

**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Season 5, Episode 5: Hamnet with Maggie O'Farrell**

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**Imogen Greenberg:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

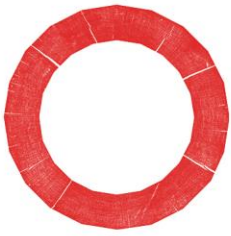
Whilst we're working hard to bring you content and stories to keep you inspired whilst our building is closed, there are still so many extraordinary events and performances that we were so sad to have to postpone or cancel.

One that we were gutted to miss out on was a special event we had planned with the brilliant author Maggie O'Farrell. The author of eight novels, plus the Sunday Time no. 1 best-selling memoir *I am, I am, I am*, she has been nominated for the Costa Novel Award three times, winning it for *The Hand That First Held Mine*.

Her new book – *Hamnet* – is set in the summer of 1596 and imagines the story behind one of Shakespeare's best-known tragedies and its connection to Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet. It's a stunning novel, a tender story of love and grief that shifts the focus to the family that Shakespeare left behind in Stratford when he moved to London to become the playwright we know today.

We cannot recommend the novel enough, and if that's not high enough praise, it's just been nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction.

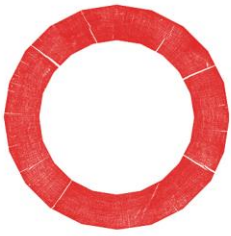
We were so looking forward to hosting Maggie at the Globe, but through the wonders of technology, we still managed to catch up with her for a chat about the book. As her first historical novel, we asked how she researched the story, how she approached the daunting prospect of writing about such a well-known figure as Shakespeare... and we were lucky enough to have Maggie read an extract from the novel.



So, without further ado, Maggie O'Farrell...

**IG:** The book very much focuses on Agnes and the family in Stratford. Why did you choose to focus the story on them and to tell it through their eyes?

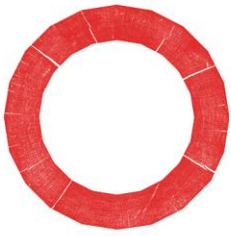
**Maggie O'Farrell:** Well I think I have always been really interested, particularly in Hamnet. You know, I first heard about him when I was studying the play for my Scottish Highers when I was 16. And I really, the play just really got under my skin, I think as it maybe does with a certain type of adolescent [laughs]. Perhaps a slightly kind of gloomy adolescent which I certainly was. And I think it just, it really spoke to me and it really got under my skin and I really sort of identified with Hamlet the character. And then one day my teacher mentioned in passing that Shakespeare had had a son who was called Hamnet and he had died a couple of years before the play was written. And you know I mean it's strange because later in life, you know I studied literature at university and obviously then I was reading a lot of critics and a lot of biographers on Shakespeare and I was always really shocked that even in these kind of huge 500 page biographies that you get, Hamnet the boy got very little mention. You know, he maybe gets two references if he's lucky. You know you get the mention of his birth and you get a mention of his death and that's about it, and his death was always followed by several paragraphs about Elizabethan child mortality, almost as if the implication was that it wasn't really that upsetting because it happened so much and they would have been half expecting it. And you know, I was whatever I was, 18 or 19 at this point, and I was really far off being a parent and certainly very far off being a writer, it really kind of struck me and I thought what a terrible presumption to make, the idea that he and Hamlet's mother and his sister didn't grieve for him, seemed to me an outrageous assumption. You know when I wanted to write this book I wanted to give this boy, who I think has been really overlooked by history, a voice and a presence because you know it's not, it's not nothing to call perhaps your greatest tragedy and your most enduring anti-hero after your dead son. You know, it's speaking enormous volumes and of course Shakespeare is a man who's very, you know for all his incredible



output that we still have thanks to his two friends, he is quite a mysterious figure. You know, we do know very little about him really, very little, very few concrete facts but this act, in calling this play after your dead son, seems to me to speak, it's a huge communication to us as an audience and as readers and it speaks of such enormous depth of grief and the desire to still be communicating with this dead boy.

