



AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMA DONOGHUE

Article Author:

[Imogen Russell Williams](#) [1]

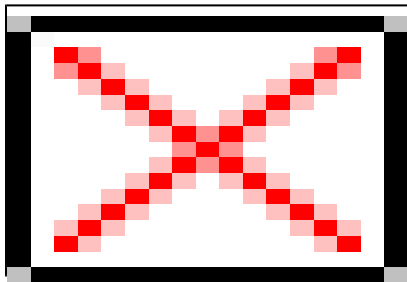
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The author of **Room** interviewed about her debut children's book.



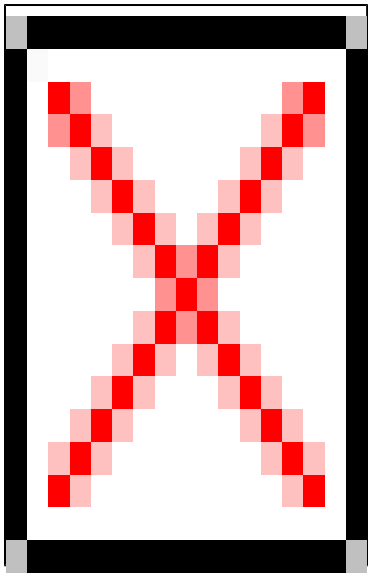
Emma Donoghue's novel **Room** made her an international bestseller. *Room* told the story of a mother and child held prisoner; her debut children's novel [The Lottery's Plus One](#) [3] is instead a celebration of independence and freedom starring a large family living happily together in a big old house. **Imogen Russell Williams** interviewed Emma about it for **Books for Keeps**.

Absent or deceased parents are a staple of classic children's literature ? in *The Lottery's Plus One* though, you have an abundance! Why did you decide to give your family four parents (and seven children!)

Well, one of the distinctive things about this family is the number of parents and the fact that they are two same-sex couples, with the friendship between all four being part of the family bond. So it would have seemed a waste of this new material to keep the parents absent! I decided instead to make the most of it - and to skip the usual division of children's novels into home sections and school sections - by having them be a homeschooling family. I like the fact that there are enough children and adults that I can put together scenes in which the kids do things solo, or with other siblings, or with different combinations of parents; I can keep mixing it up. And I try to give all the parents breaks - times when we see them heading off on travels or taking time for themselves - as well as times of irritation and crisis, because I can't stand when parents in picture books in particular are ALWAYS hovering around like domestic angels.

Financial hardship and family breakdown also feature frequently in contemporary kids' writing; but not in this story, in which there's plenty of money and all four parents are loving and present. What drew you to make a grandparent the source of conflict instead?

I liked the idea that the Lottery's are really odd, demographically, yet they succeed: it's a highly functional family. So yes, the



conflict had to come from outside, and I thought it would be interesting if they suddenly felt obliged to take in a newcomer whose culture is very different from theirs. My own mum had just been diagnosed with dementia six years ago when I got the idea for this book, so I immediately thought of a grandparent with dementia. That illness also allowed me to reflect on the issue of need/disability/difference which comes up in relation to other characters (such as their baby, Oak) too.

Your heroine, studious, conscientious nine-year-old Sumac, thinks of herself as somebody who solves problems rather than posing them ? so for her, making mistakes and struggling with shame is particularly hard. Do you see yourself in her? Where did she come from?

Oh yes, I was a goody-good, precociously verbal, eager-to-please child. But that was a long time ago, so it feels to me more as if I'm drawing on our daughter Una (now 9). Also, I wanted a character who'd be a conscientious reporter on all the details of life at Camelottery, and I thought it would be funny if her natural tendency was towards order and calm, but she's ended up in a family of chaos.

Why did you decide to set your book in Toronto?

There are a few liberal cities that would have made good homes for the Lottery's - including New York, San Francisco, London - but politically speaking, Canada felt right, partly because same-sex couples have been legally protected there for a long time and partly because of Canadians' commitment to multiculturalism and the welcoming of immigrants.

The Lottery's have an in-joke or slang phrase for almost everything. Did you draw on your own childhood experience in creating their shared language?

I believe every family has its own micro culture, so I gathered examples from so many different households, and they're often based on how children mishear words.

Did you know this would be a book for children before you started writing it? Was the process of writing it different to the process of writing your earlier books?

Oh yes, I planned this specifically as a children's series. And it was harder than my adult books, because you have to put just as much work into it - depth of theme and character, research, subtlety - but aim for a disarmingly simple storytelling style and somewhat easier vocabulary.

Did it take a lot of research to create the multi-ethnic, homeschooling, car-free world of the Lottery's? Was there anything you found particularly challenging about it?

So much research! Everything from native-plant gardening to treatments for haemophilia. But I didn't mind any of it; I saw it as a chance to live vicariously. There I sit writing my books in my small city (London Ontario) while my two kids are at school, but in my mind's eye I'm roaming around a much bigger city with a pack of seven kids, having

adventures and changing the world.

Will you return to Camelottery in future?

I've drafted the second already - **The Lottery's More Or Less** - and plan several more. This crew have a lot to say.

Imogen Russell Williams is a journalist and editorial consultant specialising in children's literature and YA.

The Lottery's Plus One [3] is published by Macmillan Children's Books, £10.99 hbk.

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