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"All Those Years, I Kept Him Safe"

Maternal Practice as Redemption and Resistance in Emma Donoghue's *Room*

Philosopher Sara Ruddick argues in Maternal Thinking *that maternal practice is characterized by three demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptance. "To be a mother," Ruddick argues, "is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17). The first duty of mothers is to protect and preserve their children: "to keep safe whatever is vulnerable and valuable in a child" (80). The second demand requires mothers to nurture the child's emotional and intellectual growth. The third demand of training and social acceptability of children, Ruddick emphasizes, "is made not by children's needs but by the social groups of which a mother is a member. Social groups require that mothers shape their children's growth in 'acceptable' ways. What counts as acceptable varies enormously within and among groups and cultures" (21). The article examines how the mother in the novel* Room *performs the three demands of maternal practice in both captivity and freedom. It considers how her strategies of preservation and care—in particular keeping her son with her in Room, her close bond with her son, and her act of extended breastfeeding—are reconstructed as bad mothering upon freedom as the first strategy is read as maternal selfishness and the second two are read as violations of social acceptability, particularly for a male child. The article argues that only when the mother reclaims the maternal authenticity of her maternal practice in Room can she and her son reclaim their connection and achieve healing.*

In a 2010 interview Emily Donoghue comments "*Room* is a universal story of parenthood and childhood, and in Jack and Ma's relationship I wanted to dramatise the full range of extraordinary emotions parents and children feel for each other: to put mothering in a weird spotlight and test it to its

limits" ("On *Room*"). In another interview, she elaborates "I tried to take the common or garden experience of parenting and just by isolating it under a spotlight, I tried to bring out the true, crazy drama of parenting" ("In Donoghue's *Room*"). The novel *Room*, to use Donoghue's words, seeks to examine "an extraordinary act of motherhood" (Ue) through what she terms "a defamiarisation of ordinary parenthood" (Crown). By using feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick's theory of maternal practice, this article will explore how Donoghue, in making the commonness of motherhood extraordinary, positions Ma's mothering as both redemptive and resistant. More specifically, the article will analyze Ma's performance of the three demands of maternal practice as theorized by Ruddick, in both captivity and freedom, and consider how her strategies of preservation and care—in particular her commitment to keep her son with her in Room, her close bond with her son and her act of extended breastfeeding—are reconstructed as bad mothering upon her escape as the first option is read as maternal selfishness and the latter two are read as violations of social acceptability, particularly for a male child. The paper argues that only when Ma reclaims what Ruddick terms the maternal authenticity of her maternal practice, is she and Jake able to reclaim their connection and achieve healing.

Sara Ruddick argues that maternal practice is characterized by three demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptance. "To be a mother," continues Ruddick, "is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17). The first duty of mothers is to protect and preserve their children: "to keep safe whatever is vulnerable and valuable in a child" (80). "Preserving the lives of children," Ruddick writes, "is the central constitutive, invariant aim of maternal practice: the commitment to achieving that aim is the constitutive maternal act" (19). "To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation," Ruddick elaborates, "does not require enthusiasm or even love; it simply means to see vulnerability and to respond to it with care rather than abuse, indifference, or flight" (19). "The demand to preserve a child's life is quickly supplemented," Ruddick continues, "by the second demand, to nurture its emotional and intellectual growth" (19). Ruddick explains:

> To foster growth … is to sponsor or nurture a child's unfolding, expanding material spirit. Children demand this nurturance because their development is complex, gradual, and subject to distinctive kinds of distortion or inhibition.… Children's emotional, cognitive, sexual, and social development is sufficiently complex to demand nurturance; this demand is an aspect of maternal work ... and it structures maternal thinking. (83)

The third demand of maternal practice is training and social acceptability of children:

> [The demand] is made not by children's needs but by the social groups of which a mother is a member. Social groups require that mothers shape their children's growth in "acceptable" ways. What counts as acceptable varies enormously within and among groups and cultures. The demand for acceptability, however, does not vary, nor does there seem to be much dissent from the belief that children cannot "naturally" develop in socially correct ways but must be "trained." I use the neutral, though somewhat harsh, term "training" to underline a mother's active aims to make her children "acceptable." Her training strategies may be persuasive, manipulative, educative, abusive, seductive, or respectful and are typically a mix of most of these. (21)

"In any mother's day," as Ruddick notes, "the demands of preservation, growth and acceptability are intertwined. Yet a reflective mother, she continues, "can separately identify each demand, partly because they are often in conflict" (23).

