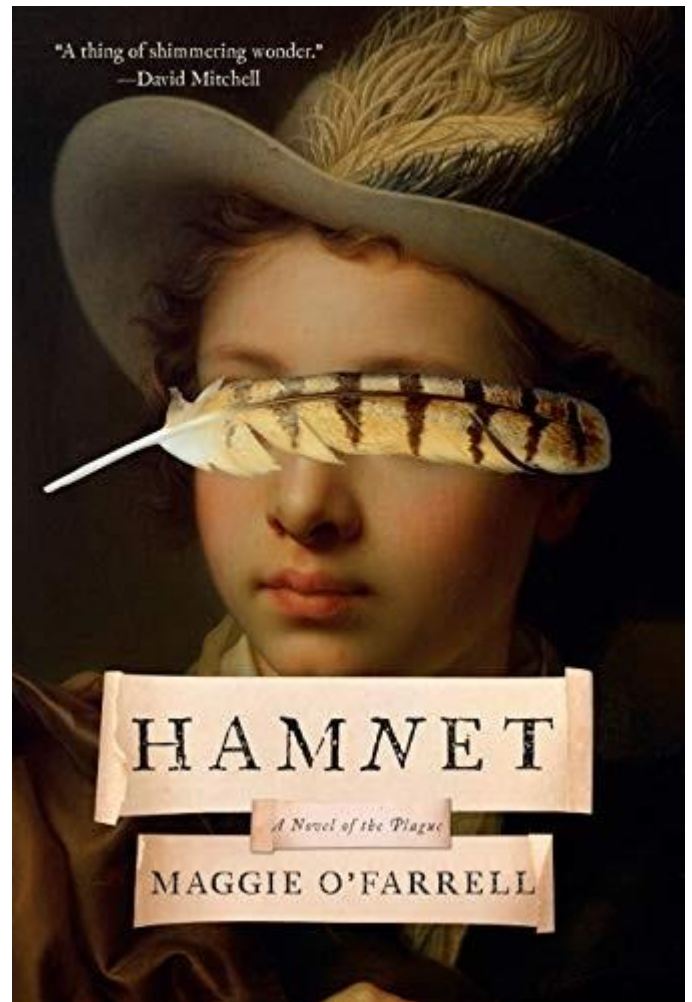


I can't recall reading any other book with such consistently beautiful writing throughout.
—Sarah Barnett

From Maribeth Fischer

What I, and many of you realized with our email book discussion is that answering these questions is work. It takes a chunk of time many of us don't feel we have (especially around the holidays). And yet, there is such richness to be gained in forcing ourselves to sit with the book, to dig down into the questions. I myself learned more about the book and some of O'Farrell's choices by taking time to respond and I gained such insights from some of the other responses posted here! With each question there was a statement where I thought, *Oh! Yes! I had never thought of it that way!* Those moments are gifts, and I am not sure I would have found them had they not been written. For that, I am so grateful to the 15 women who took the time to participate, and Jen Epler and Karen Schneiderman, thank you for your help in coming up with such terrific questions. I hope all readers of *Hamnet* enjoy the discussion!



Special thanks to the generous person who donated seven copies of *Hamnet* to our members.

Question 1: While many readers think of this as Agnes' story (so much so that some have felt it could have been titled *Agnes* instead of *Hamnet*) O'Farrell chooses to move around in many different point of views (POV). We have the POV of Hamnet, Judith, Eliza, Mary, Agnes of course, Shakespeare, and Bartholomew. How did the constantly changing POV help or hurt the overall impact of the story? Were there any instances where you felt it especially significant or important to be in another POV? In other words, were there instances when staying in Agnes' perspective would not have been effective or, in contrast, were there times when staying with her POV (and not veering into another) would have been more effective?

Cindy Hall

At first, I was slightly lost with the change of time and POV. However, I don't think the story would have been as rich told from only one POV. In particular, the scene with Hamnet at his sister's sickbed seems like it would be flat from another POV.

Gail Comorat

As soon as I read the opening line, *A boy is coming down a flight of stairs*, I felt as if I were reading stage directions and found myself immersed in reading the story to see what might happen. As I read, it was as if I were watching a play unfold. By giving us the boy first, O'Farrell put him in center stage and showed us his youth and uncertainty. When the story moved to another setting with the mother, and I read "*If she had left her swarming bees to their own devices she might have headed off what was coming*" (p. 17), I loved that O'Farrell had brought me into another key character's thoughts, making me want to know more about Hamnet's mother.

