

Book Club Discussion Guide



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The Pull of the Stars

By Emma Donoghue

About the author:

Born in Dublin, Ireland, in October 1969, I am the youngest of eight children of Frances and Denis Donoghue (the literary critic). I attended Catholic convent schools in Dublin, apart from one eye-opening year in New York at the age of ten. In 1990 I earned a first-class honours BA in English and French from University College Dublin (unfortunately, without learning to actually speak French). I moved to England, and in 1997 received my PhD (on the concept of friendship between men and women in eighteenth-century English fiction) from the University of Cambridge. From the age of 23, I have earned my living as a writer, and have been lucky enough to never have an 'honest job' since I was sacked after a single summer month as a chambermaid. After years of commuting between England, Ireland, and Canada, in 1998 I settled in London, Ontario, where I live with Chris Roulston and our son Finn and daughter Una.

Source: <https://www.emmadonoghue.com/emma-donoghue.html>

About this 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. 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. 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

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lose patients to this baffling pandemic, but they also shepherd new life into a fearful world. With tireless tenderness and humanity, carers and mothers alike somehow do their impossible work.

Source: www.emmadonoghue.com/books/novels/the-pull-of-the-stars.html

Discussion Questions:

1. How has the current pandemic changed the way you approach *The Pull of the Stars*? What similarities do you see between the pandemic in the novel and the one we're living through now? What details are different?
2. Do you think that people will be more or less likely to read this novel now in light of what is going on? Do you think that your own opinion of the novel is influenced by your response to the day-to-day realities of living amidst COVID-19?
3. World War I is reaching its end and Julia's home country, Ireland, is in the midst of political turmoil regarding Home Rule. How does this total lack of normalcy affect Julia and the other characters? Do you think that the novel does a good job of balancing these various world events?
4. Discuss the intersections where the war, the influenza, and the civil unrest all meet:
 - a. How do the crises allow Julia to operate differently than she might have in a more normal era?
 - b. Would the novel have unfolded in the same way if the influenza had been an isolated incident, and Julia and the others did not have to deal with the war or the heightened Irish politics? How might it have changed?
5. Throughout the novel, Julia clashes with various members of the church, particularly Sister Luke. Does *The Pull of the Stars* have a deliberate anti-religion message? Is it

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a condemnation of human rights abuses perpetrated by those who claim to be against them?

a. One particularly memorable offense detailed is when Bridie tells Julia about the priest who thought it improper to leave teenaged daughters with a widowed father and Julia balks at the depravity and hypocrisy of such a statement coming from a priest: “For a priest to make such a comment—somehow both prudish and filthy-minded...” (182). Why do you think Donoghue included details like this?

6. Discuss Groyne as a character. How much sympathy are we meant to feel for him? Are we meant to feel as Julia does, that he is an unlikeable chauvinist? Or should we, like Bridie, look deeper to see the tragedies that lie beneath the surface?
7. What do you make of Julia’s relationship with Bridie? How do the two of them even each other out? a. Consider the things that Julia is able to teach Bridie and the things that she entirely overlooks until Bridie points them out to her. Would their relationship have flourished in other circumstances? Would their relationship have even been possible in other circumstances?

Source: <https://funfandomblog.wordpress.com/>