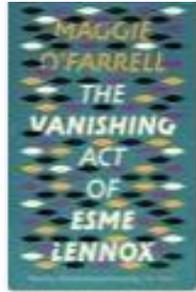


Maggie O'Farrell



Chris

Hamnet

Shakespeare is never mentioned in this story, but it is clearly based in the life of his family and death of his son Hamnet. It's a fascinating story mostly told through the eyes and heart of the boy's mother Agnes and the everyday small, local life of the town, the land and people of the time. Agnes is an unusual woman of those times, able to look into the souls of people, a herbalist and healer. Her love of family, and grief in the death of her son from the plague is beautifully described, and the detail of rituals, beliefs and practices well-written. The story of the flea spreading plague through the world is well-imagined and tragically pertinent in current times. In the end it is a heartbreaking story of finding love and loss, and recovery with her frequently absent husband. The play "Hamlet", at first an abomination in her eyes, reveals the pain and love they both share. A touching story, unusual and I enjoyed it very much.

Jean

Maggie O'Farrell, has deservedly won the Women's Prize for Literature, for her novel, *Hamnet*.

It is beautifully written, and the use of the present tense gives one the feeling of living at that time; in the late 16th century. Agnes (Anne), Shakespeare's wife, is the protagonist in the novel. She is feared, but also respected for her unusual gifts which include falconry and herbalism. She is also a bee whisperer. O'Farrell cleverly swings between their twin son's short life and the backstory of Shakespeare's family covering many decades. The novel is a story of loss. It portrays the effect that the death of a child can have on parents. Agnes loses her rationale -her interest in life. Shakespeare,(known as the Latin teacher in the novel) goes off to London and writes comedies and historical plays to take his mind off the tragedy. It is only when Agnes travels to London and sees his new play, 'Hamlet' that she realises how grief-stricken her husband is over Hamnet's death. Shakespeare himself plays the part of the King, the father, and a boy appears on-stage who the King addresses as 'Hamlet, my son'. This boy speaks, stands, walks with same buoyant tread as her Hamnet. He has the same yellow hair which stands up at the eyebrows. She realises that her husband instructed this boy how to be her Hamnet. He has pulled off a manner of alchemy. Hamlet, on stage is two people -the young man alive and the father, the ghost, dead. It's as if Shakespeare, himself, would willingly have sacrificed his own life to save his son. The novel ends with Agnes stretching out her hand towards her husband as if to acknowledge them. She feels the air between the three of them as if she wishes to bridge the boundary between real life and the play. A truly remarkable ending to a memorable novel.

Angela

I found *Hamnet*, Maggie O'Farrell's most recent novel a wonderfully absorbing and enjoyable read. The title is somewhat misleading, for although Hamnet, Shakespeare's son, is the focus for the plot, most of the book is very much centred around the character of his mother Agnes. The most striking feature of the book for me is the beautifully built atmosphere. From Agnes's childhood through her wooing and into her family life with her children, husband and in-laws, every-thing shows her close affinity with nature

and the natural world. She is thought by the more conventional to be strange and unlikeable with her herbs and remedies, but she is a true child of the forest. Even though the events and relationships we read about are seemingly commonplace and ordinary, they are brought extraordinarily to life and take on a dream-like magical quality. I felt great empathy for the wild and free spirited Agnes and felt too the great sadness at her loss. It bore out her premonition about the children she would have, but in an unexpected way. Relationships are very much key in the story and they are sensitively and realistically portrayed. There are many beautiful moments: the twins Hamnet and Judith's taking each other's place; Agnes waiting for a sign from her mother at her wedding, which reveals their past strong and raw natural bond. It was poignant that when she was grieving she found herself checking in her mind for each individual child and wondering what was missing. I thought this was beautifully portrayed. Written brilliantly from the point of view of an observer, this was a compelling read.

Margaret

Hamnet

Initially I found it confusing the way the chapters interleaved between the two generations - Hamnet's life and the life of his parents before he was born. Once I became used to this way of covering the events I enjoyed it and was compelled to read on. The descriptions of how people lived in the 16th century gave a real insight into what it could have been like at that time. Hamnet's mother appeared to be so involved in her herbal cures for other people but at the detriment to her own family, and Hamnet was unable to find any help when he was worried about his twin sister being ill. I liked the ending of the rather distressing story in that the production of the play "Hamlet" not only gave the writer a way of coming to terms with his son's death but eventually his wife appreciated that this was why he had done it. Maggie O'Farrell had followed the true story of Shakespeare and his family in an engaging way.

William

This Must Be the Place

For me this was a book that distinguishes people's tastes in literature. The eulogies on the cover and their recommendations for awards encapsulated in the comment by the Scotsman's reviewer: 'Exquisite.. exceptionally accomplished and emotionally sophisticated' were at odds with my opinion of this book. I found it hard to concentrate and basically difficult to follow the changes in storyline, character association, chronology, complex changing perspectives and found its structure extremely perplexing. For me that was because the principal characters are not plausible and the plot variations I found extremely difficult to follow. The problems I experienced were the the jumps in time and characters between chapters, which made it hard to engage with the story and its personnel. I read somewhere that this is a testament to how deep each of the main characters are, and their tales all ultimately tie together and contribute to the central theme of Daniel and Claudette's marriage where she lets us empathise with the depth of her characters. Somewhere I missed this coherence. Through the eyes of the reader I failed to realise that I was a witness to the reasons behind the characters actions supported by the constant time-shifting - so I did not fully engage with them. But then it's probably me being out of step.....

