

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Maggie O'Farrell, FR SOL, is the author of *HAMNET*, Winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction 2020, and the memoir *I AM, I AM, I AM*, both Sunday Times no. 1 bestsellers. Her novels include *AFTER YOU'D GONE*, *MY LOVER'S LOVER*, *THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *THE VANISHING ACT OF ESME LENNOX*, *THE HAND THAT FIRST HELD MINE*, which won the 2010 Costa Novel Award, *INSTRUCTIONS FOR A HEATWAVE* and *THIS MUST BE THE PLACE.*, and *THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT*. She is also the author of two books for children, *WHERE SNOW ANGELS GO* and *THE BOY WHO LOST HIS SPARK*. She lives in Edinburgh.

[Author's website.](#)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. From the start, Lucrezia's temperament is difficult for her mother to tolerate. Are Lucrezia's intellect and willfulness a liability or a benefit in shaping the course of her life?
2. What distinctions did you notice between the way girls and boys were raised in Cosimo's household? To what extent are Lucrezia and her siblings permitted to experience childhood innocence?
3. As you read the story of the tigress, what parallels did you see between the entrapment of trophy animals and the Duke's quest to preserve and expand his dynasty?
4. Discuss the novel's portrayals of motherhood. How do Eleanora, Sofia and Emilia's mother (a cook and wet nurse) provide varied forms of sustenance to Lucrezia at key points in her life? Ultimately, who makes up her true family?

5. Did you trust Alfonso's initial kindness toward Lucrezia? Is there any room for genuine love in Alfonso's business of building empires?
6. In the novel, what is the role of artists? What is significant about Lucrezia's ability to capture the imagery around her, and the imagery of her mind? How does her artistry compare to that of Il Bastianino and Jacopo, who are at the mercy of their clients? Who are the modern-day equivalents of these celebrity portraitists?
7. How does Lucrezia cope with her duty to serve as a replacement for Maria? As Lucrezia's body matures and transforms, how is she affected by her sister's legacy of womanhood, and by the connection between a woman's value and her ability to sustain a pregnancy?
8. Are there many similarities between Lucrezia's parents' marriage and her marriage to Alfonso? As Eleanora writes to her daughter with advice for establishing power within her new family, what does she fail to understand about the fundamental differences between her daughter's situation and her own?
9. Discuss the political fallout caused by Alfonso's mother and her history of Protestantism. What was it like to read about a society in which religion was interwoven with military might and the wealth of the ruling families?
10. How did your impressions of Elisabetta and Nunciata shift as you learned more about them? How would you have fared as their sister-in-law?
11. As the Duke's closest companion, Leonello is loyal at all costs. Does Lucrezia have a similar ally in Emilia?
12. Read Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," quoted in the novel's epigraph, and revisit Maggie O'Farrell's note at the end of her novel. What makes the Duke and Duchess of Ferrara such intriguing subjects for creative interpretation? What are your theories about what caused the death of the real Lucrezia? How did you react to O'Farrell's reimagining of her fate?
13. O'Farrell has been widely praised for crafting poignant, perceptive depictions of life's unexpected turns. How does *THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT* amplify aspects of the human experience portrayed in her other novels that you have read?

Readinggroupguides.com.

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

Following the critically acclaimed *Hamnet* (2020), O'Farrell creates another mesmerizing portrait of a Renaissance-era woman whose life is shrouded in mystery. "My Last Duchess," Robert Browning's poem about Lucrezia de' Medici (1545–61), gave voice to the longstanding rumors that its subject was murdered by her husband, Alfonso, duke of Ferrara. Was she, and if so, why? A member of Florence's large ruling family, Lucrezia, a restless dreamer who adores animals and creating art, is devastated to learn, at age 12, about plans for her to wed her late sister's fiancé. While Alfonso appears charming, she later witnesses his cruel streak. O'Farrell shines at instilling elegantly described scenes

with human feeling, such as Lucrezia's wedding preparations and her sense of inner strength while viewing the sunrise transform the sky at Alfonso's country villa. The author proves equally skilled at evoking suspense. This she accomplishes by alternating between Lucrezia's earlier life and the time when Alfonso brings Lucrezia, his 16-year-old bride, to an isolated stone fortress—perhaps to kill her. The potential motive won't surprise anyone familiar with noblewomen's dynastic roles. Historical-fiction readers will love the cultural details, while Lucrezia's plight speaks to modern themes of gaslighting and women's agency. The leitmotif of "underpainting," hiding truths beneath the surface, echoes throughout this poetically written, multilayered novel. -- Sarah Johnson (Reviewed 9/1/2022) (Booklist, vol 119, number 1, p40)

