**EMMA DONOGHUE – *ROOM***

Just before her novel, *Room,* was published to huge acclaim in 2010 Emma Donoghue decided to write a version for the screen.

“I love films and I’ve always wanted to write for film as well, and it just never happened until now,” she says. “Although fiction is my default form – it’s usually the way I think first ­– as long as I’ve been going to films, I’ve thought if you could possibly write in that collaborative way, using all those other elements as well, like music and camerawork and acting, then you can touch people so much.”

She knew, too, that once the book was published there would be interest from filmmakers and, perhaps, pressure to let a more experienced screenwriter adapt her novel.

“Yes, with this story in particular I thought, ‘this one is probably a strong enough storyline to carry it.’ Even though it’s odd and I knew we would need a tiny child, and it’s technically peculiar in that the first half is in a locked room, I still thought this one has a strong enough concept and a strong enough storyline.

“So yes, I started writing the screenplay right before the book was actually published. There had been a lot of hype about the selling of the book, and I knew there would be a lot of attention on me as soon as the book was out, so I thought, ‘well, before they start crowding round telling me what to do or pressuring me to hand it over to a better screenwriter, I’ll have a bash myself,’” she laughs.

*Room,* the deeply moving story of Ma and her 5 year-old son Jack, who are imprisoned inside a tiny, 11 x 11 foot garden shed,was a literary sensation and shortlisted for several awards, including the Booker Prize.

Both a riveting thriller – Ma meticulously plans an escape that will save their lives – and an uplifting story about the incredible bond between a mother and her son, *Room* touched readers all over the world and even now, five years after it was first published, many still contact the author to tell her how much her book has meant to them.

“Yes, they still do. The range is amazing. If they’re writing from the West, they’re writing about their personal stories. It will be a grandfather saying, ‘I have a grandson I’m mad about.’ Or it will be a mother saying, ‘my son has Asperger’s.’ Or it’ll be a woman saying, ‘my husband used to beat me.’

“Or it’ll be a man saying, ‘I was raised by Jehovah’s Witnesses and it felt exactly like that.’ People relate to the story so passionately. Then, from China or Iran, they’ll say, ‘thank you for your allegory of life under an oppressive regime.’

“You think, ‘Oh my god, they’re reading it politically.’ So that’s made me realise that a book transforms in the head of its reader. In a way, I’m writing the first half of it and they finish it themselves.”

Several filmmakers were indeed very interested in making a film of the novel but Ms Donoghue was determined to wait until she found exactly the right director.

“I had a lot of nibbles, at least, and they were often quite big names and I would get briefly excited, and then I would think, ‘well that’s a big name but it’s not the right big name.’ It was never the perfect director.

“I was very nervous of selling it to any one studio or producer without knowing who the director would be, because I’m from that European tradition where a film is the auteur’s. A film is the filmmaker’s. So I so needed to have a director I could trust not to make it either sentimental or creepy.

“It could have been such a bad film, couldn’t it? Also, I didn’t feel a film *had* to be made of it. I’m not desperate for the money to feed my children, so I thought, ‘I just won’t sell the film rights if I can’t get the right director.’”

And then she received a letter from Lenny Abrahamson and she knew she had found the perfect creative partner. “The man is way more of an intellectual than I am, he studied philosophy, and so his ten-page letter quoted Plato. He completely understood the book and he went straight on with how he would make a film of it.

“He was terribly confident and direct – he wasn’t saying, ‘well my people will meet your people for lunch.’ There was none of that bullshit. It was like, ‘how I would film the sequence where Ma is depressed and gone for the day is the following: my camera would be there…’

“He was plunging in with great verve, and then at the end he said, ‘Please entrust your book to me,’ and I thought, ‘I think this is the man.’”

Casting was, of course, crucial especially finding the young boy who could play Jack opposite Brie Larson as Ma. Jack is oblivious to the outside world that he has never experienced and unaware of the terrifying reality that his mother endures – abducted as a 19 year old and raped by the shadowy figure who turns up after his bed time, known only as ‘Old Nick.’