Alix

Hamnet

Book about Shakespeare's family. Father had been a respected member of the Town but was disgraced as he drank a lot and fell from favour. He was a glove-maker. He was violent towards the men of the family. Agnes came from a bigger family from a large estate called Hewlands but was unhappy as her father had remarried and the stepmother was not kind to his children from his first wife. Agnes has psychic powers and can read the future of people. She also makes potions from wild plants and herbs and can help people with ailments. Shakespeare was sent to tutor some of the boys in Latin and then met Agnes. They married and she came to live in Shakespeare's house. They had 3 children a girl called Susanna and twins called Hamnet and Judith. Agnes helped Mary, Shakespeare's mother around the house and continued to live there when he went to London to work. It was about 1580 and the Bubonic Plague was rampant.

Judith caught it and was very ill and Hamlet went to lie beside her to comfort her and he caught it and died while she recovered. Agnes was inconsolable and felt guilty that she had not realised that Hamnet was ill. The death affected the whole family. Shakespeare returned to London to his plays and distractions. Susanna and Judith were very sad and they all took ages to recover. Shakespeare was doing well in London and had enough money to have a separate house built for Agnes and the children. He was away for nearly a year at a time and when he returned Agnes realised he had another woman (or women). She was very upset but they did still have sexual relations. Whether she became pregnant again is not clear. Book a bit muddly at times as goes back and forth a lot and Shakespeare is not given a name. I enjoyed it and it was educational as well.

Stephanie

Hamnet

This is a lovely book on so many levels. It is based in the 16th century and on the life of Shakespeare's son who died of the plague at the age of 11. I found the historic details fascinating, basic points such as how Shakespeare's father earned a meagre living as a (disreputable) glover and the living conditions of the family. Of particular interest to me were the details of how the dead were prepared for burial, being washed and carefully and lovingly sewn into a shroud and the necessary speed required to prevent further spread of the plague. Details of child birth and care of the mother was also interesting, if terrifying, on today's terms. The account of Hamnet's mother, Agnes, was also very interesting since she clearly did not conform to the norm for a young lady. She flew a kestrel, wandered through the forest (and indeed retired to the forest to give birth to her first daughter) and was a herbalist. She could also predict her own future and that of others. In many times I am sure she would have been classed as a witch and her life had an interesting and largely unspoken mystical air about it. The description of Agnes' grief on the death of her only son, Hamnet was incredibly moving. Shakespeare himself was largely absent father and plays but little part in this story. A really good read.

Ann

This must be the place

There are two main characters in this book. Daniel Sullivan, who is a Brooklyn-born linguist, with a son who suffers from an horrific eczema and whose vengeful wife has divorced him and doesn't allow him access to his two children. Claudette Wells, who graduated from University "we were experts in our way, with sharp spikes in our knowledge; we knew everything there was to know about one narrow field". She was manipulated into becoming a famous and popular film actress by controlling Swedish film director/lover, but ran away from the life that didn't suit her, to a remote location in Ireland. She had a son with a stutter. These two characters meet up in Ireland and subsequently marry and have children. Their past life continues to influence them and the novel slips back and forth as they try to resolve the former issues. in their lives.

I enjoyed the book, although I despaired at the behaviour of the main characters!

In my ignorance, there were many words I didn't know :- (although my computer knew them!)

p. 27 philtre and orthogonal strabismus p 309 corporeality
p. 36 leucitic glow p. 310 a Newton's cradle and a Yoruba deity
p. 40 speleologist p. 357 perspicuous
p. 43 villanelle p. 379 etiolated
p. 44 metonym p. 381 obfuscatory and neologism
p. 178 chutzpah p. 398 synecdoche
p. 219 sisyphian p. 423 araucaria forest
p. 221 alluvial-smooth p. 429 Detlene and amaranth
p.228 pratfall p. 437 bichromial
p. 234 susurration p. 453 Gallic froidieur (Pascaline)
p. 281 sessile p. 454'All Pascaline Lefeuvre'

Sharon

I was keen to read *Hamnet* but must say it was not the most enjoyable experience. It all started well and I loved the descriptions of people, daily life and did not mind the jumping back and forth in time. The author conveyed the feeling of stress when the boy could not find any of his family and it was clear that disaster approached. However, the detailed descriptions of the girl's illness and death of Hamnet were very difficult to read and I found myself skipping over pages, willing it to be over and get to the payoff when the father writes the play. This I thought was dealt with in a very short, perfunctory way and I would have liked more detail in that part of the book. As ever, M O'F writes very well and it is probably a failing on my part that I was unable to take the death of the child and it's aftermath in such awful detail.

Angie

***Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* by Maggie O'Farrell**

I quickly became engrossed in this book, which is imaginatively written and is an intimate portrayal of complex family relationships. This is a story about Esme, who as a feisty teenage girl is completely misunderstood by her family and ends up institutionalised for over sixty years of her life. Esme emerges from the institution as a naive old woman with the ability to appear invisible to others. She has an older sister, Kitty, with whom she has a complex relationship. As the story unfolds the reader is taken back in time to the events that led up to Esme's incarceration and to what happened shortly after. An understanding of the frailty of human nature and the complexities of presenting an acceptable front to society in Edwardian times are clearly shown. The characters are brilliantly portrayed and the twist in the story as it ends left me feeling unbearably sad. I found this a very disturbing book, brilliantly written and compulsive.