"With every change in point of view, the story moved the way a play would with each character stepping up to perform his actions or to speak her thoughts."

—*Gail Comorat*

With every change in point of view, the story moved the way a play would with each character stepping up to perform his actions or to speak her thoughts. While I needed Agnes' thoughts about her life, I also needed to know about Mary's losses and fears, to be able to see a mother's grief through the eyes of two very different mothers. I also needed to know Hamnet's thoughts about his sister: *He feels again the sensation he has had all his life: that she is the other side to him. That without her he is incomplete, lost.* Knowing this helped me to understand his desire to "hoodwink Death" and trade places with Judith.

For me, the most significant place where I needed Agnes' thoughts was at the very end when she attended the play her husband wrote about their son's death. Her thoughts, before and after she came to understand the weight of her husband's grief,

were both heartbreaking and eye-opening. O'Farrell takes us through the process of Agnes working from anger with *How could he thief this name? It pierces her heart, it eviscerates her*—to her awareness of how her husband dealt with his son's death: He has, Agnes sees, *done what any father would wish to do to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live*. That final understanding was key for the character, and also for me, the reader.

Maribeth Fischer

I loved the shifting POV and thought that it was a brilliant decision on O'Farrell's part. Had it only been in Agnes' POV, the story might have felt claustrophobic especially in the chapters when Hamnet is dying and in the immediate aftermath, for grief is so claustrophobic. But more importantly, if it were only Agnes' POV I'm not sure we'd see her fully. A great example is the second chapter where we see her for the first time from Shakespeare's POV. He's curious and captivated and we see her as a lovely young woman, nothing at all like the rumors about her. And could we have fully known about those rumors if we'd been in Agnes' POV?

In other words, I think we know Agnes more, not less, because of the shifting POVs that allow us to be in her head and heart, on one hand, but also allow us to see her as others do.

I also felt it crucial to be in Hamnet's POV and an excellent decision to start the book with him. We were, from page one, completely immersed in his thoughts. From the start, then, Hamnet felt alive to me (and this made his death all the more devastating later). He felt like a real boy: *He bangs open, one by one, the doors to the cookhouse, the brewhouse, the washhouse. All of them empty, their interiors dark and cool. He calls out, slightly hoarse this time, his throat scraped with the shouting. He leans against the cookhouse wall and kicks at a nutshell, sending it skittering across the yard. He is utterly confounded to be so alone. Someone ought to be here; someone is always here*. We are not only in his thoughts, but in his body—banging and kicking; feeling the scraped throat from calling, seeing the dark interiors as he did. He nearly leaps out of the pages he is so present and without this, I am not sure I could fully appreciate his absence later.

But mostly, by not having the entire thing in Agnes' POV, I felt that it forced me to pay attention more when we were, and I felt this especially in connection to her grief. O'Farrell captures the grief beautifully—there is a paragraph on page 219 that begins: *Inside Agnes' head, her thoughts are widening out, then narrowing down, then widening, narrowing over and over again. She thinks, This cannot happen, it cannot, how will we live, what will we do, how can Judith bear it, what will I tell people, how can we continue, what should I have done...* The litany of questions continues then the paragraph ends with *He is dead, he is dead, he is dead*. O'Farrell is making so many choices (in just one sentence!) that I can learn from as a writer—the run on sentence, one question bleeding into the next to capture the

run-on formlessness of the grief; the use of the questions themselves—there are no answers; the repetition of words and phrases—all of this spins in a narrow circle and it seems there is no breath in the sentence, in Agnes, no room for anything but the death. And in fact, there is no room for a while. We stay in Agnes' POV for over 15 pages (one of the longest times in any single POV) and this too is a narrative choice, as if O'Farrell is saying that the mother's grief consumes all others; there is no room for anything *but* her pain. I'm not sure I would have felt so locked into Agnes' grief, almost suffocated by the enormity of it had I been 100% in her POV all along. In other words, it's not just the overall choice to switch POVs that is so good, but O'Farrell's deliberate choice of WHEN to switch and to whom. It seems fitting, for instance, that the first time we break from Agnes' POV after the death we go to the POV of the father, the person who might be the next in terms of levels of grief (and love), and from the father we go to Judith—This is no accident. These three are the ones who loved and knew Hamnet best perhaps.

