

BOOKS

A handful

Emma Donoghue turns fact into fiction; Evelyn Waugh republished

THE WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO RABBITS
by Emma Donoghue. Harcourt Brace, 2002; \$24 hardcover.

She's an ingenious trickster with an enticing world of florid prose, a wonderland of historical fiction. Then the wonderland turns awry and ventures on in the peculiar world of outrageous frauds, lurid scandals, dark secrets, private afflictions and bold pranks.

In the eccentric story collection *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits*, lesbian author Emma Donoghue resurrects various women's voices, once muted in Irish and British history. She fleshes out scraps of historical anecdotes until they become full-blown imaginary scenes, each story being one of many possible plots hiding behind a handful of facts.

The title story "The Last Rabbit" stars Mary Toft, who majorly counts on 1720s English gullibility during the act of giving birth to rabbits. "How a Lady Dies" features the dying poet Miss Pennington and her closest friend, writer Frances Sheridan, in 1759 Bath.

"Words for Things" is inspired by a young girl's obsession with her governess, Miss Mary Wollstonecraft (!): "It was June by the time she found that there were words for girls like her. Words tucked away in the library, locked only until you looked for them. *Romp* and *boyden* she knew already. *Tomboy* was when she ran down the front staircase with her bootlaces undone."

Donoghue is best known for the mid-'90s fictions *Kissing the Witch* and *Stirfry*, but she has written even better work since. Her audacious 2000 novel *Slammerkin* is an outstanding piece of work and should not be missed.

The Irish writer, who lives in Canada with her partner, is already working on her next book, *Life Mask*, "about a love triangle in 1790s London among the elite, who moved through the overlapping worlds of art, politics, sport and theater."

—Els Debbaut

A HANDFUL OF DUST
by Evelyn Waugh. Everyman's Library, 2002; \$18 hardcover.

Evelyn Waugh's 1934 novel *A Handful of Dust* has recently been republished as part of Random House's Everyman's Library series. Born in 1903, the popular author of the gay-themed *Brideshead Revisited* is one of the sharpest satirists of the 20th century, and his works are found on many "best books" lists.

Waugh's attitude toward homosexuality was largely shaped by the experience of his



The wry Emma Donoghue gives birth to another winner

older brother, who was expelled from prep school after writing a semi-autobiographical novel detailing his schoolboy romances. Waugh, too, had gay relationships up through his attendance at Oxford University, but, like the character of Charles Ryder in *Brideshead*, he was determined to live a heterosexual life as an adult.

Similarly, *Handful* contains autobiographical elements; its story of a cuckolded husband mirrors the embarrassing circumstances of Waugh's failed first marriage.

Handful takes its title from TS Eliot's nihilistic poem *The Waste Land* and reflects Waugh's conflicted feelings about his marriage and his sense of aimlessness at the time. (He attempted suicide after his divorce by trying to drown himself.)

Indeed, Waugh could not decide how to finish the novel and ended up appending a previously written short story onto it. Whether the book's disjointed conclusion is representative of poor story structure or an accurate rendering of a sad and confused life is up for interpretation. Regardless, *A Handful of Dust* makes for compelling reading.

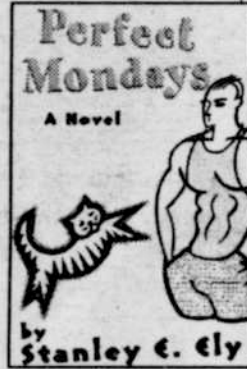
—Floyd Sklaver

PERFECT MONDAYS
by Stanley Ely. Painted Leaf Press, 2002; \$15.95 softcover.

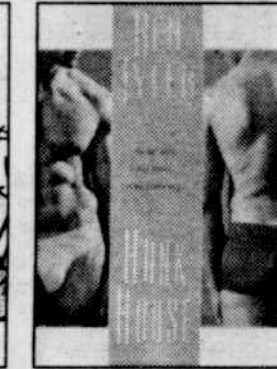
In Stanley Ely's first novel, *Perfect Mondays*, Greg Fine is an aging, gay, Jewish Manhattanite who joins a psychotherapy group to explore why he is unable to find love. What he discovers is neither enlightened nor enjoyable. In fact, the book is downright dull and poorly written.

Greg's group consists of six neurotics who gather weekly to bicker, yell, kvetch and, generally, display exactly why they need to be in therapy. Unfortunately, none of the characters is delineated enough to tell them apart, and the sessions have no more depth than a newspaper advice column. I am not opposed to group therapy, but is it really helpful to have people who can't function themselves give direction to each other?

For his entire adult life Greg has been unable to maintain an intimate relationship, instead finding anonymous sex in bars and bathhouses. The explanation given is that when he was young he slept in the same room as his parents and witnessed plenty that made him excited and ashamed. "It programmed him into not talking, pretending to see nothing, while staring at everything that others



Two bad attempts at gay lit



HUNK HOUSE
by Ben Tyler. Kensington Publishing, 2002; \$18 hardcover.

Hunk House, the new novel by Ben Tyler, author of *Tricks of the Trade*, is the sort of fantasy story where every gay man is fit, gorgeous and hung like a horse. (He even names one of the characters Bull—guess why!)

While this second attempt contains beautiful men, the same can't be said for the writing, which is sophomoric, or the plot, which is just plain dumb.

In *Hunk*, six men are selected for a new reality TV series—sort of a cross between *Survivor* and *Big Brother*. They are locked into an old Victorian mansion to compete against each other in a series of inane challenges before one of them is voted out each week.

During this time, every interaction and movement is filmed by hidden cameras, and every conversation, snore and moan is captured by microphones.

Of course, the six fit, gorgeous, hung men quickly break the "no sex" rule—and a good thing, too, because only during the sex scenes does the book come alive. Tyler's writing is as hot as anything in *Men* or *Mandate*.

Unfortunately, though, the sexscapes of *Hunk House* are surrounded by long stretches of silly plot and, unlike magazines, there are no pretty pictures of naked men to keep the reader interested.

—FS

ELS DEBBAUT is the assistant manager of *In Other Words*.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance reviewer.



Sundays Swing

ABOARD PORTLAND SPIRIT

America's most treasured art form returns to the city's only floating venue. Portland Spirit's 2nd annual Jazz Brunch series is under way. Every Sunday though September 29th, musicians send notes sailing. Different artists and sounds will be explored weekly. Join us for one, multiple, or all performances.

Upcoming Cruise Events: Live Jazz Brunch Series - Every Sunday, July - September 29th
Friday Early Escapes Cruises coming in July

CALL (503) 224-3900 OR (800) 224-3901 • BOOK ONLINE NOW AT WWW.PORTLANDSPIRIT.COM