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History of Midwifery and Childbirth Research Group



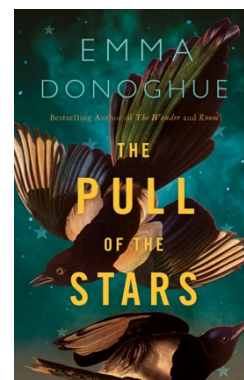
The Pull of the Stars

Emma Donoghue

Picador, 2020

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The Pull of the Stars is a historical novel described by the author as ‘fiction pinned together with fact’. Against the backdrop of the fallout from the First World War, the setting is a cramped, cold, temporary maternity/fever ward in a Dublin hospital in 1919. The tiny ward of three beds had been hastily converted from a storeroom to accommodate pregnant women who were suffering from ‘the flu’ or ‘gripe’ or one of a number of descriptive names given to a disease about which little was understood. Influenza, ‘blame the stars’, was a fatalistic belief of some. The reader may find the need, early in the book, to go back and check when it was actually written, so reminiscent is it of our current Covid-19 pandemic experience. The strangeness of mask wearing, the spraying of streets with disinfectant, boarded-up shops, and the use of snappy public health slogans - VENTILATION AND SANITATION WILL BE OUR NATION’S SALVATION - are now all too familiar. The book was in fact started in 2018 and completed just as the current pandemic broke. It was then rushed through to publication in early 2020. The reader may also reflect on lessons learned, or in some cases not learned, from that earlier pandemic - overwhelmed hospitals and mortuaries, the exhaustion of frontline staff and the lasting ill health of those lucky enough to survive the pandemic. A striking difference, captured by the terrible experiences of the women on the ward, was that, unlike in the present pandemic, pregnant women were particularly vulnerable to Spanish ‘flu’. Miscarriage, stillbirth and maternal death were all a real risk.

Chapter headings of red, brown, blue and black at first appear as a literary affectation, but it becomes clear that this represents the striking clinical skin colouration changes which indicate increasing hypoxia in patients. Only one of the three main characters is based on a real individual. Dr Kathleen Lynn was a political activist and advocate for public health in Dublin before, and for many years after, the pandemic, and in a radio interview Emma Donoghue explained that she felt Dr Lynn was worthy of greater public acknowledgement. The character of Bridie Sweeny, who arrives unannounced as a ‘volunteer’, is fictitious but heavily drawn from what is known of the life of a young woman in her circumstances through the 2009 Ryan Report on Irish residential institutions. Julia Power, also an invented character, is the nurse/midwife with whom the reader spends three harrowing and exhausting days and nights with the women in her care. Readers with experience of such an environment will be transported into that adrenaline-filled space where afterbirths fail to deliver, labours become obstructed, inexperienced practitioners threaten symphysiotomy (a now-discredited



procedure used in Irish hospitals up until the 1980s), and in these particularly harrowing circumstances babies and mothers die. Largely forgotten procedures to assist in difficult births, such as Walcher's manoeuvre, are tried and, in some cases, succeed. In spite of many references to hand washing with carbolic, it is nevertheless a surprise to read that, sixty years after Semmelweis, the midwife and doctor participate in a post mortem. There is also a little confusion on the nature of the forceps chosen: French or English?

This novel is not a light read. It is however written with clarity and touches of humour. The nurse/midwife is ever aware of 'the rules', and how she would be in trouble if caught breaking them. Don't run on the corridor, not even in an emergency; don't be caught eating or drinking on the stairs; don't use first names, and (a particular favourite), don't sit on the bed. Although the book tends to fall away into unlikely cliché towards the end it is nevertheless a gem, either for personal reading or as an addition to a student booklist.

Margaret Lynch, R.M.