One other thought is that it was important to be in Judith's POV later—as the twin, as the one who survived, the one who still feels a sense of her dead twin out there in the world. Hamnet's death didn't just affect Agnes—it scorched them all in different ways; they feel it all in different ways. How could one POV have captured this?

Susan I. Morse

The changes in POV and the shifts of time/place set a fast pace for the story saturated in glorious details and vibrant settings. The reader is swept into the frantic current of the characters, their thoughts, their home and fields, their prejudices and their desires as they move through the themes of grief, love, family and ambition.

The reader sees the same room, the same people, with the thoughts of the different characters. Hamnet's desperate search for help for his dying twin vs. the grandfather's drunken anger, Mary's fury vs. Agnes' serenity, John's hatred vs. his son's quiet determination and brilliance, Bartholomew's steady/kind consideration of different matters vs. Joan's pure desire to punish/disregard Agnes' disarming gifts. Even the kestrel had a POV; that is creativity. All of the POVs provide such depth, such a feeling of understanding of the lives in their 16th century world.

You are crossing London Bridge and you are astounded by the hovel of dwellings and the variety of people (dead and alive) on that bridge. At Hewlands you can feel their breath on your face you can smell the lavender, you can hear the bees, you recognize the love and you weep with the inconsolable losses.

Question 2: *Hamnet* deals with the grief of a mother for her child who dies at age 11. But the author also includes grief felt in other situations. What are some of the other experiences of grief in this book (or just pick one if you prefer) and comment on how these other griefs contribute to the overall plot/effect/feeling of the novel?

Maureen Rouhi

Agnes' all-consuming grief is expected and its exquisite portrayal tugs at the heart. Juxtaposing it over the sorrows of Hamnet's twin Judith and the Father gives the story a richly textured rendering of deep loss. Agnes, Judith, and the Father would have done anything to bring back Hamnet. How each expresses sorrow illuminates the breadth of human experience.

Agnes drowns in her melancholy, which everyone sees. She weeps, she neglects herself and her household, she lives in her head, she is paralyzed. She is *utterly changed, adrift, unmoored, at a loss*. She also expects others to grieve as she does.

At 11, Judith is bewildered. At first, she asks questions, which are heartbreaking. A child without parents is an orphan. A woman who's lost her husband is a widower. She asks her mother: *What is a twin who's lost her twin?* She speculates to her sister that the father's long absences from home must be because of her face, *because I resemble [Hamnet] so closely. Perhaps it is hard for Father to let his eyes rest upon me*. She feels lost without the brother from whom she had been inseparable since they shared their mother's womb.

Later, Judith seeks her own relief. In the middle of the night, she slips out of the house to wait for someone *running like the wind as if the devil himself is at its back*, according to the midwife who helped birth Judith and Hamnet. Because the midwife tells only Judith, it becomes her secret connection to her twin. While out in the dark hours of the night, Judith begs for this figure to appear, just once, for the last time. When at last she feels Hamnet's presence, *The thought that forms in her head is: I miss you, I miss you, I would give anything to have you back, anything at all*. Judith's anguish—that of a child's—is as painful as Agnes' but distinctively manifested.

The grief of Hamnet's Father is the subtlest. It is so understated and internal that Agnes thinks he doesn't care that they had lost a son. How could he resume a normal life, go back to London, and leave his family in Stratford? She cannot bear that he is not as devastated as she is.

What Agnes doesn't know is the *private pain* piercing the Father when seeing young actors grow *from lad to man*. In his heartbrokenness, he is *constantly wondering where [Hamnet] is. He can't have just vanished. I look for him everywhere, in every street, in every crowd*,

in every audience. That's what I am doing, when I look out at them all: I try to find him, or a version of him. His quest hurts so much that he fears it will make him mad.

The Father also sees Agnes' surrender to despair as *a fatal pull*, a treacherous undertow that would drown him and his family. So he goes back to his work in London, where he remains for long stretches before returning to Stratford for visits. What Agnes doesn't know is that in London he lives in an austere attic—*a monk's cell, a scholar's study*—where he writes, *for weeks and weeks, barely leaving his room, barely eating, never speaking to anyone else*, a play that moves through him as blood through his veins. The Father disentangles his grief through a play that bears his son's name, a play with two people, *the young man, alive, and the father, dead. He has taken his son's death and made it his own; he has put himself in death's clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place.* Grief transforms to an eternal remembrance.

