

HAMNET, *By Maggie O'Farrell*

Review by Bettany Hughes

Imagination is time-travel: It allows us to be in many times at once. Nothing is more true of Maggie O'Farrell's Hamnet. On the face of it this is a story of late 16th century England - and in many, finely-wrought ways, it is utterly and specifically about now. Dreaming the loss of Shakespeare's son Hamnet (interchangeable with the name Hamlet for Elizabethans), who died of an unrecorded cause age 11, the luscious, zesty, possibly perfect prose could be describing Covid-struck Warwickshire. As Hamnet's twin sister Judith is in decline, the mindfulness of panic is brilliantly observed. Shakespeare's wife Agnes - the woman we call Anne Hathaway - fights fear, and fear of fear itself, to save her child. Her mission has an absolute acuity of purpose. There is too the quiet and comprehensible selfishness of common crisis, Shakespeare's daughter hopes there is a plague so her father will come home from London; his son is worried that the discovery of a horror has prevented him from chopping logs, distracted as he was by the fact his sister seems to be dying.

The writing is saturated with understanding, and describes woodlands, births, writing, tokens of love that feel so real, this is a book you yearn to read to return to reality. An inverted life and times of Shakespeare - told through the lives and times of those around him - is also a place where the veil between natural and supernatural worlds is thin: Where there is a kind of ecstasy found by those in contact with the natural world (Agnes and her brother Bartholomew), and a bigoted superstition of these enlightened earth-lovers from the Elizabethan equivalent of net-curtain-twitchers. There are too pre-echoes of other Shakespearian themes, cross-dressing, twins, traders from the east, tragedy.

Some have railed against O'Farrell's presentation of Shakespeare's father, John, as an abuser. But although John's 'coiled fury' might make the historian in me quail a little - it lands the need to describe domestic abuse as a constant for so many across so much time. And, clearly having done her research on the page and in the field, hard history is delivered elegantly here. Shakespeare did live and love and lose through his own pandemic. When plague closed the theatres in London, Shakespeare, (and many other writers), turned a hand to other art forms to make ends meet - the narrative poem Venus and Adonis was such a venture. Erotic and titillating, it sold like hot cakes - and was so ardently thumbed that very few copies of the original edition survive. Creativity proves itself to be an instinctive response to crisis. And as Hamnet shows, with lacerating pathos, how the creative process can heal.

There is something deeply historical here - famously the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In the afterword we hear that the genesis of this book came when O'Farrell wondered why Shakespeare's work never refers to the plague although he lived through it.

O'Farrell's writing is packed with marvel and menace. Agnes collects impressions as 'a wool-gatherer gathers horads of wool' - one can't but help feel this is autobiography. Hamnet is a rule-book in clear-sightedness, and an historical escape into now.