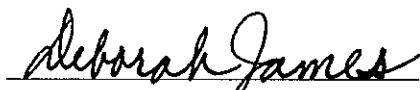


The Struggle to Survive and Thrive: Assessing the Cognitive Complexities of Trauma and Recovery in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

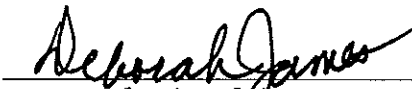
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In 1984, eighteen-year-old Elisabeth Fritzl disappeared from her small Austrian town of Amstetten. Her mother, Rosemarie, filed a missing-persons report right away. Little did she know, her husband Josef had abducted their daughter and was keeping her locked away in the basement of the family's home. A month after Elisabeth's disappearance, Josef provided the police with a letter that he had forced Elisabeth to write in captivity. The letter, postmarked a city almost a hundred miles east of Amstetten, stated that she was tired of living with her family and was staying with a friend. It also warned her parents not to look for her or she would flee Austria. Elisabeth had been frequently abused by her father growing up and had a habit of running away from home for days at a time, so the police did not conduct a search for her.

For twenty-four years, Elisabeth endured countless abuse and torture at the hands of her father. On average, Josef would visit his daughter in the hidden cellar every three days to bring food and other supplies - all without his wife knowing. Elisabeth was raped repeatedly, which resulted in the birth of seven children. Three of the children - Lisa, Monika, and Alexander - were taken from the basement as infants to live in the family house, with Josef claiming that the three grandchildren were left on his doorstep. Three others - Kerstin, Stefan, and Felix - were allowed to remain in captivity with their mother. The seventh child, Michael, died shortly after his birth.

Elisabeth and her children were only rescued from captivity when her eldest child, Kerstin, fell unconscious and was rushed to the hospital. Elisabeth pleaded with Josef to go see her daughter and Josef eventually relented. At the hospital, Elisabeth was recognized as the girl who had disappeared almost three decades prior.

In an exclusive interview following the rescue of Elisabeth and her children, Josef Fritzl, the "sex-obsessed pensioner" told reporters that he "could have killed them all,

disposed of their bodies, and nobody would have been any the wiser” (Armstrong and Mulchrone 1). Josef Fritzl has been compared to the likes of Jekyll and Hyde who is “desperately trying to fight his dark side” (1). In 2009, he received a life sentence after pleading guilty to murder by negligence over the death of baby Michael, who was incinerated in the basement. His other charges included enslavement, incest, rape, coercion, and false imprisonment.

Two years after Elisabeth’s liberation, a novel based off of the Fritzl case thrust Elisabeth and her family back into the spotlight. Canadian-Irish author Emma Donoghue’s novel, *Room*, follows five-year-old Jack who is being held captive with his mother, “Ma” in an outbuilding by a man only referred to as “Old Nick.” Jack is a product of Old Nick’s rape of Ma shortly after she was abducted. He was born in Room and therefore knows nothing of the outside world. Jack’s character is based on Felix, the youngest of Elisabeth’s children, who was born in 2002; however, Jack and Felix share little else in common. Though Elisabeth gave birth to seven children in all, Donoghue’s narrative focuses only on Felix’s story as the youngest and most naïve.

Because of her dedication to history and research and her literary skill in several genres, Emma Donoghue is considered to be “one of the most prolific young Irish writers to emerge since the 1970s” (Bensyl 2003). Though she known for her queer literature, *Room* moves away from her usual dealings with contemporary lesbian themes and instead emphasizes the themes of psychological literature by utilizing child narration.

In a 2011 interview with *The New Yorker*, Emma Donoghue was asked about any inspiration she had for the book other than motherhood, to which she responded with

Well, yes, the headlines about the release of the Fritzl family, back in April 2008.

Within a few days I knew I wanted to write the story of a boy who would have only

that much in common with Felix Fritzl, that he'd be five and stepping into our world for the first time.