**IG:** There's this very, very rich texture to the daily life that you build in Stratford and the medicinal elements of Agnes' work and the landscape. How did that come to play such a big role in the novel and how did that picture build for you? Was there a lot of research involved?

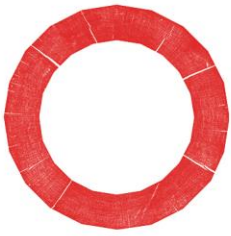
**MOF:** The thing about Shakespeare is you could spend the rest of your life reading about him, you know, the amount that's written about him is astonishing. And you know, plenty of people do spend their lives reading about him. So in a sense I had to, I tried to balance it, I really wanted to... I suppose my impulse with the book was to communicate that although, obviously a lot of the scholarly work and quite rightly so, focuses on Shakespeare's career in London, it seems to me that the biggest sort of drama of his life was happening off stage and it happened in Stratford off-stage with his family and that's the death of his son. And so I suppose I wanted to kind of animate the people who are necessarily sort of side-lined in his story and in particular with his wife who we know usually is Anne Hathaway. But the other thing that struck me when I was you know beginning the research for the book because it's a book you know I wanted to write for a long time is how much... you know obviously there are such huge longueurs and voids in William's story but I mean you think we don't know much about him we know even less about her. You know, we don't even have the record of her birth for example because I think she was born before parish records were taken. It just struck me, I was really horrified actually, because what seems to have happened in her case is that people have rushed forwards to fill the voids in her story with this terrible negativity and criticism. You know, she's attracted so much hostility and opprobrium and disapproval and all this... you know, people have



judged her so harshly. It's draw dropping, you know, I mean if you ask I don't know a passer-by in the street and say 'what do you know about the woman Shakespeare married?', they're probably likely to say he hated her and that she trapped him into marriage, that she was an older, that she was scheming, that she was this kind of peasant. And you know, it's really shocking, I was so shocked by this because... and you find it everywhere, on all kind of levels, right down to scholarly work up to popular culture. I felt so offended on her behalf that I wanted to try and create a kind of three dimensional character for her. I wanted her to be a fully realised person with a life and a kind of creativity of her own in a sense, an artistry.

There is no evidence actually that he hated her at all. And I think, there is evidence I think, that they had a proper partnership and maybe they were in love, I hope they were. Certainly at the end of his life, when he retired from the stage, you know, he was incredibly wealthy man at this point. You know, not only was he an incredibly successful writer as we know, an actor, but he was a very canny businessman, he'd invested a huge amount of money in property but he still lived in quite modest lodgings in London. But all his money he sent back to Stratford you know, and he bought his wife and daughters after Hamnet died, this enormous house, I mean it's vast. Which doesn't seem to me the kind of act of somebody who hated his family or his wife and regretted his marriage. And you know also at the end of his life when he retired he came back to Stratford, he chose to live there, with her, and didn't stay in London. So it seems to me those are huge signifiers of love.

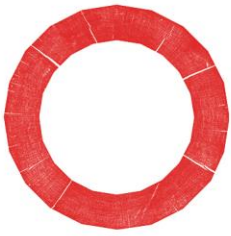
But also, I suppose with the character, you know one of the things that really shocked me actually when I was researching it was coming across her father's will. So Richard Hathaway, he died a year before they married. And he left her a very generous dowry, but he describes her in his will as my daughter Agnes, which in Elizabethan times would have been pronounced Annes or Agnes like the French. But I was so shocked when I read that because I thought, you know, if anyone's going to know her proper name, her given name, it's gonna be her Dad, isn't it? [laughs] I thought my



god have we been calling her by the wrong name for 400 years. How is that possible? And if we've called her by the wrong name, maybe we've been wrong about everything. Maybe... in a sense it was a sort of gift to a novelist, because I sort of seized on this name and I thought this is an opportunity to ask people to think again, to forget everything they think they know about her and open themselves up to a new interpretation.