The demands of maternal practice—preservation, nurturance and training—are fully enacted and accomplished by Ma, despite her confinement in Room. Ma is, as Emma Donoghue remarks, "a young resourceful mother. She really civilizes and humanizes Jack; he's not a feral child. She passes on her cultural knowledge to him, from religion to tooth-brushing to rules" (Wyrick). Indeed, throughout their five years of captivity, Ma commits to the preservation, nurturance, and training of Jack. She sets time limits on television viewing (11), ensures that Jack gets physical exercise (15), and teaches him reading, spelling, and math through both play (measuring the room, cards, and games) and lessons. She also disciplines and nurtures Jack to foster his social and emotional development. In an interview when Ma is asked about Jack and his childhood in captivity, she explains: "He's just spent his first five years in a strange place, that's all. It wasn't an ordeal to Jack, it was just how things were" (236). However, it is with the first duty of protection and preservation that Ma most fervently enacts maternal practice. It was, as Ma explains later in her media interview, "all about keeping Jack safe" (233). When Ma gives birth to Jack she does not let Old Nick into Room after he refused to help when her first baby died in childbirth. With the birth of Jack, as she explains, "I was ready, this time I wanted it be just me and you" (206). For his first five years in captivity, Jack only sees Old Nick "through the slats (of the wardrobe) some nights but never all of him close up" (26). One night when Jack leaves the wardrobe not knowing Old Nick is in Room and when Old Nick, upon seeing Jack says "Hey sonny" Ma, Jack tells us, "is louder than I ever heard her

even during Scream 'Get away, get away from him!'" (74). When Jack is back in the wardrobe, he hears Ma say to Old Nick, "I can be quiet. You know how quiet I can be, so long as you leave him alone. It's all I've ever asked" (74). Later when the interviewer asks Ma "You must feel an almost pathological need—understandably—to stand guard between your son and the world?" Ma responds with a snarl "Yeah, it's called being a mother" (236). And earlier in the same interview Ma explains "All I did was I survived, and I did a pretty good job of raising Jack. A good enough job" (235). Indeed, as Ma says to Dr. Kendrick, "All those years, I kept him safe" (167).

However, the methods used by Ma in her maternal practice to provide this comfort and security to Jack are then questioned and criticized by characters in, and readers of, the novel, which include Ma's extended breastfeeding of Jack and her close relationship with him. The novel opens with Ma breastfeeding Jack on his fifth birthday, and although Ma suggests that "Maybe we could skip it once in a while, now you're five," Jack responds, "No way Jose" and "[they lie] down on the white of Duvet and [Jack has] lots" (6). Although Ma's breastfeeding of Jack has been commented on in reviews of the novel, commentators have not considered how breastfeeding in the novel functions specifically as an act of both nurturance and preservation. Ma nurses to console and calm Jack when he is distressed or troubled—when he is disturbed by the marks on Ma's neck from Old Nick (56); when he cannot fall asleep after one of Old Nick's visits (66); when he becomes upset as Ma seeks to describe the outside world (85); and when Ma explains their plan to escape and she assures him that he has the superpowers to do it (105, 109). Along with emotional nurturance, breastfeeding also aids and sustains Jack's physical wellbeing. In captivity, the nutritious foods, sunshine, and physical exercise required for a child's health are not available, nor are medicine and doctors. Indeed, Ma's extended breastfeeding, and the nutrients that it provides, has kept Jack healthy throughout his years in captivity; it is a remarkable achievement for a child to have never become ill in their first five years of life. Ma breastfeeds Jack because in captivity that is how she can fulfill the necessary work of nurturance and preservation required for her son's physical survival and emotional wellbeing. So later in the text when her mother asks "You don't mean to say you're still ----" Ma responds before the question is complete and answers, "There was no reason to stop" (215). However, following their escape, Ma's breastfeeding of Jack is seen not as a commendable strategy of emotional and physical care but as a violation of appropriate mothering. Ma initially seeks to counter and contest this interpretation of her breastfeeding. She challenges, for example, a police officer by asking the police Captain, "Is there a problem? ... Then why is she staring at us? .... I'm nursing my son, Is that OK with you, lady?" (161). Later, when the interviewer says, "You breastfed him. In fact, this may startle

some of our viewers, I understand you still do?”, Ma responds with a laugh: “In this whole story, that’s the shocking detail?” (233). For Ma, breastfeeding her son Jack was the right and appropriate thing to do, but only at the conclusion of the novel, as will be discussed below, can Ma reclaim this act of preservative love from the judgment of others. Until then, in the words of Jack, “In Outside, they don’t know about having some, it’s a secret” (161).

