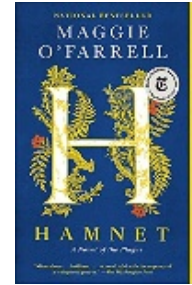


# Maggie O'Farrell Hamnet



## Excerpt Chapter One

A boy is coming down a flight of stairs. The passage is narrow and twists back on itself.

He takes each step slowly, sliding himself along the wall, his boots meeting each tread with a thud.

Near the bottom, he pauses for a moment, looking back the way he has come. Then, suddenly resolute, he leaps the final three stairs, as is his habit. He tumbles as he lands, falling to his knees on the flagstone floor.

It is a close, windless day in late summer, and the downstairs room is slashed by long strips of light. The sun glowers at him from outside, the windows latticed slabs of yellow, set into the plaster.

He gets up, rubbing his legs. He looks one way, up the stairs; he looks the other, unable to decide which way he should turn.

The room is empty, the fire ruminating in its grate, orange embers below soft, spiralling smoke. His injured kneecaps throb in time with his heartbeat. He stands with one hand resting on the latch of the door to the stairs, the scuffed leather tip of his boot raised, poised for motion, for flight. His hair, light-coloured, almost gold, rises up from his brow in tufts.

There is no one here.

He sighs, drawing in the warm, dusty air and moves through the room, out of the front door and on to the street. The noise of barrows, horses, vendors, people calling to each other, a man hurling a sack from an upper window doesn't reach him. He wanders along the front of the house and into the neighbouring doorway.

The smell of his grandparents' home is always the same: a mix of woodsmoke, polish, leather, wool. It is similar yet indefinitely different from the adjoining two-roomed apartment, built by his grandfather in a narrow gap next to the larger house, where he lives with his mother and sisters. Sometimes he cannot understand why this might be. The two dwellings are, after all, separated by only a thin wattled wall but the air in each place is of a different ilk, a different scent, a different temperature.

This house whistles with draughts and eddies of air, with the tapping and hammering of his grandfather's workshop, with the raps and calls of customers at the window, with the noise and welter of the courtyard out the back, with the sound of his uncles coming and going.

But not today. The boy stands in the passageway, listening for signs of occupation. He can see from here that the workshop, to his right, is empty, the stools at the benches vacant, the tools idle on the counters, a tray of abandoned gloves, like handprints, left out for all to see. The vending window is shut and bolted tight. There is no one in the dining hall, to his left. A stack of napkins is piled on the long table, an unlit candle, a heap of feathers. Nothing more.

He calls out, a cry of greeting, a questioning sound. Once, twice, he makes this noise. Then he cocks his head, listening for a response.

Nothing. Just the creaking of beams expanding gently in the sun, the sigh of air passing under doors, between rooms, the swish of linen drapes, the crack of the fire, the indefinable noise of a house at rest, empty.

His fingers tighten around the iron of the door handle. The heat of the day, even this late, causes sweat to express itself from the skin of his brow, down his back. The pain in his knees sharpens, twinges, then fades again.

The boy opens his mouth. He calls the names, one by one, of all the people who live here, in this house. His grandmother. The maid. His uncles. His aunt. The apprentice. His grandfather. The boy tries them all, one after another. For a moment, it crosses his mind to call his father's name, to shout for him, but his father is miles and hours and days away, in London, where the boy has never been.

But where, he would like to know, are his mother, his older sister, his grandmother, his uncles? Where is the maid? Where is his grandfather, who tends not to leave the house by day, who is usually to be found in the workshop, harrying his apprentice or reckoning his takings in a ledger? Where is everyone? How can both houses be empty?

He moves along the passageway. At the door to the workshop, he stops. He throws a quick glance over his shoulder, to make sure nobody is there, then steps inside.

His grandfather's glove workshop is a place he is rarely allowed to enter. Even to pause in the doorway is forbidden. Don't stand there idling, his grandfather will roar. Can't a man do an honest day's work without people stopping to gawk at him? Have you nothing better to do than loiter there catching flies?

