

Hilary Mantel, renowned author of *Wolf Hall* trilogy, dies aged 70

Paul Bond
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The novelist Hilary Mantel has died suddenly, aged 70. Reactions to her death express a widespread yearning for the serious, thoughtful and uncompromising in artistic work.

Mantel is best known for her critically acclaimed *Wolf Hall* trilogy of novels about Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's political fixer. The first two, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up The Bodies* (2012), are the only consecutive novels by an author to have both won the Booker prize, with the second also winning the Costa book of the year. The concluding novel, *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), was longlisted for the Booker.

These were her breakthrough novels, garnering fulsome reviews and wide readerships. To date the trilogy has sold more than five million copies globally and been translated into 41 languages.

The books were popularised further by hugely successful stage and screen adaptations in which Mantel was closely involved. The actor Ben Miles collaborated on a series of stage adaptations for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), in which he played Cromwell. The BBC's *Wolf Hall* was a powerful six-part series based on the first two novels, featuring an outstanding performance from Mark Rylance as Cromwell.

Mantel was born in Derbyshire in 1952 and studied law at the London School of Economics and Sheffield University. She experienced ill health throughout her life, suffering from a severe form of endometriosis that went undiagnosed for many years. She required a surgical menopause in her late twenties. Unable to have children, she needed continued treatment for the rest of her life.

Her younger years were informed by a wide range of experiences and interests. She worked as a social worker and lived in Botswana and Saudi Arabia until the mid-1980s. In 1972, she married the geologist Gerald McEwan. They divorced in 1981 and remarried the following year.

After her return to Britain, Mantel became a film critic at the *Spectator*. She continued to review widely throughout her career. Her literary agent Bill Hamilton has spoken of "the huge array of her journalism and criticism."

Alongside authoring 17 books—novels, short stories and a memoir—she was a regular public speaker, giving the BBC's 2017 Reith lectures on history and culture. A wide-ranging critic, she was supportive of younger writers and a forceful defender of literature.

By the late 1980s Mantel was beginning to win literary prizes regularly. Her fourth novel, *Fludd* (1989), won three awards. When *A Place of Greater Safety* was finally published, it won the *Sunday Express* Book of the Year Award. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1990. Her 2014 damehood was awarded for services to literature.

That she earned such respect and popularity both for her work and her reflections on such themes points to a broad and genuine striving for informed artistic engagement with history.

Through her extensive historical research, Mantel's aim was to create an immediacy in the situations she portrayed, giving a sense of real contemporary development "moving forward with imperfect information and perhaps wrong expectations, but in any case moving forward into a future that is not predetermined."

She sought to place the reader in "that time and that place ... not to judge with hindsight, not to pass judgement ... when we know what happened."

The *Wolf Hall* novels treat the political and religious upheaval of the English Reformation. This was not a new historical turn for Mantel. She had been attracted by history at university, but chose law. She ultimately could not afford to finish her legal training. Later deciding against being a social worker after a year working in a geriatric hospital and wanting to move on from selling dresses in a department store, she began reading extensively around the French Revolution.

She wanted to write about it but felt that without training as an historian she could only write the subject as fiction. This care resulted in close attention to the factual historical record, which she developed through experimental fiction writing that owed much to her student reading of Bertolt

Brecht.

The result was *A Place of Greater Safety* (written in 1974 but not published until 1992), a fictionalised account of the lives of Danton, Robespierre and Camille Desmoulins. She returned to the period with *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998), set in London in the 1780s, which dealt with the Irish giant Charles Byrne and the anatomist surgeon John Hunter as figures within the Age of Enlightenment.

Mantel was considered and thoughtful on the role of history in culture, and extremely cautious about easy, shallow and inappropriate historical comparisons. She became a fascinating and compelling speaker on the subject, and her popularity was achieved without intellectual concession or compromise.

Personal testimonies point to a sharp intelligence and wit, while Miles praised her “gentle tenacity.” There was an appealing and determined independence of thought about her. She was brought up a Roman Catholic but stopped believing aged 12. She said the upbringing had left her with “a very intense habit of introspection and self-examination and a terrible severity with myself... like installing a policeman, and one moreover who keeps changing the law.”

She later described the Catholic Church as “not an institution for respectable people,” leading one bishop to accuse her novels on the Reformation of “an anti-Catholic thread.”

Her caution about making easy and inappropriate parallels was driven by a determination to see the reality in any given historical moment. It is refreshing and salutary that she rejected attempts to co-opt her books in this way, on the grounds that it prevented clearer thinking about present realities.

She persistently disputed shallow comparisons between Boris Johnson’s former adviser Dominic Cummings and Thomas Cromwell, for example, “simply because I prize the long view so much. And that’s why I won’t make the parallels. I think that if you do, it turns real people into these kind of fantasy figures and unfortunately, they’re not. They’re real, present and dangerous.”

If anything, she saw the sharp lurch to the right of British politics in the last decade as a tearing up of any historical lessons. In 2014, she called the government’s portrayal of “poor and unfortunate people as being morally defective... a return to the thinking of the Victorians. Even in the 16th century, Thomas Cromwell was trying to tell people that a thriving economy has casualties and that something must be done by the state for people out of work.

“Even back then, you saw the tide turning against this idea that poverty was a moral weakness. Who could have predicted that it would come back into style? It’s myth making on a grand scale, and it’s poisonous.”

She said the government’s austerity programme was “not really a question of resources. It’s a question of ideology, which is moving to the right. It wishes to reduce the role of government and it strives for a small state.”

She recently expressed concern at “the speed at which we are consuming history now, the way that the past, the very recent past, is being made into a version and real-life people walking around have to live with their representatives and so on.”

She remained a careful thinker about contemporary social situations, critical without being particularly radical. An opponent of Brexit, she and McEwan were planning to move to Ireland to become “a European again.”

In these days, even this might be enough to draw hostility. Mantel attracted right-wing ire repeatedly for some cautious historical prognoses, like her recent comment that the British monarchy might be facing “the endgame” and may not “outlast [Prince] William.”

In 2013, she wrote of views of Kate Middleton as a “plastic princess,” constructed solely to produce an heir to the throne. Mantel was hardly championing a radical republicanism, but rather discussing “the way we maltreat royal persons, making them one superhuman and yet less than human.”

Such nuance was enough to bring denunciations from then Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and then leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband.

The following year—the year she received her damehood—Mantel wrote a short story, “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher.” There were Tory demands for a police investigation, which Mantel said was “beyond anything I could have planned or hoped for, because it immediately exposes them to ridicule.”

Her historically grounded, serious and wonderfully written body of work will earn her an enduring place in literary history.



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