Sarah Barnett

One of my favorite scenes in the book (p 180) shows Agnes walking through town with her husband as he is about to leave for London. She doesn't watch him until he's out of sight but turns back the way she came and realizes that while things seem the same *the woman still choosing between two pots, the dog, still dozing in a doorway* her life has diminished drastically. This foreshadows the enormous grief Agnes will feel after Hamnet dies. She cannot bear the sight of a street full of children *Walking along, calling to each other, holding their parents' hands, laughing, crying, sleeping on a shoulder, having their mantles buttoned.* Everything is the same, but for Agnes, nothing will ever be the same.

Maribeth Fischer

Agnes' grief for her own mother; Judith's grief for her twin; Shakespeare's grief for his son; Mary's grief for her lost daughter, Anne, which Shakespeare's sister Eliza also feels. There is so much death and though it might have been more common back then, I think O'Farrell reminds us of how profoundly loss moves us and shapes us. Just as Shakespeare is so affected by his son's death that he writes a play bearing his name, so Agnes becomes who she is, in part, as a way of holding onto her own dead mother.

I think too of the opening scene in the glovemaker's shop (again, such a deliberate choice on the part of O'Farrell). We literally begin with the images of death, all those animal skins and how they will be shaped into beautiful, perhaps expensive gloves, and in a similar way, Hamnet's death will be used to make something beautiful too, the play. It's an awful comparison and yet, there is a hard truth in it for us as writers. What use do we make of our own losses? How do we shape them into these other things? And isn't there a profound grief in that? I think O'Farrell's book is also a commentary on art and on cost of using one's life (and family) in one's work. *How could he take up his pen and write it (the name Hamlet) on a page, breaking its connection with*

their son, Agnes wonders near the end of the book. It makes no sense. *It pierces her heart. It eviscerates her.*

Ellen Collins

While Agnes' grief carries the story, there are other characters who grieve also. I was most touched by Judith's reaction to her twin's death. She asks her mother one day what is the name for someone who has lost a twin. She says that there is a name for someone who loses a husband (widow) and a name for someone who loses parents (an orphan), but asks what the name is for a twin left behind. They decide together that there is no word for that. Judith's grief must be a kind of mourning of her own self,

“I found it interesting that [Judith] does not learn to read or write, because she has already been told that there is no word for who she is.”

—Ellen Collins

because half of who she was is gone. I found it interesting that she does not learn to read or write, because she has already been told that there is no word for who she is. Why would she want to decipher other words? When Susanna tries to teach her to write, she refuses to pick up the quill in her right hand. That was Hamnet's hand. She can't be the other half of their twin-dom.

And it is grief that sends her out into the streets in the night, thinking she sees him, thinking that sound behind that building, behind that tree, might be his footstep. Everyone expects Agnes to grieve, but no one seems to notice Judith, and isn't being alone the worst part of grieving?

Beth Thompson

Nearly every character in *Hamnet* has a grief journey—or, at the very least, expression of loss and longing—woven into their profile by the author. William's sister Eliza speaks of the loss of and longing for her sister, Anne, lying *awake at night, whispering her name, just in case she was listening*. The reader wonders how the loss of Anne and two other of his children contribute to John's rage (which serves to separate William from the love of a father); the more evident loss for John is his loss of social standing and indeed friendship in the town. The unsympathetic Joan loses her husband, the minor-character glassmaker his fingers. It is *Hamnet's* own coming-of-age story, a solitary and scary journey, a loss of innocence—that plays out as he tries to attend to Judith. William's whole family—his wife and children, primarily, but also his parents and sister—long for him to be with them on Henley Street.

But it is Agnes' grief which is so complete, so central to the story that it has a narrative arc all its own. Beginning with the expository early loss of her mother, a grief complicated by gaslighting around young Agnes' memories of her mother, and

of there ever having been a mother at all—to the ongoing losses of her agency implicit in the cohabitation with her in-laws and most dramatically at the birth of the twins; the family’s ongoing longing for William to return to them; the anticipatory grief she experiences as she desperately does her best to care for a very-ill Judith; the devastating climax of loss and grief at the death of her son. Even as this tension falls, Agnes continues to suffer losses: awareness of her husband’s indiscretions, his return to the playhouse, her loneliness in her parental grief. It is the final stage of our hero(ine)’s journey—to London, to the playhouse, to the elixir of understanding of both her husband’s grief process and of how Hamnet *can be both dead and yet alive among them* that brings resolution to the story, if not the experience, of Agnes’ grief.

