

HAMNET

by Maggie O'Farrell

About the Book

Published in 2020, *Hamnet* is Maggie O'Farrell's eighth novel and winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction. It is a work of historical fiction set primarily in Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1580s and 1590s, imagining the lives of William Shakespeare's family, though Shakespeare himself is never named in the novel. O'Farrell centers the story on Agnes (a historical variant of Anne Hathaway), her marriage to a young Latin tutor, and the death of their eleven-year-old son, Hamnet, from bubonic plague in 1596.

O'Farrell draws on the sparse historical record to construct a rich, sensory, emotionally layered portrait of grief, marriage, creativity, and the relationship between life and art. The novel moves fluidly in time, weaving between Agnes and her husband's courtship and the devastating weeks surrounding Hamnet's death, before arriving at a quiet, aching conclusion in a London theatre.

About the Author

Maggie O'Farrell was born in Northern Ireland in 1972 and grew up in Wales and Scotland. She is the author of eight novels, including *After You'd Gone*, *The Hand That First Held Mine* (winner of the Costa Novel Award), and *I Am, I Am, I Am*, a memoir about her seventeen near-death experiences. She lives in Edinburgh with her family. O'Farrell has spoken publicly about her deep interest in the untold stories of women in history, and *Hamnet* grew directly from her fascination with the near-total historical silence around the women in Shakespeare's life.

Historical Context

The Real Hamnet Shakespeare

Hamnet Shakespeare was baptized on 2 February 1585, alongside his twin sister, Judith. He died on 11 August 1596, at the age of eleven. The cause of his death is not recorded in historical documents. Three years after his death, his father, William Shakespeare, wrote *Hamlet*, and scholars have long debated the relationship between son and play. Hamnet and Hamlet were, in Elizabethan England, variant spellings of the same name.

Anne Hathaway and the Historical Record

Anne Hathaway (whom O'Farrell calls Agnes, her name in her father's will) was approximately eight years older than Shakespeare. They married in 1582, when she was around twenty-six and he was eighteen. Their daughter Susanna was born six months after their marriage. The historical record offers almost nothing about Anne's inner life, personality, or experiences. O'Farrell has described this silence as both an invitation and a creative challenge.

Bubonic Plague in Elizabethan England

The bubonic plague (caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*) was a recurring and devastating presence in Elizabethan England. London theatres were regularly closed during outbreaks. One of the novel's most striking structural sequences traces the origin of the flea that carries the plague to Hamnet, moving from Alexandria through a glassmaker's workshop in Venice, across trade routes, and eventually to Stratford. This sequence illustrates how interconnected the early modern world was, even as individual people had no way of understanding the forces converging on them.

Shakespeare's Globe and the London Theatre World

By the mid-1590s, Shakespeare had established himself in London's theatre world. The Globe Theatre was built in 1599, after Hamnet's death. The novel's final scene takes place at a performance of Hamlet (unnamed, but clearly implied), which O'Farrell portrays as Agnes encountering her son's name called out from the stage, a moment of devastating artistic transformation.

Discussion Questions

Opening and Structure

1. The novel opens with Hamnet alone in his family's house, searching for an adult to help his sick sister Judith. How does this opening shape your expectations and your emotional relationship to Hamnet as a character throughout the book?
2. O'Farrell moves freely back and forth in time between the courtship of Agnes and the husband, and the crisis of Hamnet's illness and death. How did this structure affect your reading experience? What would have been lost or gained from a strictly chronological telling?
3. The novel never names Shakespeare. Did you find this choice liberating, disorienting, or something else? How did it affect how you read his character?

Agnes

4. Agnes is one of the more unusual protagonists in recent literary fiction: she has near-psychic perception, keeps a wild hawk, and defies the social conventions of her time. Did you find her believable as a historical figure, or did she feel more like a mythological construction? Does the distinction matter?
5. Agnes 'reads' people through touch from early in her life. When she holds the young Latin tutor's wrist at their first meeting, she sees something in him that draws her to him. What do you think she saw? How does this moment resonate later in the novel?
6. Agnes is consistently described as 'other' or apart from those around her. How does her outsider status shape her marriage, her motherhood, and her grief?
7. After Hamnet's death, Agnes and her husband grow distant, and she eventually turns her grief into near-obsessive herb cultivation. What do you make of the way she processes loss through physical labor and the natural world?

The Marriage

8. The early sections depicting the courtship are full of desire, wonder, and a sense of two unusual people recognizing each other. By the middle of the novel, the marriage is strained and cold. Did the novel earn this transition for you? What does O'Farrell suggest caused the distance between them?
9. The husband spends most of his time in London while Agnes remains in Stratford with the children. The novel presents this as both a practical arrangement and a source of ongoing pain for Agnes. How did you read the husband's absences? As ambition, escape, or something more complicated?
10. Agnes sends the hawk to London as a gift or message to her husband. What do you understand this gesture to mean? How does he interpret it, and how does she?

Hamnet's Death

11. Hamnet dies midway through the novel, having given his life force to his sick twin, Judith, who then recovers. Did you find this a satisfying narrative choice, or did it feel too symbolic? What do you think O'Farrell was trying to say about the relationship between twins, between siblings, between life and death?
12. The sequence tracing the plague from a monkey in Alexandria through a glassmaker's apprentice in Venice to Stratford is among the most formally ambitious passages in the novel. What did you make of this section? What does it suggest about causality, fate, and the nature of tragedy?
13. Agnes refuses to accept Hamnet's death even when confronted with his body. She holds him, speaks to him, tries to warm him back to life. How did you read this scene? As denial, love, desperation, or something else?
14. The plague kills Hamnet but spares Judith. How do you think Judith's survival shaped the remainder of Agnes's life, as the novel presents it? Is there guilt alongside love when Judith recovers?

Art, Grief, and Transformation

15. The novel ends with Agnes attending a performance of a play she does not know, hearing her son's name called from the stage, and slowly understanding what her husband has done. She experiences this as both a wound and a kind of return. How did you respond to this ending emotionally and intellectually?
16. O'Farrell presents the creation of Hamlet as an act of love and preservation, a father putting his dead son into a play so he would never entirely disappear. Do you find this reading of the play convincing or moving? Does it change how you think about Hamlet?
17. Agnes does not want to be 'smoothed and painted over' in art, as she has been by others throughout her life. And yet her husband's greatest work arguably does exactly that. Is the ending triumphant, ambiguous, or tragic?
18. Can grief be transformed into art without the transformation being a kind of betrayal of the person grieved? The novel never quite answers this. Where do you land on the question?