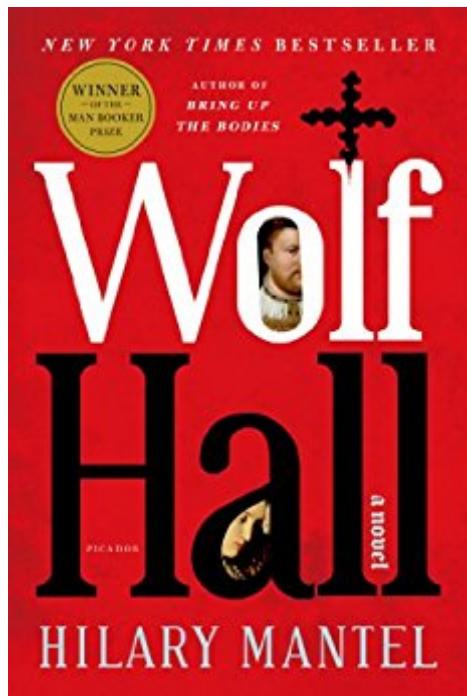


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Wolf Hall: A Novel



Synopsis

In the ruthless arena of King Henry VIII's court, only one man dares to gamble his life to win the king's favor and ascend to the heights of political power. England in the 1520s is a heartbeat from disaster. If the king dies without a male heir, the country could be destroyed by civil war. Henry VIII wants to annul his marriage of twenty years, and marry Anne Boleyn. The pope and most of Europe opposes him. The quest for the king's freedom destroys his adviser, the brilliant Cardinal Wolsey, and leaves a power vacuum. Into this impasse steps Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell is a wholly original man, a charmer and a bully, both idealist and opportunist, astute in reading people and a demon of energy: he is also a consummate politician, hardened by his personal losses, implacable in his ambition. But Henry is volatile: one day tender, one day murderous. Cromwell helps him break the opposition, but what will be the price of his triumph? In inimitable style, Hilary Mantel presents a picture of a half-made society on the cusp of change, where individuals fight or embrace their fate with passion and courage. With a vast array of characters, overflowing with incident, the novel re-creates an era when the personal and political are separated by a hairbreadth, where success brings unlimited power but a single failure means death.

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Customer Reviews

Movies based on books rarely live up to the magic of the book. That's not a condemnation of movies or the movie industry, but rather a reflection of greatest source of magic of all—man's imagination. No reality ever lives up to my best fantasies. Normally, I read a book first and then—if a subsequent film production gets rave reviews—I'll see the movie. Occasionally, the movie will live magnificently up to all my wildest expectations; *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a good example of movie-from-book perfection. And occasionally, rarely, a movie will surpass the book. I thought *The Graduate* a mediocre book, but the movie was and always will be a classic portrait of a particular time and place. Which brings us to *Wolf Hall*. I'm not sure how and why I missed the book. It won a Man-Booker Prize (Great Britain's equivalent of the Pulitzer, though over there they might say the Pulitzer is America's equivalent of the Booker) and then author Hilary Mantel turned right around and won another Man-Booker for the sequel to *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*. That is, I believe, the only time Booker prizes have ever been awarded to a novel and then its sequel. Not only had I missed the book(s), but at first, when I saw the trailers on PBS for the film version, I wasn't all that intrigued. *Downton Abbey* had just finished its last episode of the season and it was hard to imagine anything equaling that. So, a mini-series based on Henry VIII and his wretched excesses, told from the point of view of Thomas Cromwell, one of the king's, ah, shall we say, less fastidious enablers. Ho, hum. I've read my history; I've seen *A Man for All Seasons*; been there, done that. But a Close Relative By Marriage insisted we watch, and after the first ten minutes you could have set fire to my chair and I wouldn't have left. That's how good the production was, and Mark Rylance, the British actor who stars as Thomas Cromwell, gave one of the most compelling performances I have ever seen: quiet, understated, absolutely convincing, and absolutely electrifying. So consider this also a rave review for the PBS series. (By the way, for those of you interested in historical tidbits: any great English house with "abbey" as part of its name, as in *Downton Abbey*, is so named because when Henry VIII, aided by Thomas Cromwell, took the great monasteries from the Pope, he awarded some of those lands to favored courtiers who retained the appellation "abbey.") After the second episode I galloped to my desk and ordered copies of both *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* for myself and just everybody I know, and as soon as they arrived, I dove in. Now I know why Hilary Mantel won the Man-Booker twice.

