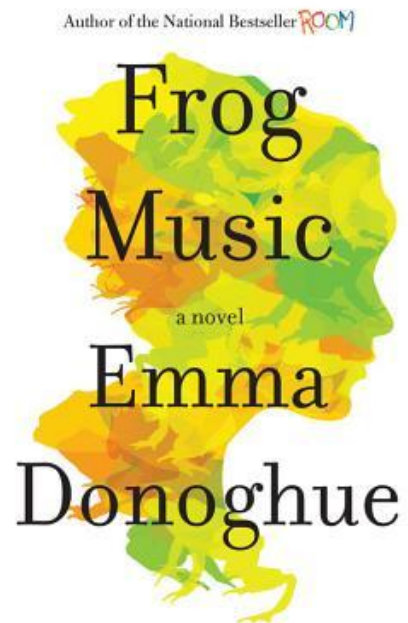




Frog Music

Emma Donoghue

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Frog Music Emma Donoghue

Summer of 1876: San Francisco is in the fierce grip of a record-breaking heat wave and a smallpox epidemic. Through the window of a railroad saloon, a young woman named Jenny Bonnet is shot dead.

The survivor, her friend Blanche Beunon, is a French burlesque dancer. Over the next three days, she will risk everything to bring Jenny's murderer to justice--if he doesn't track her down first. The story Blanche struggles to piece together is one of free-love bohemians, desperate paupers, and arrogant millionaires; of jealous men, icy women, and damaged children. It's the secret life of Jenny herself, a notorious character who breaks the law every morning by getting dressed: a charmer as slippery as the frogs she hunts.

In thrilling, cinematic style, FROG MUSIC digs up a long-forgotten, never-solved crime. Full of songs that migrated across the world, Emma Donoghue's lyrical tale of love and bloodshed among lowlifes captures the pulse of a boomtown like no other.

Frog Music Details

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Author : Emma Donoghue

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Mystery, Abandoned, Audiobook

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From Reader Review Frog Music for online ebook

Philip says

Explanation of Review to follow.

When I finished this book, I was all like:

I mean - did that SERIOUSLY just happen?

That's a girl on the Penny-Farthing bike that's about to crash into you, even though you thought it was a dude at first glance. She was just minding her own business - off to catch some of these guys:

She be like: YOU GUYS WOULD BE MIGHTY TASTY!!!!!!

At that point, I found myself again saying this:

Half the time though, I was like: why all the old-timey songs?

Then I put two and two together and remembered the title of the book.

Still, murder?

That's a pretty heavy topic for a book about musical frogs.

And that wasn't all. There was a lot of other stuff going on in here too, if you know what I mean:

And now I **HAVE** to put a winky face, because I'm not talking about Wednesday...

I don't feel like it's appropriate to post pictures of some of the other stuff that was going on in this book, maybe they'd be blocked by parent filters, but it's not worth the risk. Let me just say that day-care has come a long way.

Look, I don't want to give anything/ too much away. The book was good. Maybe a little over-hyped for me:

(Sorry that I couldn't find an animated gif for FIF's All the Hype. Seriously, why isn't there an animated gif for that yet?)

So yeah, the book was good. A little over-hyped, and maybe a little too much into the prostitution/sex/child-abuse/disease stuff. I know the 1800s can't be all unicorns and rainbows 24-7, but if you're writing speculative historical fiction, you *could* add in some, right? Actually, I guess if you're writing speculative historical-fiction, the 1860s could be all unicorns and rainbows 24-7...

That'd be a book I'd give 5 stars to. (I'd be the only one, though. All y'all'd hate it.)

*** An Explanation About This Review ***

I keep seeing these reviews around that are chock full of animated gifs - and they essentially say nothing.

And I hate them. I. Hate. Them.

But everybody seems to love them, because they're always at the top with forty-thousand likes.

I figured, this once I'd try to see if I could write a review like that: say nothing, put in a bunch of pictures I find online, and see what happens.

And I'll say this, it was fun to write. Really fun. But I don't think I'll do it again. I'm not a prostitute like Blanche. I like the feeling *ahem* of getting likes on my reviews - but I'm not stooping this low. At least not again.

And I'd really REALLY like to say something substantial about the book, but I don't think I can now. It wouldn't fit with the style of this review... Maybe I'll go read and like other reviews and leave comments on them.

Brenda says

3.5★s

Exotic dancer Blanche Beunon was executing her routine dance at the House of Mirrors with energy and dedication, while the audience cheered and screamed for her. The San Francisco heatwave of 1876 was stifling but she gave her customers everything she had. Wandering home later that night, hot and exhausted but looking forward to seeing her lover Arthur, she was suddenly knocked violently to one side – a person

dressed in men's clothing had run her over with a one-wheeled bicycle. When she furiously rounded on that person, she discovered it was a young woman who then introduced herself as Jenny Bonnet...

Blanche, along with Arthur and his companion Ernest were from Paris; they had starred in the Parisian Circus together, a tight threesome who did everything together. One year previously they had travelled to San Francisco after Arthur had injured himself and was no longer able to perform on the flying trapeze. Living in a small apartment complex in Chinatown Blanche was the money maker of the three; but she found herself hiding part of her income away from Arthur in an old boot in their bedroom, for the future, and in case it was needed.

