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Sunday, October 11, 2009

Sunday Salon: Review of Wolf Hall



I had planned on posting my review of the 1986 film 'Lady Jane' directed by Trevor Nunn starring Helena Bonham Carter as Lady Jane Grey, and Cary Elwes as her husband Dudley but my DVR broke last night. Instead I was able to finish Hilary Mantel's Booker prize winning novel WOLF HALL which will be released this Tuesday, October 13.

Here is a brief 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?

Mantel tells the story of the rise of Thomas Cromwell (1485?-1540), a self-made son and the of a violent Putney brewer and blacksmith, in the third person present tense, most often referring to the protagonist as "he." It gives the novel a simultaneous sense of immediacy and distance. The reader feels like they are right there in the room as the wheeling and dealing is going on. There are a few drawbacks to this, however. Since there are several scenes where there is more than one man in the room, referring to Cromwell as "he" makes it incredibly confusing at times, and I had to re-read sections to make sure I knew who was talking. It doesn't help that so many of the characters are named Thomas.

The novel is like a rich stew that needs to be savored over time, not rushed through. As I said earlier, this is not a fast read. The book is 532 pages long. It is a remarkable portrait of the Tudor era, although at times I needed a timeline to figure out exactly when things were happening. She has a tendency to skip around, as Cromwell remembers key events from his past, and the narrator recounts events that Cromwell couldn't have first hand knowledge of. Despite the dramatic license she takes with events at times, it all works.

Cromwell is an interesting person to have as the main character. There are some who might not find him likeable, but I found him sympathetic and even admirable at times. It's a testament to Mantel's skill as a writer that she is able to convey the complexity of the man without softening him. Cromwell is ambitious, yet practical, hard yet extremely loyal to Cardinal Wolsey. These two men, who both came from nothing, Wolsey the son of an Ipswich butcher, and Cromwell the poor kid from Putney are two of a kind. It's fascinating when one realizes that both rose so high and both fell when they lost the King's favor.

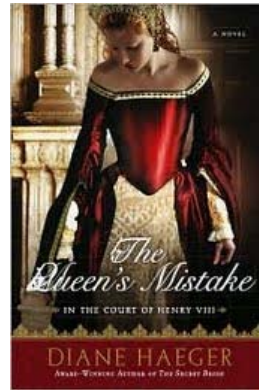
Cromwell has great love for his children and relatives, and he's a devout follower of the new religion. He can also be arrogant, and sarcastic. She spares no one in revealing them for the complex and intriguing people they undoubtedly are. All the usual suspects are here, the Duke of Suffolk, the Duke of Norfolk (who inexplicably disappeared after the first season of The Tudors), Mary Boleyn (who is not the good girl portrayed in *The Other Boleyn Girl*), Jane Seymour, Cranmer, and those who might not be so familiar to readers, like Elizabeth Barton. Readers hoping for a sympathetic portrait of Anne Boleyn will be disappointed. She comes off as a grasping, ambitious shrew in Mantel's version.

Those who revere Sir Thomas More as a saintly and principled man might have a hard time with her portrayal of him as a religious zealot as bloodthirsty as his adversaries. , although apparently this portrait is nearer the mark than the image we know from *A Man For All Seasons*. This Sir Thomas More scourges, tortures and burns those who were considered heretics against the one 'true' church. She also repeats the rumors that Henry VIII had carnal knowledge of Anne and Mary Boleyn's mother Lady Elizabeth Howard. Apparently Henry liked to keep it in the family, the Howard family that is, since his fifth wife was Anne's cousin Katherine.

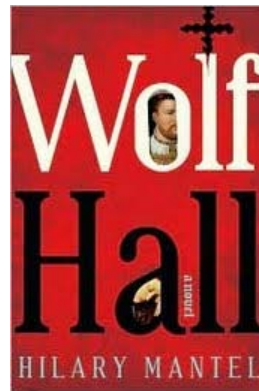
The book also gives the reader a good sense of how society was beginning to change during the Tudor period, as self-made men like Cromwell and Wolsey were starting to make their way at court, and the old aristocracy had to reluctantly make way for these upstarts who were gaining the ear of the King. Not much is really known about Cromwell's early life but Mantel manages to fill the reader in with a plausible history for Cromwell.

Readers who are well versed in Tudor history will adore this book, even though they know how it all ends up. I am not sure that the book will be as enjoyable to those who only know the Tudors via Showtime's series. At times, it may feel like one needs a scorecard to keep up with all the family relationships, and frequent trips to the computer to look things up on Wikipedia! But if the reader sticks with the book they will not be disappointed.

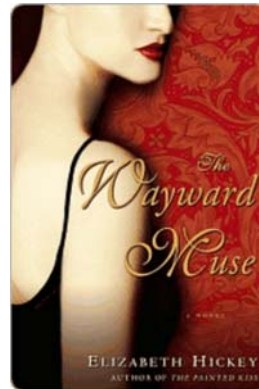
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