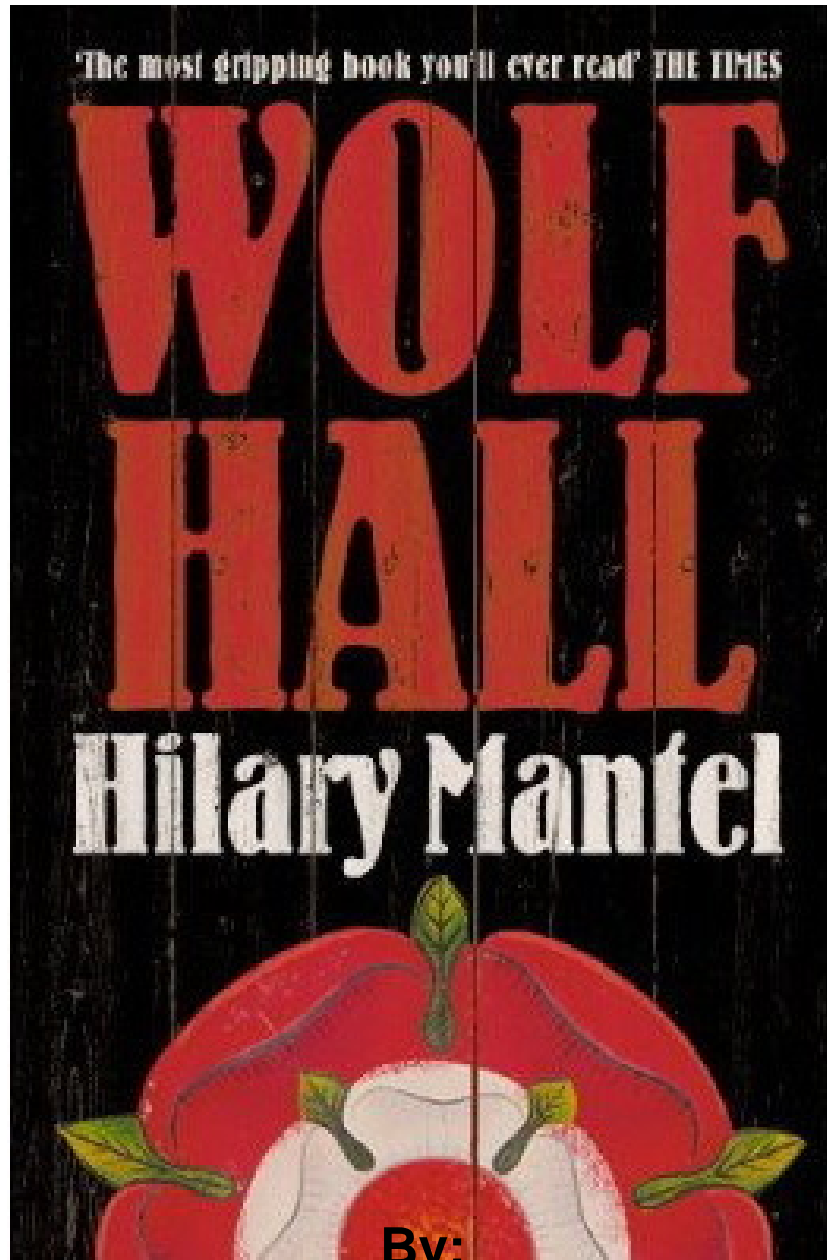


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By:
Hilary Mantel

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What people Say:

Wendy

Have you ever been with a group of people when someone tells a joke and the rest of the group thinks it's hilarious but you just don't get it?

was that way for me. So many people think it's brilliant while I couldn't maintain enough interest to finish it.

I love historical fiction, especially from this time period, so I expected to really like this one. I thought that telling the story of Henry VIII from the viewpoint of Cromwell was an interesting twist and I looked forward to learning

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I love historical fiction, especially from this time period, so I expected to really like this one. I thought that telling the story of Henry VIII from the viewpoint of Cromwell was an interesting twist and I looked forward to learning more about him. So what was the problem?