Donoghue mentioned later in the interview her fascination with confinement cases also prompted her to write *Room* (Halford, Macy. Personal interview. 2011).

Donoghue considers the difference between what Jack learns throughout his journey about life outside of Room and what readers learn through Jack about the pair's desperate circumstances. Through depth of tragedy and the various elements that allow Jack to flourish but also inhibit his healthy growth, *Room* lends itself to various experimental readings that focus on the process of healing. Jack's wide-eyed innocence and curiosity about the outside world he knows nothing about affects his emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The novel's various characteristics of psychological literature allow for fair comparison to texts of similar topics.

As Jack navigates only metaphorically through the many challenges the situation presents him with, he experiences a myriad of different feelings and emotions, particularly fear and freedom. Further, Jack learns how family acts as a social construct in even the most antisocial situations. A five-year-old's stream of consciousness is what keeps the novel interesting. Jack's wide-eyed innocence and curiosity brings a freshness to the story that would otherwise be missing if written from Ma's point of view. Through Jack's use of language, readers are given a glimpse of the horrors of the world in a different way. Documenting such a terrible act through the voice of a child shows the potential the world possesses to become a better place. Without Jack, his circumstances would read just like any other true crime story broadcast on television and in the news. Ma's abduction represents many characteristics of a typical hostage situation, as Old Nick

provides her and Jack with enough food for them to survive, but he also sexually abuses her on a regular basis.

Readers aren't given much insight into Old Nick's life. The only information Donoghue provides her audience with is that he abducted Ma when she was nineteen by luring her to his truck saying his dog was sick. There was no dog. Shortly after she was confined to Room, she tried and failed to escape: "[...] I tried to get out, I tried everything. I stood on tiptoe on the table for days scraping around the skylight, I broke all my nails. I threw everything I could think of at it, but the mesh is so strong, I never even managed to crack the glass" (Donoghue 118).

Jack is impressed by Ma's strength and courage, but even as he comes up with ideas from cartoons on how to get out of Room, he still doesn't understand the severity of the situation. Being trapped in such a small space, or trapped in general, is likely to make a person go to extreme measures, which Ma eventually does: "I knew my only chance was to make him give me the code. So I pressed the knife against his throat" (121).

Another example of Jack's fresh point of view is demonstrated in his attitude toward Old Nick. Technically speaking, Old Nick is a part of Jack's family: he's his father. His real name is never revealed, but Jack calls him Old Nick because of something he saw on TV: "I didn't even know the name for him till I saw a cartoon about a guy that comes in the night called Old Nick. I call the real one that because he comes in the night, but he doesn't look like the TV guy with a beard and horns and stuff" (14). In short, Jack is calling his father the devil. Whether Old Nick is the embodiment of evil or not, he is still Jack's father. Like a traditional father would, Old Nick "brings groceries and Sundaytreat" (22), but his violent history and behavior toward Ma puts this otherwise good deed in a bad light.

Though Old Nick can be viewed as the antagonist of the novel, he has his own fears about what he has done. Ma and Jack have curry for dinner one night and when Old Nick comes for his nightly visit, he complains about the smell. Ma asks for a fan, “just a little one,” but Old Nick refuses: “Let’s start all the neighbors wondering why I’m cooking up something spicy in my workshop” (85). Consequently, “childcare officials visited the Fritzl at least twenty-one times” but Elisabeth and her children remained hidden away in the soundproof room beneath the house (Randall 3).

Additionally, because Ma does not acknowledge Old Nick as Jack’s father, she is ultimately considered a single mother. Even after they are rescued from Room and return to the family, Ma still has no financial assistance from Old Nick, nor is he helping raise Jack. Social class becomes a significant factor once Ma and Jack return to society, because “it not only affects physical health but also influences a mother’s assessment of the severity of symptoms and constraints her decisions concerning appropriate illness behavior” (Angel and Worobey 39). For a five-year-old that has never even seen the sunshine, Jack adjusts beautifully to his new surroundings, but Ma struggles to re-adjust to her life before she was abducted.