As Ma’s extended breastfeeding is viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility, by characters and readers alike so too is the close and intimate relationship of Ma and Jack, particularly because he is a male child. In her article, “‘Room’ is the ‘Crash’ of Feminism,” Sarah Blackwood writes “the metaphor of room/womb … tracks our culture’s rose tinted view of the mother/infant bond, while allowing readers the satisfaction of judging the perversity of that bond when it … inches into the excessive” (2). Once outside Room, Blackwood continues “Ma shrivels … because she is no longer the sole nourisher of her son [while] Jack must peel himself from a Ma who can’t stop taking baths with him” (2). Although Blackwood concedes that the novel is empathetic to the bond’s importance, she goes on to assert “that [the depiction of their bond is] ultimately just reproductive of tired gendered messages about motherly sacrifice and childish narcissism” (2). Confined together in a eleven by eleven foot room for five years together, Jack and Ma’s Room may be read metaphorically as a womb to represent, in Blackwood’s words “the deep primal bond between mother and child”(2). However, I argue that this bond is not pathological or even restrictive as Blackwood argues, but it is rather a redemptive space and one that creates a reciprocal connection of empowerment for both mother and son.

There are many examples, both in captivity and freedom, of Ma and Jack’s symbiotic identification and connection. Thinking about the spider web he has not told his mother about, Jack comments: “It’s weird to have something that’s mine-not-Ma’s. Everything else is both of ours” (10). When Ma tells Jack her name for first time, Jack says “My tummy hurts, I don’t like her to have other names that I never even knowed” (117). During his escape, Jack cannot speak because, as he explains “*Ma, Ma, I need you for talking*. She’s not in my head anymore” (142, emphasis in original). Later the doctor asks Jack, “‘Do you know who you belong to?’ and he answers ‘yourself.’ Jack thinks ‘He’s wrong, actually, I belong to Ma’” (209). And when Ma asks Jack to be gentle with her present from Paul, her brother, Jack reflects, “I didn’t know it was hers-not-mine. In Room everything was ours” (220). However, although Jack and Ma are certainly closely connected, their bond, as portrayed in the novel, is neither disparaged as Blackwood suggests nor is it as romanticized as conveyed by the media coverage in the novel, in which Ma is described as “an angel, a talisman of goodness” (233). As Donoghue comments, “Lots of people have called the book a celebration of mother-child love, but it’s really

more of an interrogation. I never had Ma and Jack say 'I love you.' I wanted to conjure up that love but not have big soppy pools of it lying around. Love is what is saving them both, yes, but there are problems to it" (Crown).

Indeed, there are several scenes of disagreements between mother and son in both captivity and freedom. Jack, for example, remembers the three fights they had over three days: "one about the candles and one about Mouse and one about Lucky" (42). One time, Jack remarks, "I wish we got those special boxing gloves for Sundaytreat so I'd be allowed to hit her" (115). However, I argue that it is ultimately and precisely their trust in and familiarity of each other that enables them to plan and execute their successful escape. Ma knows and trusts that Jack can hide in and free himself from Rug because of her confidence and trust in him. Their bond gives them the courage and strength to escape and, ultimately, as will be discussed later, to survive and thrive in freedom. Moreover, as Jack and Ma's connection is reciprocal in the agency it affords each of them, this reciprocity still allows for Ma's authority as mother. As Ma roars to Jack, "I'm your mother. That means sometimes I have to choose for both of us" (115). Ma also asserts, "I brought you here, and tonight I'm going to get you out" (128).