Well, for starters, the writing style took turns irritating and confusing me. Quotation marks are apparently optional, making it hard to figure out that you're reading dialogue until you get to the "he said". Speaking of which, the author relies heavily on the pronoun "he" and since there were frequently at least 2 men in each scene, this reader was often unsure which he was the right he. As the men in scene multiplied, so did the confusion. It took so much effort to figure out who was who and who said what and what was going on that it stopped being entertaining or thought-provoking and just became work.

And did I mention the colon? The poor, lonesome, and oft-ignored colon finally has his time in the spotlight in this novel. Upgraded from lonely punctuation understudy, the colon has a lead role here. The author uses colons so frequently and somewhat oddly that I would recommend a complete colonectomy. Here's an example from one paragraph: (Aargh! A colon! It must be contagious.)

"But by the time he reaches Dover the big gash on his scalp has closed, and the tender parts inside, he trusts, have mended themselves: kidneys, lungs, and heart." "Morgan Williams will have done an inventory of him before he left: teeth (miraculously) still in his head, and two eyes, miraculously seeing. Two arms, two legs: what more do you want?"

Overall, the book felt like it was trying too hard to be literary. Some of the prose was lovely, but there were enough little stylistic choices that annoyed me to put me off. After reading numerous reviews,

even from people who loved the book, that said that most of the characters remained distant throughout and that they didn't learn anything more about Cromwell after reading 500+ pages, that was enough for me. Sadly, life's too short and my TBR pile's too big. I had to abandon this one.

Lewis Weinstein

I just started Wolf Hall, and I find the relentless use of "he" to be extremely irritating. In the first several chapters, there are dozens of instances where it is not clear who is speaking. Every once in a while, as if recognizing the problem she has created, Mantel uses the phrase "he, Cromwell." Why not just say Cromwell?

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Unless there is some good reason which I can't imagine, this sort of obfuscation is just lazy writing which disrespects the reader. May I re-think that, based on a comment by another reader. It's not lazy writing. It's very purposeful. And very distracting.

... later ...

I just read some of the amazon reviews. There are actually quite a few readers who found the "he" business as disconcerting as I did, and who expressed their displeasure in rather strong terms, along with many *-star ratings. However, many others really liked the book, as do many Goodreads readers, so it must not bother them as it does me.

Another Goodreads reader suggested that the use of "he" all the time created a closer intimacy with Cromwell. Perhaps, but I see it differently. If you want to create intimacy, use the first person. Then it is clear that everything is seen and felt by the single protagonist, and the reader can share that character's viewpoint, thoughts and feelings. What Mantel has done is not to bring us close to Cromwell, but to inject herself, the author, between the reader and the prime character. She does this on practically every page and I find it jarring every time it happens.

Before my final negative notes, let me say that Mantel clearly has an exquisite command of the language. Even in the few chapters I read, her elegant choice of words often made me reflect and smile. She can paint a picture when describing a character or a setting that is truly wonderful. And,

when she chooses to do so, she writes a vivid scene that has power and emotion.

Such continuity of story, however, is the exception rather than the rule. The constant switching of time and place, often without the merest hint of transition, made the reading much more difficult than it had to be. Just a word here or there would have made a huge difference.

Finally, the breezy style in which much of the book is written is entertaining, as many have noted and I agree, but it had the effect of making me wonder if Mantel was as true to the history as I think a historical fiction should be. Of course the dialogue and many of the personal incidents are made up, but does the author, when portraying actual events, present them accurately? I think such concern for the truth is an obligation of an author when writing about historical characters and events. Mantel left me unsure.

Teresa

The thing to remember when starting this book is that 99% percent of the time the pronoun 'he' refers to Cromwell, even at times when the sentence structure makes it seem like 'he' would be someone else. It took me a short while to realize this, but once I did, I was fine. You are in Cromwell's head; you see everything from his perspective. As he reacts to others' reactions of him (many times, he is bemused to see how he is thought of) another layer of characterization is added.

