



Slammerkin

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Mary Saunders, a lower-class London schoolgirl, was born into rough cloth but hungered for lace and the trappings of a higher station than her family would ever know. In 18th-century England, Mary's shrewd instincts will get her only so far, and she despairs of the plans made for her to carve out a trade as a seamstress or a maid. Unwilling to bend to such a destiny, Mary strikes out on a painful, fateful journey all her own. Inspired by the obscure historical figure Mary Saunders, *Slammerkin* is a provocative, graphic tale and a rich feast of an historical novel. Author Emma Donoghue probes the gap between a young girl's quest for freedom and a better life and the shackles that society imposes on her. "Never give up your liberty."

Slammerkin Details

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Author : Emma Donoghue

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From Reader Review Slammerkin for online ebook

Sarah says

Most depressing book EVER! Considering that I am currently reading Everything Is Illuminated and We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families right now, and I picked this book up because I apparently was an idiot and thought it would be relief from those two books ... well, consider my idiocy, please. Not a wise move on my part.

Depressing, but amazingly written. One of the best books I've read in a long while. As dreadful as some of the characters are, they are all engaging. Beautiful array of female characters, who all show different aspects of being a woman in 18th-century society. You could definitely tell that the author had done her research, from everything to clothing to food to society to architecture. Considering the research fail I usually encounter, this book was one long session of me saying YES!

I wanted, wanted, wanted Mary to have a happy ending, to reform herself and marry Daffy, but she didn't. She failed pretty spectacularly at the whole reform thing, though I wonder if she were even capable of it. Or even if she would have been successful at being a wife, considering she was barren, though I imagine that Daffy would have grown to accept that after a time. This book is just a slow ebbing of Mary's innocence. You think she lost it entirely when her mother threw her out of the house, but she kept finding new ways to build up hope and then destroy it. Simultaneously naive and worldly, really.

Loved it. From cover to cover.

Maya Rock says

A slammerkin, as is noted on the cover is a loose dress, a loose woman. I love this book so much that I actually couldn't bear to read the end the first time around. Gender and poverty is really well explored. I love the way the main character becomes a prostitute--she wants to buy a ribbon, she can't afford it, so she agrees to kiss this peddler of ribbons and ends up sort of getting raped (that word just seems so harsh even though it's exactly what happened.) Everything is just perfect--that it's only a ribbon, that she only agrees to the kiss and then of course that the need for material things continues, and the question looming over all of it--why is there such income disparity that she can't get these things, has very few avenues to get them. All of this is done in such a way that you see she does have alternatives and basically does appreciate the finer things a little much. Also Emma Donoghue is an excellent stylist.

My one caveat that I have with all of Donoghue's books is that she seems incapable of depicting heterosexual relationships in a positive light and it's always the homosexual ones that seem the most natural and real. But given the way women were treated at the time--well, it just seems like it would be hard to have a positive relationship with a man because they...I'm having too much trouble finishing this sentence, I'll cut it off here.

Karen says

Slammerkin is inspired by fragments of a real life story from 18th-century newspapers.

We follow young Mary Saunders who falls , for the love of a ribbon, into prostitution and ultimate disaster... I loved how Emma Donoghue describes life on the streets in London 1760 for a young prostitute. We follow her to the Magdalen Hospital for reformed prostitutes and then to the quiet country town of Monmouth in Wales. Fans of Sarah Waters work and Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* will love this story.

Ted says

more knowledge -> altered opinion -> explanation & new rating

Since I wrote this review almost four years ago, I've learned more about the author, Emma Donoghue. I've learned that she's won or been nominated for several prizes, and that her historical fiction has tended to be centered around the different ways that in past times women were perceived; the pretty limited choices that women often had; and the real stories of certain women that became rather sensational in their own time – or perhaps *scandalous* would be a better word?

Knowing these and other bits about Donoghue has caused me to think that I may have been somewhat dismissive of this book, and the author, those four years ago. So (and I'm *sure* this will *thrill* Ms. Donoghue) I'm raising my rating for the book to a four. I hope to try at least one of her other books, possibly *Room* as suggested in a comment below.

