

Women's
Prize for
Fiction
2020 25



Fremantle



2020 SHORTLIST

HAMNET BY MAGGIE O'FARRELL

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Maggie O'Farrell is the author of the Sunday Times no. 1 bestselling memoir *I Am, I Am, I Am*, and eight novels: *After You'd Gone*, *My Lover's Lover*, *The Distance Between Us*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, *The Hand that First Held Mine*, which won the 2010 Costa Novel Award, *Instructions for a Heatwave*, which was shortlisted for the 2013 Costa Novel Award, *This Must Be The Place*, which was shortlisted for the 2016 Costa Novel Award, and *Hamnet*. She lives in Edinburgh.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a summer's day in 1596, a young girl in Stratford-on Avon takes to her bed with a fever. Her twin brother, Hamnet, searches everywhere for help. Why is nobody at home? Their mother, Agnes, is over a mile away, in the garden where she grows medicinal herbs. Their father, a playwright, is working in London. Neither parent knows that one of the children will not survive the week.

Hamnet is a novel inspired by the son of a famous playwright. It is a story of the bond between twins and of a marriage pushed to the brink by grief. It is also the story of a kestrel and its mistress; a flea that boards a ship at Alexandria and a glovemaker's son who flouts convention in pursuit of the woman he loves. Above all, it is the tender reimagining of a boy whose life has been all but forgotten, but whose name was given to one of the most celebrated plays ever written.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In a book initially seeming to be 'about' William Shakespeare, the reader could be forgiven for forgetting Shakespeare as historical icon when reading *Hamnet*, which is instead a powerful story about women, motherhood, death and fate, (the latter two being themes that are nonetheless deeply interwoven in the play *Hamlet*). In O'Farrell's story of Shakespeare's domestic life and the

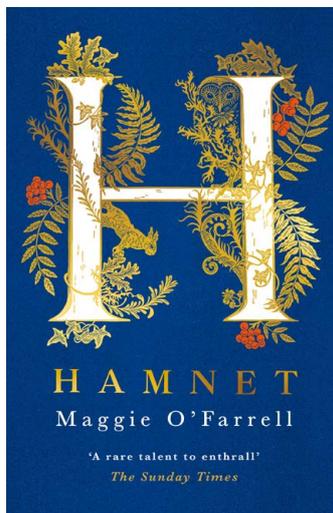
loss of his son, he is often absent, and the narrative thrust of the story lies with his wife Agnes, her children and the women in her family: how they move and live and take up space. Joan, Agnes' stepmother, desperately hangs on to the running of her dead husband's home so that she and her children may have somewhere to live, though, on his death, she has lost ownership of the house. Mary, Agnes' mother-in-law, negotiates a careful line with an explosively violent

husband. Agnes occupies a delicate position in the community too, which tolerates her perceived oddness in return for her skills as wise woman deft in herbal medicine.

Hamnet, rather than being a book about 'a Great Man' or even 'a Great Work', intricately details the daily life of women, from the laundry to the cooking, from Agnes' growing and drying of medicinal herbs to the customs and experiences of childbirth, domestic work and the play of children: dolls made of straw, string for the cat to paw, imaginary games of ducks in ponds, long hours playing with leaves, sticks, what little there was to hand. It is the tragedy at the heart of a family which inspires Shakespeare's play, and the play itself happens at the end of the book, rather than being the focus of the narrative at all. Instead, Agnes' fate and that of twins Judith and Hamnet, are

bound up together in a whirl of almost magic realist destiny, grief and loss.

O'Farrell also considers ideas around health, healing and disease. This is a book set during years when bubonic plague was rampant, and Shakespeare himself returns to his family in Stratford during times when the theatres and other public spaces are periodically closed to prevent greater infection. Ironically, the impetus for his occasional homecoming is also the disease that takes Hamnet, after threatening to kill Judith. We are led to believe that Agnes' skill as a healer means that Judith narrowly escapes death, but Hamnet dies because he doesn't receive her herbal remedies. This reversal of the fate written in the children's palms perplexes Agnes: yet, one of her children is still dead. Like Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, O'Farrell weighs up fate and finds it, ultimately, inescapable.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Hamnet is a tremendously poignant book about the experience of motherhood and of losing a child. Very early in the book we are shown Agnes losing her own mother, and this sets up the emotional tone for the rest of the book: nature is Agnes' connection to her lost mother, and nature (in terms of Agnes' expertise with natural remedies) is ultimately what saves Judith, though it does not save Hamnet. Nature, nurturing and motherhood are bound together in Agnes, a healer and tamer of wild animals. Yet nature itself is also responsible for bubonic plague. After Hamnet dies, Agnes dreams of Rowan sowing baby teeth in rows in a field: a terrifying, harrowing image. Nature is beautiful but also savage: a mother can bring life, and she may also have to witness it end.

O'Farrell writes with an incredible and relatable depth of emotion about Agnes' feelings for her children: of the immediate bond at their birth, of the bear-like fury with which she protects her children, baring her teeth at death; of her inability to watch Hamnet's body buried; at the way she both wants to embrace his grave and run from it. Though the specificities of Agnes' motherhood (and Mary's and Joan's) are of the 1500s, there is a timelessness to the way that motherhood is described that focuses on its emotion.

Discuss the ways in which Maggie O'Farrell depicts the experience and emotion of grief in *Hamnet*. How did you relate to it as you were reading? Did you recognise any personal experience? How does O'Farrell describe Agnes' physicality in her grief? How does she depict Agnes' emotions? How does the experience change Agnes as a person, and what impact does it have on her marriage?



THE 2020 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION SHORTLIST

QUESTIONS

How instrumental is William's relationship to his father in his becoming a playwright?

Should William have gone back to London after Hamnet's death?

Does it make any difference to the reader that Agnes is William Shakespeare's wife? How do you feel about Anne Hathaway now? What did you know about her before?

How does William's social standing (and that of his family) change as he becomes more successful in London?

The young William is a Latin tutor, which is how he meets Agnes. Agnes is not taught how to read and write, yet

is immensely knowledgeable about plants and their uses – and also 'knows' everything she needs to about someone by touching their hand. Later in the book we see Judith struggling to learn to read; Agnes says she has other skills. What value does education have in *Hamnet*?

NEXT STEPS

Research three different plants and their medicinal or therapeutic qualities in as much detail as you can – you could choose some mentioned in *Hamnet*, such as comfrey, lavender, rosemary, angelica or valerian. Look at an old herbal guide and see how the plants are classified; you might even draw the plants and describe their

appearance, where they grow, etc. Make notes about their traditional uses; perhaps research what they were used for in Tudor times and what they are used for now, if at all. Are any of these plants still used for similar purposes? Have they been synthesised into modern medicine?

Read Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Reading it having read *Hamnet*, what are your thoughts about Prince Hamlet and the themes of death, grief and fate? Can you find passages that relate to Maggie O'Farrell's reimagining of the inspiration for the play?

“ A HEART-STOPPING STORY ABOUT GRIEF, FAMILY AND SHAKESPEARE'S MOST FAMOUS PLAY ”

VIV GRSKOP
JUDGE 2020

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

I AM, I AM, I AM: SEVENTEEN BRUSHES WITH DEATH
BY MAGGIE O' FARRELL

JANE AUSTEN: A LIFE BY CLAIRE TOMALIN