After their daring escape, Jack and Ma are plunged into an unfamiliar, strange and at times, terrifying world that wants to know their story. Ma, who has had to fight to survive and protect her son, suddenly has to readjust to life outside the room. Ma’s separated parents (played by Joan Allen and William H. Macy) can scarcely believe that she is still alive and struggle to come to terms with what has happened to their daughter.

Ms Donoghue admits that at one point, she feared they wouldn’t find a child actor who would be up to the considerable challenge of playing Jack.

“The funny thing is, in the planning of this film – and we were planning it for years – they would always say, ‘Okay, we need to find one great child, obviously.’ And I would think, ‘what if we don’t?’ “

The search ended with Jacob Tremblay, a then seven year old from Vancouver, who, both Ms Donoghue and Abrahamson agreed, stood out from the hundreds of hopefuls who auditioned for the role.

“I saw about 40 clips of boys talking. Jacob was just so much more relaxed with the whole business. He has such a natural charm and he’s actually consciously acting in a way that child actors don’t always,” she says. “He always knew he was acting younger than he was. Also they filmed it more or less in sequence so that he would understand at every point what Jack was scared of and where he was.

“We never discussed the rape premise with him, not at all. All he needed to know was what I told my own kids when I was writing the book: ‘This bad guy has kept her locked up in a room and she’d rather be outside.’ In a way, the sex is incidental.

“The important thing is, ‘do you have the freedom to go out the door? Is the guy mean to them?’ We never needed to have any uncomfortable discussions about rape with Jacob.

“Also, one of his parents was always with him, so he was always very protected and looked after. I never felt, ‘Oh this is exploitative of the child.’ He has such a zest for the acting process.

“He’d come off and have his breaks but then they’d say, ‘Next take,’ and he would bound back into the room and into wardrobe. I just thought, ‘this lifestyle, weird as it is, suits this child. He’s having enormous fun.’”

The film, and the performances, won huge critical acclaim when it premiered at the Telluride Film Festival before screening at the Toronto Film Festival.

“Brie not only stunning in her acting but also really, really good to work with, too. She’d be sitting round in Ugg boots in a completely unpretentious way chatting with everybody.

“There was no, ‘I’m a star.’ Also, she really gave extra energy to the child as well. Not just making a bond with him, but often she’d be right there with him in every scene, reminding him where to put his foot or reminding him not to move his hand, tucking his hair behind his ear. She really mammies him in a lovely way, which I think kept him very relaxed and looked after.”

Ms Donoghue clearly enjoyed the filmmaking process and she’ll write for the screen again in the future.

“Yeah I will do. I like the collaboration. It’s so different to working on my own. You have to give up some power. That’s a little bit scary, but it’s the same with theatre as well.

“I would happily write original screenplays as well, and I would adapt other people’s work – that would be an interesting challenge, too. It’s really nice in my mid-forties that my writing is starting to take on this whole other direction. I’ve been writing books since I was 20. Not that I’m sick of that, but it’s fun to learn a whole new set of skills.”

Ms Donoghue was born in Dublin and now lives in Canada. Her novels include *Stir Fry, Hood, Life Mask, Landing, The Sealed Letter* and *Frog Music.*

**Q&A**

**Q: Were you worried that your novel would lose something in adaptation? A lot of writers feel very protective over their work.**

**A:** A lot of authors are very squeamish about having their work adapted for the screen and if they feel that way then they shouldn’t get involved at all. It’s not like I know a great deal about cinema but I’m a keen cinemagoer. I love films and I’ve always wanted to write for film as well, and it just never happened until now. Although fiction is my default form – it’s usually the way I think first ­– as long as I’ve been going to films, I’ve thought if you could possibly write in that collaborative way, using all those other elements as well, like music and camerawork and acting, then you can touch people so much. I write for theatre as well, so I think it’s helpful that I’m used to writing in a number of different forms, like radio drama for instance, which is fantastic fun – so wonderfully low budget. You can get some good actors because it’s only taking them a morning. So I’m already used to the idea that my stories could translate into different media, and that that is a plus rather than a terror.

