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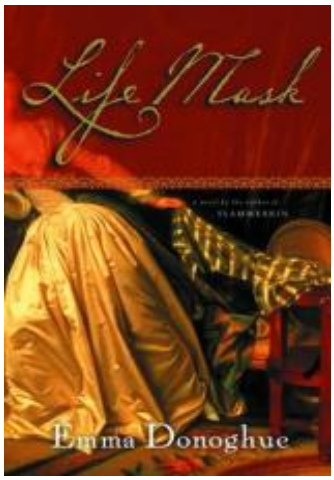
Life Mask

by Emma Donoghue



About the Book

In **Life Mask**, the bestselling author of **Slammerkin** turns her eye to the aristocracy of late eighteenth-century England, a world where art, politics, sports, and theater combine to form webs of intrigue. At the center of **Life Mask** are the Honorable Mrs. Anne Damer, the only female sculptor of her time; the Earl of Derby, inventor of the horse race that bears his name and the richest (though homeliest) man in the House of Lords; and Miss Eliza Farren, born without pedigree but now the reigning Queen of Comedy at London's famed Drury Lane Theatre.

Against a backdrop of political turmoil, the trio copes with the harsh glare of publicity while trying to maintain behind-the-scenes alliances. Each character faces an elusive challenge: Eliza struggles to be accepted by the elite, while her mother pressures her to become Lord Derby's mistress. Lord Derby endures mockery over his long, unconsummated, adulterous courtship of Eliza. And Anne Damer tries to silence the whispers of Sapphism that test her friendships with both Lord Derby and Eliza. Inspired by true stories, this is the tale of wealthy liberal Whigs who work to topple a tyrannical prime minister and lunatic King George in an atmosphere where political liaisons prove as volatile as romantic ones.

Discussion Guide

1. Who comprises the Beau Monde? What do the qualifications for admission appear to be? Is there a contemporary equivalent to the Beau Monde?

2. In what ways does the political climate portrayed in the novel affect the characters' personal lives? What motivates the Whigs to call for reform? What limits are imposed on their open-mindedness? How does the presence of a monarchy appear to affect the characters' psyches?

3. Page 134 features a scene in which Lord Derby discusses cockfights, horses, and his competitive nature in general.

What does he reveal about his temperament?

4. What surprising details of eighteenth-century English life did you discover in these chapters?

5. How would you have responded to the epigram about Anne? On page 359, Anne mentions Fox and the Libel Bill. What is her perception of freedom of the press?

6. Discuss the parallels and contrasts between Anne and Eliza. Do they use their artistic gifts in similar ways? Are they equally capable of distinguishing artifice from truth?

7. Though Eliza had reservations about the expense of Bow Window House, her new address provided her with status as well as creature comforts. How does her attitude toward material gain compare to that of the novel's wealthier characters? What political and cultural factors enhance their ability to sustain such wealth?

8. Eliza's mother is decidedly difficult. But is she wise?

9. Chapter 7, "Écorché," features the scene in which Eliza and Anne visit Lord Derby's ailing wife. On page 474, the Countess reveals that she had begged her husband for a divorce. Do you trust her account of their marriage? Is it true that he "kept himself and this woman horribly yoked together all these years out of sheer perversity"?

10. What do you believe is the true reason for the demise of Anne and Eliza's friendship? Are they ever genuinely unmasked before one another? What does their kiss, in the scene on page 487, prove?

11. Why do you imagine Walpole encounters such despair in his final days?

12. Were you able to see through Anne's insistence about her sexuality? Did you expect her friendship with Mary to evolve into something more?

13. Though a bit awkward at first, Lord Derby and Eliza seem supremely content with their marriage. What enabled them to maintain their alliance for so many years: Attraction? Stubbornness? Love?

14. Clearly, Lord Derby is a prestigious catch for Eliza. What comparable matches have made headlines in recent years? What does this indicate about the notion of "trophy wives" and their evolution over the past two centuries? Would you have made the same choices as Eliza?

15. Discuss the chapter titles. How does each of the definitions serve as a metaphor while the plot unfolds?

16. Which of Eliza's roles best mirrors her life?

17. Anne, Eliza, Georgiana, and Mary were each offered a version of "protection" through marriage proposals. How did each one respond, and what were the consequences of those responses? What is the effect of Anne's status as a widow? Does this give her more or less freedom than the other women in the novel?

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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.

Critical Praise

"[A] colorful romp of a novel . . . Impossible to resist. Donoghue paints a spirited picture . . . Fabulous."

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