Because of Ma’s relationship with Old Nick, Jack has a difficult time understanding the complexities of a family and how one different from his operates. When Ma tells him “I came down and I was a kid like you, I lived with my mother and father,” Jack finds it puzzling that his mother also had a mother (103). He thought his only family was Ma and her only family was him, so learning that he has family beyond Ma is weird for him. As the novel progresses, Jack continues to learn how much he doesn’t know about the world that is so much larger than himself.

Old Nick's treatment of Ma instills an unimaginable fear in both her and Jack. While Jack's point of view lessens the shock and horror of Ma's situation, it's still alarming from an adult's perspective. Ma must come to terms with the fact that Old Nick will likely leave them to die and there is always a cloud of terror and unease that goes along with the concept of death. One would think that in a place as small as Room, there would be less to be afraid of than there is in the outside world; however, this isn't the case. There is plenty for Jack to be afraid of, like germs. "Remember not to nibble your finger, germs could sneak in the hole," Ma tells Jack about his habit of putting his hands in his mouth. "Germs could make you die" (4). Being confined to an 11x11 shed doesn't necessarily mean that Ma and Jack are protected from disease and sickness. Her comment makes Jack unreasonably scared of germs, but it also comes from a place of fear. Jack is the only person she has and she has to be extremely careful as to not get him sick since they don't have any access to medical care.

Ma does an excellent job of hiding her fears because Jack thinks "Nothing makes Ma scared. Except Old Nick maybe. Mostly she calls him just him [...]" (14). She is terrified of Old Nick for good reason, but he is also the only one she can rely on for survival. He brings Ma and Jack the bare necessities they need to survive, but he physically abuses and rapes her several times a week, during which Jack is confined to Wardrobe. He doesn't understand exactly what's going on, but he knows that when Old Nick comes he needs to make himself scarce.

The fear that Old Nick has imparted on Ma, Ma has imparted onto Jack. He thinks "Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer" (22). She has made sure to scare him into being safe because she doesn't want to lose him, especially in a horrible way such as a fire: "If the rings [of the stovetop] ever go against something like a dish towel or our

clothes even, flames would run all over with orange tongues and burn Room to ashes with us coughing and choking and screaming with the worst pain ever” (25). In his own way, Jack is learning what to do and what not to do if he and Ma ever get out of Room.

In the 2015 novel *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression*, author Laurie Vickroy reassesses trauma in the literary world (examining narratives) in the context of psychological, literary, and cultural criticism. She also is developing a thesis about how trauma is represented in literature, particularly fiction and creative nonfiction. By comparing individual traumas and social forces of injustice, objectification, and oppression, Vickroy is able to move past Freudian psychoanalysis. Both Ma and Jack experience their own individual traumas, specifically the neglect they endure from Old Nick, as they deal with their circumstances differently, but are both exposed to social norms outside of Room that they wouldn't have necessarily encountered while being held captive. The oppression they face in their situation makes their abrupt transition even more difficult for them to grasp.

Further, the link between literature and psychoanalysis as explained by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan is presented in Esther Rashkin's 2014 book *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative*. Exploring the ramifications of the psychoanalytic theory of the phantom for narrative literature allows Rashkin to focus on the effects of family secrets. Once outside of Room, Jack's grandmother immediately takes a liking to her grandson, but Jack's grandfather struggles to do the same. He sees Jack only as the product of his daughter's rape and violation. He never outwardly expresses his concerns about Jack's origins, but Ma and Jack's grandmother notice his distant behavior. Ma doesn't want Jack to feel unloved or unwanted because how he came into the world is no fault of his own, and she makes sure to explain that to Jack's grandfather.