This novel is be

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This novel is beautifully written with unique descriptions (I love when authors can pull that uniqueness off -- not easy to do!) sprinkled here and there; Cromwell is fascinating (and drawn sympathetically by Mantel) and even surprisingly charming in his interactions with family members and certain others. (Though that's not to say that he doesn't use some of these others either.) And he's funny! Though all of this is done, oh, so, subtly.

It's said that historical fiction is as much about the time during which it's written as it is about the time it's set in. And through Mantel's eyes, we see the similarities of the time periods' political intrigue, as messy and incestuous then as it is now. I thought I was done with Tudor historical fiction (I've read so much of it through the years) but this book is different.

You won't understand the novel's title until later in the book, and I won't explain it here, as I got excited (a rare emotion when reading) seeing the meanings unfold, and I wouldn't want to spoil that for anyone.

I also got very excited as I read this quote: (page 394) "Suppose within each book there is another book, and within every letter on every page another volume constantly unfolding; but these volumes take no space on the desk. Suppose knowledge could be reduced to a quintessence, held within a picture, a sign, held within a place which is no place. Suppose the human skull were to become capacious, spaces opening inside it, humming chambers like beehives." I felt as if I had found the 'key' to the whole book.

This is one of those long novels that I loved living with and hated to see end, one of those experiences which causes you not to want to rush off to read something else, because you're still soaking in the one you've just finished.

Paul Bryant

For the first 100 pages I was like a Monkees song, you know the one -

[Cue cute organ/guitar intro]

I thought great historical novels about the 16th century were only true in fairy tales

Meant for someone else but not for me

Mmm, historical novelists were out to get me

That's the way it seemed

Disappointment haunted all my dreams

But then some strange things began

For the first 100 pages I was like a Monkees song, you know the one -

[Cue cute organ/guitar intro]

Riku Sayuj

I treat this novel as a qualified failure of an experiment (qualified since I am open to the possibility that the failure was mine) and I sincerely wish that Mantel does not win the Booker this year - I just cannot bring myself to spend anymore time with her lifeless narrator.

More than anything else Wolf Hall seemed to me to be a literary experiment - on how closely a woman can get into a man's mind, and as far as I am concerned, a qualified failure. I could never truly feel that the narration w

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More than anything else Wolf Hall seemed to me to be a literary experiment - on how closely a woman can get into a man's mind, and as far as I am concerned, a qualified failure. I could never truly feel that the narration was being executed by a male voice, it was as if a woman narrator residing inside a captive male character was telling the story and every time a 'he' or 'his' comes along, it resulted in a string of confused stumblings over adjectives before I remembered again (many times) that it is of himself that the narrator is talking about. Eventually I came to understand the reason for this jarring feeling - it was not because I was not reading thoroughly enough, it was because I couldn't think of the narrator as a 'he' - it just didn't cut it, especially when he/she informed me with wonder of how men embrace other men.

I wish Mary Boleyn had been the narrator, she was the only 'real' person in this narrative peopled by artificial characters, only she had an authentic voice to me and I can't help but feel that she was the character that Mantel most identified with - the novel came alive and took such vibrancy every time Mary entered the narrator's field of vision, like a deprived woman lighting up at the sight of a beautiful mirror to finally examine herself!

As I said, I am open to the fact that my bad experience was due to a failure of imagination on my part, so I hope fans of this book will take pity on my deprived pleasure and be gentle in their recriminations.

Come to think of it I really cannot think of any book I have read in which a novelist tries to get so intimate with the mind of a narrator of the opposite sex. So maybe my problem was not a failure of imagination but a poverty of literary experience as I haven't encountered such an effort before; maybe I need to read some Hardy.

I also believe that if there were less 'Thomas's in the story, I could have still come out the better in this expedition. So there.