However, the intimacy of their connection becomes pathologized in freedom by characters and readers alike, particularly because Jack is a male child. The assumption in patriarchal culture is that boys, as scripted by the Freudian Oedipal scenario, must gradually withdraw and distance themselves from their mothers as they grow into manhood. A close and caring relationship between a mother and a son is pathologized as aberrant, whereas a relationship structured upon separation is naturalized as the real and normal way to experience mother-son attachment. Olga Silverstein and Beth Rashbaum explain:

> [Our culture believes] that a male child must be removed from his mother's influence in order to escape the contamination of a close relationship with her. The love of a mother—both the son's love for her, and hers for him—is believed to "feminize" a boy, to make him soft, weak, dependent, homebound … only through renunciation of the loving mother, and identification with the aggressor father, does the ... boy become a man. (11)

Thus, the central and organizing premise of patriarchally mandated mother-son separation is that separation is both natural and good for our sons. In other words, Western culture sees mother-son separation as both inevitable and desirable.

In *Room*, Jack's long hair is read as a symbol of this femininization, which his close relationship with Ma has engendered. Jack's long hair causes people

to think he is a girl as when the man asks Old Nick "Is your little girl OK? (141). Later when Jack is in the mall with Uncle Paul, a woman asks if Jack is his daughter because of "[his] long hair and Dora bag" (244). According to critics, such as Blackwood, who regard mother and son intimacy as emasculating to sons, Jack thus must, in her words, "cut the hair that feminized him and kept him tied to his mother like an umbilical cord" (2). However, I argue that their closeness is not problematic; rather, how the outside world misreads their connection as restrictive and ruinous *is* problematic, especially since for the two of them, it is both redemptive and resistant.

The third and final that way that both characters and readers misconstrue Ma's maternal practice as deleterious and damaging to Jack is in their interpretation of Ma's decision to keep Jack with her in Room as a selfish and an irresponsible act. On his fifth birthday, Jack says to Ma, "You were sad till I happened in your tummy," to which Ma responds, "I cried till I didn't have any tears left" (3). Later when Ma tells Jack about her abduction and time in Room before he was born she says, "when I was asleep was the only time I wasn't crying, so I slept about sixteen hours a day" (94), and later, she tells him, "I brought you into Room, I didn't mean to but I did it and I've never once been sorry" (128). Ma says something similar in the television interview: "Jack was everything. I was alive again, I mattered" (233). The birth of Jack gives purpose to Ma's life in Room and enables her to endure captivity through his love and their companionship. Indeed as Donoghue comments: "It is a nightmare for Ma, but she's managed to create an idyll for Jack within it, so she benefits too. She gets to escape from her situation by entering into this fantasy that they live in this world of only two people. In a way they are their own society" (Wyrick).

However, when the interviewer asks Ma, "did you ever consider asking your captor to take Jack away?", Ma responds, "Why would I have done that?" The interviewer answers: "Well, so he could be free … It would have been a sacrifice of course—the ultimate sacrifice—but if Jack could have had a normal, happy childhood with a loving family?" (237). Ma responds, "He had a childhood with me, whether you'd call it *normal* or not" (emphasis in original, 237). After this, Jack tells us that "Ma's got tears coming down her face, she puts her hands to catch them … and [Jack] gets to Ma and wrap[s] her all up" (238). In her article "Am I Not OK?," Lucia Lorenzi argues that "by the end of the scene, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily Ma's trauma that pushes her to the point of emotional breakdown, but rather the trauma induced by the interviewer's violent attempts to shape, control, and manipulate Ma's narrative" (11). I suggest, more specifically, that it is the discourse of normative motherhood that distorts and perverts Ma's maternal narrative of reciprocal mother-child love as self-interested and negligent. Normative motherhood assumes and dictates an asymmetrical relationship between mother and child: a mother is for the

child, not the child for the mother. But with Ma and Jack, their relationship is truly reciprocal; Ma needs Jack as much as Jack needs Ma. But because this reciprocity violates the roles and rules of normative motherhood, Ma is deemed a bad mother in her decision to keep Jack with her in captivity. However, Ma's emotional breakdown and suicide attempt are triggered not only by this judgement of her mothering, as Lorenzi argues, but, more accurately by Ma's reassessment of her maternal practice from the perspective of this judgement and the subsequent self-blame and guilt she feels. It is only when Ma reclaims her maternal authenticity as practised and honoured in Room can she heal and reconnect with Jack to form a reciprocal bond of redemption and empowerment in freedom. To this discussion, I now briefly turn.