Mary Ann Waelde

Hamlet also deals with grief of a sibling as told in Judith’s views. Even in adulthood she is still looking for the return of her brother, imagining how it might be to see him again. What he looked like in the past and how he looks as a grown man.

Question 3: What is the purpose of never mentioning Shakespeare’s name? Was the technique effective in accomplishing that purpose?

Jen Epler

O’Farrells omission of William Shakespeare’s name was necessary to keep the story focused on Agnes, who could represent any struggling and grieving woman, mother and wife. I often had to remind myself that it was Shakespeare who was the father in the story, and even found myself questioning it on occasion. I sometimes wondered how Agnes might have called him—Will? Bill? William? But those urges left quickly and I was back again in Agnes’ world.

Sarah Barnett

Omitting Shakespeare’s name from the novel was one way to emphasize the fictional nature of the story, that the details of the daily lives and relationships of Agnes and her family and of her husband’s family are all the author’s invention. However, I doubt that this technique is effective, as most readers will connect this story to Shakespeare’s life, regardless of the characters’ names or lack of names.

I also imagine that the author used this device to send a message that her story is not about Will Shakespeare. Its heroes are Agnes and the women of Stratford, who are so beautifully portrayed. They were the people who endured the dangers of childbirth and the horror of child death, so common in those times. They cooked, baked, gardened, scrubbed, washed, mothered, loved and grieved. The novel inspired me to look up Virginia Woolf’s *If Shakespeare Had a Sister* (part of *A Room of One’s Own*) that

eloquently answers the question of why there was no female Elizabethan equivalent of the great author. You can read it [here](#).

Nancy P. Sherman

I believe that the reason Shakespeare's name is not mentioned is because this novel is a shared story with multiple points of view of equal value. The focus of this book is on a family, its relationships, its conflicts, its losses, its grieving. The author's decision to use identification markers (husband, father, Latin tutor), rather than Shakespeare's name, stops the reader from trying to match Shakespeare's theatrical endeavors to the events in the lives of these families. Other than the ending of the book, this story could be told about anyone who lived through the pandemic. The author waits until the end of the story to connect Hamnet's father to the playwright of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, a play in which grieving, death, and family relationships are at the center, offering a plausible reason for why Shakespeare wrote this tragedy after the death of his own son. This technique of keeping secret one character's given name is an interesting technique; however, it does create confusion when there are so many characters being introduced early in the book. Although the historical note and the quote from *Hamlet* placed before the first chapter suggests that William Shakespeare is important to this novel, I didn't realize that the Latin tutor was he until I got frustrated enough with the names that I researched Shakespeare's family tree. Had I not found this information, I might have put down the book, despite the beauty of the author's writing style.

Ellen Collins

If I had not known at the outset that this book was about Shakespeare's family, I would not have guessed until the end when Agnes goes to see the play. I think the author did this so that while we were reading the novel we wouldn't be constantly trying to make connections to the playwright. Knowing "the tutor" was Shakespeare would make us look for historical facts about his life, and would take us out of the story. Readers would have seen this as historical fiction instead of a work of imagination. It would have sent the reader scurrying to check out the facts of his life (which are scant) to hold them up against what was happening in the book. And the story would be weakened. It wouldn't stand on its own.

By not mentioning his name, O'Farrell made him into a husband and a father and not a famous writer. We could see him as a young man falling in love, as an artist torn between his family and his work, and eventually, as a grieving father. Not William Shakespeare. Just a father who was so quietly tortured by the death of his son that he did the only thing he could do lest he sink into grief. He recreated him on the stage through his words. He brought him back to life, which would be any father's dream.

It didn't matter to me that the character was Shakespeare. I only saw him as a father torn apart by his son's death.

Taralee Morgan

The name "Shakespeare" brings with it a lot of history and images—the language, famous quotations, plays, previous books and movies about him, etc. Very few of those aspects are relevant to this story. I studied Shakespeare's culture and plays in college, had season tickets to the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. for seven years, have seen movies about him and his works, and even went to see his play, *As You Like It*, last August at the Globe Theatre in London. Despite all of this background, I found it easy to forget what I knew about him. The novel is about him and his family before he became famous. By not mentioning Shakespeare's name, I could forget my preconceived ideas about who he was after a few chapters. I thought it was a brilliant technique.

"I studied Shakespeare's culture and plays in college, had season tickets to the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. for seven years, have seen movies about him and his works, and even went to see his play, As You Like It, last August at the Globe Theatre in London. Despite all of this background, I found it easy to forget what I knew about him."

