

Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell

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. How do Agnes's special gifts affect her reputation throughout the town and her connection to her husband? Consider especially the way she feels the space between a person's index finger and thumb, where a person's ability, their reach, their essence can be gleaned, and how she uses this part of the body to connect with different people in the novel.
3. 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. What makes Susanna's birth different from that of the twins? How does this manifest itself in each of the children's relationships with their mother?
5. Throughout the book, Susanna expresses frustration with the rumors about her mother and her strange ways, which is exacerbated after Hamnet's death. Why do you think this daughter still takes up her mother's work in the garden and caring for the house?
6. Discuss the lineage of mothers within the two families in the novel vis-à-vis the expectations of women at the time. How do Mary, Joan, and Agnes differ in their approach to women's work and rearing children?
7. The fathers in the book—John, Hamnet's father, and King Hamlet—all create distance between themselves and their families. How does this affect their children and lineage overall?
8. The plague is an insidious, but familiar, presence for the inhabitants of England during the time of the novel. How is its arrival marked and felt by the families we follow?
9. Hamnet's death comes as a shock to all in his family. How do the twins' similarities affect the family's ability to grieve and heal?
10. 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?
11. Agnes is very sensitive to her environment, including when she moves between homes. What information do the three houses she inhabits tell her about what will happen there?