Original review, with small alterations underlined -> (view spoiler)

Faye says

[to the point I didn't even know Mary Saunders was a real person (hide spoiler)]

Stacey says

I honestly hate this book. I had thought I would like it as I generally like historical novels but was very disappointed after reading it. Maybe I just couldn't appreciate it because I despised the protagonist who seemed to have no sympathy, empathy, hopes, dreams, hobbies or show any emotions really (aside from prostitution, expensive fashion, lying and destroying families). Throughout the story Mary is continuously being given to, even in the beginning she didn't have too bad of a life but continued to make things worse for herself without any thought. Not once did she show any shred of common sense and continuously proved to me what a moron she was. I kept with the story because I thought there is no way the story can continue like this, but it did. Then I had to actually do a project for my grade 11 english class on this terrible book. The book was well written so I guess the one star I'm forced to give this because of the website format can be given towards that, but I really don't think its worth the star.

Diane says

Must start out by saying this is the second book I've read by Emma Donoghue, and I think she is a brilliant writer.

Slammerkin was one of the darkest and saddest books I have read. The book covers 3 years in the life of Mary Saunders, and takes place in the mid 1700's in London and, primarily, Monmouth. It should also be noted that according the author's note, it is based on a real person.

Mary's home in London is one of poverty; when she finds herself pregnant and disowned by her mother and step-father early on in the story, she turns to a life of prostitution where she finds she can make money. Mary is obsessed with money and finery, determined not to live the life her mother leads. She gets into serious trouble and is hunted by a pimp which leads her to Monmouth to escape him; there her plan is to meet her mother's best friend, Mrs. Jones, and concocts a lie so that Mrs. Jones takes her into her family.

What's saddest about this book in my opinion is that Mary did love the life she had with Mrs. Jones and her family; it was the first time she really had a sense of family. BUT the story and Mary unravel.....and the story turns to one of despair and crushing sadness.

The reason for my 3 star rating is because I think the story could have been told just as effectively in a shorter version; it encompassed only 3 years, yet it was close to 400 pages. It would have been a 4 star for me easily if the story were edited down. Also, some of the sex scenes were described way too graphic for my tastes, a couple of them made my skin crawl.

Some classic lines of prose in here:

"Grief was a pricey business."

"For all the books in his possession, he still failed to read the stories written plain as day in the faces of the people around him."

Erin says

It's strange that when you don't like a book you can come up with a lot of reasons why, yet when I love one I just say "Fantastic. Read it." This book had a lot of ingredients for me to love, but it just fell completely flat. I felt absolutely nothing for the main character, Mary. I think that was the crux of the problem. She is just a psychopath. I mean at least give me a better reason for her to willingly give into that ribbon peddler at age 14 than she just likes colorful hair bows. What? Come on. Skip this one and read *Room* by Donoghue instead.

Melanie says

I never leave the house without a red ribbon.

Mary Saunders, the focus of *Slammerkin*, is thrown out of her house after being raped for her desire for a red ribbon.

Does the red ribbon establish a kinship between Mary and me? Perhaps. Lacking a common desire or situation, the reader may have difficulty opening herself to a character – in my case, the relationship between a middle-aged librarian and a doomed teenaged prostitute.

Slammerkin places a very young woman in a desperately poor household, where she is neither loved nor consulted about how her life will unfold.

All evidence points to a miserable and colorless continuation of her mother's life of poverty, drudgery, and subjugation that was sealed when her father was killed in a misguided protest by men who believed that they were going to lose, literally lose, eleven days of their lives when the government changed to the Gregorian calendar in 1752 -that they would lose time.

I was fascinated by the subjective inconstancy of Mary's perception of time. In her mother's house, time is nearly a solid mass, changing only by suffering and the family's heartless response to Mary's pregnancy. This response, a product of the times, is doled out without mercy.

How could the family understand the depth of Mary's need to escape the faded beige of their lives, or the magical hope symbolized by that red ribbon? And yet, how could a mother cast out her raped, pregnant daughter?

