “spoiled academic” myself—by which I mean someone who strayed off the professorial path, as some trainee priests wander from the seminary—I take pure pleasure in my interactions with the university world. Occasionally I am amused by students writing to alert me to the blindingly obvious (“Did you know that your *Kissing the Witch* collection has thirteen stories, and thirteen is the number traditionally associated with witches?”), but often scholars manage to squeeze more meanings out of my work than I thought I'd put in.

Do you ever wish you could have a conversation with your characters and give them advice? Is there anything you wish you could go back and say to Pen?

Oh, even while I was writing the novel I wanted to slap her. Stand up for yourself! Dump the girl! Chuck the job! Move on! The writer-character relationship often has elements of both identification and antagonism; that helps the sparks to fly.

The title of Hood seems like it evokes a lot of elements in the novel. What suggested the title to you?

Olga Broumas's poem about Red Riding Hood, quoted in my epigraph. Also the weirdly nineteenth-century hoods attached to our school uniform coats. The clitoris. The pleasures and claustrophobia of secrecy.

How important is it that the novel is set in early-1990s Dublin? Is the city another character in the book? Could this novel still be set in post-Boom Dublin, or has the city changed irrevocably from the one Pen knew?

The Dublin of *Hood* seems to me utterly pre-Boom—not just in its details, but in the way the novel broods over the enfolding, constricting stasis of Irish culture. Whatever “state of chassis” Ireland might find itself in now, it’s not like the old days.

How would you fit Pen’s spirituality, particularly her very personally defined Catholicism, into this sense of change? ►

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A Conversation with Emma Donoghue (*continued*)

Is that something you think could still be true of a similar character in contemporary Dublin?

While I'm sure Ireland is still littered with à la carte Catholics, and maybe even à la carte Catholic lesbians, I do think Pen's heroic attempt to stay inside a church that despises her is typical of the period in which *Hood* is set. Since the early '90s, many Irish Catholics I know have either given up on that institution, or stayed in it but with an increasingly skeptical attitude.

The Attic and Immac are convincing and distinct worlds. How did you create them as spaces and as groups of characters? Were they based on any of your own experiences in Dublin?

Immac is basically my secondary school (Muckcross Park Convent in Donnybrook, Dublin) with the uniforms switched from green to red. I was grateful for the excellent intellectual education I received, but I chafed under the nuns' ideological regime. The Attic is inspired by the all-womyn (as we used to spell it) Paradise Housing Co-op I spent many years living in while I was doing my PhD in Cambridge. I loved it, in all its shabby and occasionally absurd collectivity, but I thought it would probably give a loner like Pen the creeps.

Pen and Cara have a very intimate sexual life. Was it difficult to write the sex scenes and integrate them into the plot?

Readers are sometimes surprised that certain of my books have lots of sex and others have almost none. For me, it's all about what the book needs. *Room* is the story of an innocent five-year-old so the rapes are barely alluded to, for instance. By contrast, *Hood* is about the loss of a lover, so it seemed to call for a detailed and authentic evocation of exactly what has been lost: the suddenly truncated history of two hearts and two bodies.

How did you make Pen's experience of grief and mourning so convincing? Was there much research involved? And would you say that Pen starts to come to terms with her grief by the end?

Yes, I think that in that one intense week she does work through the worst of it. I feel a little sheepish in admitting that it was all

research—though that’s too cold-blooded a term for the kind of reading, interviewing, and unsparing imagining I did when I was writing *Hood*. I hadn’t (and still haven’t) experienced any major bereavement; mostly I sat with my eyes shut, asking myself highly specific questions such as “It’s been eighteen hours since the phone call. How would you be feeling right now?” I tried not to exclude anything that rang true to me, from Pen’s still-hearty appetite for cake to her surges of irritation at her dead beloved.

Looking back at your second novel, how do you feel it has aged? How do you see Hood fitting alongside the rest of your books?

Hood strikes me as having a lot in common with elegaic AIDS fiction of the 1990s. Not that lesbians were losing each other to an illness in great numbers, but we did share gay men’s sense of loss, damage, anger, isolation and invisibility—and a bereavement premise lets you shape all those dark emotions into a strong story. Although *Hood* did not sell well on first publication—I joke that it was about lesbians and death, two turn-offs for the average reader—I have always been fond of it. Not just because it has so much of my adolescence in it, I hope, but because it stands up for itself: it has a clear tragicomic voice, a sort of my-heart-is-broken-so-I-couldn’t-give-a-damn-if-I-offend-you quality. Culturally, it sits between an earlier Dublin novel (*Stir-fry*) and a later one (*Landing*), but actually I think it has most in common with *Room*: they are the only two novels I’ve written in a single first-person voice, and they are both about the peculiar intensities of a loving relationship.

If you were to write a sequel to Hood, or to revisit some of the characters as Landing did with some of the Stir-fry characters, where would they be in their lives?

My hope is that Pen has long left both the closet and the convent school behind her, and now rolls her eyes in disbelief that she wasted so many years in both. I see her as running a business of her own in Sligo with a devoted girlfriend, perhaps planning their civil partnership . . . taking up the space she’s entitled to, basically. 