

Emma Donoghue

The Wonder

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Photo: Howard Lifschitz (adapted)

Synopsis

[Contains spoilers]

Lib Wright, a Protestant English nurse, who trained under Florence Nightingale in the Crimea, comes to a poor Irish village. She has been engaged by a committee to watch over and observe an eleven-year old girl, Anna O'Donnell, who is said to have been living without food or drink for months, a so-called 'fasting girl' and a living wonder. Lib and a nun have been engaged to take shifts to observe the child and see whether she is really surviving without food.

Lib is a sceptic from the first and appalled by the uncritical religious piety she finds. People come to see the 'holy' child and expect to receive miracles. These people leave money with the family so Lib suspects a fraud being perpetuated in order to obtain wealth. Lib observes the child and notices that she does not eat and only accepts a few sips of water. She also observes that the child is sick and weakening despite apparently having survived for months since the moment of her First Holy Communion. Lib talks to Anna and finds nothing but simple piety and her assurance that she has been living on 'manna from heaven'.

As time goes on, Lib, growing fond of the child, and having lost a child of her own, becomes increasingly alarmed about Anna's condition. Appeals to the family, the priest and to the nun fall on deaf ears; they seem determined to let Anna die. Lib confides in, and becomes attracted to, a

journalist, William Byrne, who is covering the story and who provides an outside perspective on what might be going on.

Gradually Lib becomes detective. She discovers that Anna's mother had been passing chewed up food to her under the pretence of morning and evening kisses and so she had managed to survive on this 'manna' but that since the nurses had arrived, that had stopped so that Anna is truly starving to death. Lib further discovers that Anna believes that she is implicated in the death of her brother Pat who is now suffering in purgatory and needs help which can be obtained by Anna's renunciation. Anna wants to die so that she will be forgiven and she and Pat will go to heaven.

Lib does not believe in any of this but she learns to use the language of piety to dig down beneath what is going on. She uncovers a terrible tale of abuse. Anna's brother consistently abused her and Anna believes that he died because of this and that it was her fault. So she believes she must die to expiate her sin and recover her brother. It turns out that the parish priest knew all of this but has chosen to cover it up and won't help Anna with her issues about guilt, sin and redemption.

Lib is determined not to let this happen. Reasoning with Anna does not work, theological arguments don't work either. Lib appeals to each of the family and interested parties in turn but no one will act to change the situation or try to get Anna to eat. With the journalist's help, Lib conceives a plan.

When Anna has sunk so far that she is hours from death, Lib has a chance because the whole family and the nun are going to Mass to pray for her. She records in her log that Anna's symptoms worsened until she died. She tells Anna that she is going to die but that she has the chance to be reborn as 'Nan' and begin a new life. Anna will be dead and Pat, her brother, will be saved. Lib persuades Anna to accept this 'death' and to start taking nourishment as 'Nan'. Then she and the journalist kidnap the child. Lib sets fire to Anna's bedroom in the hope that it will burn fiercely enough to convince people that Anna's body has entirely gone. She also burns herself in the process.

Lib takes Nan to Australia to begin a new life. She and 'Wilkie Burns' get married, telling the story that they met on the boat. They continue sailing towards a new life.

Some questions for discussion:

- Fasting and penitence have often been attributes of saints. What does it mean to be holy?
- How do you feel about the way Anna's family behave?
- How might Anna's story shed light on modern problems of body image, anorexia, abusive relationships?
- What do you make of Lib's 'solution' for saving Anna?
- What does this story make you think about faith, miracles, salvation, resurrection, redemption?
- What do you suppose Lib, Wilkie and Nan's 'afterlife' was like in Australia?