



Discussion Questions: *Hamnet*

“Words, Words, Words” Book Club—December 2020

1. What are your first impressions of the novel? Were there any passages that stuck out to you?
2. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story of this family primarily from the perspective of Agnes, as opposed to her famous husband? What do you think is gained (or lost) by this choice? Why do you think she chooses not to name him?
3. Little is known about the real Agnes (or Anne) Hathaway. What did you like—or dislike—about her character? Why do you think the author chose to make her a healer and herbalist?
4. What did you think of the relationship between Agnes her husband? Were they a good match? How does the novel’s portrayal of this marriage differ from others you have seen?
5. Shakespeare has been portrayed in popular culture countless times—including in last month’s Book Club selection. What did you notice about O’Farrell’s version of him? Did anything surprise you or cause you to think differently about such an immensely popular figure?
6. In this novel, Shakespeare’s family seems to have little interest or understanding about his theatrical career and his writing. Discuss the significance of this choice.
7. The author visited Stratford-upon-Avon and did extensive research of what is known about the Shakespeare family in order to authentically portray domestic life in small town Tudor England. How successful do you think she was? Are there any examples, descriptions, or moments that stuck out to you?
8. Why do you think the author included the chapter detailing how the “pestilence” reached the Shakespeare family? What did you think of it?
9. Maggie O’Farrell said the novel was inspired by the desire to honor the often-overlooked Hamnet Shakespeare. Do you think she did this successfully? What did you think of the choice to have Hamnet “switch places” with Judith?
10. Discuss the ways in which O’Farrell depicts the experience and emotion of grief. How did you experience it as you were reading? What struck you about the way she depicted Agnes’ emotional and physical state? Did you relate to her or the other members of the family?
11. At the end of the novel, Agnes watches a premiere performance of *Hamlet*, with Shakespeare playing the Ghost of Hamlet’s father. The author chooses to end with the line, “Remember me.” Why do you think she chose this, out of all the text in *Hamlet*? What do you think she is trying to convey?