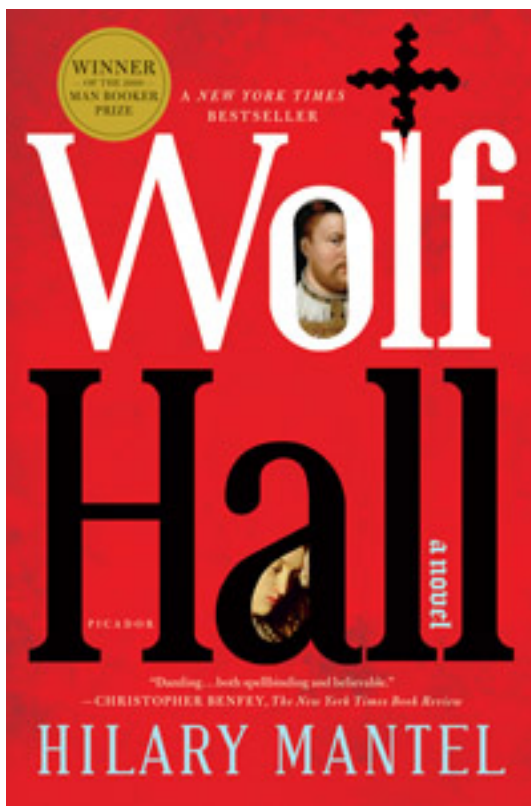


Wolf Hall

The most acclaimed novel of the last year may be a literary achievement -
but it is also a historical travesty

By Kathleen McGowan



Hilary Mantel certainly doesn't need my praise and I am sure she will not miss it.

Ms. Mantel's seventh novel, *Wolf Hall*, was the 2009 winner of the prestigious Booker Prize and the Fiction Critics' Award. The book, which tells the story of the Boleyn period from the point of view of Thomas Cromwell, has received heaps of critical acclaim from virtually every major publication in the English language.

The Guardian's review calls Mantel "The Tudor's finest portraitist yet." I don't suppose any of the Tudors would agree with that claim were they here today, and neither do I. *Wolf Hall* is not a portrait of the Tudors; it is a portrait of Thomas Cromwell, with the Tudors acting as the sometimes colorful but always superficial catalysts for Cromwell's daily manipulations of government and religion. I was initially puzzled by this particular piece of praise, not because it was so glowing – but because it

was so off the mark. A quick Google search revealed that Ms Mantel writes for the Guardian, enlightening me to a type of nepotism worthy of a Tudor!

We are expected to enter into Wolf Hall with a knowledge of this infamous period of time, and to have a grasp of the history, but what a fundamentalist, tired and unimaginative version of history it is. Henry is capricious! Anne Boleyn is a scheming slut and so is her sister! All Boleyns are wicked! Everyone except Cromwell is a caricature, a one dimensional paper doll in Tudor costume. Anne is the comic book villainess, the Poison Ivy to Cromwell's Bat Man. It's not bad enough that she has sharp pointed teeth, a black stare, a cold, slick brain, but she is also capable of infanticide. And yet, for all of her melodramatic wickedness, Cromwell and others will appeal to her for the sake of an imperiled reformer who faces death. We are never shown why this woman who is otherwise depicted as a soulless, demonic schemer would care, even for a moment, to defend new religious thought. Nor is it given a political explanation. So whereas we are treated to Cromwell's opinion that Anne will potentially stab people with the forks that he gives her for Christmas, we are not shown any reason whatsoever that this evil Anne the Impaler would advocate for reformers – or for anyone.

I experienced a surreal moment near the end of the book where I had a feeling of having fallen down the historical rabbit hole, wherein everything is a little bit topsy turvy. Any world wherein Thomas Cromwell is the most decent of the characters in the Tudor/Boleyn saga is definitely a strange and dark version of the past – and ultimately, a twisted one. I had to tell myself on a number of occasions, “do not fall in love with this fictional version of Cromwell” which is much to the author's credit, given that I believe him to be one of the great villains of all time. But it is ultimately at the cost of virtually every other character in the story that we come to see Cromwell as sympathetic. In retrospect, there is no other major character within the book who is truly redeemable.

Mantel uses up her supply of creative characterization with Cromwell. He is so well drawn, so multidimensional, that she has no energy left over for the paper dolls who populate the rest of the story. We watch the meticulous and precise way in which Cromwell eliminates Anne Boleyn – and everyone else who has offended him during his career – with deadly surgical strikes. It is mass murder made legal by the king's seal. Cromwell as serial killer. And yet, Mantel's skill as a storyteller is such that we view Cromwell with sympathy through the most heinous of his crimes.

Mantel is a skilled technician, but the sheer number of cheap caricatures and shallow portraits in this book renders it irredeemable for me. This appears to be part of the author's strategy to ensure sympathy for Cromwell - he is the only fully formed character to populate her landscape. Was I the only one frustrated by this?

I found myself wondering as I read: is this all style over substance? Is Mantel's achievement that she created something that is stylistically unique rather than important of content? My verdict is to the affirmative.