Hamnet

By Maggie O’Farrell

**About the Author:**

Born in Northern Ireland in 1972, MAGGIE O'FARRELL grew up in Wales and Scotland and now lives in London. She has worked as a waitress, chambermaid, bike messenger, teacher, arts administrator, and journalist in Hong Kong and London, and as the deputy literary editor of The Independent on Sunday. Her debut novel, After You'd Gone (2000) won a Betty Trask Award and was followed by My Lover's Lover (2002); The Distance Between Us (2004), winner of a Somerset Maugham Award; The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox (2006); The Hand That First Held Mine (2010), winner of the Costa Novel Award; Instructions for a Heatwave (2013), and, most recently, This Must Be the Place (2016).

**About the Book:**

In 1580’s England, during the Black Plague a young Latin tutor falls in love with an extraordinary, eccentric young woman in this “exceptional historical novel” (*The New Yorker*) and best-selling winner of the Women’s Prize for Fiction.

Agnes is a wild creature who walks her family’s land with a falcon on her glove and is known throughout the countryside for her unusual gifts as a healer, understanding plants and potions better than she does people. Once she settles with her husband on Henley Street in Stratford-upon-Avon she becomes a fiercely protective mother and a steadfast, centrifugal force in the life of her young husband, whose career on the London stage is taking off when his beloved young son succumbs to sudden fever.

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Discussion Questions:

1. In **Hamnet,** Faggie O'Farrell doesn't ever call Agnes' husband Will or Shakespeare. Why do you think she chooses not to name him?
2. Agnes is presented as quite a strange woman who paid little attention to convention and respectability. She cured lots of people's illnesses with herbs and tinctures. How did this conform with or differ to your own perception of Anne Hathaway?
3. How would you describe the narrative? What do you think O'Farrell was trying to convey through it?
4. In Maggie' O'Farrell's story were Agnes and her husband in love? Discuss.
5. The last line of Maggie' O'Farrell''s novel is 'Remember Me'. This is said by Shakespeare who is acting the role of ghost from the play ['Hamlet'](https://www.literacyshed.com/the-tale-of-3-brothers.html). In Hamlet (the play) this line is often interpreted as the ghost of dead king Hamlet (who has been murdered by his brother) asking that young Hamlet seeks revenge. Why does Maggie O'Farrell conclude her story with this line?
6. What Is Agnes' interpretation of her husband's rationale behind playing the part of old King Hamlet's ghost? Were you convinced by Agnes' reading of events? If not how did this affect your enjoyment of the story?
7. Maggie O'Farrell visited Stratford and the tourist spots linked to Shakespeare in order to be able to write authentically about Tudor England. How successfully does she bring Shakspeare's England to life? Give examples of what is effective?
8. "Dazzling, Devastating", "Flawless and furious". "Heartstopping, Hamnet does for the Shakespeare story what Jean Rhys does for Jane Eyre" are all quotations used in lieu of a blurb on the back of the book. What quotation would you add to these? Feel free to joke around.
9. ​In Maggie O'Farrell's retelling of Hamnet's story, Shakespare's family seem to have little interest in or understanding of his writing? Discuss the significance of this.
10. While we can't ever know for sure what Shakspeare was like, how true is Maggie O'Farrell's characterisation of Shakespeare, in comparison to the image you have built up of him in your own mind?