When Jenny entered their little group, her strange ways (capturing frogs for the dining halls of the city; wearing men's clothing; riding the one-wheel bicycle everywhere) upset the routine of Blanche and the two men. Blanche found herself declaring Jenny her one and only friend and suddenly the dynamics changed. Plus the smallpox epidemic had hit the city and there were yellow flags attached to residences everywhere. With past secrets unravelling and danger where it was least expected, Blanche and Jenny left Chinatown for San Miguel Station where Jenny had friends. But suddenly and irrevocably tragedy occurred – lives would never be the same again....

Emma Donoghue has written this novel using the exact names and stories of their time, blending truth and imagination into a tale which is steeped in intrigue and mystery. Her research is amazing – at the end of the book is the information about the characters, their dates of birth and death (where known). The smallpox epidemic and massive heatwave are documented facts from that year and into the next; the lives of the poor, the prostitutes, the horrors all around are authentic.

The events in the book spanned a period of approximately one month – the story jumped backward and forward between the before and after quite abruptly and I had trouble working out the time frame on occasion. Blanche was not really a likeable young woman – she let herself be used abominably, but that would also be the lot of women back in those days. Jenny was a strong character, very likeable, quirky and fun. I have no hesitation in recommending this novel.

karen says

From the Author Q & A:

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.

and it is indeed a story about that, although it sounds a bit silly described that way, but it's not at all a silly book. it is an entirely serious book based on an unsolved murder case in san francisco in 1876, during the smallpox epidemic and a terrible heat wave. which makes it a perfect book to have read during this polar vortex situation. emma donoghue is one of those authors who does all the right things when it comes to her historical fiction. there is an author's note in which she describes all the research she did for this book, and the difficulties she faced with much of the primary materials having been destroyed in the fire and earthquake of 1906, and a later fire in 1921, plus an extensive back matter section for all the songs used in the book and their provenance and meaning, as well as a glossary with all the french terms, which was particularly helpful when it came to the slang.

the story is about two women thrown into each other's lives when one of them, jenny, runs into the other one, blanche, on her bicycle, which would have been one like this:

despite their completely different backgrounds and personalities, they form a sort of friendship, and blanche ends up bearing witness to jenny's murder, and takes it upon herself to see justice done.

blanche is a french woman brought to this country, pregnant, with her *maque* arthur and his *ami intime* ernest, all of whom have come from a background of circus and performance. the men now live off of the money she makes dancing in a burlesque theater and her... other services to men, while they swan about town in their fancy clothes, living their bohemian lifestyle. she has left her infant son in the care of others "farmed out," in the french custom, but once she learns of the conditions in which he is being kept, she takes him back home with her, even though she has no idea how to care for him, or even how to love him.

jenny is an irrepressible sort - living life on her own terms, frequently thrown into jail for daring to wear trousers in public. she is one charmed by the world - socializing with every person she encounters, picking up scraps of stories and songs wherever she goes like a musical magpie. she seems to glide through life - all bluster and bravado, and her relationship with blanche is conducted entirely on her terms, whenever she happens to show up, grinning and full of energy. she does indeed earn her crust by hunting frogs, where the trousers come in handy, and she sells these frogs to the french and chinese immigrants as the delicacies they are.

as in Visitation Street, which is not so much a mystery novel as a celebration of location and character, this book is also a celebration of location and character but also time period, although "celebration" may not be quite the right word when it comes to the time period. it is certainly an *evocation* of the period, though, with its spreading disease and racial unrest and sweltering heat and gender inequality etc..

blanche is a tough character to applaud from the comfort of our modern sensibilities. she has cast off her inconvenient child without a second thought in order to pursue her life in the sex trade, giving both her money and her body to these two men who degrade her and then go out on the town on her dime to have sex with other women, and subtextually, each other. her feelings towards jenny are both feelings of envy for her freedom and carefree attitude, but also disdain for the same. and yet the friendship flourishes in a way that is genuine and meaningful despite blanche's realization after jenny's death that she knew very little about this woman to whom she had become so attached. her treatment of her son, after she removes him from the squalor of the "nursery," is not a typical mother's unconditional love - she is almost revolted by him, although at her very core, she has a reluctant mother's love that needs him near, even as she is unfit for the task of caring for him.

the middle gets a little draggy, as blanche flounders around without direction, but even then, the description of the city is so vividly rendered in these parts, it doesn't ruin the overall novel, it just makes the pacing a little uneven.

again, this novel is based on an unsolved murder. donoghue offers what she calls an "educated hunch," and from a narrative standpoint, her conclusions are justified and satisfying, but we will never know the truth of what happened, or the truth of jenny herself. even within the confines of this novel's explanation, she remains a cipher, as blanche's inquiries only lead to more questions about how much of jenny's persona was real and how much a protective contrivance.

it's a strong return to historical fiction for donoghue, and while it doesn't have the shock value "ripped from the headlines" appeal of room, it will most likely be a bestseller with book club potential.

come to my blog!

