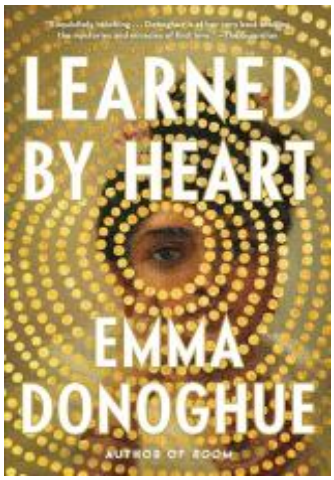
Learned by Heart

by Emma Donoghue



About the Book

A heartbreakingly gorgeous novel based on the true story of two girls who fall secretly, deeply and dangerously in love at boarding school in 19th-century York, from the bestselling author of ROOM and THE WONDER.

Drawing on years of investigation and Anne Lister?s five-million-word secret journal, LEARNED BY HEART is the long-buried love story of Eliza Raine, an orphan heiress banished from India to England at age six, and Anne Lister, a brilliant, troublesome tomboy. Eliza and Anne meet at the Manor School for young ladies in York in 1805 when they are both 14.

Emotionally intense, psychologically compelling and deeply researched, LEARNED BY HEART is an extraordinary work of fiction by one of the world?s greatest storytellers. Full of passion and heartbreak, the tangled lives of Anne Lister and Eliza Raine form a love story for the ages.

Discussion Guide

Spoiler Alert: Discussion questions to be read after finishing the novel

1. Much of LEARNED BY HEART draws upon the five-million-word journals by Anne Lister, who was a real historical figure often considered one of the ?first modern lesbians.? What can a journal teach us as a historical document? Do you keep a journal, and if so, how do you think your words would be read in 200 years? Why is it important to write one?s story, even without the intent of sharing it with others?

2. Eliza gets her pen taken away from her at the end of each letter. How may this be representative of a larger question, about who gets to write and why? Why tell this story from Eliza?s perspective, instead of Anne?s?

3. Discuss the title of the novel. What does it mean to ?learn by heart?? Is it to memorize something, as the girls do at their school, or, as Eliza says on page 223, is it to discover something that it feels like you?ve invented? On page 131, Lister says ??if the mind?s constantly trained to remember rather than to reason, won?t the faculty of memory become overdeveloped and the mind be left lopsided?? Are memories a reliable source of knowledge about ourselves? What has Eliza learned by the end of the novel? Did you have to learn anything as a child that you have memorized ?by heart??

4. Is this story a tragedy or a triumph? Does Raine make the right choice in letting Lister go?

5. This is a story about first love, but also about friendship. On page 262, Mercy walks in on Raine and Lister engaged in their love affair. Why don?t you think she shares what she has seen? Do you think the other girls suspect the nature of Raine and Lister?s relationship? How might the social dynamics between the girls mirror the society they live in?

6. Why does this story still resonate in the current moment? Why is it important to tell the stories of those who may not have been able to tell their own?

Author Bio

Born in Dublin in 1969, Emma Donoghue is an Irish emigrant twice over: she spent eight years in Cambridge doing a PhD in 18th-century literature before moving to London, Ontario, where she lives with her partner and their two children. She migrates between genres, writing for screen and stage, but she is best known for her novels, which range from the historical (THE WONDER, FROG MUSIC, SLAMMERKIN, LIFE MASK, THE SEALED LETTER) to the contemporary (AKIN, STIR-FRY, HOOD, LANDING). Her international bestseller ROOM was a *New York Times* Best Book of the Year and a finalist for the Man Booker, Commonwealth, and Orange Prizes. Donoghue also wrote the screenplays for ROOM and THE WONDER. Her most recent film (adapted with Philippa Lowthorpe from Helen Macdonald?s memoir) is H IS FOR HAWK.

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