**Q: So did you always want to adapt *Room* yourself?**

**A:** Yes, with this story in particular I thought, ‘This one is probably a strong enough storyline to carry it.’ Even though it’s odd and I knew we would need a tiny child, and it’s technically peculiar in that the first half is in a locked room, I still thought this one has a strong enough concept and a strong enough storyline. So yes, I started writing the screenplay right before the book was actually published. There had been a lot of hype about the selling of the book, and I knew there would be a lot of attention on me as soon as the book was out, so I thought, ‘Well, before they start crowding round telling me what to do or pressuring me to hand it over to a better screenwriter, I’ll have a bash myself.’ (Laughs).

**Q: And did you enjoy writing a screenplay?**

**A:** Oh, so much. I had read a lot of books about screenwriting. The funny thing was, when I then ended up working with Lenny Abrahamson, he encouraged me to relax a little bit about the so-called ‘rules of screenwriting’. For instance, in the books, they’re advising you on how to write a script that would get a total stranger to buy it from you, so they want it to be polished as possible. They tell you to go in late every scene – start at the first line that you absolutely crucially need, rather than the preamble – and then get out early, after the last good line. Lenny said to me, ‘Let’s think of it more as a wildlife documentary. Just give me long scenes of Ma and Jack talking and I’ll do the cutting.’ So because I was already working with him, the screenplay didn’t have to be clean-lined in the way a screenplay that you’re sending in cold has to be. As soon as you’re walking with the director, it’s a more collaborative process anyway. So that was very interesting.

**Q: Did any aspect of the process surprise you?**

**A:** There were things that I thought would be just too weird and unconventional for film. For instance, in the book Jack has got long hair and he barely mentions it. He doesn’t care, and you don’t notice until the second half. I thought if we opened the film with a very longhaired boy, he’s going to look so gender variant that that would be preoccupying to the audience. Lenny said to me, ‘who cares? Let’s start with the long hair. He is a bit different from the rest of the world, so why not mark him out that way?’ Lenny was really unafraid of the breastfeeding, the long time spent in the locked room, the fact that we never give a backstory to the villain. We’ve all seen so many TV shows about the psychopath. We have that moment with Sean Bridgers where you see him through the slats of the door and his trousers drop. You see the hairy knees of the rapist – it just takes all the sexiness out of that role. I loved the fact that he wore glasses. I thought that was a really smart decision. We’re all capable of evil, even men with glasses (laughs).

**Q: Your script must have attracted a lot of directors. Why was Lenny right for the job?**

**A:** I had a lot of nibbles, at least, and they were often quite big names and I would get briefly excited, and then I would think, ‘well that’s a big name but it’s not the right big name.’ It was never the perfect director. I was very nervous of selling it to any one studio or producer without knowing who the director would be, because I’m from that European tradition where a film is the auteur’s. A film is the filmmaker’s. So I so needed to have a director I could trust not to make it either sentimental or creepy. It could have been such a bad film, couldn’t it? Also, I didn’t feel a film *had* to be made of it. I’m not desperate for the money to feed my children, so I thought, ‘I just won’t sell the film rights if I can’t get the right director.’ Then Lenny sent me this ten-page letter. The man is way more of an intellectual than I am, he studied philosophy, and so his ten-page letter quoted Plato. He completely understood the book and he went straight on with how he would make a film of it. He was terribly confident and direct – he wasn’t saying, ‘Well my people will meet your people for lunch.’ There was none of that bullshit. It was like, ‘how I would film the sequence where Ma is depressed and gone for the day is the following: my camera would be there...’ He was plunging in with great verve, and then at the end he said, ‘Please entrust your book to me,’ and I thought, ‘I think this is the man.’

**Q: Had you seen any of his films?**

**A:** I hadn’t. I’d been out of Ireland a long time so I wasn’t up to date on Irish film, but they sent me a few of his films. Watching *Garage* and *Adam and Paul* in particular, I knew he would be able to catch the humour in dark situations and also the warmth. Some art movies can be so coldblooded or just tricksy for its own sake, whereas Lenny is always telling quite straightforward human stories. I knew that he was right for it. What I didn’t know was whether we would be able to get the funding, because I had some old fashioned ideas about the film business. I thought, ‘I’m not a big name in film, so we will need a big name director.’ But it turns out you don’t, because there’s all sorts of interesting ways to finance films nowadays. We got Irish film money, we got Canadian film money, and then the American distributors, A24, put in their third of the budget up front. I didn’t know about any of these ways to fund a film. At no point did we have to go the traditional big studio and hand over all the rights to them, so it was like this little magic circle of creativity – myself and Lenny and Ed [Guiney], the producer who he has always worked with. Then they would bring in people like the designer, one by one, but they were never bringing in the sort of faceless moneymen.