Michael says

Sleaze and sordidness behind the glitz and glamour of showbiz provides a decadent backdrop for this sexy historical whodunnit. Set amid the gaudy world of burlesque, gambling and prostitution in San Francisco's Chinatown during a heatwave and smallpox epidemic in the late 1870's, this is a story of lust, betrayal, murder and redemption that will keep the reader hooked from the very first page till the end.

Former circus performer Blanche Beunon is an exotic dancer who lures the crowds at the House of Mirrors, funding an indolent lifestyle for her lover Arthur and his resentful companion Ernest who are both former trapeze artists. She is content with her life that includes a love of booze and a seedy sex life. When Blanche literally collides with Jenny Bonnet, a spirited young woman who catches frogs and is notorious for dressing in men's clothing their lives and those around them will never be the same again.

The story explores many issues including sexuality, exploitation, racism and the plight of institutionalised children. Frog Music is more than just historical crime fiction with a great twist. It will challenge the reader to look beyond the headlines to the stories that sit in the background and is certain to garner many new fans for the bestselling author. Filled with questionable characters that are based on real people Frog Music is a gripping yarn.

Phrynne says

I really struggled with this one. The characters were unpleasant, the subject matter was frequently disgusting and the story bounced around all over the place. Plus it was written in the present tense which I always dislike. To be absolutely honest I cannot find a redeeming feature for the whole book. Sorry everyone who liked it! It just was not for me.

Diane says

This book is a mess.

I find this extra disappointing because this was one of the novels I had been looking forward to reading this summer. I had been so impressed with Donoghue's earlier book, "Room," that I wanted to read more of her work.

Now, I want to read less of it.

"Frog Music" is an attempt at historical fiction and true crime. It's set in San Francisco in the summer of 1876, and it's based on the true story of an unsolved murder. Someone killed Jenny Bonnet in a boardinghouse, and in the novel, Jenny's friend, Blanche, tries to bring the murderer to justice.

Unfortunately, the dialogue is eye-rollingly awkward. And there is so much of it! This seems to be a mistake that young writers make -- filling pages with pointless dialogue. Donoghue is not an immature writer, but she seems to have gotten carried away while playing around with the speech of the time period.

(Do you remember that great scene in the movie Amadeus, where the Emperor tells Mozart that his composition had "too many notes?" I giggled when I thought of an editor telling Donoghue that she had too many words.)

Here is an early example, from when Jenny and Blanche first meet:

"How long have you been here?" Jenny asks Blanche.

"Since the winter before last."

"So why've you stayed?"

Blanche blinks at the question. "You have no manners, miss."

"Oh, I've got some," says Jenny, "they're just not what you might call pretty. Diamond in the rough, that's me."

Blanche rolls her eyes. "And why shouldn't I have stayed, may I ask?"

"Most move on through," observes Jenny. "As if the City's just a mouth, swallowing them whole, and the rest of America's the belly where they end up."

Here is another irritating one, with Blanche and Jenny talking about the Smallpox epidemic in the city:

"I hope you've had your scratch?" she asks Jenny, suddenly wary.

"Jenny slaps her sleeve above the elbow. "Stood in line for a day, eight years back, when it hit the City last."

"I thought perhaps you'd take your chances," Blanche teases, "being so devil-may-care."

Jenny grins back. "Devil-may-care's not the same as dumb as an ox."

GAAAAAAA. MAKE IT STOP.

Aside from the poor dialogue, I found the story boring. Jenny gets shot within the first few pages, and I felt no connection to either her or Blanche. Earlier this year, I slogged through Donna Tartt's "The Goldfinch" (which is almost 800 pages!) without caring about any of the characters. I made it more than 100 pages in this novel and decided to abandon it. I've already paid my blah-blah-blah dues this year, thank you.

(After a few days of consideration, I dropped my rating from 2 stars down to 1 because I really did not like this book. Sorry, Donoghue.)

Diane says

I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway. Lacking a fire, I put it in the recycle bin. I was expecting a

story about San Francisco, a murder mystery and some historical facts not commonly known. I was not expecting to read French (sex slang mostly), or songs about drinking and child abuse (in French and English). The main character is a dancer/prostitute/circus performer. She loses all of her belongings, money and clothing several times in a few weeks. She loses her own child several times as well. Her house is sold while she is out of town for a few days. Her lover and his friend leave her. She has no street smarts or common sense. There is historical information about baby farms, juvenile detention camps, small pox epidemics, Chinese immigrants, funeral and court traditions and details of prostitutes lives. It seemed that the author couldn't decide what the main topic of the story line was.

Petra says

I found that this story had not much to do with the premise of the outline. Sure, there's a murder but it's not what this book is about. It's about Blanche; just Blanche. No matter what happened in the storyline, it became about how it affected Blanche.

I find Blanche a self-pitying, obnoxious, self-centered woman. I don't have to like the characters in a book, so this didn't play into my rating. But it got eye-rollingly annoying how much Blanche thought only of herself and how all the events are about her.....including the murder.

The premise of the murder and it's solution aren't realistic. This is a true-life unsolved murder. Emma Donoghue's story-behind-the-murder isn't realistic or interesting.

The dialogue is mostly unnecessary and deals with "chit chat" not the story.