(As I write, I realize that Mary's mother is the only truly unforgivable character in the book. Perhaps my modern-time sensibility intrudes. All of the subsequent damage and tragedy that defined Mary's brief time, and all of the bitter focus on the actual material that she craved in this world, began with this primal betrayal. If she was not loved for what was within, she could, at least, adorn herself with the transitory beauty of clothes.)

Time, and the times, were different when Mary fled to London. London was fast-paced, and the woman who accepted her into the sisterhood of prostitutes were fast. Doll's love and practical guidance showed Mary that society can tolerate – even require – actions and beliefs far larger than she had ever imagined. Through prostitution, Mary acquired financial independence and freedom to see some of the wonders of her modern world. Like the fireworks over London, she and her sisters of the night were brief flashes of beauty, dressed in their colorful slammerkins (loose dresses) and masked behind their paint.

Mary's sudden need to escape a street thug impelled her to Magdalene Hospital, a residence founded to purge the evil from the street-wise women. Time was suspended there, with silence, blandness, and time to think without fearing starvation or death in the freezing streets. With Doll's death, Mary realizes that she has to leave London, and her retreat ends in a desperate flight from the sanctuary to the town where her mother had grown up. Glimpses of the possibilities there almost melt her cynicism, but her nature has been formed, and she can not escape.

This novel is based, loosely, on the actual life of a Mary Saunders who was executed for murder in 1764. From the beginning of the novel, when Mary is 13, to her death by hanging at age 16, Mary passes through more lifetimes than many experience in ten times the years.

How many such lifetimes can a child endure? For Mary is a child, and my working-class perception of childhood makes me ache for this young girl, whose only transgression was the love of a piece of red ribbon.

How does the red ribbon bind me to Mary's life? For both the 18th -century child and the 21st century woman, the red ribbon symbolizes hope. Mary's hope for a better life is destroyed, but the hopes of my Eastern European Jewish ancestors for the children who would be born in the new world, and would escape the Evil Eye of the old, have been realized. After reading *Slammerkin*, I realize anew

that I am, indeed, blessed.

Xysea says

Well, from all the books I've read about this time period, it has become alarmingly clear that a woman such as myself would not have existed back then.

Women were allowed only a few scripted roles, one of which was prostitute. For any woman who didn't find the confines of holy matrimony a sacrifice worth making, there was always the stree whore, the slammerkin, the dress lodger, the bar wench or the mistress. All were examples of the same thing; a woman who exchanged sexual relations for money and/or power (of a sort).

Most woman who chose door #2 often made bad ends; the heroine in this novel (or is that anti-heroine?) is no different. Probably some long hold-over (hangover?) from morality tales of the past. Like the Hayes Code for movies, if you will. A woman who sells herself for money can't possibly end up well off and comfortable, because that would promote such a thing, right? Right??

Other than that amount of predictability, this is a better-than-decent read. It flows pretty well, and our heroines adventures fly fairly high until the inevitable denouement.

You do care about the characters, for the most part. Though, not deeply. The comeuppance she receives doesn't encite schaudenfreude, rather a terse shake of the head - tsk, tsk.

Fans of historical novels, however, will likely enjoy it.

Suzanne says

“Clothes outlived people, she knew that. Clothes were more of a sure thing.”

“Slammerkin” refers to both a loose woman and a loose gown, and the sartorial is a constant motif in this story about a teen-aged prostitute named Mary Saunders in London and Monmouth, a Welsh border town, in the 1760s. There was an actual person of this name, but Emma Donoghue had only a very few sketchy facts from which she created this moving fiction that effectively illustrates that, in the mid-18th century anyway, life was short and brutal, and then you died. The journey was especially harsh if you didn't have any money, and for women, it was even more harrowing due to the paucity of options.

Donoghue's Mary has a grim-faced mother who works as a low-paid sewer of piece work, the bottom of the seamstress barrel. Drabness and drudgery are something the 14-year-old Mary abhors and she's sure she's meant for finer things. She wants color in her life, freedom from the work that's making her mother prematurely old, and a future that is better than the dreary existence she sees all around her. Dream on, little Mary, dream on.

