

THE MIGHTY PEN

An Irish author's second novel marks her
as a master image maker

by Bonnie Ruth Beebe

Emma Donoghue's *Hood* is a novel which gives the lie to the commonly held notion that there is no modern lesbian literature. Donoghue, a young Irish scholar pursuing her doctorate at Cambridge, has raised the level of contemporary fiction in a market dominated by sexual juvenilia. While she may have appropriated themes from lesser works, i.e., the excruciating journey to self

with a series of willing cohorts, a condition revealed by her inability to give up the practice even at the cost of tremendous pain to Pen, who "enabled" Cara in her dependency, by negotiating "in a civilized and honest way to allow for the occasional other sexual partner...."

So, while they became "sort of girlfriends" in their youth and housemates after college, their arrangement was more in the nature of an adoption than a marriage.

There's a bounty of sensual and playful memories for Pen to refer to and she relies on those to spell her from the grieving process. But they are interspersed with the accusatory voices that plague her conscience about the unresolved issues she'll now have to settle alone.

Here is where Donoghue gives the coming-out, breaking-up, getting-over-it plot a tighter twist. Whether by reason or by cynicism, Pen refuses abduction by the recovery cult, distrustful of the premise that all our maladies can be stepped off in 12 scripted paces. Preferring the deliberative method of listening to and learning from the

distilled history of their relationship and aided by the twin engines of grief which dull our sense of expediency and heighten our perception of significance, Pen reaches her own conclusions about the validity of her genuine love for and devotion to Cara: "I didn't trust her not to lie or do me harm, because she had done both before, but I did keep choosing to trust myself in her hands."

Avoiding the seductive appeal of the victim pose is a challenge that many of us are not up to in difficult situations. Not so with Pen. Though her love for Cara was the one—perhaps too in-

tense—emotion that Pen permitted herself, it was, nevertheless, as real and healthy as love ever is.

Ultimately, though, it is the realization that her own identity must never again depend on that of another that frees Pen from her hood of self denial.

Lesbian "enmeshment" is the dreaded disease of our time, killing off our relationships as efficiently as any virus. Pen and Cara's story of negotiating away the breathing space necessary for true authenticity sounds an ominous warning to us, but also points the way around the danger. What we have of ourselves when we are together is precisely what we'll have left when we no longer are.

Donoghue was especially perceptive to age the characters into their fourth decade, realizing, no doubt, that Pen's measured wisdom is not usually present in women (or men) her own age. At 26, Donoghue is already a master image maker, spiking, jarring, vibrating her scenes and catching the odd and ordinary detail that frames a momentary circumstance. American readers will be so captivated by the melodic quality of her Irish prose that the occasional alien reference will pose no hindrance. Fans of her previous novel, *Stir-fry*, a first fiction Lambda Award finalist, will rejoice in the increasing caliber of Donoghue's contribution to literature, one that transcends and surpasses what we have come to expect.

Hood by Emma Donoghue. Harper Collins, 1995; \$23 cloth.



Emma Donoghue

discovery, the shock and grief of sudden loss, and coming to terms with a hostile environment, in her eloquent voice and fist-taut imagery, those themes meet at the intersection of faith and intellect that we call "truth."

Why is it the most ordinary images that fall out, when I shuffle the memories? The memories in this weeklong walk through the mind of Pen O'Grady are of Cara, her lover of 13 years, the only lover she has ever known and ever expected to know until Cara is suddenly killed in an auto accident. And the images are ordinary because "It was all very ordinary.... I liked to do stuff like brushing the fluff off her jacket, but that's not what you call a grand passion, is it?"

No, Pen, it isn't a grand passion and that, contrary to what we'd hoped for, sums up the situation that many of us settle into with our partners, even the gender outlaws among us.

Providence set me up to read *Hood* the week after I parted company with a companion I intended to spend my entire life loving, and, like Pen, I had lost a partner to sudden, inexplicable death in my late 20s. So I was able to plod along with her through the days that crept by, hour by muttering hour, attending to only the necessary tasks while the two of us, Pen and I, mostly stared into space and mentally argued with the authors of our respective fates. What we discovered at the end of the argument is that we have seen the enemy and she is us.

Pen originally gravitated to Cara Wall when they met as convent school adolescents in Dublin, by the mechanism that often powerfully attracts two opposite poles but cruelly repels once the poles are matched. Cara was a motherless daughter who had chosen to stay with her father when her parents separated, Mrs. Wall repairing to America with Cara's only sister, Kate. Pen was, in classic psychobabble, the "parentified child," isolated from her emotions and self-worth by her own mother's inexpressive distance.

Call her enabler, call her co-dependent, call her whatever you will, Pen's list of self-described symptoms reads like a chart from *Women Who Love Too Much*: "I would do anything for this girl. I will make her smile, make merry, make up for it all." "How I love being necessary." "[S]ometimes I faked an inefficiency to make other people feel better." Check, check, check. Score 100 for Pen on the Saint Test.

Cara, the operand in this neat equation, was "addicted" to unencumbered sexual encounters



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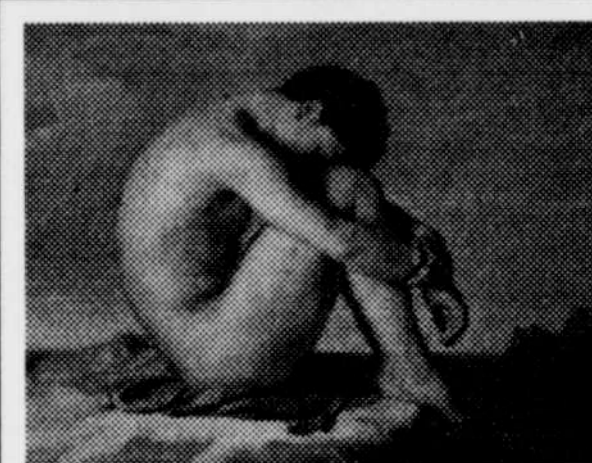
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