The interspersed songs and ditties did nothing to enchant or enhance. They were page fillers. Neither Blanche nor Jenny are singers....why would they constantly be breaking into song? Sure, Jenny likes a good drinking ditty but they don't need to be peppered throughout the book.

I am curious as to what happened to the real Jenny Bonnet. We'll never know, though.

Emma Donoghue can write a good story, as seen with Room. I'm not sure what happened to this one.

I listened to the audio version of this book. The narration was fine, so it isn't the reason for my low rating. It's the story that fell apart for me.

Julie says

This book croaked!

The narrative and characters were dead, dead, dead.

Should I just check the thesaurus for synonyms for "tedious" because I might overuse the word in my review? (Actually I am afraid that if I looked up "tedious" I would probably see "Frog Music"!)

If only I had checked and seen the rather long appendix. It made far more interesting reading that the drivel presented as fictionalised history ... but sadly by then I had more than lost interest in it all.

If only women dressing as men, or burlesque dancers engaging in raunchy sex made up for a boring storyline. And making that storyline chronologically fractured did nothing to add to the mess. Either did the insipid snippets of song lyrics. Or the blathering conversations.

I love San Francisco and I love a book with a strong sense of place. Possibly the problem here was that it

was so try-hard ... it tried hard to get in so much history that it seemed like a cut-and-paste from research notes, just point-form trivia. The feeling was missing : the feeling of being there, feelings for the welfare of the characters.

Mish says

Frog Music is absolutely remarkable, well researched and thought-out novel where the reader is transported back in time to a colourful, wild bohemian lifestyle of San Francisco in 1876; during an unforgiving heat wave and the outbreak of smallpox, racial prejudice and riots against the influx of Chinese immigrant, and the damaged infants at these 'baby farms'.

And while this is all taking place, Donoghue tells us of a crime that has been committed, based on actual events.

Donoghue gives us an insight into the life and unsolved murder of Jenny Bonnet, frog catcher by trade, and well known for outspoken boisterous behaviour, and illegal attire as a cross dresser. And to the surviving woman and friend of Jenny, Blanche Beunon, an erotic dancer, performer and prostitute, who's adamant, the bullet was meant for her.

In Frog Music the plot alternates back and forth in time, as we follow a grief stricken Blanche after the murder, as she desperately tries to seek justice to expose Jenny's killer. And then it moves to the events leading up to the murder; the moment Blanche contented life is turns to disorder, how Jenny influence altered Blanche outlook in life, and the shifts in dynamics between life long friendships.

The back and forth in time is quite sudden and I've heard from a few readers that this transition created an interruption to their reading flow and have, in parts, put the reader off. Surprisingly it didn't have that effect on me, I thought the transition was quite seamless and was able to pin point exactly where and what timeframe I was in. Plus I felt it added intrigue and intensity to the plot; with Jenny's death as a reminder throughout the book, I was eager to find out at what point in time did the situation turned criminal and why.

Emma Donoghue incorporated as many facts as she can possibly could into this novel; including their real names, and their actual place of residence, work and the murder scene, and so much more – where you will find parts of her research in a summary at the end of the book called 'Afterwards' - and the rest was her perspective of what took place, based on historical records she uncovered.

I can't tell you if it's because of the factual details but these people felt so alive and genuine, so much so, I felt their confusion, grief and suffering, radiating off the pages into me. And regardless of the fact that their thoughts or actions can occasionally be cringe worthy and frustrating – especially Blanche with her naive attitude – you can't help but feel a strong bond with them.

Frog Music is atmospheric - perfect novel to read if you live or have visited San Francisco for its fascinating history and vividness - and magnificently written and intriguing novel.

Amalia Gavea says

"Care to receive a bullet through your brains" ,Jenny quipped to St.Clair, "or have you got plans for this

evening?"

First things first. I feel the need to say from the start that I loved this book. I am an avid reader of everything that is raw and gritty and realistic, especially when it comes to Historical Fiction. However, I know that this novel isn't for everyone. If one is offended by the issue of prostitution, of abuse and if (very few) graphic sex scenes may disturb you, then this isn't a suitable read for you. If you consider these themes provocative, there are plenty of historical mysteries that will suit your tastes. But if you enjoy a combination of mystery and a brave glance to the extent a woman may act to save herself and try to correct the mistakes she has committed, if you look for a faithful representation of the USA during the 1870s, then give *Frog Music* a try.

The time is 1876, the place is San Francisco. Blanche, a French young woman, is a famous burlesque dancer and an occasional night butterfly for the upper society. Following her from Paris, we have Arthur, her dandee paramour and overall gigantic leech and Ernest who is Arthur's lackey, companion in just about everything and second leech in command. Oddly enough (or maybe not...) life seems agreeable to these three Bohemians until Blanche meets Jenny, a young woman who dresses herself in men's attire and catches frogs for a living. It is precisely this encounter that causes Blanche to rethink and reevaluate her life as it is. The sad thing is that it takes a murder for her to wake up, but who's the victim and who's the perpetrator? This is something you'll have to discover yourselves, waiting until the final chapter. The depiction of the setting and the era is marvellous. Do not expect poetic language. It is not this kind of story. There is an afterword by Donoghue in which she explains the basis of her story, the actual events that inspired the novel and the way she shaped them to fit her vision.