—*Taralee Morgan*

Linda Federman

I think of myself as a pretty imaginative person and I often engage in speculating why people do the things they do, but for the life of me I can't guess why the author chose to never name the character that is based on William Shakespeare. As I was reading I thought she was saving it for some big reveal, but it never came. At best it was an annoyance, at worst it was a distraction. I look forward to reading what others have to say about this, because I cannot parse out the reasoning for this technique. If it was meant as a literary device of some kind, it was lost on me. The book was delicious with detail, and what I assume was a lot of deep and meticulous research. You could see, smell, taste and feel everything with such clarity, but only vague identifiers (the father, the husband) for Will?

Mary Ann Waelde

History's depiction of Shakespeare is that of a writer and actor. The absence of his name throughout the novel allows the reader to form their own image of Hamlet's father as a man with great love for his family and a father grieving the loss of a son.

Question 4: How a novelist structures his/her story is a deliberate choice and this includes the decision of how much backstory/history to include and how to include it. Another writer might have begun *Hamnet* with the meeting of Shakespeare and Agnes and moved forward chronologically. But Maggie O'Farrell chooses to move back and forth in time, alternating between the present (starting with the day Judith falls ill) and the past (the meeting/courtship/early marriage of Shakespeare and Agnes). How did this movement between past and present work for you and, how do you feel about the way those time lines converged? Two thirds of the way through the book we have the birth and then immediate death of Hamnet—once he dies we move forward in a straight chronological line. What impact did O'Farrell's structural choices have on your reading experience (keeping your interest/drawing you in emotionally)?

Renay Regardie

By giving so much backstory/history, O'Farrell paints a picture of Agnes, who she was before, and who she was after Hamnet's death. The back and forth worked well for me. Indeed the history takes precedence in the first half of the book. Agnes shines while Shakespeare is but a mere shadow. You get a clear picture of her individualism, her character. She is independent, strong, and mystical. She, and everyone, is changed after Hamnet's death. The pace is much quicker here.

The first half of the book gives you more time for reflection, while the pace in the second half is faster, with no time to think and pause. It is all action. Everything quickens as Agnes goes on her journey to London. Then you have her feelings in what seems like real time.

The structure kept me reading, kept me entranced.

I took my time reading the first half but as O'Farrell moved the chronology forward, I could not put the book down. Really well done, a great reading experience.

Gail Comorat

Since the story is as much Hamnet's as it is his mother's story, I felt that O'Farrell was right to begin with the boy alone in his home before delving into the history of his parents. I loved the back and forth telling of the story, even liked the break in the middle of how the plague arrived in the town. It was another example of "since this happened, then this also happened". O'Farrell was great in showing us how small consequences figure into a story.

The structural choice of putting the birth of the twins beside the death of Hamnet worked well for me. Because she'd always had a vision of only two children at her own deathbed, Agnes feared for Judith's death after her birth, assumed Judith would

be the child she would lose. As a reader who knew what was going to happen, I felt the emotional pull of Agnes' thoughts as she went from thinking her daughter had survived to realizing her son had not. Moving forward from that point on was the most logical choice, I thought. Life goes on even after a great loss, and for O'Farrell to deviate from the trajectory of the story would provide a reprieve, and I didn't want relief via backstory at that point. The story had to roll on to its conclusion without any breaks in the tension or emotion. "

Nancy P. Sherman

I found the lack of chronology frustrating and confusing at first. Using setting (time and place) to begin each chapter would have helped the reader. Had it not been for her poetic descriptions and her method of slowing down the action, pausing the reader to experience the sensory details and to take the time to "be in each moment" (a phrase used in acting,) I would have given up on the book. What kept me going was the lyrical nature of her imagery, the word choices (length of each word and hard vs. soft consonants) that created the rhythm of each phrase or clause which, in turn, joined other phrases and clauses, building into a powerful paragraph.

Beth Thompson

I found O'Farrell's tender, artful movement between past and present gorgeously effective in creating more than just a story of grief but a felt sense of it. For me, this felt sense is what that makes the story so magnetic and real.