Journalist Janet Maslin, in her article “A Captive’s View of Life and He’s Five,” examines how Room is “a place of such warmth, fun, intimacy, and soothing routine” (1) for Jack, but is a literal prison for Ma. Because Jack has never been outside of Room, it’s all he knows, but Ma struggles to explain to him that there is so much more in the outside world. Maslin also raises the question of how the novel would progress if Jack and Ma were never rescued from Room. She writes “If *Room* remained purely claustrophobic throughout, Ms. Donoghue and her reader might tire of Jack’s version of events, not to mention Jack’s bubbly cheer” (1). Jack’s escape from Room is the “dramatic turning point” in the novel and Maslin suggests that the story would otherwise remain flat. The characters of Ma and Jack remain unpredictable to garner a sense of suspicion and hope for readers.

Maslin makes a point to initiate the idea of Ma breastfeeding Jack as “eyebrow raising” (2). Though Jack is far past the age at which mothers traditionally stop breastfeeding, Jack maintains a special connection with his mother that otherwise may not be possible. Jack’s sheltered life has done little to prepare him for the “cavalcade of new experiences” (2) outside of Room. Adjusting to his new life proves easier for Jack than Ma readjusting to her old one. Jack continues to make giant steps toward recovery and absorbs new ideas and experiences like a sponge. Maslin reasons that writing the novel entirely in Jack’s point-of-view was risky for Donoghue, because anything that happens to Ma is “filtered through his fear, love, and curiosity about her” (2). Readers are given no direct insight into Ma’s thoughts or feelings, but her actions throughout the novel reveal the reality of what’s going on inside her head.

Ma loves Jack unconditionally, but it is not uncommon for readers to wonder how Ma feels about him being the product of her rape. Author Padmasayee Papineni explores

the psychological aspects of conceiving a child from rape, writing “Described as the silent and hidden emotion, shame is perhaps one of the most pervasive reactions to conceiving a child from rape” (1). Still, Ma’s circumstances are different, as she does not have to worry about the social context of Jack’s origins until they are rescued and returned to her parents. Jack’s grandmother welcomes him with open arms, but his grandfather struggles to see Jack as anything other than a product of his daughter’s rape. What Papineni calls “rejection by the family” is common among cases of children conceived from rape (1).

Many women have feelings of rejection toward their child conceived from rape, as one Congolese woman felt uncomfortable around her son until she finally realized that they both were innocent victims. Ma never shows anything but love and adoration for Jack and, considering she gave birth to him at such a young age and under unimaginable circumstances, is remarkable. Jack’s fear of abandonment by Ma may stem from the psychological consequences he experiences in Room. A study conducted via interviews with children conceived from rape revealed that their relationship with their mothers were traumatic, surely because they reminded their mothers of the horrors of rape. Ma, however, sees Jack as the bright light in her otherwise shadowy world and does not consider Old Nick Jack’s father.

Jack’s determined-to-learn nature and fascination with life is what keeps his mother going. Their mother-son bond is solid and may demonstrate some characteristics of the Oedipal complex. “You look like me,” she tells him as the two of them stand in front of the mirror in Room. “I guess it’s because you’re made of me, like my spit is. Same brown eyes, same big mouth, same pointy chin...” (8). Ma communicates to Jack what she means by explaining DNA and genetics in terms that a five-year-old can easily understand. Since Jack cannot go to school, Ma must fulfill the role of teacher to ensure he is growing

developmentally. Room has deprived Jack of exercising his social skills, something that is common among children in abduction cases. This concept of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills is crucial for school-age children.

According to an article by The Future of Children, “Young children who enter school without sufficient social and emotional learning skills may have a hard time learning” (McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt, and Duncan 33). The quartet of psychologists conducted a study that examined the theory and science behind early childhood SEL interventions. While most of the interventions were effective and promising, some cases did not produce positive results. Jack is incredibly precocious for his age, so it would be interesting to include him in a study such as this. Yet Jack may be disadvantaged because although he has had no formal schooling, neither has he had any practice using his social skills with anyone other than Ma.

Over the course of Ma’s captivity, she has learned to negotiate with Old Nick in order to get the things she needs – like vitamins for Jack and birth control for herself. Criminal psychologist Gordon James Knowles writes that

Hostage negotiations revolve around communication skills. Specifically, hostage negotiations are a highly specialized set of crisis communication skills designed to reduce risks and increase options for successful outcomes in hostage situations. Unfortunately, very few negotiators are taught advanced communication techniques that are designed to influence others and increase compliance (18).

