

Hamnet was William Shakespeare's only son, but he died in 1596 at the age of 11.

Maggie O'Farrell's new novel, *Hamnet*, imagines a story in which a young Latin tutor—penniless and bullied by a violent father—falls in love with an extraordinary, eccentric young woman. They marry and start a family in Stratford-upon-Avon. But as the husband's career on the London stage is taking off, his beloved young son succumbs to sudden fever.

In this excerpt though, it is not Hamnet who is ill, but his twin sister, Judith. He is trying to find help.

The door is swung open and the narrow, vexed face of a woman appears around it. "Whatever are you doing?" she cries, shaking a cloth at him, as if to waft him away, like an insect. "That's a racket loud enough to wake the dead. Be off with you."

She goes to shut the door but Hamnet leaps forward. "No," he says. "Please. I'm sorry, madam. I need the physician. We need him. My sister—she is unwell. Can he come to us? Can he come now?"

The woman holds the door firm in her reddened hand but looks at Hamnet with care, with attention, as if reading the seriousness of the problem in his features. "He's not here," she says eventually. "He's with a patient."

Hamnet has to swallow, hard. "When will he be back, if you please?"

The pressure on the door is lessening. He steps one foot into the house, leaving the other behind him.

"I couldn't say." She looks him up and down, at the encroaching foot in her hallway. "What ails your sister?"

"I don't know." He tries to think back to Judith, the way she looked as she lay on the blankets, her eyes closed, her skin flushed and yet pale. "She has a fever. She has taken to her bed."

The woman frowns. "A fever? Has she buboes?"

"Buboes?"

"Lumps. Under the skin. On her neck, under her arms."

Hamnet stares at her, at the small pleat of skin between her brows, at the rim of her cap, how it has rubbed a raw patch beside her ear, at the wiry coils of hair escaping at the back. He thinks of the word “buboes,” its vaguely vegetal overtones, how its bulging sound mimics the thing it describes. A cold fear rinses down through his chest, encasing his heart in an instant, crackling frost.

The woman’s frown deepens. She places her hand in the centre of Hamnet’s chest and propels him back, out of her house.

“Go,” she says, her face pinched. “Go home. Now. Leave.” She goes to close the door but then, through the narrowest crack, says, not unkindly, “I will ask the physician to call. I know who you are. You’re the glover’s boy, aren’t you? The grandson. From Henley Street. I will ask him to come by your house, when he returns. Go now. Don’t stop on the way back.” As an afterthought, she adds, “God speed to you.”

He runs back. The world seems more glaring, the people louder, the streets longer, the colour of the sky an invasive, glancing blue. The horse still stands at its cart; the dog is now curled up on a doorstep. Buboes, he thinks again. He has heard the word before. He knows what it means, what it denotes.

Surely not, he is thinking, as he turns into his street. It cannot be. It cannot. That—he will not name it, he will not allow the word to form, even inside his head—hasn’t been known in this town for years.

Someone will be home, he knows, by the time he gets to the front door. By the time he opens it. By the time he crosses the threshold. By the time he calls out, to someone, anyone. There will be an answer. Someone will be there.

Unbeknown to him, he passed the maid, both his grandparents and his older sister on his trip to the physician’s house.

His grandmother, Mary, had been coming along an alleyway, down near the river, making deliveries, her stick held out to ward off the advances of a particularly peevish cockerel, Susanna behind her. Susanna had been brought along to carry Mary’s basket of gloves—deerskin, kidskin, squirrel-lined, wool-lined, embroidered, plain. “I don’t for the life of me know why,” Mary had been saying, as Hamnet

flashed unseen past the end of the alley, “you cannot at the very least look people in the eye when they greet you. These are some of your grandfather’s highest paying customers and a shred of courtesy wouldn’t go amiss. Now I do really believe that . . .” Susanna had trailed in her wake, rolling her eyes, lugging the basket filled with gloves. Like severed hands, she was thinking, as she let her grandmother’s voice be blotted out by the sound of her own sigh, by the sight of a slice of sky cutting through the building tops.

John, Hamnet’s grandfather, had been among the men outside the guildhall. He had left the parlour and his calculations while Hamnet had been upstairs with Judith, and had been standing with his back to Hamnet as the boy ran for the physician. If the boy had turned his head as he passed, he would have seen his grandfather pushing his way into this group, leaning towards the other men, gripping their reluctant arms, urging them, teasing them, exhorting them to come with him to a tavern.

