



**FROG MUSIC**  
**By Emma Donoghue**

**Questions for Discussion**

- 1) Discuss the title. How do frogs relate to the story?
- 2) *Frog Music* takes place during 1870s San Francisco. How does Donoghue describe the city? Discuss.
- 3) How is *Frog Music* different from other historical fiction you've read recently? Did anything surprise you about the novel?
- 4) How does Donoghue incorporate lyrics and French references into the book? What do the lyrics and references reveal about the characters and plot? How do they influence the structure and style of the book?
- 5) Discuss the role of cross-dressing in *Frog Music*. How does Jenny defy and transcend the social boundaries of 1870s San Francisco?
- 6) *Frog Music* features depictions of strong female characters. How are Jenny and Blanche similar? How are they different?
- 7) Describe the role of motherhood in *Frog Music*. How does Donoghue depict the role of motherhood during this time period and for specific characters in the book?
- 8) What roles do secondary characters play in the story? Discuss the role of Arthur. Why does Arthur find Jenny so threatening?
- 9) What taboos does Emma Donoghue address during *Frog Music*? Do any of them still exist today?
- 10) Was Blanche a likeable character? In what ways did you sympathize with her? In what ways could you not relate? In what ways does Blanche have to fight against what she wants in life versus what society expects from her? Discuss.

## Q & A WITH EMMA DONOGHUE

*What was your inspiration for Frog Music?*

I've been planning *Frog Music* for a long, long time, and I finally found a few years to write it. I think it was back in the early nineties that I picked up a fun illustrated book in some museum gift shop, Autumn Stephens's *Wild Women: Crusaders, Curmudgeons, and Completely Corsetless Ladies in the Otherwise Virtuous Victorian Era*, and read her few paragraphs about the never-quite-solved murder of frog catcher Jeanne Bonnet in San Francisco 1876. So for almost two decades I've known I wanted to write something about this case.

*When you finally sat down to write it, did anything surprise you?*

*Frog Music* surprised me by turning out to be very much the survivor's story—told entirely from the point of view of Blanche Beunon, the erotic dancer who was in that grimy saloon with Jenny when the bullets came through the window. And almost against my will, a one-line reference in a newspaper article to Blanche having a missing baby became central to the novel. Perhaps because I've spent several years now talking about Ma in *Room*—the heroic, almost saintly mother who protects her little boy—I couldn't resist the chance Blanche's story gave me to write about the ultimate bad

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mother: a selfish, promiscuous woman who farms out her baby and then mislays him. When mother love doesn't come naturally, can it come at all?

*Tell us a little more about the title. How do frogs relate to the story?*

*Frog Music* is named for the amphibians Jenny hunted for the restaurant trade, but also for her fellow French, who dominated the San Francisco entertainment scene. The whole setup does sound slightly insane, I admit. One journalist kindly alerted me to the fact that there was a hoax in my Wikipedia entry, a claim that I was writing about 'the murder of a cross-dressing frog-catcher!'—and was abashed when I told him it was true.

The music alluded to in the title leapt from background to foreground as I conducted my research. I ended up including almost thirty songs of the time, and using them to stitch together the multicultural quilt that was 1870s San Francisco.

*How is Frog Music different from your other historical fiction?*

*Frog Music* is a departure for me in several ways. It's my first historical novel set not in Britain but on the other side of the water. And it's my first mystery. I've written about crimes, but I've never before dared to attempt offering readers the pleasures I so enjoy myself when I read whodunits at their best: the tension, the fumbling, the guessing, the dread, and the final satisfaction. Perhaps it was the overwhelming response to the thriller aspects of *Room* I got from readers—some of whom e-mailed me right in the middle of reading the escape scene—that emboldened me to try my hand at a literary fiction that would really work as a crime novel, too. It's always good for writers, like muscles, to have to stretch in a new direction.

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*What literary crime novels did you use as inspiration?*

My favorite literary crime novels are those that manage to be deeply stimulating evocations of character, time, and place, as well as satisfying murder stories, without any of that sense of mechanical conventions pulling the strings of the plot that can make some genre-fiction crime tedious. I'm thinking of, say, stunners such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* or Iain Pears's *An Instance of the Fingerpost*. So my ambition in *Frog Music* was to tell the story of Jenny Bonnet's murder in a way that would also reveal it as the story of millions of immigrants, drifters, risk takers, broken families, and damaged children.

*Anything else you would like to add?*

I'd like to thank all you booksellers for the hand-selling that helped make *Room* a bestseller. Readers often have to be talked into tackling what sounds like such a grim account of an imprisoned childhood—led into the darkness, toward a faraway light. So I deeply appreciate what you do, every day, to persuade the public to take a chance on stories they may not know they're going to enjoy.

Have questions you'd like to ask Emma Donoghue? Write to her at [emma@emmadonoghue.com](mailto:emma@emmadonoghue.com).