

Sex and scandal, Victorian style

FICTION

The Sealed Letter

By Emma Donoghue
Scribe, 367pp, \$35

Reviewed by Claire Scobie

"EVERY woman should be free to support herself by the use of whatever faculties God has given her," wrote Emily Faithfull, a pioneer of the British feminist movement in 1862. With this quotation, Irish-Canadian author Emma Donoghue opens her latest historical novel, *The Sealed Letter*, recent winner of the Lambda Literary Award for the best work of lesbian fiction. In the vein of Sarah Waters, Donoghue has become known for her best-selling bodice-ripping yarns (*Slammerkin* and *Life Mask*) set in late 18th-century Britain.

The Sealed Letter is based on a true and shocking divorce case of 1864 and the fast-paced narrative opens with Emily "Fido" Faithfull, the proud proprietor of her own printing press in London. An intelligent, modern woman, she eschews corsets and enjoys Turkish cigarettes.

Yet while Fido has gumption and counts feminist Bessie Parkes among her friends, it's clear that Fido's naivety will be her undoing. Her prim world is turned upside down by the unexpected return of a friend, Helen Jane Codrington, who is obsessed with a "scarlet-chested" army officer. Brought up in India and Italy – synonymous at that time for loose morals – the flighty Helen is seeking escape from her unhappy marriage to Admiral Henry "Harry" Codrington.

Helen has a reputation for taking "advantage of the strongest sentiments of female friendship" and, like a spider in a web, Emily finds herself entangled in her friend's reckless affair. She cannot hide her strong feelings for Helen.

Meanwhile, the buttoned-up admiral is suspicious of his wife and suspects she is having "carnal relations with a stranger". After hiring a spy, he gathers enough

evidence to divorce Helen, wanting to "cast her off like a monkey from his back".

Told from the perspectives of the three main characters – Harry, the petitioner, Helen, the respondent, and Emily, the witness – each chapter begins with a legal definition and gathers pace to reach the climactic court scenes, when Mrs Codrington is accused of committing "adultery with David Anderson and divers other persons". While there are counter-claims of rape and Emily stands accused of abetting her friend's affair, it is the mysterious "sealed letter" that threatens to be her undoing.

As the tawdry evidence comes to light, it's apparent that nobody will be left unscathed. Harry is lampooned as "a skeletal puppet of a husband". But it's the women who are dragged through the muck. At this pivotal time of the

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early feminist movement, a married Victorian woman still had no legal identity or property rights, and in a divorce case always lost custody of her children. Through the trial Helen recognises that she's "a most flawed, grubby specimen of humanity" and Fido is ostracised from the feminist movement.

Donoghue excels in her attention to period detail without overplaying the historical content. The court scenes are high-octane drama, which would not be out of place on any reality courtroom TV show. But it's her refined characterisation and the artful multiplicity of views that bring such warmth to the novel. Despite (or because of) each character's flaws, it's hard not to be touched by their plight. In a curiously modern twist, the lawyers are the victors of it all. For as Harry remarks: "It's all a game to them."



Good fortune ... Thomas Buergenthal has lived a charmed but terrifying life.
Photo: Andrew Sheargold

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so long afterwards. He writes scrupulously from a child's point of view but not in childlike prose, and inevitably there is stuff he can't remember.

While it is to some extent inevitable that the drama of his story lessens after his liberation, what remains fascinating is his intellectual development and his later work in the field of human rights law. He castigates the US for not ratifying the International Criminal Court, saying it reflects poorly on its commitment to the international rule of law, and his experiences in El Salvador tell him that the "orders are orders" defence still lingers.

"If," he wonders, "we humans can so easily wash the blood of our fellow humans from our hands, then what hope is there that future generations will be spared a repeat of the mass killings of the past?" A reasonable question.

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