

# Women's Prize for Fiction 2020

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Fremantle



## 2020 SHORTLIST

### THE MIRROR AND THE LIGHT BY HILARY MANTEL

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Hilary Mantel is the author of fifteen books, including *A Place of Greater Safety*, *Beyond Black*, the memoir *Giving up the Ghost*, and the short-story collection *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*. Her two most recent novels, *Wolf Hall* and its sequel *Bring up the Bodies*, have both been awarded the Man Booker Prize.

#### PLOT SUMMARY

England, May 1536. Anne Boleyn is dead, decapitated in the space of a heartbeat by a hired French executioner. As her remains are bundled into oblivion, Thomas Cromwell breakfasts with the victors. The blacksmith's son from Putney emerges from the spring's bloodbath to continue his climb to power and wealth, while his formidable master, Henry VIII, settles to short-lived happiness with his third Queen, Jane Seymour.

Cromwell is a man with only his wits to rely on; he has no great family to back him, no private army. Despite rebellion at home, traitors plotting abroad and the threat of invasion testing Henry's regime to breaking point, Cromwell's robust imagination sees a new country in the mirror of the future.

But can a nation, or a person, shed the past like a skin? Do the dead continually unbury themselves? What will you do, the Spanish ambassador asks Cromwell, when the King turns on you, as sooner or later he turns on everyone close to him?

In *The Mirror and the Light*, Hilary Mantel brings to a triumphant close the trilogy she began with *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*. She traces the final years of Thomas Cromwell, the boy from nowhere who climbs to the heights of power, offering a defining portrait of predator and prey, of a ferocious contest between present and past, between royal will and a common man's vision: of a modern nation making itself through conflict, passion and courage.

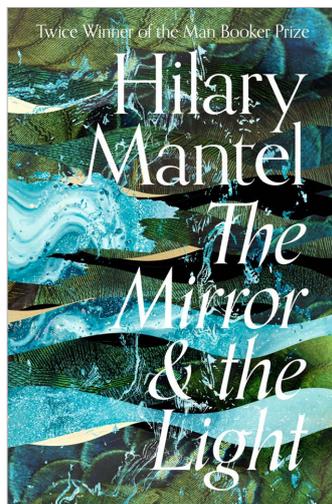
#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

*The Mirror & The Light* is the third book in a trilogy but is written in such a way that it can be read alone. This is both because the history Mantel's story is based on – the reign of Henry VIII – is particularly well known, and readers will most likely already know the main events of the book and the previous ones. Thomas Cromwell is also well known as Henry's right-hand man during this period, and many people will know that he too was executed by Henry. Hence, for the broad strokes of the story (if

not the minutiae of the lives of the more minor characters, the politics and granular detail of the story) the reader is already on board. It might be said that the fact that some readers know what happens to Cromwell at the end of the book presents an additional challenge for Mantel: she has to keep the reader turning the pages despite the fact they know what's coming. Fortunately, there is so much intrigue to follow that the reader is kept engaged throughout.

Mantel also reminds the reader of Cromwell's origins in poverty, his history before becoming Lord Cromwell and his rise to power, as well as the recent history in the reign of Henry VIII, yet weaves this backstory into the novel without distracting us from the ongoing narrative. This also helps *The Mirror & The Light* read as a standalone novel.

Additionally, Mantel writes in an immersive style which both gives the impression of an authentic Tudor period in its language, but which is completely understandable for the modern reader. There are occasional nods to specific Tudor era words which we no longer use, but they are always clarified in the text so we understand what they mean: dottypoll, mammet, aglets, gable hoods. For the most part, though, Mantel writes in modern English whilst adhering to recognisable linguistic conventions such as characters using titles to address each other, e.g. My Lord/ My Lady, slightly old fashioned-seeming nicknames, e.g. Crumb, Call-Me, etc, a complete lack of contractions (e.g. always using 'I have' instead of 'I've', which gives a more formal and historical tone), and using words which have now fallen out of popular use but which we still understand the meaning of, e.g. "what does ail him?" or "I fear he would be up and fomenting trouble".



## DISCUSSION POINTS

Accusations of sorcery assail Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell at different times: after her death, Anne is referred to as a witch who seduced Henry into becoming Queen. She is believed to have had the power to make him and other men impotent, to have poisoned Cardinal Wolsey (an accusation made by Henry Fitzroy, the Duke of Richmond, Henry VIII's illegitimate son) and witches, more generally, were believed to be able to "sour milk, cause cattle to abort and cause a horse to shy and injure its rider". Cromwell himself is believed to be a sorcerer by some, especially the poor who resent his meteoric rise to fame and power.

Mantel's Cromwell, as narrator, is instead a rationalist who always knows the facts behind the many deaths and intrigues that happen around him: Cromwell has no time for magic or religion. Is it just his superior intelligence or knowledge of secrets that makes Cromwell immune to fears around 'sorcery', or is it also that Mantel has crafted his narrative voice as being rational for a modern, secular readership?

Cromwell frequently seems to be a voice of reason amidst superstition, confusion and intrigue, even though he is the originator of much of the intrigue (and murder) that happens in the story. It might also be argued that Cromwell is a relatable hero because he is a self-made man, someone who fights his way out of poverty using just his wits and intelligence. The idea of being able to work hard and achieve anything, despite a lack of social privileges, is a popular fantasy both in fiction and real life. In reality, such a rise to power is fraught with structural difficulties that make success much more difficult for those who are not rich, white, well-connected, or, in Tudor times, already nobility. And as Cromwell is eventually executed, is he really so successful after all? Or is his fate inevitable for a person with no support or safety net?



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## QUESTIONS

Is Mary Tudor a likeable character? Does she need to be likeable?

Did you find any parallels in *The Mirror and The Light* to modern day politics?

What is the position of women in Henry Tudor's court? Do any of the female characters have any real power? Who does, who doesn't, and why?

Is Mantel applying any kind of 'theory' to Cromwell's life and ambitions in her rendering of him? Is he a victim, a tyrant, a hero? Or is she merely telling the story of a flawed but memorable historical figure?

## NEXT STEPS

*The Mirror and The Light* fills in many of what we might imagine are 'unseen' scenes in the years of Henry VIII's reign: the breakfast after Anne Boleyn's execution, the meetings between Henry and Cromwell, Hans Holbein painting the pregnant Jane Seymour and what was said as she sat for him. Write what you imagine the 'unseen scene' might look like at a key point for a king or queen in history, Tudor or otherwise. Is it the hour before they die, a moment just before a battle, the day after a historic ruling, their wedding night? You can

choose to research facts and imagine from there, or write completely freely.

Write a series of diary entries as Mary Tudor covering the period just before she returns to court. How does she feel about her father, and how does that change once she realises she was wrong about it being Anne Boleyn that turned him against her? Include mention of her various illnesses and ailments, and try to describe what her daily life might look like. What type of character is Mary? How can you show her determined nature? Try to think of a way you can *show* her character with her actions rather than just describing it.

“ THE READER IS GRIPPED FROM THE VERY FIRST PAGE AND THE TENSION AND PACE DO NOT LET UP. MANTEL'S USE OF DIALOGUE IS STUNNING ”

PAULA HAWKINS  
JUDGE 2020

## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

WOLF HALL BY HILARY MANTEL

THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL BY PHILIPPA GREGORY