

## Room to Read Book Group - report by Kate Bailey (May 2023)

The historical novel, 'Hamnet' by Maggie O'Farrell, a fictional account of the life of Shakespeare's wife and the death of his son in 1596, has received national acclaim and awards such as the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020. The paperback cover reviews are effusive (*'staggeringly beautiful and unbearably poignant, radiant, a thing of shimmering wonder'*)! Our book group mostly admired and applauded the book; one or two of us thought the lyrical writing was over-wrought.

Hamnet is an eleven-year-old twin, his sister Judith falls ill as the story opens, and as the boy searches frantically for someone to help her, O'Farrell's absorbing portraits of the unexpectedly absent people in and around their gloomy home draw the reader in. The convincing descriptions of large families living in cramped conditions in Tudor times reminded one reader of the present-day Shambles in York.

Hamnet's mother Agnes is a countrywoman, brought up to marry a farmer, now away from the town gathering medicinal herbs, delays her return to coax swarming bees back into their hives. Pivotal moments tend to be a central theme of O'Farrell's essays and novels. Hamnet's life turns on this delay; his mother reflects "it will lie at her very core, for the rest of her life" as she tries to make sense of her grief.

Shakespeare is never mentioned by name, he is 'the Latin tutor, her husband, the father'. His relationship with Agnes (Anne) starts as a scandalous love story. She is a strong-willed young woman - gossips say she is fierce and savage and "capable of souring milk by touching it" - and determined to marry him. He claims to love his children but becomes a consistently absent father, two days ride away in London writing and producing his plays.

Agnes is a highly perceptive person, absorbed in nature, protective of her family; she becomes a natural healer but can't save her precious son. Much of the dialogue takes place in her head; the scenes of walking to their wedding, the workings of the glove factory, laying the child out for burial, are moving and evocative. But her husband rarely communicates his feelings and only at the very end does she come to an understanding of his reasons for writing the play 'Hamlet'.

The group agreed that the book would be hard to read for anyone who has lost a child; it moved some readers to tears though others thought the author was being self-indulgent. Overall, it is highly recommended - scoring 5 for a book group and 4.5 for a friend.