

## ***The Pull of the Stars: Female Voices Claiming for Justice***

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### **Abstract**

Emma Donoghue's *The Pull of the Stars* (2020) definitely exceeds real life and assigns new meanings to human experience. The compelling narrative voice in the novel is given to a nurse, a woman necessarily involved in the defining moments of strangers' lives. Julia works at the maternity fever ward of an Irish city hospital, which is desperately short-staffed because of war and contagion, caring for pregnant women with severe flu, working beyond her training because there is no one else available. Patients stay long enough for Julia and the reader to learn to read their bodies and speech as more than symptoms, to recognize that class privilege is no protection from grief, that poverty and overcrowding and malnutrition tell their final tales in hospital beds. The purpose of this paper is to explore how a gendered narrative of independence is created by the writer in the darkness and intensity of a tiny ward in which three women --Julia, Doctor Kathleen Lynn, a rumoured rebel on the run from the police, and a young volunteer helper, Bridie Sweeney, change each other's lives in unexpected ways.

**Keywords:** Gendered narrative, pregnancy experience, sanitary symptoms, fever.

The meaning of the word "influenza," which is where "flu" comes from, comes from an Italian superstition that the stars were having an influence on health; that they were directly causing the

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flu. To blame it on the stars is like saying, “It's random,” but it's more poetic because it suggests there's meaning to it. (Donoghue, 2020<sup>2</sup>)

Sometimes fiction exceeds real life and assigns new meanings to human experience. Emma Donoghue's novel, *The Pull of the Stars*, definitely inspires that reflection at grimly foreshadowing present-day circumstances. She began writing the story in 2018, inspired by the centenary of the Spanish Flu pandemic<sup>3</sup> setting it in a maternity ward in 1918 in Dublin, a city hollowed out by the flu, World War I and the 1916 Irish Uprising. Donoghue delivered the final draft to her publishers in March 2020, just as a stunned world was taking in the chaos of the COVID-19 crisis. The strong and compelling narrative voice in the novel is given to a nurse, a woman necessarily involved in the defining moments of strangers' lives. Charged with expertise and kindness, professionalism and femininity, 30-year-old Julia Power portrays an unsettling combination for her era. She works at the maternity fever ward of an Irish city hospital, which is desperately short-staffed because of war and contagion, caring for pregnant women with severe flu, working beyond her training because there is no one else available. Patients stay long enough for Julia and the reader to learn to read their bodies and speech as more than symptoms, to recognize that class privilege is no protection from grief, that poverty, overcrowding and malnutrition tell their final tales in hospital beds.

The novel is divided in four parts called ‘Red,’ ‘Blue,’ ‘Brown’ and ‘Black’ to stand for the progression of color on the face of patients who are cyanotic –starved for oxygen– and fully describe both the flu and difficult childbirths. It is a challenging fight for the medical profession against an enemy they cannot see, armed with little more than rudimentary supplies –carbolic soap, mustard poultices, whiskey and ipecac syrup. Though no one is safe and many die within a few days of influenza infection, pregnant women are at particular risk, as there are their unborn children. Donoghue is quite explicit in both the effects of influenza and the harsh experience of laboring mothers, which has the potential to shock.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/books/a33371238/emma-donoghues-the-pull-of-the-stars/> (interview with Emma Donoghue explaining the meaning of the title)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-1918-flu-pandemic-a-cautionary-tale/>

Some placed their trust in treacle to ward off this flu, others in, as if there had to be one household substance that could save us all. I'd even met fools who credited their safety to the wearing of red ('Red,' p. 57).

Despite the narrowness of the physical setting, and the single narrative perspective, *The Pull of the Stars* explores a number of issues. Most notably those related to women's physical and emotional experience of pregnancy, motherhood, marriage, and institutional abuse, particularly among the poorest of women. Donoghue also touches on the political climate of Ireland during the period including the fallout of The Great War and The Easter Rising conflict, and the reaction of the government and populace to the pandemic. Private and public experiences, poverty, religious and political issues are intertwined in this gendered narrative of independence.

*The Pull of the Stars* can be seen as articulating a feminist critique of the long-established patriarchal system of public as well as private institutions, especially in the wake of the third wave of feminism<sup>4</sup>. The character-narrator resists traditional gender roles and attempts to criticize the conflicting demands made on them by female dual roles as healthcare workers and women skilled in domestic affairs. Breaking with the precedent that medical narratives are highly gender coded (Moosavi, Ghandeharion & Sabbagh, 2019), Donoghue presents her story through the power of her female protagonists' perspectives. This is discernible through a close look at the narrative discourse of *The Pull of the Stars*, noticeable in her textual representation of one heroine's access to the hospital institution (i.e., a maternity fever ward) and one heroine's mastery of the political affairs (a member of Sinn Fein released from jail after the Easter Rising). Here, Julia Power and Dr. Kathleen Lynn negotiate their professional training and daily working experience, and trust each other to provide immediate medical care to women in urgent need. The female aid triad is made complete when Bridie Sweeney, a young volunteer helper, enters the space to reinforce the

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<sup>4</sup> Third-wave feminism makes three important tactical moves that respond to a series of theoretical problems within the second wave. First, in response to the collapse of the category of "women," the third wave foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism. Second, as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism, third-wavers embrace multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification. Finally, in response to the divisiveness of the sex wars, third-wave feminism emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political (Snyder, 2008).

sisterhood of women helping other women along the perilous journey of bringing life into the world, especially under such extreme circumstances.