Her path is chosen by fate when she becomes covetous of a pretty red ribbon, is molested by the ribbon vendor, becomes pregnant, and is thrown out on the streets by her hard-working, pious mother. After a gang rape leaves her close to death, she is taken in by a local whore who shelters her and trains in the tricks of the

trade. Despite the hardships of this life, she still finds it suits her better than the more respectable but constricting, back-breaking, and soul-crushing alternatives open to her. It allows her to attain her most important desire, which is her liberty. She also learns that, out in the world, “clothes make the woman” and that “clothes are the greatest lie ever told.” Her appearance is a means to getting what she wants. Not only does she want to look pretty – what girl doesn’t?—but there is a practical aspect too. It keeps her from falling even further socially and economically, into the kind of destitution that means rapid death by starvation in a freezing alley or being murdered by someone even more desperate. And her realization that appearances can be deceiving reinforces her belief that the better-dressed are not necessarily superior to her, further strengthening her desire for social mobility.

There is much description throughout the book of clothing, fabrics, and women’s accessories which are integral to the story, but that might be off-putting to some readers (read: “men”). But this emphasis on apparel and fashion all ties in with Mary’s need for some beauty in her world and with her conviction that a certain appearance is a survival technique.

Concern about survival is at the core of Mary’s motivations and her capacity for caring about others or her actions’ effects on them is sorely limited, understandable given her youth and her small experience with anything resembling trusting or nurturing relationships. Nor is she temperamentally suited to the resignation displayed by so many working class types she has contact with, such as her mother, or a mother-substitute later in the story when she takes temporary shelter at the home of a family friend. Their philosophy is, where you are is where you’re supposed to be; it doesn’t occur to them to question or try to change their lot. They keep their heads down and spend their grueling days being grateful it isn’t even worse. At her mother’s old friend’s home Mary manages to fake a life as a respectable servant girl / seamstress apprentice for a while, learning more about sewing and fashion that she hopes to use to elevate herself later, daydreaming, as girls will, about a glamorous life. Getting an education about better quality clothing stokes her desires for even finer things, without getting her any closer to a real means of attaining them.

Mary yearns for freedom, class mobility and beauty. For life to be nothing but servitude, under the control of other for bare sustenance, and daily bleakness without hope is not something her young and spirited but rather cold heart can ever come to terms with. And in that time and place, this drive rebounds on her to a world of hurt. Mary’s narcissistic character might not be an admirable one, but I did feel some compassion for this girl, slightly more than a child, who hardly stood a chance in these circumstances, and who had few opportunities to develop close emotional connections or a moral compass. There was a point where a couple of tenuous threads connecting her with others began to be spun, but in the end they are too thin to withstand the events that befall her and her own weaknesses, ambition, and restlessness. Mary at 14 and 15 doesn’t have the maturity to develop any view other than that which centers on her immediate wants and needs and fears. It is not a happy story, but a well-told one.

In spite of the potential for this to be a depressing story, I did not find it so, although parts of it were sad. Donoghue manages to weave a compelling tale about distressing situations in an engaging way, just as she did in *Room*. The details of this world are colorful and vividly drawn, from the symptoms of the diseases the whores were prone to, to the sumptuous embroidered fabrics worn by the well-to-do, to the customs at seasonal festivals and funerals, to all the family fun to be had at public executions, with their picnicking and rope-bit souvenirs.

Recommended for fans of historical fiction.

Doug Bradshaw says

I had to read the Goodreads meaning of each of the stars. One star means "didn't like it." If there were different categories of ratings such as "rate the author's writing skill" I could have given it a four or a five. She is an excellent writer and there was a lot of excellent research and history incorporated into the story which we find on the last page was loosely based on a real incident. It was a Dickensian story but without any redemption. One of my favorite words is lugubrious and look for places to use it. This is truly a lugubrious tale and I have to wonder if the story needed to be told. Wouldn't it be much better to tell the story of a young abused child of 14 years pushed out into the streets and treated kindly by a prostitute and then who becomes a prostitute to make ends meet who then finds her way out of that pit and becomes successful? But this isn't that story.

I'm not going to tell the story except to say, there isn't one truly good thing that happens to any character in the book and almost every person in the book was somewhat messed up. There were no happy or good things going on ever in the book and every character had some kind of evil or misguided by religious thinking motive behind their actions. The somewhat likable "Doll" the older hooker who took Mary in may be a bit of an exception to this and I do think she had sex for fun sometimes, but that's about the only slightly fun thing or good thing I can think of in the book.