Publisher's Weekly

This lush, provocative historical from National Book Critics Circle Award winner O'Farrell (*Hamnet*) follows a young woman who is married off at 15 amid the complex world of 16th-century Italian city-states. O'Farrell bases her heroine, Lucrezia de' Medici, on a real-life figure depicted in Robert Browning's poem "My Last Duchess," who was murdered by her husband. When the reader first meets Lucrezia, she's been married for not quite a year and faces mortal danger in what O'Farrell describes as a "wild and lonely place." The narrative moves back and forth from the nearly deserted fortress where Lucrezia plays a game of cat and mouse with the duke of Ferrara, the husband who might be attempting to kill her, and the events that have brought her here. As a child of a noble family in Florence, she was untamable and passionate about making art. Now, the duke grows increasingly impatient with her as she fails to produce the heir he needs to secure his position. O'Farrell excels at sumptuous set pieces: Lucrezia's encounter with a tiger her father keeps in the basement beneath their palace, the wedding where she is draped and almost swallowed up by her gown, her meetings with the mysterious figures at her new home, particularly her enigmatic husband. By imagining an alternative fate for Lucrezia that deviates from the historical record, the author crafts a captivating portrait of a woman attempting to free herself from a golden cage. Fans of the accomplished *Hamnet* won't be disappointed by this formidable outing. Agent: Christy Fletcher, Fletcher & Co. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/11/2022) (Publishers Weekly, vol 269, issue 29, p)

Library Journal

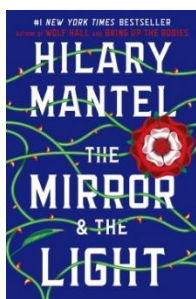
Having won a stack of awards for the Shakespearian meditation *Hamnet*, O'Farrell moves on to 1550s Florence, where barely pubescent Lucrezia de Medici is content to be the obscure third daughter of the grand duke. Then an older sister dies on the eve of marrying the ruler of Ferrara, Moderna, and Regio, and the groom opts for Lucrezia instead. Lucrezia can't understand her new husband is both a lover of the arts and a fearsome politician, but her job is clear: to produce an heir. --Barbara Hoffert (Reviewed 04/01/2022) (Library Journal, vol 147, issue 4, p5)

Kirkus Reviews

A teenage Renaissance bride discovers that her husband of scarcely a year intends to murder her. Following up her National Book Critics Circle Award winner *Hamnet* (2020), inspired by the life of Shakespeare's wife, O'Farrell turns to another woman seen by history only in glimpses. Little is known about Lucrezia de' Medici, married at 15 to the Duke of Ferrara, besides her suspicious death; rumors that she was poisoned prompted Robert Browning's famous poem "My Last Duchess." In contrast to Browning's ever smiling victim, O'Farrell imagines a rebellious spirit less interested in matrimony than in painting the natural world around her. The author develops tension with a split time frame, opening in 1561 in "a wild and lonely place" to which 16-year-old Lucrezia is quite sure Alfonso has brought her to be killed, then circling back to depict her childhood in Florence, including a life-changing encounter with a tiger in her father's private menagerie. From there the two narratives move forward in tandem: We see Lucrezia growing up to be sacrificed to political maneuvering that mandates her marriage to the suave Alfonso and growing aware in Ferrara that her outwardly courteous and kind husband is brutally determined to cement his shaky hold on the

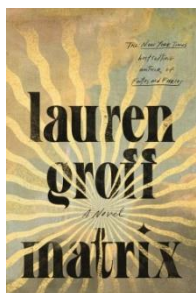
dukedom and ferociously intent on making sure she produces an heir. Her only solace comes in painting wild scenes of imaginary creatures, then covering them up with conventional still lifes approved by Alfonso as proper diversions for his duchess. When she meets Jacopo, an apprentice to the painter commissioned to create her portrait, she finds a soul mate who perhaps offers a way out of her imprisoning marriage. Several grim scenes make clear the mortal consequences of any attempt to escape Alfonso's clutches: Will Lucrezia take the risk? The rollbacks to earlier periods spark some impatience as Lucrezia's 1561 dilemma becomes more pressing, but O'Farrell's vivid portrait of a turbulent age and a vibrant heroine mostly compensate for an undue lengthening of suspense as Lucrezia struggles to defy her fate. A compelling portrait of a young woman out of step with her times. (Kirkus Reviews, July 15, 2022)

SOLITO READALIKES - FOOTNOTES



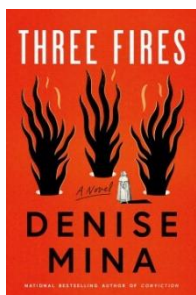
***The Mirror & the Light* by Hilary Mantel**

A tale inspired by the final years of Thomas Cromwell describes how after the execution of Anne Boleyn and childbed death of Queen Jane, the former blacksmith's son orchestrates a desperate plot to fortify England and save his own life.



***Matix* by Lauren Groff**

In the twelfth century, former child crusader and "bastardess heir to the crown" of France and England, "poor illegitimate Marie from nowhere in Le Maine," at age 17 arrives at the crumbling, dismal abbey where she will live, and which she will transform completely, during the many remaining years of her life. Considered unmarriageable for her great height and lack of beauty, and an overall burden, Marie was sent to save the abbey by Queen Eleanor, who prides herself on the brilliant move despite Marie's strong resistance to it.



***Three Fires* by Denise Mina**

Reimagining the "Bonfire of the Vanities" through a series of fires lit throughout Florence at the end of the fifteenth century, this modern take on a fascinating historical story follows Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar who, railing against the vice and avarice of the ruling Medici family, was instrumental in their removal from power. In dramatizing the life and last days of Savonarola, the author explores the downfall of the original architect of cancel culture and, in the process, explores the never-ending tensions between wealth, inequality, and freedom of speech that so dominate our modern world.