

## Medicine in the movies

# Real and unreal: The two worlds of *Room*

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### Room

Starring Brie Larson, Jason Tremblay, Sean Bridges, Joan Allen, William H. Macy.

Directed by Lenny Abrahamson. Film Release September 2015; DVD Release March 2016.

Rated R. Running time 118 minutes.

Reviewed by Amy Haddad, PhD

The July 18, 2016, cover of *People* magazine features the smiling face of Jaycee Duggard who was held prisoner for 18 years by a convicted sex-offender and his wife. Jaycee was 11-years-old when she was abducted, and gave birth to two daughters while in captivity. Now 36-years-old, she is “happy and healthy,” according to the cover story, and trying to make sense of her life in light of this unbelievable trauma.

Although the 2015 film *Room* is not based on Jaycee’s story, or any other real life cases, the similarities are

striking. Like Jaycee, Ma, the mother imprisoned in the film, endures seven years of rape, and gives birth twice, losing the first baby. Her second child, Jack, survives.

The action of the film is terrifying and depressing, yet *Room* is surprisingly uplifting, as it focuses on the relationship between Ma and Jack, and the love that saves them.

Before turning to a description of the film, it is important to note that Emma Donoghue wrote both the novel of the same title as well as the screenplay. The often-heated debate about which is the better version—book or film—takes on new meaning when the author is also the screenwriter. Reading *Room* is a very different experience than watching the film version.

Writer Annie Dillard observed that the “ordinary reader picking up a book can’t yet hear a thing; it will take half an hour to pick up the writing modulations, its ups and downs, louds and softs.”<sup>1</sup>

What readers hear when picking up the book *Room* is Jack’s voice. *Room* is entered through him, and as the sole narrator of the novel, the reader must wait for him to describe his world. We learn that his language is similar to our own, but slightly different, as it is a private form of communication that only he and Ma share. For example, they name the objects in Room, the proper name Jack and Ma have given where they live. This personification of inanimate objects in the book (and film) creates a unique world.

In the novel, readers are often plunged into the dark along with Jack, struggling to make sense of the world in Room, as well as the real world outside of its boundaries.

In the film, however, we learn very quickly that Jack (Jason Tremblay) lives with Ma (Brie Larson) in Room. Although we hear a voice-over from Jack a few times, we see and understand long before he does that something is terribly wrong. He lives in a small, dark space (about 11 feet

by 11 feet) with a single skylight, and no visible access to the outside world. There is a door to Room, but it is metal and has a keypad.

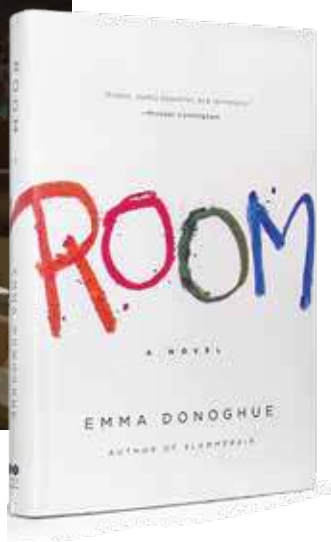
Jack introduces us to the other occupants of Room—Bed, Wardrobe, Sink, Plant, Toilet, etc.

Beginning on the morning of Jack’s fifth birthday, we watch how Jack and Ma spend their time in Room. They eat breakfast, roll up Rug, and exercise, play games, read, and watch a barely visible television.

Ma still breastfeeds Jack, which is somewhat startling because he is



Jacob Tremblay, in *Room*. A24/Photofest ©A24



so old but understandable given the circumstances of his birth and the deep bond between them. When Jack wants to nurse, he asks Ma for “some.”

We see Old Nick (Sean Bridges), Ma’s captor, through the slats of Wardrobe’s doors because Jack has to sleep in Wardrobe when Old Nick visits Room at night.

Somehow Ma has created a loving environment for Jack within the most stifling situation imaginable. Ma worries about the lack of sunlight, proper food and vitamins, and enough space for Jack to move. She also knows Jack is growing up and asking more questions about Room. He is confused about what is real and what is not real on television. For example, Ma tries to explain that dogs are real, but cartoon dogs are not real.

Shortly after his birthday, Jack accidentally wakes Old Nick who is sleeping next to Ma. She becomes nearly hysterical, terrifying Jack and prompting Old Nick to punish both of them by cutting off Room’s power for days, leaving mother and son to suffer with no heat or electricity in freezing temperatures.

Actions like this fuel Ma’s fears for Jack’s and her safety. The last time Ma attempted to escape, she smashed Old Nick’s head with the top of the toilet tank. He remained conscious and fractured her wrist. Another escape attempt would be a desperate move, but Ma recognizes that Jack is now old enough to make an escape plan possible. For the plan to work, Jack has to be exceptionally brave, while Ma has to be willing to lose him forever.

They do escape, and the film’s trailer begins there.

The second part of the film explores how Jack and Ma adapt to the world outside of Room.

Jack finds everything new and strange. He has never been in sunlight, or interacted with other people. He has never seen grass, snow, or leaves.

Several scenes are memorable, including the reunion of Ma, whose name is Joy, with her parents Nancy (Joan Allen) and Robert (William H. Macy) who, for many years, believed their daughter was dead. Nancy and Robert divorced after Joy’s abduction. They must adjust to the fact that Joy is alive, and has a son. This is particularly difficult for Robert who sees Jack’s very existence as a vivid reminder of his daughter’s rapist.

One of the most touching scenes is Jack’s first encounter with a real dog, Shamus, who belongs to Nancy’s partner, Leo (Tom McCamus). The look of pure wonder on Jack’s face when he reaches out to touch Shamus accentuates all that he has missed in his isolation from the world.

The health professionals who appear in the film—doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, and dentists—are

only a small part of Jack’s and Ma’s recovery, reflecting the tangential role that outsiders, like the police, play in the arc of their lives. However, the psychiatrist who happens to be on call the night that Ma and Jack are brought to the hospital talks with her about separation anxiety, social integration, and self-blame, none of which Jack understands. The psychiatrist tells Ma, the “very best thing you did was, you got him out early. At five, they’re still plastic.” Jack has his head buried deep under Ma’s arm but whispers to her, “I’m not plastic, I’m a real boy,” which she repeats to the doctor. That exchange highlights the gap between the language that health professionals use and what patients actually hear.

Ma and Jack return to her childhood home to live, but the media attention becomes almost unbearable. Eventually, Ma agrees to an interview for a national television show during which the interviewer asks her why she didn’t give Jack to her captor when he was born so that he could be left at a hospital and possibly have a chance at a normal life. The interviewer’s question shatters Ma’s fragile defense mechanisms, and a short while later she attempts suicide.

By the end of the film, through in-patient and out-patient psychiatric care, Ma recovers enough to begin to move toward a more independent life with her son.

Although relatively few patients suffer the profound trauma of Ma and Jack, *Room* contains important lessons for health professionals who care for survivors of trauma—both physical and mental. For example, Ma complains more than once after their escape that she isn’t a superwoman or saint—she simply tried her best to find a way out of a horrible situation. Similarly, many patients feel trapped, and finding a way out while protecting those they love consumes their lives. Listening and patience are essential for healing as well as a non-judgmental approach.

I strongly recommend reading the novel as well as seeing the film as they are different experiences that inform each other, and both offer insightful views into a painful situation.

## Reference

1. Dillard, A. *The Writing Life*. New York:Harper Perennial Publishers; 1989.

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