**Q: Did you meet with Lenny right after he sent you the letter?**

**A:** I didn’t at first, because I just assumed we needed a more established director to get funding. After about a year, my agent said to me, ‘That Irish man – he’s getting kind of hot because he cast Michael Fassbender in a film.’ I was like, ‘is that all it takes? Is hotness caught like a cold?’ She said, ‘Yeah, Fassbender is hot and so Lenny is hot.’ I said, ‘If I can make this film with the Irishman who sent me the ten-page letter, then great.’ (Laughs). Nobody else had sent me a letter like that. They generally don’t. It’s all a matter of setting up lunches and expressing interest and not putting themselves on the line, whereas he was wonderfully straightforward.

**Q: So when did you first meet?**

**A:** At their offices in Dublin. I was a little bit nervous that he’d be too art-house for me, because I love art-house films but this particular one I thought could get such a general audience that it would be a shame to lose that chance.

**Q: You already knew how broad the appeal of this story was because of the book’s success?**

**A:** Exactly. With the book, academics write their PHDs on it, but also people buy it in Costco or Wal-Mart. People are writing me fan letters that are misspelled and so on, but clearly the book has worked for them. They don’t know about allusions to James Joyce and they don’t care, so I wanted to keep that breadth of audience. 12 year-olds have read it, and it’s taught in school, so there’s quite an age range. I sat down with Lenny and I said slightly nervously, ‘Would you guarantee me that nobody dies?’ because there’s quite a high death rate in his films. He said, ‘I swear nobody will die.’ Then I said, ‘It wouldn’t be black and white, would it?’ He said, ‘No!’ Then I said, ‘Will there be any music?’ because I think *Garage* only has 30 seconds of music somewhere in the middle. He said, ‘I promise there will be music.’ I said, ‘Would you keep in the breastfeeding?’ He said, ‘There will be tits galore!’ (Laughs) I have to say it has been plain sailing ever since. I wasn’t looking for an Irishman to make it, because the film is set in America, but I have to say we have bonded so easily and well, and with Ed, who he has been making his films with all these years. They’re very easy with who they are and they mock each other all the time.

**Q: Tell us what first sparked you to write *Room?***

**A:** My children were four and one when I heard about the Fritzl case in Austria and I thought I would like to write a story about a child seeing the world for the first time, but I didn’t want to set it in Europe, I wanted to get it well away from the Fritzl case so I thought, ‘should it be Canada?’ And then I thought ‘no’ for two reasons, when they emerge into the outside world I wanted them to be in a society that assumed it was the best place in the world and I thought America might do well for that. I didn’t want anyone to be self deprecating in the outside world; I wanted that assumption of ‘here you are, you’ve come to Utopia...’ And also I wanted them to be worried about health care, so I thought ‘I can’t set that in Canada...’ so it’s set in pre Obama care America. It was very much a novel about motherhood for me. It was about that magical, yet confining bond, that so many mothers and fathers experience these days. You know, I’ve never seen it as that dark a story because the child is loved, that’s the thing, he is getting a best case scenario of intense 24 hours a day mother love. So I think anyone who felt that the story was dark at first find their way through the dark tunnels to the light and the film has exactly the same uplifting effect.

**Q: Did Lenny talk to you about casting?**

**A:** Oh yeah. Actually he said in a very modest way from the start, ‘It doesn’t matter than nobody has heard of me outside of Ireland because nobody goes to see a film based on who the director is. Most people just care what the face on the poster is.’ He said, ‘If we get an actress who is beginning to be well known then that is all we need.’ But that’s something else I hadn’t realised – I mean I’m so new to the film business that it’s all new to me – I thought you needed somebody who is terribly well known as a name already, but actually in the film business they prefer people like Brie [Larson] who are just beginning to be well known, the beginning of a discovery. She’s worked such a lot, but *Short Term 12* was the first time I saw her in a role that really challenged her. It’s just thrilling to see her get the big meaty role.