I'm not a prude like, say Erin, but I also found the whole first section of the book to be stinky, ugly, creepy and yucky (I'm using PG13 descriptions unlike the book) with a 14 year old girl having various sexual encounters with creepy men. I wish they'd've edited her in at an older age and that there were at least one or two decent guys, maybe handsome sailors or something, that were good to her.

Read this book if you want a depressing and sad story of an abused and unloved young girl who had a crappy existence.

Karla says

This is irresistible transporting fiction. Emma Donoghue writes a story inspired by few surviving facts of the real Mary Saunder's life. At 14 she is thrust into the London streets by her mother and thought of as worthless trash. Mary meets so many bawdy characters like Dall one tuff talking street guide, who teaches her how to make money in the oldest profession known for survival. Mary's desire of vanity holds no bounds although she is given many chances for a fresh life she only knows one way to get what her heart desires, the luxury of fine clothes and fame. This is a book I know made me think deeply of today's lost youth who don't know how to receive love cause their heart has hardened and can't absorb it. Mary only saw the evil in others and that seemed to be her downward spiral. Some can't change the only way they know to live cause it's the only way for them. I loved this book and look forward to much more of Donoghue's intelligent and absorbing writing.

Laura Leaney says

When I was just a young thing (when was that ever possible?) I had a near obsession with England, especially the age of Austen. It was the equipment and accoutrement of the rich that particularly fascinated me. Jane Austen probably began this, but there must have been some other source that I cannot recall. Even

the poverty stricken orphans of the later Dickensian world were painted with Romance for me, because didn't some of them get found? Didn't the end turn out all right? Look at Oliver. Whatever blackness existed, I know I blocked it out.

This book makes that blackness extremely real. *Slammerkin* is a brutal look at one particular facet of the Georgian era underclass: prostitution. Donoghue's writing is luscious, but she writes in the rich imagery of rot. Like fruit gone bad. London is an explosion of color and activity, carriage wheels and powdered wigs. Within the current of its streets are the men (cullies) rutting with girls against alley walls, pimps shining with sweat, the high colour of rouge and coralled lips, the clap, the stink of sex, and dead eyes like glass. It's horrible and fascinating. A bit like opening a privy door to 1760.

The focus of the book is Mary Saunders, a courageous girl with a core of something distinctly unlikeable wedged inside her heart. Her journey begins with the craving for a bit of red ribbon. It takes her straight to hell. I didn't see too many choices for her on the way though.

What I really like about the book is the author's brilliant use of period detail. Stomachers, corsets, improvers, stays.....everything is here.

What I can't quite get over is the shallow nature of Mary Saunders. I should have felt more, but her character is too flat for my taste. Something seems missing in her - but perhaps that's the nature of psychopaths. Is she one? It's hard to tell. She is certainly hardened beyond belief, and if I'd understood more of her younger years I might have been able to glimpse the soul of her.

Linda (Miss Greedybooks) says

I am not sure I liked that they told me the ending right at the beginning.

The story was well told and characters well written. Fully thought out and motives examined.

Definitely recommend.

Monique says

Been a long time since I read a book I really liked, couldnt wait to get back to and genuinely learned something from and I got all that from this one gem..It is a dark, chilling tale of young girl whose thirst for the finer things in life lead her to the dark side as a fallen woman--but hooray prostitutes, they are the strongest, fiercest and funniest characters in the book and Doll (she reminds me of Sugar from another great book on harlots *The Crimson Petal and the White*) is my favorite but I come to actually admire Mary and how silly she is..She realizes that her body is all she has and she decides to use it to get what she wants though the honest career of sewing she was made for is open and available to her. In this book I learned three great rules : Never give up your liberty--Clothes make the woman---and Clothes are the greatest lie ever told--and honestly I plan on using these rules and applying them in 2009...I enjoyed this book, felt a little cheated at the end but only because it felt too short, contrived and not hardly fitting of the girl you grow to like despite her flaws..Sassy and dark read but thoroughly enjoyable.

