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Sappho's 18th-Century London

John Kenny

Life Mask.

By Emma Donoghue.

Virago. 613pp, (pounds)14.99.

“A genre is hardening.” Thus begins James Wood’s incisive essay on what he terms “Hysterical Realism” in the “big, ambitious” contemporary novels. An Irish version of this ambition is also hardening, though it might be better termed Hysterical Historicism. On variable scales of size and success the genre of historical fiction has in recent years been adopted and adapted by Irish novelists to a degree worth wondering about.

While the most recent big works by, for instance, Roddy Doyle and Joe O’Connor, have received much attention, the especially intense attraction the chase back to history seems to hold for Irish women novelists is notable and is perhaps best exemplified in the recent work of Emma Donoghue, who claims, in any case, the credentials of a literary historian. While Donoghue’s first two novels, *Stirfry* (1994) and *Hood* (1995), were set in contemporary Dublin, since her immersion in the archetypal old world of European fairytales in *Kissing the Witch* (1997) she has been examining the fictional possibilities of reengaging with historical persons and events. The true histories and bizarre tales of *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) were preceded by her most successful novel to date, *Slammerkin* (2000), the inspired-by-fact story of a destitute girl in 18th-century London.

With *Life Mask* Donoghue goes definitively high society in her further borrowings from 18th-century London. Though the treatment – mainly by way of character psychologising – is extensive, the plot is small and centers on a love triangle between society notables: Lord Derby is suitor to steadfast stage star Eliza Farren, who in turn is a friend of sculptor and rumoured Sapphist, Anne Damer. Scandals develop, these three manoeuvre among such other high-flyers as Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Edmund Burke, and Hugh Walpole (the best characterization in the book), and sexual passions are eventually consummated in ways that are surprising if not entirely free of cliché (there is talk towards the end of “a hard-nosed, eager snake”.)

There are two principal dangers with this kind of historical fiction. Research and information can themselves become a kind of domineering character, effacing the credibility of consciousness and realistic character interaction necessary for the humanization of the factual record. Conversely, there can be such a determination to make historical figures breathe and walk on the page that they become individualized out of historical existence, unanchored from the particularities of the historical context that is the justification for their interest in the first place.

Donoghue veers on occasion towards each of these dangers, but she nevertheless treads carefully the fine line between holding the reader by the hand and condescending the reasonably well-informed with schoolbook history. The fallout of the French

Revolution for the British chattering class is well assimilated in the general progress of the story, and Irish political developments are particularly nicely underplayed.

The best Irish historical fiction (Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales* say) creates a sense of external place and period in quiet organic parallel to the internal characterizations of a story. The privacies of Donoghue's story, however, are naturally punctuated by pointed mentions of the public events of the day since the group of characters involved is at the very centre of political and social power. The dialogue is occasionally wooden but, overall, the gentlemen and ladies are convincingly shown at parliament and at play. And scholarly help is kept where it should be: in an "Author's Note" and "Dramatis Personae" at the end.

Whatever one's staying power over this many pages or preference for more artfully controlled novels, Donoghue's ambition is not to be gainsaid. The extensive research carried out for this project further consolidates her formidable devotion to gender issues, at least as they relate to women, and establishes her potential as a prime devotee of long historical fiction. By the evidence of the gargantuan labour that is *Life Mask* she has more than enough resolve to produce more big work.

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