Hamnet is, at its core, the story of loss, longing, and grief, ranging from the tragic, traumatic kind (the young child's loss of her mother, the young mother's loss of her child) and the ordinary, to-be-expected kind (an absent husband and father, babies that grow up, plans for a together-family life that would never be). The powerful but gentle ebb and flow of past to present and back again illuminate a layer of grief which I would not have been able to identify but was immediately familiar: in grief, we often find ourselves pulled suddenly from the present into the past. We are busy with all that needs to be done, dealing with the crisis at hand until without warning, we are pulled into memory: how it all started, the day we met, when the child was born, how things used to be.

Both past and present are necessary if we are—as mourner or as reader—to understand what it is that is being lost, if we are to find a way forward, if we are to have any chance of acceptance or, on the story level, resolution.

"Hamnet's mother cannot possibly experience his death without also considering his birth, and O'Farrell invites the reader into the sacred spaces of both."

—Beth Thompson

Hamnet's mother cannot possibly experience his death without also considering his birth, and O'Farrell invites the reader into the sacred spaces of both. Once Hamnet dies, staccato paragraphs echo the barely-there experience of acute loss and raw grief; it is interesting that the flashbacks cease. Perhaps from here, Agnes has no choice but to keep moving, however haltingly, forward.

Linda Federman

The timeline of *Hamnet* yanking back and forth ruined the arc. The reader is aware that Judith is ill in late childhood, so when the story of her birth is told, we already know how it resolves. Had we not seen that she survives into at least early adolescence, the intensity of her touch-and-go infancy would have carried a lot more emotional weight. As I read it, I was impatient for the writer to get to the part where the baby is ok, because I know she will be. For me, the book would have worked better as a straight traditional timeline, with plot points unfolding in chronological order.

Before I read it, I had heard the book described as being “about Shakespeare’s son, who dies young in a pandemic.” So during the telling of Judith’s illness, I knew she wasn’t the one who would succumb. This bled those scenes of all their uncertainty and dramatic tension.

Even the subhead on the cover, “a novel of the plague,” gives away too much, and fails to reflect the larger story. The book is about much more than that—although the plague is a major plot point—but I guess those were “spoilers” for me. A better synopsis might be “it’s the story of the life of Shakespeare’s wife.”

Question 5: Mid-way through the book, we shift to an omniscient point of view and actually follow the path of the plague itself until it finally finds a host in Judith. How did this chapter help or hurt the book? The wisdom in writing classes is often that if you can cut a chapter or scene and nothing changes in the plot or the characters, then you should cut it—but does that wisdom hold up in this case? Why or why not?

Cindy Hall

I am not a fan of the chapter. As someone who reads for characters and story, it did not add anything to the story from my perspective. The reasoning for an editor to leave it in the book eludes me. I am interested to read what others see as the purpose of that chapter.

Jen Epler

Grieving people often search out the “how” and the “why” of their grief. Some want reasons for the unexplainable, hoping for a place to lay blame. What caused this to happen? Some seek out absolution. What did I miss? Could I have done more?

“O’Farrell is a master contact tracer (so eerily relevant in COVID times).”

—Jen Epler

Though Agnes can’t know exactly how the plague came into her house, she certainly wondered about it as she sought solace from her agony and feelings of helplessness. Because of Maggie O’Farrell’s expertly written chapter, we (as readers) know that poor Agnes could have done nothing to prevent it. If Judith hadn’t opened the box with the infected, flea-ridden rags, there could have easily been other opportunities for the virus to find its host.

I never wondered how Judith became infected, yet I was enthralled when reading the details of it. O’Farrell is a master contact tracer (so eerily relevant in COVID times). Her weaving of happenstance and intersection is brilliant, and it builds a much more complex and multilayered world. The chapter also introduces interesting contrasts, such as unfairness in opportunity (the boy on the ship is juxtaposed with Hamnet and his studies) as well as devastating sameness, like how the “doctors” treated the disease (a dead toad prescribed by the physician in Warwickshire and the massive ineptitude of the ship’s physician).

As the narrative is already so heavy with emotion, this chapter allows for break. And though cutting the chapter would do nothing to change the circumstances of Judith, Hamnet and Agnes, I was left richer to the experience of the O’Farrell’s characters by reading it.

Maureen Rouhi

The plague chapter gives the novel breathing space. Up to this point, the story is confined to the households of Agnes, her brother, and her in-laws. The scenes are in different parts of the houses or the outdoors, where there is so much toiling to keep up with daily life. It’s almost claustrophobic, relieved only when the story sometimes ventures out to town. The chapter on the plague is a welcome zooming out to the wider world, beyond Warwickshire, beyond England, beyond Europe. The chapter also puts the novel in a broader historical context. It tells us what else was going on in 1596.