Hamnet's mind is quick: he has no trouble understanding the schoolmasters' lessons. He can grasp the logic and sense of what he is being told, and he can memorise readily. Recalling verbs and grammar and tenses and rhetoric and numbers and calculations comes to him with an ease that can, on occasion, attract the envy of other boys. But his is a mind also easily distracted. A cart going past in the street during a Greek lesson will draw his attention away from his slate to wonderings as to where the cart might be going and what it could be carrying and how about that time his uncle gave him and his

sisters a ride on a haycart, how wonderful that was, the scent and prick of new-cut hay, the wheels tugged along to the rhythm of the tired mare's hoofs. More than twice in recent weeks he has been whipped at school for not paying attention (his grandmother has said if it happens once more, just once, she will send word of it to his father). The schoolmasters cannot understand it. Hamnet learns quickly, can recite by rote, but he will not keep his mind on his work.

The noise of a bird in the sky can make him cease speaking, mid-utterance, as if the very heavens have struck him deaf and dumb at a stroke. The sight of a person entering a room, out of the corner of his eye, can make him break off whatever he is doing – eating, reading, copying out his schoolwork – and gaze at them as if they have some important message just for him. He has a tendency to slip the bounds of the real, tangible world around him and enter another place. He will sit in a room in body, but in his head he is somewhere else, someone else, in a place known only to him. Wake up, child, his grandmother will shout, snapping her fingers at him. Come back, his older sister, Susanna, will hiss, flicking his ear. Pay attention, his schoolmasters will yell. Where did you go? Judith will be whispering to him, when he finally re-enters the world, when he comes to, when he glances around to find that he is back, in his house, at his table, surrounded by his family, his mother eyeing him, half smiling, as if she knows exactly where he's been.

In the same way, now, walking into the forbidden space of the glove workshop, Hamnet has lost track of what he is meant to be doing. He has momentarily slipped free of his moorings, of the fact that Judith is unwell and needs someone to care for her, that he is meant to be finding their mother or grandmother or anyone else who might know what to do.

Skins hang from a rail. Hamnet knows enough to recognise the rust-red spotted hide of a deer, the delicate and supple kidskin, the

smaller pelts of squirrels, the coarse and bristling boarskin. As he moves nearer to them, the skins start to rustle and stir on their hangings, as if some life might yet be left in them, just a little, just enough for them to hear him coming. Hamnet extends a finger and touches the goat hide. It is unaccountably soft, like the brush of river weed against his legs when he swims on hot days. It sways gently to and fro, legs splayed, stretched out, as if in flight, like a bird or a ghoul.

Hamnet turns, surveys the two seats at the workbench: the padded leather one worn smooth by the rub of his grandfather's breeches, and the hard wooden stool for Ned, the apprentice. He sees the tools, suspended from hooks on the wall above the workbench. He is able to identify those for cutting, those for stretching, those for pinning and stitching. He sees that the narrower of the glove stretchers – used for women – is out of place, left on the bench where Ned works with bent head and curved shoulders and anxious, nimble fingers. Hamnet knows that his grandfather needs little provocation to yell at the boy, perhaps worse, so he picks up the glove stretcher, weighing its warm wooden heft, and replaces it on its hook.

He is just about to slide out the drawer where the twists of thread are kept, and the boxes of buttons – carefully, carefully, because he knows the drawer will squeak – when a noise, a slight shifting or scraping, reaches his ears.

Within seconds, Hamnet has darted out, along the passageway and into the yard. His task returns to him. What is he doing, fiddling in the workshop? His sister is unwell: he is meant to be finding someone to help.

He bangs open, one by one, the doors to the cookhouse, the brewhouse, the washhouse. All of them empty, their interiors dark and cool. He calls out again, slightly hoarse this time, his throat scraped with the shouting. He leans against the cookhouse wall and kicks at a nutshell, sending it skittering across the yard. He is utterly confounded to be so alone.

Someone ought to be here; someone always is here. Where can they be? What must he do? How can they all be out? How can his mother and grandmother not be in the house, as they usually are, heaving open the doors of the oven, stirring a pot over the fire? He stands in the yard, looking about himself, at the door to the passageway, at the door to the brewhouse, at the door to their apartment. Where should he go? Whom should he call on for help? And where is everyone?

Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry. Him standing here, at the back of the house, calling for the people who had fed him, swaddled him, rocked him to sleep, held his hand as he took his first steps, taught him to use a spoon, to blow on broth before he ate it, to take care crossing the street, to let sleeping dogs lie, to swill out a cup before drinking, to stay away from deep water.

It will lie at her very core, for the rest of her life.

## Second Excerpt

### Chapter One continued

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.

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