This book is vastly different from *Room* or *The Wonder*. Donoghue structures her mystery on a true crime case that remains unsolved and offers her own version of the events. I found this work just wonderful. Not only the mystery itself - which is guaranteed to have you guessing, then altering your opinion and then guessing again - but the way she inserts the themes of motherhood and independence in the centre of the story. Besides waiting anxiously for an explanation of the crime, I wanted to see how Blanche's fate would turn out. I won't hide the fact that I cared more for her than for the discovery of the guilty party and the motive.

So motherhood and independence. What constitutes a "suitable" mother? To what extent would a woman go to claim and protect her child? And independence. Blanche believes she is free just because she earns her living by herself - regardless of the manner in which she gains the daily bread - but cannot see the leeches drinking her blood before it's too late. Jenny dares to go against the "rules" of society and is punished for that. The bottom line is that to gain independence, you'll have to sacrifice a part of yourself. It's an eternal battle where strength and honesty are required and even then it may not be enough.

Donoghue creates powerful, often disturbing, stories and populates them with characters that may not be likeable or their actions may come in direct contrast with some of our principles, but they attract our attention. It doesn't matter whether we love or hate them. Blanche gathers a lot of hatred, judging from some of the reviews I've read. I can understand why, but I disagree utterly and completely (yeah for emphatic adverbs...) She may not be sympathetic per se, she may not be as clever as we'd like to see her, but I found her to be a realistic character and truthful to the era depicted. She reaches a point when she realises the futility of her way of living and tries to salvage what is good in her. Why doesn't she deserve a second chance?

rant warning

I'll tell you why. Because there are still some people who are afraid of a woman who's comfortable with her sexuality. And these people belong to both sexes. They utter the word "promiscuity" - which belongs to a bygone era - and retain a "holier-than-thou" attitude, pointing the finger. We are readers, we're supposed to be open-minded and accepting. Judging a character within the historical context and not by today's standards is a major "rule" in Historical Fiction, and yet somehow, there is a minority (thank God) who "seems" to forget

this. Same goes with the critique on Jenny's character who is plainly brilliant and sassy and excellent. Well, of course, she needs to create a persona to live. This is the 19th century, any woman wearing trousers was arrested and put in prison.

This came out longer than expected, but there were some things I felt the need to state. As I said in the beginning, this book isn't for everyone. I can't recommend it to all readers because it isn't suitable to all. However, it should be ideal to brave souls who don't shy away from challenging, disturbing books that make us feel uncomfortable and yet remain Literature in the true meaning of the word. Think of it as a mix of Dickens, *The Crimson Petal and the White* and the brilliant TV series *Ripper Street*. Just a bit more gritty and dirty and more powerful...

Ron Charles says

Emma Donoghue has broken out of her “Room.” Four years after that bestselling story of a mother and child imprisoned in a garden shed, she’s back with a novel ravenous for space, for people, for sounds — for all the life that 5-year-old Jack never had. The millions of readers who know Donoghue only from the harrowing tale of that little boy will discover in “Frog Music” just how expansive and boisterous this Irish Canadian author can be.

“Frog Music” — her first historical novel set in America — takes us to San Francisco in the broiling summer of 1876. The shaky city is aflame with crime, disease and racial violence, fueled by grotesque extremes of wealth and poverty. Donoghue has the whole rambunctious city swarming through this book. Teeming immigrants are about to riot. Health officials have only tenuous control over a raging smallpox epidemic. The legal age for prostitution is 10, but that’s better than what goes on in the “schools” for delinquent children or on the flourishing baby market. This is Victorian London with earthquakes and good Chinese food.

Her story is based on the real-life shooting of a cocky cross-dresser who supported herself by supplying restaurants with frog legs. Donoghue notes that a journalist saw this description of the novel on Wikipedia and alerted her that someone must be playing a prank. But no. Using contemporaneous newspaper articles about Jenny Bonnet, Donoghue has created a full-throated murder mystery, spiced with song and forbidden love.

While “Room” held us with the precision of its cloistered voice, “Frog Music” entrances us with Blanche Beunon, a spirited prostitute whose life is about to be completely upended. Recently arrived from France, she’s so successful in the flesh trade that she’s already bought her own apartment building. By dancing and whoring, she brings in enough to support her dandy lover and his equally dissipated friend, both ex-acrobats and now chronic gamblers.

They might have gone on abusing Blanche’s body and generosity indefinitely, but in the opening pages, she’s run over by Jenny Bonnet riding a gigantic bicycle. “Blanche should just walk away, right now, from this gun-packing jester who’s caused her damage,” Donoghue writes, but something about the ridiculous, iconoclastic young woman delights her. “The fact is, Blanche hasn’t had so much fun with a stranger since — well, since leaving France.”