Lobo says

Nie by?am przekonana, bo mam to poczucie, ?e twórczo?? Donoghue ociera si? o eksploatacj?, bior?c pod uwag?, jak bazuje na pewnych faktach na korzy?? samej autorki i jej pisania, a nie dla jakiegolwiek innej racji. Jednak?e Donoghue ma ogromny talent i powie?? napisana jest w niesamowicie wci?gaj?cy sposób, który ka?e czyta? dalej. Ostatecznie nie ?a?uj? swojej przygody z Mary Saunders.

G?ówna bohaterka jest niesamowicie antypatyczna i uwielbiam to w niej. Jej chciwo??, ambicja i poczucie, ?e spo?ecznie rojenia o podziale klasowym to mrzonki, jej buta i bezwzgl?dno?? - to wszystko sprawia?o, ?e wspaniale si? o niej czyta?o. Ka?dy moment, kiedy kwestionowa?a przeznaczone jej miejsce w spo?ecze?stwie i lekcewa?y?a pot??niejszych od siebie, podbija?a moje serce. Ostatecznie trudno powiedzie?, czy Mary jest psychopatk? czy dziewczyn? po traumatycznych prze?ciach, ale by?am w stanie j? zrozumie? i mia?am wiele empatii dla jej poczyna?. Co oznacza, ?e kiedy dosz?o do zbrodni, zdziwi?am si? tylko, dlaczego dopiero teraz.

Bardzo podoba? mi si? te? w?tek Abi, chyba najciekawszy w powie?ci, pokazuj?cy g?upot? i bezmy?lne okrucie?stwo bia?ych ludzi.

Ciekawe przedstawienie realiów ?ycia w XVIII-wiecznym Londynie, czy te? szerzej - ca?ej Anglii. Sprawdza si? jako powie?? historyczna. Definitywne warte czytania.

Francine says

I was highly disappointed by this book, especially since it received some really good reviews. The writing style was fine, and Emma Donoghue painted a fairly accurate portrait of 18th century London. (These are the only things which made me give this novel 2 stars...otherwise, it would've been a 1-star book.) I thought the narrative's main flaw lay in its heroine, Mary Saunders. To me, she was very 2-dimensional: she was vain, vapid, egotistical, wholly unapologetic (about her thoughts/feelings/actions) that she was just completely unrelatable. I found her to be very unsympathetic, and for me, that made getting through the book very difficult. Many times, as readers, we look for something within a character which can be relatable to our own lives, but the characterization of Mary Saunders was such that I just found her intolerable and insufferable. Even in the 3rd part of the novel, when she seemingly wants to try to change her ways, she still comes off as disingenuous.

Tara Chevrestit says

I read the whole thing, to my shock. In the author's defense, there was a vast and rather intriguing group of characters, but none of them were likeable. There is the bitter mother that rues the day she gave birth to a worthless girl, prostitute whose life was utterly pointless, the tailor lady that thought it ok to have a slave, the minister that was also a pimp on the side, the disloyal husband, the religious but hateful fanatic, and last, but certainly not least, an incredible spoiled brat, which is the heroine in this story. The closest I came to feeling sorry or feeling anything at all for any of these characters was the slave. Every other character in this book is a hypocrit. The jolly prostitute may be the only exception. She at least was honest about what she was and

held her up and drank and was cheerful. She did not feel the need to kill, steal, or hurt others to rise above her "station" in life. All in all, this book disgusted me. There was a little too much detail about the "cullies" (male customers) and the actual acts. However, it was interesting to get a look at the non royal life. I have read so much about the rich royal family, that it was interesting to get a feel for what went on outside the palaces in that time. Thus, I gave it two stars. However, this book is not memorable and will not enrich your life in any way.

Phil says

This book is anti-erotica. Its about a girl who is forced into prostitution by a totally heartless world (London in the eighteenth century) and who progresses in the course of the book from an innocent to the most depraved of humanity. The story wends its way from beginning to end and is interesting and readable, but it is a crabbed view of humanity, unlightened by any hope of redemption or joy. I enjoyed reading it once but its not one of those books I will seek out again.