You know, I was very keen to give a sort of artistry, a kind of creativity of her own, and it's always fascinated me and I'm sure many other people about Shakespeare's plays, is the kind of reach and the breadth of his metaphors. You know, he draws on such incredible knowledge on a huge range of things. And I found in Hamlet, obviously, there are many, many references to plants and their kind of medicinal properties and very knowledgeable ones as well. He clearly knew what he was talking about. And you know there are also, running through his work, he often reaches for falconry or hawking metaphors a lot. So that really intrigued me as well. So I decided to give these two things to her. I liked the idea of this partnership and him drawing knowledge and some of his metaphors from her sort of skills. So yeah I gave them to her.

Those two things were actually the most fun I had with the book. So obviously I did a lot of library based research. But then in order to kind of inhabit Agnes properly I actually went and learnt to fly a kestrel [laughs]. Yeah. It was fantastic. And I also dug and planted an Elizabethan herb garden [laughs]. I'm not a gardener at all but I wanted to kind of understand the sort of labour involved in that task. You know, because it's one thing to kind of read I don't know, they used rue to protect themselves from infection. But I actually wanted to physically plant rue and nurture it and then I went on a course to learn how you make... you know, because you know you have this plant and you think 'what do I do with it?' You know, do I use the seeds, do I use the flowers, the stems, the roots? And you know, it's all, everything is very, very different and I learnt how to do that. So I do actually still in my cupboard still have jars of elderberry syrup and elixirs [laughs]. I occasionally try to give them to my children [laughs] but they very firmly refuse. [laughs]

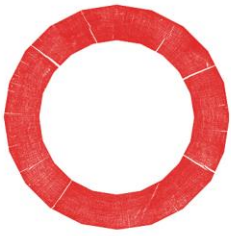


**IG:** It's sort of like method, method writing?

**MOF:** I guess so. But I think it was just that I wanted to... you know, because obviously it's the first... well when I say it's the first historical book I've written, I did write one that was set in the 20s but that's almost, almost within living memory. You know, I can ask people who were alive then if I have questions. But this was so long ago, their lives were so different to ours in so many ways and it was incredibly... you know, it's not easy for me to imagine what it would have been like to have been a woman in those days, in a household that you're running, every single thing that people use or ate or sat upon or, you know, had to be made by you or provided by you. And I think about Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, and I mean the number of children she had! You know, when William was 18 and getting married, she still had two year old Edmund, this toddler running around, and just the idea, just the very sort of idea of having to feed and clothe that number of children every day without washing machines and without cookers. It's staggering to us, it's so alien to us now what their daily life would have been, I wanted to kind of get as close to it as I possibly could.

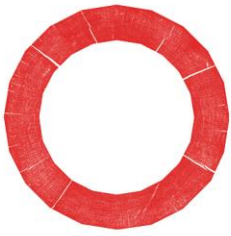
**IG:** And we've spoken a lot about where Anne's character came from. Obviously, we have centuries of ideas about who Shakespeare was and the character that you've written is, you know, he feels like a very human person not like a caricature of all the Shakespeare's we know. How did you sort of get to your Shakespeare and strip away all those other versions of him?

**MOF:** Well I think that was the most nerve wracking [laughs] thing, obviously, of the whole book because you know, he's an intimidating person to write about and obviously he carries... just his very name carries so much heft because you know, every single person I think has their own relationship with him inside their head because he pervades our, he pervades our very language and the very language that we use and you know, he defined and set how we think about ourselves and changed how we think about ourselves and continues to do so with every sort of production we