Once Donoghue lights the fuse of this tightly compressed friendship, neither the homeless cross-dresser nor the tireless burlesque dancer realizes just how explosively their lives are about to change. As soon as Jenny starts asking impertinent questions, Blanche’s maison joyeuse shatters. Suddenly, her charming lover looks like a leech, and the arrangements he’s made to have their baby taken care of on a bucolic farm in the

country sound deeply suspicious. But she can't imagine what daggers are pointed at her new, pants-wearing girlfriend.

"Frog Music" keeps us captivated because Donoghue has filled the foreground and background of this wild tale with irresistibly vivid characters. The woman who owns the dance hall where Blanche performs exchanges flesh for gold as efficiently as a modern day trader. Blanche's finely dressed lover and his inseparable friend vacillate between wheedling and menacing, carousing about town before returning home drunk to exploit their patroness together. (Yes, crossdressing isn't the only taboo stripped bare in these pages.)

And then, of course, there are the two fantastic women at the center of this bloody story: You can feel Donoghue's delight with 27-year-old Jenny, the gender-bending imp. She's quick with a joke or a jab. A friend to the downtrodden, she's a fearless provocateur who plays with her own transgressive identity for ironic effect. Best of all, she's got a song for every occasion. Some 30 different lyrics appear in the novel — all charmingly discussed in an appendix. Without ever defining herself as a lesbian, Jenny is clearly a sexual trespasser in the eyes of a culture that, tragically, is more alarmed by crossdressing than by child abuse or even murder. (One newspaper headline screams: "Woman's Mania for Wearing Male Attire Ends in Death.")

Even more fascinating, though, is Blanche, who races through this propulsive tale along two different time tracks. It's a complex but gracefully handled structure that allows us to experience her month-long friendship with Jenny and the gory panic of Jenny's murder simultaneously. In Blanche, Donoghue gives full range to a woman who has made more sacrifices than she realizes to attain success. Over the course of the novel, encouraged by needling jokes from her new friend, Blanche comes to a frightening understanding of the people she once trusted and an unsettling new perception of herself as a woman — and as a mother.

Of course, these feminist issues have always been prominent in Donoghue's fiction (and in her nonfiction — she's an illuminating literary critic with a PhD in English from Cambridge University). Fans will recall that the superhuman mom in "Room" was willing to do anything to save her child, but Blanche is a more nuanced character. This isn't a whore with a heart of gold so much as a woman with a heart of many alloys. She often hates being a mother and feels buffeted by crosscurrents of resentment toward her baby and love for him. "She can't go out," Donoghue writes, "can't have a bath, can't do anything but sit here staring at the saddest, ugliest baby in the world." How many parents have fumed with that secret frustration? "Much too late to wish this small life undone. And yet she does wish it, every time her eyes approach him."

Donoghue portrays Blanche's sexuality as similarly conflicted. She knows "the rhythmic friction between desire and disgust," and she's willing to admit to herself that she sometimes feels aroused by being "used, abased, crushed into something else." But can she still detect the difference between pleasure and exploitation, between what she wants and what others want from her? Here are many shades of grey from a writer who knows how to use all of them.

Donoghue explores these intensely personal matters even as the plot runs along like a loose cart down Filbert Street. Blanche must not only solve Jenny's murder before the killers come back for her; she must also find her sick baby before the little creature is snuffed out — all while trying to hang on to her evaporating livelihood. "It sounds like a third-rate melodrama," Blanche admits to herself, but storytelling that is this charismatic raises melodrama to first-rate historical fiction.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

The story is dark, which is usually fine with me, but it's also nasty and full of unlikable characters making stupid and cruel decisions. The narrator of the audio version uses a French accent that is annoying, but even if the book had been read perfectly, I don't think I would have finished this one.

The only character I enjoyed at all is dead.

I'll finish mildly entertaining books, and even enjoy some books that are not great, but life's too short to spend reading a book I hate. I made it about 30% through the audio version.

Rebecca McNutt says

Frog Music is a good historical work, but it seemed too short to me, and the characters felt rather detached and unrealistic.

Amanda Patterson says

What a terrible book. I'm not even sure what it was all about. I felt no connection to either the characters or the setting.

I think Blanche is supposed to be the protagonist but I couldn't really tell. She is a dancer/prostitute who was once a circus performer who loses her belongings and her child several times over a short period of time in San Francisco in 1876. Then she loses her house while she is out of town for a few days, and her abusive lover, Arthur and his friend, Ernest leave.

She meets a strange woman named Jenny Bonnet who catches frogs and dresses like a man. When Jenny is killed she tries to see that justice is done. I think this is meant to be the plot, but again, I'm not sure. The story meanders like a cut and paste history lesson interspersed with forced dialogue

If you can make sense of it, good luck. This should have been a non-fiction book about San Francisco in 1876. It is full of details about the smallpox epidemic, French songs, baby farms, and the plight of immigrants and prostitutes. It has very little to do with the genuine unsolved murder the book is supposed to be based on.

Amantha says

I actually finished this last night but I'm torn between writing a coherent review or just quietly sulking in a corner about how much I loved this book.

ETA: Phil ~~asked for~~ demanded a review so I'll give it my best shot:

I wasn't planning on enjoying this book so much. I wasn't even planning on reading it until BJ rang me right before she was supposed to relieve me for lunch and said "Did you want to read the new Emma Donoghue book?" I only vaguely remembered that she even had a new book coming out but on a whim I said, "Yeah

sure why not?" What a good impulsive decision that turned out to be.