**Q: What did you make of Brie as Ma?**

**A:** Brie not only stunning in her acting but also really, really good to work with, too. She’d be sitting round in Ugg boots in a completely unpretentious way chatting with everybody. There was no, ‘I’m a star.’ Also, she really gave extra energy to the child as well. Not just making a bond with him, but often she’d be right there with him in every scene, reminding him where to put his foot or reminding him not to move his hand, tucking his hair behind his ear. She really mammies him in a lovely way, which I think kept him very relaxed and looked after. He seemed to find the whole experience fun, even though he was spending about seventy days in a wardrobe or rolled up in a rug (laughs).

**Q: How crucial was it that you find the right Jack?**

**A:** The funny thing is, in the planning of this film – and we were planning it for years – they would always say, ‘Okay, we need to find one great child, obviously.’ And I would think, ‘What if we don’t?’ They kept reassuring me that there are specialist child agents out there and that we would scour all of North America – we’d look right through the States as well as Canada – and that we would probably find the right child out there somewhere. It was great luck that the best child by far happened to be Canadian, because under the Canadian film funding rules we were only allowed two Americans. We were allowed Joan Allen and Brie Larson, and then William Macy as a cameo role, because it’s small, so otherwise we would have had to have a Canadian grandmother.

**Q: Were you at the casting calls? How intensive a process was that?**

**A:** A lot of the stuff was available on video. A lot of these decisions that I thought I wouldn’t be in on, I got to share in because they do video links. Again, during filming, I was able to see the dailies every night on a password-protected website. All these things about film were new to me. I thought dailies were something only the director saw. Getting back to casting, I saw about 40 clips of boys talking. Jacob was just so much more relaxed with the whole business. He has such a natural charm and he’s actually consciously acting in a way that child actors don’t always. He always knew he was acting younger than he was. Also they filmed it more or less in sequence so that he would understand at every point what Jack was scared of and where he was.

**Q: How did you talk to him about what Jack was scared of?**

**A:** Lenny did all that. I think the screenwriter has to really learn how to work through the director and that is really important.

**Q: Were you ever uneasy that you might not be able to protect him from some of the film’s darkest themes?**

**A:** We never discussed the rape premise with him, not at all. All he needed to know was what I told my own kids when I was writing the book: ‘This bad guy has kept her locked up in a room and she’d rather be outside.’ In a way, the sex is incidental. The important thing is, ‘do you have the freedom to go out the door? Is the guy mean to them?’ We never needed to have any uncomfortable discussions about rape with Jacob. Also, one of his parents was always with him, so he was always very protected and looked after. I never felt, ‘Oh this is exploitative of the child.’ He has such a zest for the acting process. He’d come off and have his breaks but then they’d say, ‘Next take,’ and he would bound back into the room and into wardrobe. I just thought, ‘this lifestyle, weird as it is, suits this child. He’s having enormous fun.’

**Q: You filmed here in Canada, right?**

**A:** Yes, which was again an enormous treat for me, because I’m Irish and Canadian. I kept saying to the Irish company, ‘Do it in Canada.’ Eventually they found there was a lot of funding advantage to doing it in Canada because I am Canadian. Not only is it a co-production of my two native lands, but also they filmed it in Canada. I live in London, Ontario, so I was able to pop up once a week or so.