see. So yeah, [laughs] it was no small task. But I think I was very keen... in the whole of the book, I never mention his name. He's never named. I don't even mention the name Shakespeare, but I don't even call him William or Will because even if you write that it seems so colossally presumptuous [laughs], you know, who do I think I am? So I was keen to kind of divide the character from the name in a way. Because you know he isn't, as you say, he isn't the main character in the book. You know, I really wanted the book to focus on the boy Hamnet and his mother and his sisters, the kind of untold story. But also I suppose what interested me, you know, when the book opens, he is 18, so he isn't the playwright yet, he hasn't yet sort of found himself in that way. And obviously there are so many theories about how this grammar school boy from Stratford, from this quite small rural market town, became the world's greatest ever writer, not even in his time, but ever since then, nobody's even come close to him. I mean it is astonishing when you think about it, you know when you think about Marlowe or Johnson, you know, his contemporaries, both of whom went to university and it's possible you know, that Shakespeare didn't have any education beyond the age of 15. I was trying to imagine what he would have been like, you know what other inhabitants of Stratford [laughs] or rural Warwickshire would have thought of him, because even then he must have been extraordinary. You know, he must have stuck out like a sore thumb, people must have not known what to make of him at all. I mean imagine being his teacher at grammar school! Imagine what it was like teaching him Latin or Greek or rhetoric, I mean the speed at which his brain must have worked must have been like nothing else. So I suppose I was trying to just imagine this youth. I mean it's interesting to imagine him at 18 and also the idea as to why Hathaway would have married him. You know, she was 26 and of quite marriageable age, she came from a very respectable family, whereas of course the Shakespeare's fortunes had taken a bit of a nosedive. I knew almost from the beginning that I would never be able to use his name. So in the book he's referred to as the son or the husband or the Latin tutor at one point. Partly because, you know, it's actually impossible, I found it impossible to sit down at my laptop and write a sentence like, I don't know, 'William Shakespeare came and had





porridge for breakfast'. [laughs] Instantly, as soon as you write that, you get pulled out and you think I'm an absolute eejit, why am I, why am I even attempting this. I suppose it's kind of that process of defamiliarizing. You know, I wanted to defamiliarize myself to him and think of him as a person, as a bloke, you know. And I suppose I'm asking readers to do that as well.

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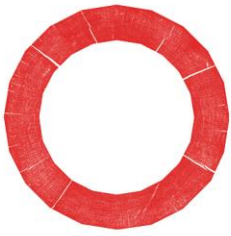
[Extract from the book]

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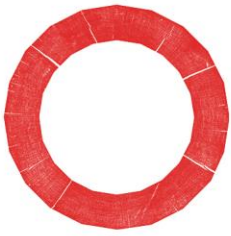
**IG:** So one of the things I really loved about the book is the alternating chapters, so you have the twin children Hamnet and Judith who get sick and then the alternate chapters sort of fill in the whole back story. And it really made me think, and I don't know if this is just because of the time in which I'm reading it, but it really made me think about the ways that illness plays with time? And you get this sort of suspended feeling of all time and no time. And I wondered if that was something you were thinking about at all when you were writing the book?

**MOF:** Well certainly I always thought that, you know, when you do have a severe illness, it is, like you say, it's a sort of, it's an experience out of time. You know, when you're in a kind of sick room or when you're unwell, everything is quite unreal and also quite heightened. When I wrote the book, however long ago it was, three years ago or so, you know the idea of this kind of looming pandemic, you know it was very alien [laughs] to me. I had to kind of, it was more a case of research or imagination or something. You know, because I think we're so used to the idea that... we kind of assume that we're inviolate now. You know, we have this incredible medications, and we have these hospitals and it's hard in a sense for us to imagine what it would have been like then. You know,





