

## Discussion Questions for Hamnet by Maggie O'Farrell

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. Agnes is presented as quite a strange woman who paid little attention to convention and respectability. She cured lots of people's illnesses with herbs and tinctures. How did this conform with or differ to your own perception of Anne Hathaway?
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 relationship with their mother?
5. Throughout the book, Susanna expresses a 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, caring for the house, and teaching of Judith, in spite of these feelings? What do you expect her prospects of marriage are, as she reflects on them at the end of the novel?
6. Discuss the lineage of mothers within the two families in the novel vis-a-vis the expectations of women at the time. How do Mary, Joan, and Agnes differ in their approach to women's work in the world and rearing children, especially their daughters? How do Agnes's insights, especially her vision of two children at the foot of her deathbed, affect her decisions as a mother? Consider her thoughts during the birth of the twins, when she fears one of her children will die: "She will place herself between them and the door leading out, and she will stand there, teeth bared, blocking the way" (202).
7. The fathers in the book – John, Hamnet's father and King Hamlet – all create a physical and/or emotional distance between themselves and their families. How does this affect their children and lineage overall? Consider the ultimate future of the Shakespeare line (in a bodily sense and otherwise).
8. Why do you think William Shakespeare goes unnamed in the novel? From how he is described -as a Latin tutor, with a diminutive stature, et cetera – would you have recognized him as the great playwright without knowing this was his family's story?

9. What are the consequences of Agnes's encouraging her husband to go to London? Do you think she still regrets the decision at the end of the book as she watching *Hamlet* onstage?
10. What is Agnes's interpretation of her husband's rationale behind playing the part of old King Hamlet's ghost? Were you convinced by Agnes's reading of events? If not, how did this affect your enjoyment of the story?
11. The last line of Maggie O'Farrell's novel is "Remember Me". This is said by Shakespeare who is acting the role of the ghost from the play *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet* (the play) this line is often interpreted as the ghost of dead King Hamlet (who has been murdered by his brother) asking that young Hamlet seek revenge. Why does Maggie O'Farrell conclude her story with this line?

*Discussion Questions from Book Companion.com and from the publisher.*