Poster warnings affixed to streetlamps with phrases like “If In Doubt, Don’t Stir Out,” (‘Blue,’ p. 139) overwhelmed hospital staff bedding patients on the floor, and stores running out of disinfectant portray chunks of the hectic fictional panorama. Yet the pandemic is simply a backdrop for Donoghue’s intense portrait of women’s lives scarred by poverty and too many pregnancies in a society that proclaims, “She doesn’t love him unless she gives him twelve” (‘Red,’ p. 26) The Catholic Church is called to judgment, as well, for its brutal treatment of unmarried mothers and their offspring. Readers are introduced into gripping action sequences, mortal menaces and triumphs through the accounts of Nurse Julia Power striving to save the lives of pregnant women at even greater risk than usual during labor and delivery because they have the flu. She has to care for them in a converted supply room barely big enough for three cots. Equipment and personnel are both scarce, due to the pandemic and the world war that has taken many doctors to the front.

When Julia arrives at work on Oct. 31, 1918, she is saddened but unsurprised to learn that one of her patients died overnight. Flu-induced pneumonia is the immediate cause, but if she had been completing the paperwork, Julia thinks bitterly,

I’d have been tempted to put: *Worn down to the bone*. Mother of five by the age of twenty-four, an underfed daughter of underfed generations, [...] Always on their feet, these Dublin mothers ... living off the scraps left on plates and gallons of weak black tea. The slums in which they somehow managed to stay alive were as pertinent as pulse or respiratory rate, it seemed to me, but only medical observations were permitted on a chart. So instead of *poverty*, I’d write *malnourishment* or *debility*. As code for *too many pregnancies*, I might put *anaemia*, ... *low spirits*, ... *torn cervix*, or *uterine prolapsed* (‘Red,’ p. 25).

Julia disagrees with the pious resignation of night nurse Sister Luke, though she is grateful when the nun reluctantly sends her an urgently needed aid. Bridie Sweeney is unqualified and

uneducated but quick to learn, and Julia warms to her as they deal with three traumatic deliveries. Fatal results in two cases awaken Julia's angry rejoinder to an orderly who argues that women should not be allowed to vote because they "don't pay the blood tax" that soldiers do. "Look around you," she snarls, indicating one patient in hard labor and another who has borne a dead baby. "This is where the nation — every nation — draws its first breath. Women have been paying the blood tax since time began. ('Blue', p. 146)."

Nurse Power and Bridie Sweeney share confidences on the hospital roof, getting some air after two exhausting days have made them friends. Bridie is one of the abused "boarders" at Sister Luke's convent, unwanted or illegitimate children left to be beaten, starved and used as enslaved labor in the same repressive, patriarchal system that consigns married women to endless childbearing. This system oppresses men and boys, as well, Donoghue acknowledges. Julia's brother Tim returned from war shellshocked and mute; the infant boy whose unwed mother died during delivery is judged by Sister Luke as "unlikely to thrive . . . his kind generally have more than one hereditary weakness" ('Blue,' p. 186) But the novel's focus is on the hard-won strength of its female characters, especially Julia's fierce dedication to her patients and Bridie's cheery enjoyment of each simple pleasure denied to her at the "Motherhouse." Some other significant basic knowledge has been denied to Bridie there who is so ignorant that she is astonished to feel a baby moving inside its mother's body: "I thought it only came to life once it was out" ('Red,' p. 55), she admits.

Reality and fiction blend in the storyline when Dr. Kathleen Lynn, an actual historical figure is introduced in Donoghue's fiction. In real life, Dr Kathleen Lynn was a suffragette, nationalist and activist for social justice who fought in the Easter Rising and was arrested and imprisoned. In Donoghue's account, Dr. Lynn is tired but glamorous, especially in the eyes of Julia, whose sense of agency is limited to her home life caring for a brother with shellshock and her work on the ward. Dr Lynn comes into fiction so as to defy Julia's subjectivity and to foster her agency under extreme health conditions: "Oh, no criticism implied, she muttered without glancing up. I never like to spell out to a patient that she's had a close call, but frankly, she'd have been a goner if you hadn't stopped that haemorrhage" ('Blue,' p. 83). Julia, whose own background is not very different from her patients,' is sadly accustomed to social injustice, but Dr. Lynn, never forgets to

be angry. ‘Babies born in the slums, she says, have less chance of surviving a year than men in the trenches. Such hypocrisy, the way the authorities preach hygiene to people forced to subsist like rats in a sack’ (‘Blue,’p. 169) ).