Removing this chapter would not have affected the narrative plot. What happens in Warwickshire will go on. Without this chapter though, we would have gone from the

grueling birth of the first baby straight to the anxious anticipation of a second pregnancy. This chapter is a graceful—if not essential—interlude.

Renay Regardie

This chapter really grabbed me. Although at first, I was thinking, *Why is this here? What's this got to do with the story?* We know Hamnet dies, did we need all of this tracking data? As we are dealing with a Pandemic here, and there has been so much information/conjecture about its spread, this has such relevance to the life we are living today. In the story, there is no indication that Bubonic Plague is rampant in the Stratford area, so I was wondering why it suddenly cropped up here, hosting in Judith. This was a great explanation, and frankly, rather scary when we think about how deathly contagious diseases may spread. So I think this chapter was critical to the overall impact of the book at this time. However, if we were still in “normal times” (do we even remember what that means) I don't think the impact would have been as great with me. I might have been satisfied with a short paragraph as to the transmission.

Taralee Morgan

The chapter about how the plague travels from a glassmaker in Venice to Judith increased the sadness of the sickness and death the family would experience. It illustrates that at times a person's unfortunate circumstances can be caused by simple chance and the unseen actions of others. It reminded me of the saying, “There but for the grace of God go I.” How many of us have come close to catastrophe except for one small decision that changed our fate? How many of us ended up in a tragic situation because of one small decision we made unknowingly? After reading the chapter, my mind filled up with “what ifs.” What if Judith hadn't seen the box or didn't insist on opening it? What if the dressmaker had said no to Judith and opened it herself? What if Judith went to the dressmaker the day before? This chapter emphasized the innocence of all the plague's victims. It also added to the suspense before the death occurred and another layer of story by placing the events within the larger world. The story had more depth because of this chapter. In this case, the author was correct to break the rules.

Susan I. Morse

The chapter in question adds ballast to the story with a plausible route of the plague and serves to move the story forward. Within the plot this chapter reflects the complexity of family dynamics. The sub-title, “A novel of the plague,” refers to the literal plague and a story about a family plagued by conflicts.

The cabin boy's attraction to the monkey (a creature unknown to him from the natural world) in a land far from his own mirrors the girl, Agnes, of the forest with a

kestral on her arm and her soon-to-be husband, the wayward son who was emotionally estranged from his family and found Agnes' allure irresistible.

The conflicted family is covered in tiny pawmarks (like Agnes' husband's body, in her mind's eye, p.260) of distrust, jealousy, greed, hatefulness, indifference, and smoldering anger. Agnes and "the glover's boy" recognize each other from their first meeting. The core of their love, respect for each other and fiery determination, embrace and bind their hearts and souls.

Skillfully placed midway in the novel, the intricacies in the journey of the plague from Alexandria to Warwickshire, the variety of people and animals during the odyssey and the reflections of the family dilemmas in this chapter enhances the brilliance of Maggie O'Farrell's masterpiece."

Jo Balistreri

When I first read *Hamnet*, I felt the plague chapter took me out of the book. And since the book was already a heavy read, a slow read, I would have said cut the chapter.

Upon rereading *Hamnet*, that choice would have been incorrect. Maggie O'Farrell is a very thoughtful writer. That chapter was there for a reason. The plague—and this chapter—is the lynch pin of the book; the plague has all the power. It can and does change lives unlike any other character. The plague chapter shows how the disease travels. The plague jumps countries, crosses oceans, and is not particular. No one is immune. There is no cure.

Agnes who could cure the entire town could not cure her own child. Her purpose for living has been destroyed. What is her talent worth, her second sight, her knowledge of plants and their cures if it could not save her child? The plague also robbed her of her identity. Nothing is worth living for in the final test. Shakespeare's theaters are shut down. There is no one to see a play.

Hamnet is dead. Judith will remain frail for the rest of her life.

Some of those who live will find ways to remake their lives. Many will not. The plague is the great destroyer. All life is subject to its whims. It stops for no one. That chapter made all this clear. The mention of the plague throughout the book did not carry this potency. It's brilliant the way O-Farrell knew this—and the way that chapter is just another chapter. Unwanted, slow, Innocuous. It is the way of the plague. Don't underestimate either.

"...that chapter is just another chapter. Unwanted, slow, Innocuous. It is the way of the plague. Don't underestimate either."

—*Jo Balistreri*