First of all, this book is being touted as a mystery but I would be hard-pressed to categorise it as such; yes there is a murder that must be solved, but the protagonist, Blanche Beunon, is less concerned with solving the murder than she is with just simply staying alive. The real strength of this book comes with the gradual unfolding of the story. It doesn't so much as have flashbacks as it does have two timelines running simultaneously: the night of the murder and its following days, and the whole month leading up to the murder. The time shifts aren't difficult to follow as long as you can keep in mind that Friday the 15th of September was the day after the murder.

I've come to find that what I love about Donoghue's writing is her ability to build characters through other people's eyes. In *Room* we learn about the mother and everyone through the eyes of a five-year-old boy; he's not the most intellectual character but what he lacks in savvy he makes up for in intuitiveness and naive observations. In *Frog Music* we learn about Jenny (and Arthur and Earnest and the Madame, but really all I cared about by the end was Jenny) through Blanche's perspective. She's a witless, annoying character at times, but she knows what she wants and she learns, with Jenny's help, to pursue it at any cost. And then there's the mystery of Jenny herself: Blanche thinks she knows her new friend but does she really? (Spoiler alert: the answer is no.)

The other thing Donoghue does well is she knows when to be explicit but more importantly she knows when to leave things slightly obscured. Jenny and Blanche's relationship feels more ethereal, more precious because of how it is presented, as opposed to the crassness with which Blanche and Arthur's relationship is illustrated.

I mean this book basically has everything you could ever want: real life events, a murder, San Francisco during the Wild West era, French burlesque dancers, cross-dressing women, brothels, whores, and much excitement. What more could you ask for?

E(again)TA: About 2/3 of the way through the book I wrote this email to BJ with the subject line "Grrrrrrr":

I'm super ridiculously angry at *Frog Music* for being such a good book and so sad that I nearly started crying three times already and I'm super ridiculously angry at you for suggesting I read it and I'm super ridiculously angry at myself for almost passing it by as "eh it sounds okay but I've got so many other books to read."

I'm also super ridiculously angry that I'm not reading it right this very minute and I have to do this weird thing people call "work."

Signed,

Angry (Super Ridiculous)

I think that pretty much sums up my whole feelings on this book.

Madeline says

In the summer of 1876, Blanche Beunon and Jenny Bonnet are on the run. The two women - Blanche, a French burlesque dancer; and Jenny, a cross-dressing frog hunter - are hiding out at a boarding house on the

outskirts of smallpox-infested San Francisco, trying to escape Blanche's violent ex-lover. In the middle of the night, someone shoots into the women's room, and Jenny is killed. Now, Blanche is racing to solve two mysteries: who murdered Jenny Bonnet, and the secrets of Jenny's past.

It wasn't until I got to the author's afterword that I found out that Emma Donoghue based *Frog Music* on true events: a woman named Jenny Bonnet, who had previously been arrested for dressing in men's clothing, was shot dead outside San Francisco, with a burlesque dancer named Blanche as the only witness. Using court documents where Blanche and others provided testimony about Jenny and the events surrounding the murders, Donoghue attempts to recreate these historical figures as fictional characters, and present her own solution to the mystery of Jenny Bonnet's death.

So yes, you *do* eventually find out who killed her - sort of. The actual historical case remains unsolved, but I thought Donoghue's solution to the mystery was perfectly acceptable, although I don't know how much artistic license she had to take with her characters to make her ending work. Overall, this is an exciting historical mystery, and Donoghue does a great job of presenting 19th-century San Francisco as a city that feels fully researched and real.

The thing that pulled me in and kept me invested in the book was the relationship between Jenny and Blanche, so I was confused and sort of annoyed when early in the story, we're also informed that Blanche has a baby that she gave up for adoption. The Jenny angle is kind of dropped by the narrative for a little while as Blanche decides to track her baby down, and ends up trying to raise it herself. Remember, at this point I still thought the story was completely fictional, so I was sitting there thinking, *what's with the baby subplot? Can we get back to the murder mystery?* Like, if I were Emma Donoghue's editor and this was a straightforward novel, I probably would have told her to cut the baby entirely, since it distracted from Jenny's story. But Blanche's baby does ultimately come into play in the aftermath of the murder, so at least there's that.

Donoghue writes in her author's note that after the breakout success of *Room*, she was interested in trying to write a "bad mother," someone who doesn't have Ma's fierce maternal instinct and is less likeable. If this was her goal with Blanche, she's...sort of successful. Sure, Blanche doesn't want to be a mother, and she's annoyed with her baby more often than not. But eventually, just like in the wildest fantasies of pro-life fanatics, a magical switch gets flipped in Blanche's brain, and she falls in love with her baby and decides she's going to do her best to be a great mother. So, way to subvert expectations there, Donoghue.

