

Hamnet



About the Book: (from Goodreads)

Drawing on Maggie O'Farrell's long-term fascination with the little-known story behind Shakespeare's most enigmatic play, *Hamnet* is a luminous portrait of a marriage, at its heart the loss of a beloved child.

Warwickshire in the 1580s. Agnes is a woman as feared as she is sought after for her unusual gifts. She settles with her husband in Henley street, Stratford, and has three children: a daughter, Susanna, and then twins, Hamnet and Judith. The boy, Hamnet, dies in 1596, aged eleven. Four years or so later, the husband writes a play called *Hamlet*.

Award-winning author Maggie O'Farrell's new novel breathes full-blooded life into the story of a loss usually consigned to literary footnotes, and provides an unforgettable vindication of Agnes, a woman intriguingly absent from history.

Suggested Reads:

- *By Any Other Name* by Jodi Picoult
- *Fools and Mortals* by Bernard Cornwell
- *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders

About the Author

Maggie O'Farrell was born in 1972 in Northern Ireland. At the age of eight she was hospitalised with encephalitis, and missed over a year of school. She says that this period fostered her love of literature. She was educated at the University of Cambridge where she studied English Literature.

In her early career, O'Farrell worked as a journalist and taught creative writing before her numerous successful novels reached widespread critical acclaim. Her novel, *Hamnet*, won The Women's Prize for Fiction in 2020 and was adapted into a film in 2025. O'Farrell co-wrote the screenplay with director Chloe Zhao, which has received extensive critical attention.

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Discussion Questions

1. What did you know about the origins of Hamlet, and about the history of William Shakespeare's life and family, before reading this novel? How did the novel change your interpretation of the play?
2. Describe the nature of Agnes's love for her husband, and his for her. What draws them to each other, despite their different backgrounds?
4. Hamnet's death comes as a shock to all in his family, but our insight into the twins' last moments together reflects a kind of knowing that not even Agnes is able to access. How do their similarities affect the family's ability to grieve and heal?
5. Agnes's husband says of her that it is a joy and a curse to be married to "Someone who knows everything about you, before you even know it yourself. Can you relate to this feeling at all, regarding your spouse, other relatives, friends, or coworkers?
6. Agnes is very sensitive to her environment, including when she moves between different homes. How do the energies of the different spaces, both indoor and outdoor, as well as the people who inhabit them become characters in and of themselves?
7. Why do you think William Shakespeare goes unnamed in the novel?
9. What are the consequences of Agnes's encouraging her husband to go to London? Do you think she still regrets the decision at the end of the book as she is watching Hamlet onstage?
10. Based on the portrayal of the play in this novel, how are Hamnet and his father, and Hamlet (the character) and his father related to one another?
11. Shakespeare's plays are known for their supernatural elements and figures. What might be considered supernatural about the events of the novel?
12. What role does the written word and literacy play in the society of the novel? Are those values similar or different from those of our current society?