



**In which a devout Irish girl
decides to fast, and a sceptic
English nurse is called to watch
over her; or, *The Wonder*.**

**DONOGHUE, Emma. *The
Wonder*. London: Picador, 2016.
291p.**

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Emma Donoghue (1969-) has ten novels² to her name. She has also written

five short story collections³, and three books of literary history.⁴ Despite this fairly extensive literary production, she is generally known as ‘the bestselling author of *Room*.’ She is also a playwright and screenwriter, having adapted her own novel *Room* into the homonymous four times Academy-nominated film released in 2015 including Best Adapted Screenplay. Being of Irish extraction, one might not see her as a Canadian author; however, the presence of writers who can be identified as holding double national identities has become commonplace in Canada’s literary landscape. Indeed, the multicultural diversity of its writers can even be regarded as a hallmark of Canadian Literature (*CanLit*). Carol Shields, Michael Ondaatje, Rohinton Mistry, and Yann Martel are a few examples of writers who were born in countries other than Canada, namely the United States, Sri Lanka, Bombay, and Spain, but who are ultimately Canadians. In Donoghue’s case, she spent her formative first twenty years in Dublin, Ireland, lived in Cambridge, England for eight years and now lives in London, Ontario, Canada. She holds joint Irish and Canadian citizenship and has declared that she is “happy to be known as a Canadian writer.”⁵

Donoghue is known for using ‘nuggets of reality’ as stepping stones for writing fiction. Most of her novels are born out of historical cases. *The Sealed Letter* (2008), for instance, is inspired by a marital breakdown scandal in the 1860s Britain involving a married couple and a feminist spinster. Although *The Wonder*⁶ does not tell a tale from life, it is based on several cases of fasting girls. In the author’s note at the end of the book, Donoghue states that between the 16th and 20th centuries almost fifty cases of girls surviving without food for long periods were reported in the British Isles, Western Europe, and North America.

The premise of the novel, that of a fasting girl, already is in its own right a very compelling and intriguing one. Can a person survive without food? What could possibly make somebody renounce for such a long time the very thing that keeps one alive? Is the human spirit stronger than any bodily need? Is she really some sort of miracle? Or is it all a well-thought-out hoax? And in that case what are the motives behind it? Add to the mixture Donoghue’s terse, evocative prose, and psychological insight, and the reader gets a thought-provoking, heart-rending, and deeply-affecting story.

Elizabeth Wright (Lib for short), estranged from her sister and husband, is a bereaved daughter and mother. “*Free of ties*” (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 66), commends her strict, respected, and famous trainer Florence Nightingale. Beyond these characteristics, her professionalism and respectability make her the perfect nurse to be sent in to an Irish village to watch over Anna O’Donnell, who claims to have been surviving without food since her eleventh birthday, four months prior to Lib’s visit. To Lib’s horror, said behaviour is condoned by both her family and the Catholic community that seem to relish the throngs of tourists who come to see the girl.

As determined by the influential and biased local committee that hires Lib’s services, her task, along with tight-lipped nun Sister Michael, is quite simple: to mount a watch in the O’Donnell’s farmhouse and take it in turns in eight-hour shifts to observe the girl all the time, and make sure she does not eat or is fed a single morsel of food for a fortnight. It is believed that this way either a well-crafted hoax will be exposed, or the girl will be proved a living marvel, “[...] thriving by special providence of the Almighty” (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 29). In the five-

chapter novel – each suspensefully titled with the single words *nurse*, *watch*, *fast*, *vigil*, *shift*, and their dictionary-like acceptations – what seemed just a brief stint at a backward village turns out to be a transformative life experience.

It begins with Lib arriving at a spirit grocery (one that sells alcohol), where she is put up at for the duration of her mission, at the dead centre of 19th-century Ireland. There, people's lives are steeped in religion and general superstition, which clashes with Lib's pragmatic background. At the O'Donnell's, by applying her rational and objective methods, Lib attempts to "[...] impose something of the systematic on [the] incongruous situation" (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 34), "[...] to make sure sense [prevails] over nonsense" (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 32). She attests to the child's relatively good welfare despite four months' fasting, and goes over every nook and cranny of the cabin to verify that no food is being stashed at Anna's reach. After her first shift, Lib comes to the realisation that she understands nothing of the rather different ways of Irish people.

Against her better judgement, Lib befriends little and feeble Anna. During their time together, talking in Anna's

bedroom or strolling in the countryside, they engage in riddles and prayer, of course. Soon enough Anna becomes the master riddle that Lib must solve as "there was something very different about – very wrong with – Anna O'Donnell" (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 118). Thus, nothing goes amiss in their conversational exchanges since the smallest piece of observation from Anna might be the key to unlocking her mind. The dialogues between them are often moving, evocative, and edgy, allowing the reader to take in glimpses of Anna's particular worldview – which does not make it any the easier to riddle her out. Lib must also take into account the influence of others on Anna, of her family members, and of the Roman Catholic Church teachings which seep into every aspect of Anna's life.