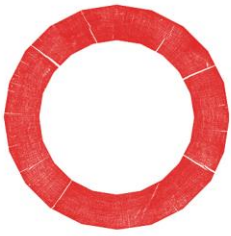
there was this ever present threat of what we now call the black death, what they call the pestilence. Which you know, would sweep through towns and cities. I mean it killed, I think it was a third of the population of London in the middle of the 17 century, which is unthinkable... but also that's only one of many, many things that could have killed you. You know, diphtheria, or measles or flu or diarrhoea. You could cut your finger and you'd be dead within two days of sepsis if you were unlucky. So I think illness was properly terrifying to them and rightly so. In the middle of the book, it kind of opens out and the camera kind of pulls back from Stratford and I sort of describe the journey of the plague, how the plague arrives in Warwickshire and I trace this journey of an infected flea from Alexandria on a ship. And obviously when I wrote that I had all these maps of Elizabethan trade routes and I worked out where it would have stopped off and what it would have picked up. Silks here, and picked up clothes and spices there, and it would have come all the way round Africa and up... and it is really odd, I mean I'm looking at them now actually in my study, they're still there. And they look oddly like the infographics that we're all studying right now, you know, every morning. So it is really odd and it's certainly not something I ever foresaw happening. But I do think, I do think the black death is very active still in our imaginations and I think we kind of reach for our... for the metaphors and the lessons learnt from that, those particular horrible pandemics in our thinking about contagion and illness now. It is very strange for us, obviously it's a very, very strange experience that we're all going through. But I think to the Elizabethans it was something unfortunately that they were all too used to. The idea that they, you know, the first thing the authorities in London would do in a plague outbreak was to shut all the playhouses because you know, all those people gathering in the middle of the day, in the sun, it was a very, very quick way of spreading infection. So I think Shakespeare's career would have been constantly disrupted by plague outbreaks and probably other outbreaks as well. You know there's lots of documentary evidence that the playhouses were closed, the globe was closed and he went off on tour around Shropshire and Kent. And he was actually in Kent on tour when Hamnet died. There is evidence of that unfortunately, and it's not even known whether he made the funeral, which is just,



ah, it's so heart-breaking to think of that. Or I suppose he would have gone home to Stratford and maybe done some writing or bought some more fields, who knows what he was up to [laughs]. I've always wondered actually whether the people of Stratford at that time thought of him as a landowner and a businessman or whether they thought of him as a playwright. I suspect the former. I do wonder how much Stratford knew about him or what he was up to and I have a feeling they didn't really know what he was doing, they just thought he was a businessman.

**IG:** Speaking of London, you... the book - without giving anything away I hope - you do eventually see Shakespeare in London. Why is it that you sort of saved that to the end and how did you sort of brings those scenes together? And how did you balance, because it struck me as really interesting how you write prose and a novel about play?

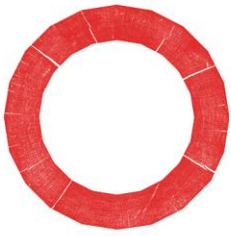
**MOF:** Well I always knew that the book would end in London and at the Globe. I always knew that. And that was where it was headed. Because I think the question for me was how might his family have felt when they discovered that they'd written this play? It isn't a question I've ever seen addressed anywhere else. I don't think. And I was thinking, how would I have felt, as a mother, if my husband [laughs] took the name of our dead son and wrote a play about it? You know, and I was looking at the playbill of Hamlet and I was imagining, I was thinking, how would I have felt? And did he tell her? At what point did he tell her? And when did she find out? Would she have been curious? Would she have seen? And of course, we don't actually know whether Agnes or Anne or Susannah and Judith ever saw any of his plays. We don't know. I really hope they did but it just seemed to me that the novel had to end there with the play in the Globe. There's certainly anecdotal mention that Shakespeare played the ghost in the first productions of Hamlet. I don't know if that's true, it may be apocryphal. But I mean it sort of seems to fit actually, in terms of I think what he's doing now with the play. Because obviously I read the play again quite carefully when I was writing the novel. It's interesting because I have, I have an overhang of impression about it from my



