

***The Pull of the Stars* by Emma Donoghue**

CITY LIBRARY BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

About the book

Dublin, 1918: three days in a maternity ward at the height of the great flu. A small world of work, risk, death and unlooked-for love, by the bestselling author of *The Wonder* and *Room*.

In an Ireland doubly ravaged by war and disease, Nurse Julia Power works at an understaffed hospital in the city centre, where expectant mothers who have come down with the terrible new flu are quarantined together. Into Julia's regimented world step two outsiders – Doctor Kathleen Lynn, on the run from the police, and a young volunteer helper, Bridie Sweeney.

In the darkness and intensity of this tiny ward, over three days, these women change each other's lives in unexpected ways. They lose patients to this baffling pandemic, but they also shepherd new life into a fearful world. With tireless tenderness and humanity, caregivers and mothers alike somehow do their impossible work.

About the author

Emma Donoghue was born on October 24, 1969 in Dublin, Ireland. She received her BA degree from the University College Dublin and PhD in English from University of Cambridge. Her first novel was *Stir*. Her next novel was *Hood* which won the 1997 American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Book Award for Literature. Her novel *Slammerkin* was a finalist in the 2001 Irish Times Irish Literature Prize for Fiction. *The Sealed Letter*, published in 2008, is a work of historical fiction. This work was the joint winner of the 2009 Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction. She continued writing several award winning novels including *Room* which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in September 2010. Some of her other works include *Astray*, *Three and a Half Deaths*, and *Frog Music*.

Interviews and articles

- **Observer:** "[Emma Donoghue on Writing 'The Pull of the Stars,' Set During the 1918 Pandemic](#)"
- **The Atlantic:** "[Emma Donoghue Talks About Her New Novel, *The Pull of the Stars*](#)"
- **Toronto Star:** "[Emma Donoghue: This was an eerie experience, living through two pandemics at once](#)"
- **NPR:** "[1918 Flu Inspired Donoghue's 'Pull Of The Stars' — A Disquieting Pandemic Novel](#)" [audio, 6 minutes]
- [A playlist of songs sung/overheard in *The Pull of the Stars*, with commentary](#)

Discussion questions

1. What stood out to you most about Bridie's story? How did your understanding of her evolve throughout the novel? How does she compare and contrast to Julia, and in what ways does she influence her?

2. What role do you think Julia's brother, Tim, played in the story? How would you characterize his and Julia's relationship? How does his experience in the war compare to the experiences of hospital staff during the pandemic?
3. Kathleen Lynn is a historical figure, while all other characters are invented. Does this change your perception of her? What impact does this have on the story? Why do you think Donoghue chose to include her, but make everyone else fictional?
4. While assisting Delia Garrett as she was in labour, Julia thinks "I realised something then: no other job would ever satisfy me" (p. 83). Why do you think this is the case? What does this say about Julia as a person, and as a nurse?
5. What is the role of gender throughout the novel? What does the book say about the role of women in society? About motherhood and being a wife? About being a nurse?
6. At several points, Julia makes a conscious point of having others refer to her as 'Nurse Power' (p. 68), and she mentions that she's breaking protocol by telling patients her first name (p. 29). She also makes sure to defer to doctors and not overstep her boundaries as a nurse. Why do you think that names and titles are so important? What does this say about the relationships between hospital staff? And hospital staff and patients?
7. What was Groyne's relevance to the story? What were your feelings about him, and did they evolve throughout the novel? What role did he play as both a character in the book and as a hospital staff member?
8. War and conflict is happening in background throughout the story — both World War 1 and the Irish revolutionary struggle. What is the relationship between these conflicts and the pandemic? How do they influence the thoughts and actions of those at the hospital (whether staff, patients, other visitors)? How do they influence Irish society as a whole?
9. Was there a particular character that you felt most attached to throughout the novel? On the flip side, was there a character that you wanted to know more about?
10. What did you think of the ending? Was it what you expected? What emotions did you feel after finishing the last page?
11. Donoghue doesn't use quotation marks to signify when someone is talking. Why do you think she chose to write this way? What effect did it have? Did you like this?

12. Donoghue started researching and writing this book in 2018, as she was inspired by the 100 year anniversary of the flu. She said in a [July 2020 interview](#) that “It’s certainly very strange, given that I didn’t write it with any contemporaneity in mind.” What particular aspects of the novel felt the most contemporary? What’s different between 1918 and today, and what’s the same?
13. How does the book shape your understanding of the 1918 flu pandemic? Did you know much about it before? What stood out to you the most? And what was your reaction to the different posters that Julia sees around the city and hospital?
14. What was it like reading this book during a pandemic? Have you read any other works of fiction about a pandemic? If so, how does this compare? And if it’s possible, can you imagine what your thoughts on the book might’ve been if you’d read it before the pandemic?