Look, the simple truth is that not all women are meant to be mothers. I'm not going to argue that Blanche's baby was better off where she initially left it, but there are other options for her character besides "abandon child at a baby farm" and "form strong emotional bond with baby through the magical power of motherhood." But the most irritating thing about the whole baby subplot, as I've said, was that it distracted from what I'd assumed was the main point of the novel. I wanted a fictionalized retelling of two unconventional women trying to break out of their circumstances in a society intent on keeping them under control, and *Frog Music* only partially delivered.

Diane S ? says

I am so glad that Donoghue has returned to historical fiction, in this her latest offering. Based on the unsolved murder, in San Francisco during the latter part of the 1800's; the murder being that of Jenny Bonnet, a cross dressing, frog catcher with a mysterious past. She and Blanche become friends after Jenny runs into her while riding her high wheeler.

Blanche, who had come from France with her two, well one was her lover and the other his friend, has

become a dancer and prostitute for the House of Mirrors. There are many graphic sex scenes, but Blanche loves sex and never apologizes for who she is. What complicates everyone's life is that Blanche had a baby and became very ill, during this time her baby was farmed out.

There are many impeccable historical details, a heatwave that ravaged the west coast, the small pox epidemic of 1876 and of course the horrific baby farms.

The story drew me in, it was hard not to like Blanche and Jenny despite Blanche's occupation. She was a smart woman, she liked what she liked and did what she did to earn the most money that she could. Watching her change from a somewhat self-centered young woman, to falling in love with her rescued son was a brilliant feat of writing. The period songs included added to the tone that the novel conveyed. At times I felt I was there living with Blanche, though hopefully not doing what she was doing, but just to say that the setting was very vivid. I also loved that the author included a lengthy afterward, detailing who and what were real or not. Most of these characters and events were actual events.

Probably not for everyone, but I do believe that those who read this will find much to enjoy.

ARC from publisher.

Jaline says

This novel is controversial. The triggers here are graphic sex involving different groupings, and also child abuse – specifically in “baby farms” where the parents of little ones sent their babies at a cost due to various personal circumstances. The place is San Francisco, the year is 1876 and the story moves back and forth between the months of August and September, the latter being the month that Jenny Bonnet was murdered. While this book is fiction, it is based on the lives of people involved with each other during the time a real incident – Jenny's murder - occurred.

This story is told from Blanche Beunon's point of view. She meets Jenny in August and they become friends. Blanche had arrived in San Francisco some 18 months earlier with her two fellow circus performers from France: Arthur Deneve, the love of Blanche's life, and Ernest Girard who was Arthur's protégé and is now Arthur's partner in businesses unknown.

Blanche uses her physical skills to become a star performer in a dance hall, and with Arthur's knowledge and consent, she also gets paid to perform with some of the clientele in the bedroom. Blanche and Arthur had a baby boy and Blanche became very ill after he was born so Arthur made arrangements for him to live “on a farm”.

After meeting the free-wheeling Jenny, Blanche begins to see her life differently and takes steps to recover her baby. One of the first incidents in the book is the murder of Jenny, and Blanche's efforts to find the killer. This is complicated further by her desire to find and recover her baby son and it is around these two primary elements that this story revolves.

This novel is gritty, brutal in places, and demonstrates inequality between the sexes in a very immediate way. It doesn't sugar-coat any of the “wild west” flavor of the post-Gold Rush era in San Francisco. Out of necessity, the city became a cauldron of many cultures and the conflicts that rage between them overflow into hot tempers, destruction of property, and yes – even murder.

As bleak as all of this sounds, I was riveted by this book. It was so compelling that when I set it down to do something else, my mind gravitated to it like a magnet to iron. The author captures the sights, smells, people and places within "The City" with such a strong feeling of reality, I was spellbound. I recommend this to people who enjoy books that take hold of your attention and propel you along with the force of the need to know what happens next.

Betsy Hetzel says

After ROOM, a book I loved, I was so excited for Ms. Donoghue's next book FROG MUSIC but.... now that I've read it, I simply do not understand how/why this book got positive reviews; in my opinion, it was just awful!

The beginning was confusing as it was difficult to know what action was happening when/where; was I reading about pre-murder or post-murder?

The characters were also awful: Blanche, the prostitute who loved her "work", and Arthur and Ernest, the parasites who lived off her and her earnings = dreadful, despicable, totally unlikeable people.

Then we had to read the awful part depicting in deplorable detail the "farms" where unwanted babies, such as Blanche and Arthur's baby P'tit, were sent and kept plus added to that we endured the very graphic details of Arthur's suffering from smallpox. I was almost sick to my stomach.

I was most disappointed in my feelings toward Jenny, the cross-dressing, frog catcher, the one character I thought that I would like. When first introduced, she provided some lighter moments to the surrounding "awfulness", and she piqued my interest with her colorful background. However, the more you learn about her, most of what she revealed were fabrications/lies later supported by her father's explanation of her troubled youth and incorrigible behavior; she was a fake. My real dislike for her came after the night that she "F...ed" (what she did was NOT making love) Blanche and the horrible, insensitive comment that she made to Blanche the day after. I was not overly distressed that she was shot.

Many reviews said "unforgettable characters"; I will be only too glad to forget this collection of misfits. I am like the child at Christmas who had such high hopes of discovering the perfect gift and received a piece of coal instead. Awful !!
