Life Mask

One of the satisfactions of Emma Donoghue's masterful fourth novel, Life Mask, is the tension between the writer's contemporary interests, like lesbianism and the balance of power in marriage, and her 18th Century subject matter. Life Mask is a fictional recreation of a plausible (but unproven) love triangle between the comedic actress Eliza Farren, the sculptor Anne Damer (the niece of Horace Walpole, a fantastic minor character here), and Edward Smith-Stanley, the twelfth Earl of Derby, a Whig (liberal) politician who left his name to the horse race he founded. Like her bestseller Slammerkin, the novel spins an intricate story from the slightest of historical traces, in this case a single reference in the commonplace book of Hester (Thrale) Piozzi: a snarky four-line epigram that hints at the danger to Miss Farren's reputation in consorting with one whose name approaches Damn Her.

Readers who stay with Donoghue through the crowded and confusing early chapters of Life Mask will find a skillful, partly sympathetic portrait of English aristocracy during and after the French Revolution, a trove of period detail, and a spellbinding tale of unlikely but enduring love. --Regina Marler

My Personal Review:
Yep, I read it, then I read it again.

I am in absolute awe of this author's commitment--not only is her writing laudable, but her research is meticulous.

The book opens with one of the main characters, Eliza Farren, in a carriage as she is driven to Richmond House, marking her entrance, if not her belonging, into the highest ranking class--the aristocracy. With her, the reader is also introduced into this dissonant world of sumptuous excess and controlled exteriors, of masks, of lies, of politics, and of love.

All the while, French troubles slowly develop in the background before finally erupting into the Revolution, throwing the English aristocracy into a state of anxiety over their own security and right to title.
The author masterfully develops her multitudinous cast against this tumultuous backdrop, especially in the person of Anne Damer. Getting to know the nuanced characters is like peeking beyond their masks, a kind of literary voyeurism.

Emma Donoghue is both historian and artist, and the result is a lavish and decadent novel meant to be savored. Enjoy.

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