Sara Ruddick argues that the rival claims of maternal practice become pronounced when they involve the third demand of training. For most mothers, Ruddick writes, "the work of training is confusing and fraught with self-doubt" (104). It is the context of the above discussion that Ruddick introduces the central and pivotal concept of inauthentic mothering: "Out of maternal powerlessness and in response to a society whose values it does not determine, maternal thinking has often and largely opted for inauthenticity and the 'good' of others" (103). She elaborates:

> By inauthenticity I designate a double willingness—first a willingness to travailer pour l'armee [to work for the army] to accept the uses to which others put one's children; and second, a willingness to remain blind to the implications for those uses for the actual lives of women and children. Maternal thought embodies inauthenticity by taking on the values of the dominant culture. (103)

Mothers are then policed by what Sara Ruddick calls the "gaze of others." This gaze causes mothers to "repudiate their own perceptions and values" and "to relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values" (111-112). I argue that Ma in freedom is judged by the gaze of the other, and this causes her to lose the confidence she had as a mother while in Room and to doubt the values and perceptions that sustained her maternal practice while in captivity. When the interviewer suggests to Ma that in freedom, she has lots of help, Ma responds: "It's actually harder. When our world was eleven foot square it was easier to control" (236). Mothering in freedom is indeed harder for Ma because she can no longer control the conditions of her mothering that in captivity gave her confidence and purpose. Ma says to Jack in freedom: "I keep messing up. I know you need me to be your ma but I'm having to remember how to be me as well" (221). And earlier when Jack asks Ma if he is meant to forget Room, Ma can only answer "I don't know" (210).

Ma, I argue, to use Jack words, "is still hurting in Outside" (216) because she has lost her own self-created identity as a mother and the authenticity that guided her maternal practice. As well, what Ma valued and what was valuable in Room—namely the reciprocal and intimate bond with her son—has been tainted and corrupted under the gaze of normative motherhood.

The novel's conclusion, however, promises a reclamation of Ma's maternal authenticity and a rehonouring of their mother-son bond. Authenticity, Elizabeth Butterfield explains, "is an ethical term that denotes being true to oneself, as in making decisions that are consistent with one's own beliefs and values [whereas] inauthenticity is generally understood to be an abdication of one's own authority and a loss of integrity" (701). In the context of mothering, maternal authenticity refers to "independence of mind and the courage to stand up to dominant values" and to "being truthful about motherhood and remaining true to oneself in motherhood" (701). I argue that Ma reclaims her maternal authenticity as enacted in Room by the novel's conclusion. The final section of the novel is titled "Living" and concludes with Ma and Jack moving into an independent living residence and their "[making] a deal, *we're* going to try everything one time so *we* know what *we* like" (311, my emphasis). The connection of their past is also held in reverence. When Ma tells Jack that breastfeeding is all done, "Jack "kiss[es] the right and say 'Bye-bye.' I kiss the left twice because it was always creamier" (303). Ma and Jack have separate rooms for daytime but sleep together in one room for night time" (304). And when Jack says to Ma: "'I could cut [your hair] and then we'd be the same again.' Ma shakes her head. 'I think I'm going to keep mine long'" (303). However, although their relationship has changed in freedom, their close bond remains at its core. Ma's rotten tooth that Jack has carried with him since Room is perhaps not lost but, as Jacks thinks, "maybe I did swallow him by accident. Maybe he's not going to slide out in my poo, maybe he's going to be hiding inside me in a corner forever" (307). Ma's tooth that remains within Jack signifies the depth and endurance of their mother and son connection and love. The novel ends with their visiting Room where Jack "look[s] back one more time. It's like a crater, a hole where something happened" (321). But then "they go out the door" (321), which symbolizes a new beginning, one created from the redemptive and resistant connection of their past.

Conclusion

During the interview, Ma is asked, "Was [giving] birth alone under medieval conditions … the hardest thing you've ever done? Ma shakes her head [and replies] 'The best thing'" (233). For Ma, becoming and being a mother is indeed "the best thing" because it is precisely through her maternal practice and the

reciprocity of her close relationship with Jack that she acquires an authentic selfhood. And because her identity as a mother is self-created and sustained by reciprocal mother-child love, Ma enacts resistance and achieves redemption in motherhood. In its portrayal of motherhood as both resistant and redemptive, *Room* offers a necessary challenge and corrective to normative motherhood. It conveys how mothers may be empowered through maternal authenticity and mother-child reciprocity.

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