John hadn’t been invited to this meeting but had heard that it was happening so had come along in the hope of catching the men before they dispersed. He wants nothing more than to reinstate himself as a man of consequence and influence, to regain the status he once had. He can do it, he knows he can. All he needs is the ear of these men, whom he has known for years, who know him, who could vouch for his industry, his loyalty to this town. Or, if nothing else, a pardon or a blind eye from the guild and the town authorities. He was once bailiff, and then a high alderman; he used to sit in the front pew of the church and wear a scarlet robe. Have these men forgotten that? How can they not have invited him to this meeting? He used to have influence—he used to rule over them all. He used to be someone. And now he is reduced to living on whatever coin his eldest can send back from London (and what an infuriating youth he had been, hanging about the market square, squandering his time; who would have thought he would amount to anything?).

John’s business still thrives, after a fashion, because people will always need gloves, and if these men know of his secret dealings in the wool trade, his summons for not attending church and fines for dumping waste in the street, so be it. John can take in his stride their disapproval, their fines and their demands, their snide mutterings about the ruination of his family, the exclusion from guild meetings. His house is one of the finest in the town: there is always that. What John cannot bear is that not one of them will take a drink with him, will break bread at his table, will warm themselves at his hearth. Outside the guildhall, the men avoid his eye, continue their conversation. They don’t listen to his prepared speech about the reliability of the glove trade, about his successes, his triumphs, his invitations

to a tavern, to eat dinner at his house. They nod distantly; they turn away. One pats his arm, says, aye, John, aye.

So he goes to the tavern alone. Just for a while. Nothing wrong with a man's own company. He will sit here, in the half-light, like that of dusk, a candle stub on the table before him, and watch as stray flies circle and circle in its light.

Judith is lying on the bed and the walls appear to be bulging inwards, then flexing back. In, out, in, out. The posts around her parents' bed, in the corner, writhe and twist like serpents; the ceiling above her ripples, like the surface of a lake; her hands seem at once too close and then very far away. The line where the white of the plasterwork meets the dark wood of the joists shimmers and refracts. Her face and chest are hot, burning, covered with slick sweat, but her feet are ice-cold. She shivers, once, twice, a full convulsion, and sees the walls bend towards her, closing in, then pulling away. To block out the walls, the serpentine bedposts, the moving ceiling, she shuts her eyes.

As soon as she does so, she is elsewhere. In many places at once. She is walking through a meadow, holding tight to a hand. The hand belongs to her sister, Susanna. It has long fingers and a mole on the fourth knuckle. It does not want to be held: the fingers aren't curled around Judith's, but kept stiff and straight. Judith has to grip with all her might for it not to slide from her. Susanna takes great steps through the long grass of the meadow and with each one her hand jerks in Judith's. If Judith lets go, she may sink beneath the surface of the grass. She may be lost, never to be found. It is important—crucial—for her to keep hold of this hand. She must never let go. Ahead of them, she knows, is her brother. Hamnet's head bobs in and out of the grass. His hair is the colour of ripe wheat. He bounds through the meadow, ahead of them, like a hare, like a comet.

Then Judith is in a crowd. It is night-time, cold; the glow of lanterns punctuates the freezing dark. She thinks it is the Candlemas fair. She is in and also above a crowd, on a pair of strong shoulders. Her father. Her legs grip his neck and he holds her by each ankle; she has buried her hands in his hair. Thick dark hair he has, like Susanna's. She uses the smallest of her fingers to tap the silver hoop in his left ear. He laughs at this—she feels the rumble of it, like thunder, pass from his body to hers—and shakes his head to make the earring rattle against her fingernail. Her mother is there, and Hamnet and Susanna, and her grandmother. Judith is the one her father has chosen to ride on his shoulders: just her.

There is a great flaring of light. Braziers are bright and fierce around a wooden platform, raised to the level of herself, there, on her father's shoulders. On the platform are two men, dressed in gold and red clothing, with many tassels and ribbons; they have tall hats on their heads and their faces are white as chalk with blackened eyebrows and reddened lips. One lets out a high, keening cry and hurls a golden ball at the other; he flips himself on to his hands and catches the ball in his feet. Her father lets go of her ankles to applaud and Judith clutches at his head. She is terrified she might fall, tip back, off his shoulders and into the seething, restive crowd that smells of potato peelings, of wet dog, of sweat and chestnuts. The man's cry has set fear in her heart. She doesn't like the braziers; she doesn't like the men's jagged eyebrows; she doesn't like any of this at all. She begins, quietly, to weep, the tears coursing from her cheeks to rest like pearls in her father's hair.

Excerpted from *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell. Copyright © 2020 by Maggie O'Farrell.