Ma and Jack’s chance at freedom doesn’t appear until later on when Ma finally decides to attempt escape. The thought of impending liberation from Room is exciting to Ma and she knows that she must try – if not for her sake, then definitely for Jack’s. Jack thinks that Room is the entire world, yet Ma knows it isn’t. All Jack knows is that “[...] the wide

of the walls is the same as the wide of Floor, but [he counts] eleven feet going both ways, that means Floor is a square” (24). Attempting to escape Room will come at a cost for both Ma and Jack.

When Ma and Jack are finally freed from Room, their worries and fears about the outside world don't disappear, not completely. Ma finds herself less free than she had hoped, while Jack finds himself freer than he ever could have dreamed of. Ma has a tough time adjusting to her life before being abducted and Jack has difficulty understanding and taking in all the new and foreign things the outside world has to offer him. When Ma attends a press conference to talk about her time in captivity, she knows that she isn't a special case and that there are others who are going through and have gone through the same experiences, because “people are locked up in all sorts of ways” (295). Everyone is dying to break free of their restraints, which is why so many people feel they can relate to Ma and Jack.

The implications of Ma and Jack's journey exemplifies that a mother's love truly knows no bounds. Ma's determination to be as creative, protective, and inventive as Room allows her is what all mothers should strive to be for their children. The paradox of publicity that Ma and Jack are swept up into may have been overwhelming for the pair, but discussing their struggle ultimately leads to dissipation of their fear. Ma can reunite with her family, while Jack is given all the time in the world to get to know not only Ma's family, but *his* family, too. Though Ma and Jack escape the physical constraints of Room, the psychological constraints put on them by Old Nick prove to be a larger hurdle than they ever could have imagined.

Author Lucia Lorenzi, in her article “Am I not OK?: Negotiating and Re-Defining Traumatic Experience in Emma Donoghue's *Room*,” describes Ma and Jack's uneasy

transition back into the world after their escape, writing “Donoghue’s novel gives equal attention to life during and after captivity” (1). Much of the tension, however, revolves around the complexity of their circumstances – both in captivity and following their escape and transition back in non-captive life. Jack’s transition into life outside of Room is marked by unfamiliarity. When he returns to the site of their imprisonment with Ma, his ambivalence is unique only to him. “We step in through Door and it’s all wrong. Smaller than Room and it smells weird,” he observes (413). Lorenzi argues that it may be tempting for readers to view the ending scene of the novel as a post-traumatic experience, but suggests that the major shift in narrative - Ma’s realization that Jack is their only way out of Room – complicates the fact that Jack does not experience his life or environment as fundamentally traumatizing.

Thus, Jack’s position is further dramatized by the novel’s narration style. The novel’s child narration allows its language and vocabulary to mimic Jack’s thoughts and actions. At first glance, the lettering is mundane but, upon further inspection, Jack’s interpretation of colors, values, and the strokes of the crayon he uses in his drawings paint a literally vivid picture.

Child narrators in adult fiction, such as 15-year-old Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, are often used to explore family situations because their innocence sheds a new light on issues ranging from love and grief, through culture and politics, to murder and rape. Because child narrators are unable to control the effects of their surroundings, they are trapped as observers and sometimes unwilling participants in their situation. Children have a limited perspective, but their voice can push these limits. They question what adults take for granted and take for granted what adults question. Through a child’s eyes, an adult’s view of the world shifts

and softens. Jack's lack of a typical adult vocabulary presents the literary message of the severity of his circumstances.

