

book club questions

HAMNET

- Was Hamnet an easy or hard read for you?
- Were you familiar with Hamlet before reading Hamnet?
- What do you know of Shakespeare's life outside of this novel?
- What did you know about "The Black Death" prior to reading?
- If you read both, compare and contrast Hamlet and Hamnet.
- Hamnet and Hamlet are said to be interchangeable names. Still, why do you think Shakespeare chose a slightly different name for his play?
- Why do you think O'Farrell chose the title Hamnet?
- O'Farrell stated there are "scant historical facts" known about the Shakespeare family (thus, much of her novel is speculation). Does this change your opinion on the contents of Hamnet?
- The true cause of death of Hamnet is unknown. Does this change your opinion on the contents of Hamnet?
- Do you think any of the accounts in Hamnet were likely to have occurred as written?
- What genre would you describe Hamnet as: based on a true story, historical fiction, literary fiction, or something else?
- Shakespeare never refers to "The Black Death" (The Plague) in his writing. What do you make of this?
- Shakespeare is only referred to as the "Latin tutor" and similarly general names in Hamnet. Why do you think O'Farrell made this choice?
- Did you like O'Farrell's unique writing style, overflowing with detailed descriptions?

- In Hamnet, the chapters about the past are longer and the chapters about the present are shorter. Do you think there is significance in this pacing?
- Did you like or dislike the dual timelines in Hamnet?
- Discuss the use of foreshadowing in premonitions in Hamnet.
- Discuss the theme of motherhood that was woven heavily throughout Hamnet.
- Discuss the theme of childbirth that was woven heavily throughout Hamnet.
- How were Agnes's childbirth experiences similar and different?
- Discuss the significance of Agnes being a healer.
- Discuss the significance of Shakespeare's difficult relationship with his father.
- Describe Agnes's personality type.
- How were life and death scenes juxtaposed in Hamnet?
- Discuss the similarities and differences among the mother figures in Hamnet.
- Given that Hamnet's father is a famous figure, why do you think O'Farrell focused so much more heavily on his mother's experiences?
- Were apples meant to be symbolic in their use during the scene involving the physical relationship between Hamnet's parents?
- What caused Agnes and William Shakespeare to fall in love?
- How do Agnes and William Shakespeare show parental love similarly and/or differently?
- Discuss the sibling bond between Hamnet and Judith.
- Discuss the differences between Bartholemew and William Shakespeare.
- Eliza's note to William Shakespeare about Judith's illness is handwritten in the print copy. Why do you think this choice was made?
- Discuss the irony in Agnes being a healer?
- Discuss the irony in the death of Hamnet versus Judith.
- Why do you think O'Farrell chose for both Judith and Hamnet to become ill?
- Judith's illness occurs over far more pages than Hamnet's. Why do you think O'Farrell made this choice?
- Why do you think O'Farrell chose not to have Hamnet's father present for his death?
- Discuss the theme of grief in Hamnet.
- Discuss how each member of the family coped with grief.

- The events of Hamnet occurred hundreds of years ago. How is grief similar and different today?
- Did the members of the Shakespeare family have regrets and/or guilt about Hamnet's death?
- In the beginning of Part II, King Hamlet is quoted, asking for his story to be told. Discuss the significance of this.
- Discuss the changes to the Shakespeares' home after the death of Hamnet.
- Discuss the changes in the Shakespeare family after the death of Hamnet.
- Why do you think O'Farrell had Joan deliver the news about Shakespeare's play?
- Discuss the final sentence of Hamnet.
- O'Farrell has said she wrote Hamnet to give a voice to an overlooked person in Shakespearean history. Did she do his (largely unknown) story justice?
- O'Farrell is no stranger to writing about death -- her book I Am, I Am, I Am is about seventeen brushes she herself had with it. Do you think this is coincidental?
- Compare and contrast "The Black Death" (pestilence) with COVID-19.
- What do you recommend to read after Hamnet? (I recommend Hamlet; I Am, I Am, I Am; and Lincoln in the Bardo.)
- The last line of Maggie O'Farrell's novel is 'Remember Me'. This is said by Shakespeare who is acting the role of 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 seeks revenge. Why does Maggie O'Farrell conclude her story with this line?