She deserves it. In case you're even more of a troglodyte than I and you've never heard of Hilary Mantel or Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies, yes, it's Henry VIII and all his unfortunate wives and all those men and women who circled around the king and his court like flies around a corpse, but! But how much do you actually know about Thomas Cromwell? Ah. That's the point. That's part of Hilary Mantel's genius: she has taken a famous and influential man about whom little is known and gone to town with him. Thomas Cromwell is one of those mysterious figures in history who beggar the imagination. Acknowledged as arguably the single most influential minister (that's minister in the political sense, not ecclesiastical) in all of English history, he seems to have sprung fully evolved out of his own imagining and will power. Even the authoritative Encyclopedia Britannica describes his origins and early life as "obscure." Probably (no one knows for certain) born around 1485; probably (no one knows for certain) born in Putney, at that time a decidedly seedy suburb of London; probably (no one knows for certain) born to a man who may have been named Cromwell, but who may have been named Smyth who was probably (no one knows for certain) a blacksmith, but who might have been a brewer or a cloth merchant or all of the above; Thomas Cromwell probably (no one knows for certain) and improbably somehow ended up in Italy early in his life; he probably (no one knows for certain) lived in the Low Countries (think Flanders, Holland, Belgium); and he was probably (no one knows for certain) somehow associated with the London Merchant Adventurers. His early history contains the qualifying words "seems," "appears," "might have," and "probably" almost more than any others. And yet, somehow, out of these inauspicious beginnings, Thomas Cromwell suddenly burst into history in 1520 as a solicitor (that's a lawyer to we simple-minded Americans) to the great and immensely powerful Cardinal Wolsey. How did a man from such meager beginnings in such a rigidly stratified society manage to catapult himself into the halls of power and the pages of history? I stumbled across an interview on the internet with Hilary Mantel, and that question is pretty much what compelled her to start her journey. So that's half the genius. The other half is Mantel's writing. To quote Rudyard Kipling: "There are nine and sixty ways of constructing tribal lays, And every single one of them is right." Doubtless very true, and who am I to question as great a writer as Rudyard Kipling? But some methods of construction are righter than others, and Hilary Mantel's writing is breathtaking. Of all the varied ways of constructing tribal lays, the one that appeals most to me is the kind where a master artist plays with his or her materials. Think Shakespeare. Think Faulkner. Think Cormac McCarthy. Think Hilary Mantel. The English language, so rich and varied, so ripe with multiple subtle meanings, lends itself to a kind of

imaginative playfulness, verbal pyrotechnics, if you like, that amaze and delight. She writes in the present tense, third person singular, which lends an urgency to her tale, but she jumps back and forth in time, sometimes in a sentence, sometimes in a paragraph, sometimes in a section, using the mnemonic device of Cromwell's memories to give us information about him and his past. But it is the oblique grace with which she tells her story that is so delightful. I will give you one example. Bring Up the Bodies, the second volume of what will eventually become Mantel's trilogy, opens with Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII out hawking. In Wolf Hall, Cromwell's daughters have died, but he cannot allow himself the luxury of grief. He lives to serve the king, and as a minister to the king he cannot indulge in such distracting luxuries as grief or rage or love or hate. Whatever he might feel or want must be subsumed in service to the throne. So in "Falcons," the opening chapter of Bring Up the Bodies, Cromwell and Henry are sitting their horses and watching their falcons, and a lesser, more pedestrian, writer might have opened the book with a paragraph such as: "Cromwell watches his falcons plunging after their prey. He has named the birds after his daughters, and as he and the king watch from horseback, this one, Grace, takes her prey in silence, returning to his fist with only a slight rustling of feathers and a blood-streaked breast." And so on. Now, consider this, *Señorita*; consider how Hilary Mantel handles the opening. "His children are falling from the sky. He watches from horseback, acres of England stretching behind him; they drop, gilt-winged, each with a blood-filled gaze. Grace Cromwell hovers in thin air. She is silent when she takes her prey, silent as she glides to his fist. But the sounds she makes then, the rustle of feathers and the creak, the sigh and rattle of pinion, the small cluck-cluck from her throat, these are sounds of recognition, intimate, daughterly, almost disapproving. Her breast is gore-streaked and flesh clings to her claws." If you don't like that, you don't like chocolate cake.

Even though it happened 481 years ago, I have long nursed a grudge against Thomas Cromwell for leading the inquiry on Queen Anne Boleyn for infidelity against King Henry VIII, the findings of which resulted in her death by beheading. I thought him a foul man, indeed. Author Hilary Mantel's magnificent novel did not make me rethink Boleyn's innocence, but it did make me rethink Cromwell's guilt. Her gift is to humanize a man who seemed a historical monster. His list of persecutions just in the period this book covers is staggering: isolating former Queen Katherine and separating her from her daughter, Mary; writing Mary out of succession; ruthlessly seizing church assets; laying the ground for (or entrapment of?) Thomas More's treason which results in his beheading; and taking lethal vengeance against enemies of his former mentor, the Cardinal

Wosley. Mantel brings us to Cromwell's side by writing in the present tense from Cromwell's perspective. That immediacy turns the reader into Cromwell's confidant "page after page, we are with him as he navigates a dynamic but uncertain world" "privy to his rationale, humor, and beneficence as he toils ceaselessly on behalf of the King and his realm. Mantel furthers our intimate status by virtually eliminating dialogue tags in this work. Since we are already in the scene, the author wisely allows the conversation to flow unimpeded" "little he said, she said, they said" "orients us. This is a narrative that is lived, not read. You must pay close attention to follow this kind of writing. In effect, you must become Thomas Cromwell to Thomas Cromwell: careful, thoughtful, alert, unobtrusive and present at all times. I read this book twice. It is an astonishing work of historical fiction both for its story and storytelling style.

Wolf Hall focuses on the early career of Thomas Cromwell who was to become one of Henry VIII's top officials. Mantel takes great care in creating a plausible and likable character. This is important because as you go on to the second book Bring up the Bodies, Thomas Cromwell is also revealed as efficient hatchet man for Henry VIII. The book is rich in historical details about how people lived, their houses, their social relationships etc. I found this very interesting. As Cromwell prospered, his household expanded but not necessarily with servants but with young men he was training or people he was taking care of.

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