Some critics may argue that child narration does readers a disservice. Children are not as observant of their surroundings, meaning the reader is responsible for filling in the blanks that the child narrator has left. Yet, Jack's "child speak" can be characterized as sophisticated and articulate because of the word games Ma plays with him - like Parrot, a game of repetition, but also because of his exposure to television, and his curiosity about words he doesn't know the meaning of. From Jack's perspective, Ma is simply a constant source of knowledge and comfort; however, to readers, she is a three-dimensional character who is dealing with things not necessarily visible or easily understandable to Jack.

Throughout the novel, Jack's syntax creates suspense for the reader. It isn't until about two hundred pages into the story that the reader realizes what he means when he says "I want some" or "I have lots" - Ma still breastfeeds him. When Old Nick comes to visit and brings what Jack calls "Sundaytreat" - necessary items such as vitamins for Jack, birth control for Ma, and groceries - Ma has taught Jack to hide in Wardrobe. Jack doesn't know what's happening when "Old Nick squeaks Bed," (87) but the reader does. He knows that something is going on with Ma and Old Nick, but he also knows that it doesn't concern him. "I don't want to count the creaks," Jack admits, "But I do" (91). Despite this, Jack's thoughts remain relatively calm while he's in Wardrobe because he has accepted the situation as a normal lifestyle.

Additionally, Jack's curiosity about Outside is piqued when Old Nick brings a lollipop as a part of Sundaytreat, telling readers "I get the plastic right off and I suck and suck it, it's the sweetest thing I ever had. I wonder if this is what Outside tastes like" (96).

The lollipop is the first piece of candy Jack has ever had and this is the first time he thinks about what life would be like if he and Ma left Room. The lollipop acts as a symbol of hope for the future. What Jack doesn't realize is that Old Nick brings the lollipop for him simply because he thinks that what kids enjoy. Jack does enjoy the candy, but Ma understands the motive behind it: "It cost him maybe fifty cents," she tells Jack. "He's laughing at you" (96).

In her research article "Extremely Young and Incredibly Wise: The Function of Child Narrators in Adult Fiction," Professor Linda Steinmetz poses several questions as to why an author would choose a child narrator of his story rather than an adult, such as

- Which literary message can a child transmit that an adult fails to impart?
- At what point in time did adults start to analyze the child's individual psychology and to define young people as different from grown-ups?
- Which influence does the author and the reader's background and prior experience have on the reading process?

Using two novels with child narrators, *The Life Before Us* by Romain Gary and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, Steinmetz debates whether there is such a literary device as a stereotypical child narrator or whether all child narrators differ according to the author who created them and their literary function. On this, she concludes

If I want to figure out if there is such a literary device as a stereotypical child narrator, I need to distinguish if that device has emerged at some point in time and stayed the same, or if the child narrator has evolved over time and mirrors society's attitude toward children (13).

In Jack's case, he is the latter. Once he and Ma escape from Room and are introduced/re-introduced to the world, Jack is able to gradually adopt a more prominent social role by interacting with his grandparents. These new experiences change his view on life significantly. From this point on, only he is able to determine what he believes family identity to be and emerge as his own person - that is, one that is not influenced by his mother's opinions or actions. Nevertheless, there are gaps in his development that are visible to the reader and hinder his interaction with people outside of Room who have had the chance to develop properly.

Further, Steinmetz explains that the child's voice serves as a function that determines the reader's positive or negative perception of the narrator as a convincing child (51-52). Jack's voice allows readers to see what influences his interaction with Ma and what affects his attitude toward Old Nick. Emma Donoghue's knowledge of Felix Fritzl, however, imparts a sense of compassion for Jack. She is able to create a character the audience deeply sympathizes with because of her extensive research of the Fritzl case.

The difficulty that comes along with child narration is finding and maintaining a voice that has the ring of childhood, yet can hold the attention of adult readers. Writing this text from a child's point of view has allowed Donoghue to avoid sentimentalizing imprisonment, but also to showcase how some people manage to rise above their undesirable circumstances. By using Jack's voice to construct a commentary on the conventions of society and contrasting his experiences with that of humanity, Donoghue effectively illustrates his ever-changing relationship with Ma, his search for individuality, and his struggle to survive and thrive.



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