**Q: Where did they film it?**

**A:** Pinewood studios down near Cherry Beach, and then various anonymous suburban locations.

**Q: Tell me about Joan Allen. Grandma is a very important character.**

**A:** She is important. It’s funny – as soon as we cast Joan, I found that character started getting nicer. Somehow once we were writing for Joan that character took on a lot of dignity and beauty, whereas Grandma in the book is quite satirised. She’s quite scatty and there’s a lot of satire of her having her book club round. As soon as it was Joan we really concentrated on the emotional core of what is it like as a mother to have your lost daughter come home. Every time Lenny and I talked about this story, we were trying to find the universal, like the fact that when Jack goes back to the room and he thinks it’s got smaller. We’ve all had that experience where you go back to something like the school you were at when you were small. Similarly with Joan, we’ve all had those moments where we grow up and suddenly our parents have to take us seriously as adults and sometimes as parents, or moments where you’re arguing with your mother about how you’re raising your child. I thought how much more extreme that would be if it’s all happening overnight. Suddenly she’s got her daughter back and her daughter has a child. I think that a key thing is that we’ve never seen this as a true crime story, or a freakish story. It’s an unusual premise but we’ve always tried to find the universal in it, about the experience of childhood and the experience of the parent child relationship, and how it always has to widen from the little tight magic circle. You have to let your children out into the wider world, you have to let them ride a bike, or go off to school for the day. What Ma and Jack go through is just a speeded up, more extreme version.

**Q: Did you anticipate the novel would have such an impact? It was published five years ago now.**

**A:** I’ve never had a break from it. I’ve been talking about it pretty much continuously since it was published. I’m not resentful because a bit of success is lovely. To be honest, I don’t think my writing suddenly got much better; I think I just hit on a really good idea. I think I was hugely lucky. Also, when I heard about the Fritzl case, I happened to have children of four and one, and that just put me in exactly the right position to suddenly grasp how the story of a child growing up in a locked room could be a powerful one. I congratulate myself that I wasn’t scared of that idea, even thought it sounds beyond repellent when you’re describing to people what the book is about. I was right to grab it, but I think I was hugely lucky to get that idea. It all came very easily. I never had any real doubts about the title of the book, or the perspective. I never thought of telling it from anybody else’s point of view. I knew exactly what the first scene would be and the last scene. This one came like a real gift. I’m really glad it wasn’t my first novel, because if you had such a hit with your first novel you’d be spoiled for the rest of your life, whining about, ‘Where are the limos?’ I know that publishing a novel is usually a very quiet business and there’s no fuss on publication day, so when it happens to you with your seventh novel, you’re much more able to totally enjoy the novelty of the success, but to realise it’s not all like this. And if I do other films, they couldn’t possibly be as good an experience as this. I mean it has been such a delight working with this small Irish company to make this film, and then to be at Telluride and Toronto with it. It’s all enormously gratifying, but again I realise it’s not always like this when you make a film.

**Q: Will you continue to write screenplays?**

**A:** Yeah I will do. I like the collaboration. It’s so different to working on my own. You have to give up some power. That’s a little bit scary, but it’s the same with theatre as well. When there’s a ring of actors and a director looking at you, you immediately start swearing that you will go home and rewrite the script that night. You give away some of your power and there is huge pleasure to it. I would happily write original screenplays as well, and I would adapt other people’s work – that would be an interesting challenge, too. It’s really nice in my mid-forties that my writing is starting to take on this whole other direction. I’ve been writing books since I was 20. Not that I’m sick of that, but it’s fun to learn a whole new set of skills.

**Q: Do readers still contact you about the book? What do they say?**

**A:** Yes, they still do. The range is amazing. If they’re writing from the West, they’re writing about their personal stories. It will be a grandfather saying, ‘I have a grandson I’m mad about.’ Or it will be a mother saying, ‘my son has Asperger’s.’ Or it’ll be a woman saying, ‘my husband used to beat me.’ Or it’ll be a man saying, ‘I was raised by Jehovah’s Witnesses and it felt exactly like that.’ People relate to the story so passionately. Then, from China or Iran, they’ll say, ‘thank you for your allegory of life under an oppressive regime.’ You think, ‘Oh my god, they’re reading it politically.’ So that’s made me realise that a book transforms in the head of its reader. In a way, I’m writing the first half of it and they finish it themselves.

**Q: Are all their readings right?**

**A:** Absolutely. I think there’s one limit to that. There was one day that I found that the book was being praised on a kind of radical mothers’ attachment parenting site, which was all about breastfeeding your child to ten. Oh, and then also on a Christian home-schooling site, as a sort of ‘How to make crafts out of cardboard.’ (Laughs). I thought, ‘In what planet is this a recommendation about how to live in a very small space?’ But hey, the book’s not mine anymore – it’s out there. Same with the film, and the film is going help the story reach a whole new set of people who don’t read books, to be honest, quite apart from all the ones who do read books. It’s fascinating to see how a story transforms.

**ENDS**