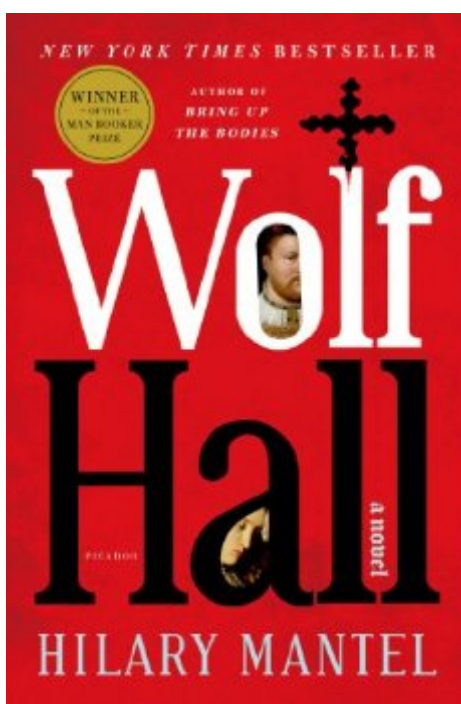


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Wolf Hall: A Novel



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

The scope and breadth of this novel is immense. Hilary Mantel sets out to describe a tumultuous period in English history, not by focusing on the main event- Henry and Anne- but by showing the struggle faced by those more behind the scenes. Thomas Cromwell says, late in the book, that worlds are not changed by kings and popes, but by two men sitting at a table, coming to an agreement, or by the exchange of thoughts and ideas across countries. And that is what Mantel seems to believe, too; thus, she does not focus her story on the huge proclamations or big meetings. She shows us Cromwell, alone at his desk, thinking and reminiscing. She details short, almost off-hand conversations between Cromwell and his wonderful family. And then, sometimes, she will give us fascinating debates between Cromwell and Sir Thomas More, the "man for all seasons" who was ruthless in his practices to rid England of heretics. Even the title of the book is more suggestive than straight-forward. Wolf Hall is the seat of the Seymour clan, but no scene in the book takes place there. The Seymours make cameos, and Cromwell takes note of them, but Wolf Hall is a distant building for most of the book. Instead, it represents Cromwell's forward thinking. He is grateful to the Boleyns for his rise in court and favor, but he does not allow himself to depend on them. He tells his son, "...it's all very well planning what you will do in six months, what you will do in a year, but it's no good at all if you don't have a plan for tomorrow." And Cromwell always, always has a plan for tomorrow. I am not sure if I fully believe in Mantel's reconstruction of Cromwell as a man who wanted only to reform England, and was so forward-thinking in his ideals.

Wolf Hall is 2009's Man Booker Prize winner and was the favourite from the beginning with something like 10 to 11 odds at winning. The Booker judges have a habit of surprising but didn't do so this year. I'm not an expert on the history from the time of Henry the 8th though it's certainly one of the most heavily mined topics in fiction. I began this book with only a basic knowledge of the history and was not familiar with the protagonist of the story Thomas Cromwell. The novel has a short preamble from Thomas Cromwell's youth and then traces his rise from a common son of a blacksmith to one of the most powerful men in England. Through Cromwell, we experience Henry, Anne Boleyn, Thomas More, Thomas Wolsey and many, many other characters of the time. The main historical focus of the novel is the events leading to Henry's second marriage and the extreme philosophical and popular debate and passion that it causes. The author deals with the events in great detail and focuses both on the debate, the reaction of the people and the intricate political wheeling and dealing. Mantel immerses us in the time and explains all sides very thoroughly. While I've mentioned that it's detailed, it doesn't really lag as for a 600+ page historical novel, it moves very quickly. Thomas Cromwell is the star of the novel and through force of will, financial competence,

good judgement and political savvy, he rises to power and wealth. He moves from poor child to a man with significant contacts and talent in the mercantile world to top advisor to Lord Chancellor Thomas Wolsey to ultimately Master Secretary to Henry the 8th.

I have to say that I love all things Tudor, and Wolf Hall is no exception, but it is exceptional. In most of the novels about Henry VIII's England, Cromwell plays a role, but he's never been the main character. Writers most often leave the famous wives of Henry VIII (divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived) to play that role. In reality, not a lot is known about this person, but Hilary Mantel has woven her tale not only around Cromwell, but through him. In Wolf Hall, Hilary Mantel takes a slice of Tudor history and allows the reader to view it through the eyes of Thomas Cromwell, who rose through life from his origins as the son of a blacksmith to become the chief minister of King Henry VIII. From his humble origins, he manages to become an important advisor to the ill-fated Cardinal Wolsey, who, as everyone knows, started his downhill slide because of his inability to provide Henry VIII with a Church-sanctioned divorce from Katherine of Aragon. It is, ironically, Wolsey's fall that begins Cromwell's rise. Cromwell survives by his own maxim: "inch by inch forward. Never mind if he calls you an eel or a worm or a snake. Head down, don't provoke him." (4) His fortune is on the ascendant throughout the story, but as everyone also knows, fortune is fleeting, and especially in this time largely at the whim of the king. Mantel gives Cromwell, who is often vilified in many Tudor history accounts, a human face. While he's busy rewriting life at court to suit his majesty and most often, to suit himself and his own desires for reform, Cromwell also is shown to be a family man and a man with a heart who cares about those less fortunate than himself.

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