adolescence and from when I was a student. And it's very interesting reading it now as what, a kind of forty something parent. There's a huge amount of debate in sort of scholarly circles about how old Hamlet is supposed to be, you know what age is he and it's funny reading it now, I looked at it and I thought, god he's 15, you know, he's a 15 or 16 year old adolescent, this poor child really. Sort of man child who is dragged far too soon into this very difficult and traumatic adult world, you know, there's murder and the death of his father and his mother's remarriage and you know, allegations of incest. He's pulled too young into this very sort of traumatic adult issues. He just struck me very, very much as that and I thought, well you know, if we are to believe that Shakespeare wrote it in 1600, then Hamnet would have been 15. And it's just such a heart-breaking idea that he was sort of reanimating his dead son and reimagining him. And also the idea that the ghost is also Hamlet. So the identity of his son is split into this father-son unit and the son was alive and the father was dead. Ah god, it's just [laughs], if you read it, *if* you read it through those spectacles in a sense, through the spectacles of Hamnet's death, it's just heart-breaking, it's almost unbearable. I mean it's as heart-breaking actually as the number of times that Shakespeare imagines boy and girl twins who are separated and then magically reunited. Those are unbearable to read, those scenes, when you think about poor Judith and Hamnet.

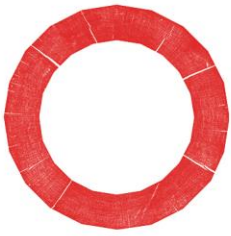
**IG:** It's interesting what you say about very closely reading Hamlet. As a writer writing about another writer, did you feel sort of a tussle at all, particularly because we know Shakespeare's words so well and they're so quoted... the book has such a clarity and singularity of voice. Was that a difficult thing to sort of negotiate how your voice related to Shakespeare's at all?

**MOF:** Yeah I mean the first absolutely inviolable rule there was, that I was never ever going to attempt kind of cod Elizabethan Shakespearean dialogue. I have a very good friend who's quite forthright and when I told her what I was writing, she said 'whatever you do, you're not allowed to use the prithy'. And I said I promise I will never use it. [laughs] I mean that's the kind of, ahhh, the historical novel that would give me the absolute shivering horrors.



So no, I knew I was never going to do that. And also, [laughs], it's not as if anyone ever could attempt to emulate his writing. So that was, it was just never going to happen and also in a sense, the book was not focusing on him as a writer. It was focusing on him as a man actually, I suppose more than anything. I didn't want to kind of... in a sense you can't really trespass on his writing, it would be very, very wrong in so many different ways so I didn't attempt that, I didn't even come close to that, I didn't even try to come close to that.

I mean there's certainly, there are I hope actually, very subtle hints at certain images or certain sort of tropes that you find in his writing. I've always been quite interested in where certain sort of characters come from. You know, not only is there a kind of hint, when he first sees Agnes in the book, he thinks she's a man and then he realises she's a woman because she's been out hawking and so she's wearing a sort of masculine outfit. And of course, if anyone's seen any Shakespeare plays, that sort of gender switch is very, very common. And even the idea that women were played by young boys in Elizabethan times was quite intriguing. I was wondering where the kind of very despotic, quite violent men, sort of power crazed and sort of disappointed men, the sort of Corionalus's of the world, come from. And so I used that sort of character type for the father in the book. And I should actually apologise to the real John Shakespeare because it's quite possible he was a very lovely man [laughs] and he and William got on really well, who knows. But, in my book, he is a kind of very angry, disappointed man because obviously his career has taken a huge nosedive, he's very angry with William because he wants William to get a job and kind of make something of himself. So there is that. And also the kind of idea of Agnes being a sort of healer, I find that intriguing and the boy and girl twins. I hope it isn't a kind of, those things aren't clunkily weighted in the novel because again, you know, you can't touch Shakespeare, you've got to be very very careful around him. Not only because everybody knows so much about him but also he's sort of sacrosanct in a way. You have to be very respectful of that.



**[Music plays]**

**IG:** That's it from us, but we'll be back soon with more stories from Shakespeare's Globe.

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You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg, and Maggie O'Farrell.

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