



EMMA  
DONOGHUE

Bestselling author of *The Wonder* and *Room*

THE  
PULL  
OF THE  
STARS

READING GROUP NOTES



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. During the coronavirus pandemic, many people refer back to the 1918 Spanish flu as a touchpoint. What was your awareness of the 1918 flu before our current pandemic? How important is an understanding of history when we deal with similar crises in the present?
2. Julia and the other health workers face many challenges, including lack of supplies, misinformation, and sexism. How many of those challenges were unique to Julia's time and place? To what extent do our healthcare workers face the same challenges today?
3. Throughout *The Pull of the Stars*, Julia notices government placards with public health warnings and advice. Why do you think Emma Donoghue included them in the novel? How has your government's communication with the general public during the coronavirus pandemic been similar, or different?
4. War in several senses – the First World War in which Tim Power served, and the Irish revolutionary struggle in which Doctor Lynn is a leader – is the context to *The Pull of the Stars*. What effect do these distant conflicts have on the story and atmosphere of the novel? Why is war kept mostly in the background rather than foreground?
5. Julia argues that women pay 'the blood tax' just as much as soldiers. What did you think about the detailed scenes that depicted childbirth and its complications? How do you think birth functions, compared with the flu, as a source of plot?
6. In the novel, the expectant mothers have very different family situations and relationships with their children. Which patient did you identify with the most? Which patient's story was the most surprising to you?
7. How does the status of "immunity" function in the novel?
8. What does Bridie Sweeney bring into Julia's life? Into the novel as a whole? What effect does the slow revelation of her background have on your sense of other characters, institutions and Ireland's history?
9. How does it change your response to a character in a novel such as Kathleen Lynn when you learn that she was a historical figure? What does an author owe to a real person when fictionalizing them?

# SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider: The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World*

Ida Milne, *Stacking the Coffins: Influenza, War and Revolution in Ireland 1918-19*

Caitriona Foley, *The Last Irish Plague: The Great Flu Epidemic in Ireland 1918-19*

Padraig Yeates, *A City in Wartime: Dublin 1914-1918*

Anne MacLellan, Dorothy Stopford Price: *Rebel Doctor*

Brian Goldman, *The Secret Language of Doctors: Cracking the Code of Hospital Slang*