At first confident and self-assured as her nurse education and experience made her be, Lib starts to throw aside her prejudiced assumptions about Irish people little by little as something more sinister seems to lie at the bottom of the case. The earth beneath her feet begins to give in like the muddy peat bogs that surround the O'Donnell's property, and before long she sees herself enmeshed in unforeseen

circumstances. Under Lib's watchful eyes Anna eats nothing and wastes away. It dawns on Lib then that she must do more than scientifically observe the girl; otherwise her vigil will become Anna's downfall. Lib has to dive deep into the workings of Anna's mind so as to help her out of her predicament.

In Lib's frantic, desperate, and claustrophobic dash to do what would be morally right, things turn out to be a stylistic game of sorts in that she must understand and disentangle the language of conversation from the language of religion and the language of riddles to find a way into Anna's mind. She has to probe into the meanings of words as in "a fast didn't go fast; it was the slowest thing there was. Fast meant a door shut fast, firmly. A fastness, a fortress. To fast was to hold fast to emptiness, to say no and no and no again" (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 192). Soon enough she sees herself obliged to learn a foreign language, or rather, a religious discursive field that up to that point she was unfamiliar with.

Anna's detachment from earthly life resembles Hannah's plight in Carol Shields' novel *Unless* (*Bondade* in Brazilian Portuguese; cf CARNEIRO,

2017a), in which Hannah gives up the comforts of family life and goes panhandling in a Toronto street. Both novels depict women's lives and explore the relationship between mothers and daughters in the face of overwhelming odds. At the centre stage of harrowing psychological turmoil are the figures of Anna and Hannah, who so resolutely resign themselves to their own oblivion.

In its gloomy, ominous, and picturesque portrayal of rural life in 19th-century Ireland as well as in its subject matter and disturbing imagery, Donoghue's novel contributes to the female gothic tradition in *CanLit* found in works by Alice Munro (cf CARNEIRO, 2016) and Margaret Atwood, for instance. In spite of its historical backdrop, it is brimful of religious, social, and moral issues that ring just as equally relevant today. The deployment of the gothic mode of literature in *The Wonder* reminds the reader that in the human world nothing should be taken at face value, as truth may be just beyond the one thing that meets the eye. It invites the reader to reflect on the gullibility of humankind and on our own responsibility for the actions we take since "[...] neither the Creator nor Nature should be blamed

for what human hands have wrought” (DONOGHUE, 2016, p. 288).

Emma Donoghue’s oeuvre has not gained wide reception in Brazil compared to other Canadian authors, such as Margaret Atwood and Yann Martel (cf CARNEIRO, 2018; CARNEIRO, 2017b). Published by *Verus Editora*, *The Wonder* was translated by Vera Ribeiro in 2018 as *O Milagre*. Prior to *The Wonder*, *Room* is her only novel to have been translated into Brazilian Portuguese. Published by *Verus Editora* as *Quarto* (2011), Vera Ribeiro was also in charge of rendering the novel to Brazilian readers. Apart from these two novels, it seems that no other translation of Donoghue’s works has hit the Brazilian literary market, which stands as a great loss to the body of English Canadian Literature translated in Brazil.

Emma Donoghue is remarkable for her ability to create and sustain suspense, and to evoke complex matters such as those of moral responsibility, faith, social mores, national and personal identity out of intimate narratives and confined spaces, just as she did in both *Room* and *The Wonder*. It is refreshing to read a novel that does not rely on some postmodern trick, but rather sticks to plain straightforward

storytelling. The reader is captured not only by each line of narration and dialogue, but also by the suspenseful spaces between them. It is a positively riveting read.

The Wonder’s atmosphere is dark, haunting, and eerie enough to sap the spirit from anyone’s heart, and yet Lib’s scepticism turned into steadfast dedication and ultimately unremitting love lights a flame like no other, capable of burning, yes, but of saving also.

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Notes

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² *Stir-Fry* (1994), *Hood* (1995), *Slammerskin* (2000), *Life Mask* (2004), *Landing* (2007), *The Sealed Letter* (2008), *Room* (2010), *Frog Music* (2014), *The Wonder* (2016), *The Loterrys Plus One* (2017).

³ *Kissing the Witch* (1997), *The Woman who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002), *Touchy Subjects* (2006), *Three and a Half Deaths* (2011), *Astray* (2012).

⁴ *Passions Between Women* (1993), *We are Michael Field* (1998), *Inseperable* (2010).

⁵ As can be seen on Emma Donoghue's personal webpage available from: <<https://www.emmadonoghue.com/faq.html>>. Accessed 4 Sep 2017.

⁶ Among other accolades, in 2016 *The Wonder* was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, which is awarded to English-language Canadian fiction including translations.