Centuries have passed, relevant scientific discoveries have taken place to improve people’s lifestyles but governmental policies and discourse are made to maintain power in the hands of a few, keeping common people ignorant even regarding basic needs such as healthcare; sometimes blaming the poorest on social calamities as it Julia and Bridie discuss the falsity of public discourse looking at the latest poster placed on the hospital wall:

THE GOVERNMENT HAS THE SITUATION  
WELL IN HAND  
AND THE EPIDEMIC IS ACTUALLY IN DECLINE.  
THERE IS NO REAL RISK  
EXCEPT TO THE RECKLESS  
WHO TRY TO FIGHT THE FLU ON THEIR FEET.  
IF YOU FEEL YOURSELF SUCCUMBING,  
REPORT YOURSELF  
AND LIE DOWN FOR A FORTNIGHT.  
*WOULD THEY BE DEAD*  
*IF THEY'D STAYED IN BED?* (‘Black,’p. 189)

‘Propaganda, Bridie, government lies.’

It is Dr. Lynn as well who explains that the word “influenza” comes from: ‘That’s what *influenza* means, she said. *Influenza delle stelle*—the influence of the stars. Medieval Italians thought the illness proved that the heavens were governing their fates, that people were quite literally starcrossed’ (‘Brown,’ p. 122). Superstition in the twentieth century to explain the inexplicable: lack of information, prevention, material and human resources to battle against the spectre that has a dozen names according to Julia:

the great flu, khaki flu, blue flu, black flu, the grippe, or the grip...(That word always made me think of a heavy hand landing on one’s shoulder and gripping it hard.) *The malady*, some called it euphemistically. Or *the war sickness*, on the assumption that it

must somehow be a side effect of four years of slaughter, a poison brewed in the trenches or spread by all this hurly-burly and milling about across the globe ('Red,' p. 12).

Donoghue cleverly gives shape to the fictional stage in which readers encounter women nurses, women doctors, women helpers, women mothers, women struggling with the flu and the system, women losing their children, friends and patients, and women supporting women in distress as Dr. Lynn highlights:

All rather humbling, she added ruefully. Here we are in the golden age of medicine—making such great strides against rabies, typhoid fever, diphtheria—and a common or garden influenza is beating us hollow. No, you're the ones who matter right now. Attentive nurses, I mean—*tender loving care*, that seems to be all that's saving lives ('Brown,' p. 121).

'Red,' 'Brown,' 'Blue,' 'Black' may be read not just as *in-crescendo* degrees of the flu but also as different stages in Julia's perception of womanhood in her self and social environment. Throughout the four sections of the storyline, she foregrounds her personal narrative that illustrates an intersectional and multi-perspectival version of feminism when giving detailed account of hers and her coworkers and patients' life experiences. She moves from silent personal reflection to an active critical stance at instructing Bridie not only into professional techniques but also into life female matters:

I took *Jellett's Midwifery* down from the shelf and lifted the delicate onionskin to show Bridie Sweeney the frontispiece captioned *The full-term uterus*.

Her eyes widened. Janey mac!

It took me a second or two to deduce that she thought this was a drawing of a woman who'd been sliced in half. No, no, it's a cutaway—sketched as if we can see right through her. You notice how the baby's all curled up?

And upside down! ('Red,' p. 51).

Moreover, Julia faces the patriarchal *status quo* when discussing about medical, political, religious issues with male Dr. Prendergast and the orderlies that come into the minute ward to unwillingly cope with the hospital tasks, especially when demanded by women. She is also the one who exposes social discrimination in the speech of a Church representative at discussing with Father Xavier when she wanted to adopt Honor White's newly-born baby, Barnabas, after his mother died:

He spelled it out: The mother was unfortunate, to say the least. What if it turns out, upon further inquiry, that the father was a brute, or degenerate—bad stock, don't you know?

The little fellow can't wait while we investigate his pedigree!

Father Xavier nodded. But do bear in mind, he's certainly not of your class.

I don't believe an infant has a class. ('Black,' p. 230)

It is also nurse Julia Power who emphasizes an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach to gender stereotyping at observing that not only women but also men are victims of a system which recruits bodies to accomplish national tasks: fight wars and deliver potential fighters. The *Pull of the Stars* plainly manifests the hidden spectre: men dying in the battlefield, women and babies dying in hospital cots and nothing, nobody assuming responsibility for those casualties.

She grumbled: So many autopsies being industriously performed all over the world, and just about all we've learnt about this strain of flu is that it takes around two days to incubate.

Aren't they any closer to a vaccine, then?

She shook her head and her loose braid leapt. No one's even managed to isolate the bacterium on a slide yet. Perhaps the little bugger's too small for us to see and we'll have to wait for the instrument makers to come up with a stronger microscope, or possibly it's some new form of microbe altogether. ('Brown,' p. 121)

Donoghue's narrative is undoubtedly a story about women awakening women, women empowering women into citizenship, women inspiring women into feminism of the Third Wave, women emulating Rebecca Walker's definition of what being a feminist means:



To be a feminist is to integrate an ideology of equality and female empowerment into the very fiber of my life; it is to search for personal clarity in the midst of systemic destruction, to join in sisterhood with women when often we are divided, to understand power structures with the intention of challenging them (Walker, 1992).

And that is definitely what Donoghue does at creating her three main female characters; different ages, divergent life experiences, diverse political stances but united by womanhood, helping one another discover and develop the inner power of being a woman.

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