



Review

TOUCHY SUBJECTS: Stories

Emma Donoghue

Harcourt

Fiction/Short Stories

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Bestselling Irish native Emma Donoghue (SLAMMERKIN) delivers a top-notch collection of 19 short stories featuring a variety of everyday characters caught in the middle of the unexpected. On the surface, each offering is grouped according to one of five themes: Babies, Domesticity, Strangers, Desire, and Death. On a deeper level, these broadly defined boundaries intersect throughout many of the stories, as they often do in reality, creating a series of snapshots that are both unique and true to life.

Although there isn't a dud in her bunch, Donoghue shines most brightly when confronting issues of sex and gender. As seen in some of her previous works (HOOD, LIFE MASK), the trajectory of unrequited homosexual love is aptly explored here in moments that are so vulnerable and pure that they virtually explode with unresolved tension. In "Speaking in Tongues," a long-held thirst is finally quenched yet ultimately discarded after 17-year-old-Lee and 34-year-old poetess Sylvia have a one-night stand in the back of Sylvia's van. In "Team Men," two football players have a brief affair and must navigate the consequences when one wants to come out publicly and the other doesn't. Both stories highlight the rawness of desire and the inevitable heartbreak that occurs when separate wants can't (or don't) align.

Along similar lines, "The Cost of Things" and "The Man Who Wrote on Beaches" focus on two very different pairs and their shared inability to see eye to eye. In "The Cost of Things," a seemingly unbreakable relationship implodes after the two involved can't agree on how much their kitten's life (i.e. their relationship) is worth. In "The Man Who Wrote on Beaches," a man feels a sudden, joyous urge to become a father after finding God --- only his wife is now 42 and not in the mood to change diapers. It is

the breaking point in a relationship that Donoghue finds so intriguing, and her repeated depictions of this moment are filled with a harsh authenticity that is liable to make many readers cringe in reluctant recognition, despite their varied circumstances.

There are thankfully a few humorous vignettes in this otherwise moody collection. "Pluck" reveals a husband's nagging obsession with a tiny hair growing underneath his wife's unbeknownst chin; the hilariously dry "Do They Know It's Christmas" features an academic couple and their collective indignation over the banning of their precious dogs --- Proust, Gide and Mallarmé --- from an annual family gathering; and the embarrassingly funny "Touchy Subjects" explores awkwardness at its best, when a husband agrees to be a sperm donor for his wife's best friend and must confront head on (pun intended) the trials of getting it up for a woman who isn't his partner. Although all touch upon the serious, these three selections show a different side of Donoghue and illustrate her versatility as a writer.

Donoghue's gift is her ability to grab the reader immediately and not let go until the events being described run their natural course. The stories in TOUCHY SUBJECTS take a crack at everything from pregnancy to marriage to the fleetingly intimate connection between strangers, and they do so beautifully and genuinely. Fans of her longer historical novels will relish in her clear mastery of the shorter form.

--- Reviewed by Alexis Burling

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