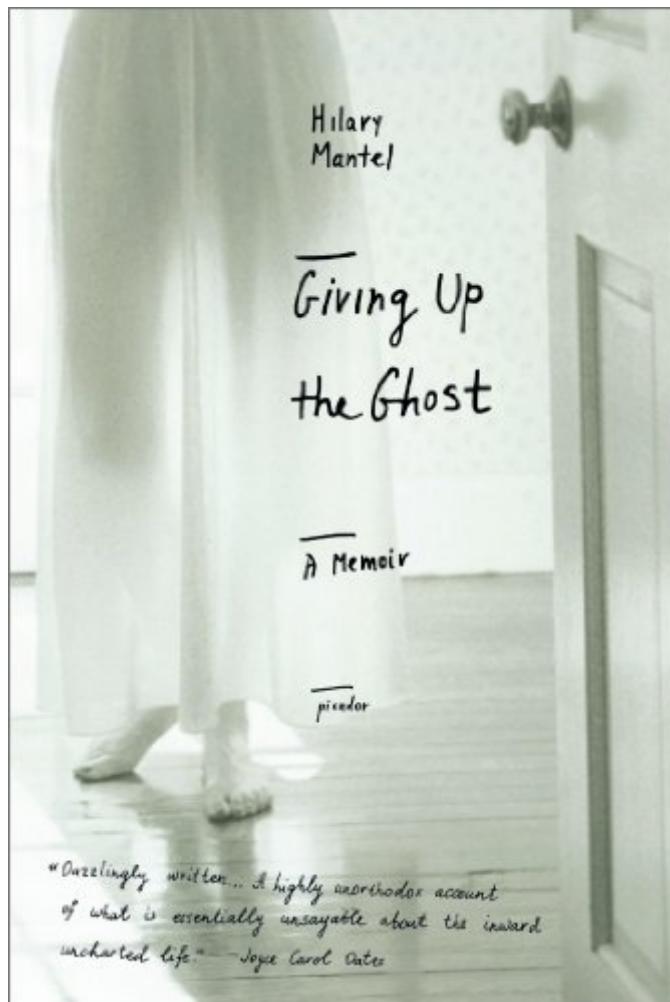


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Giving Up The Ghost: A Memoir (John MacRae Books)



Synopsis

In postwar rural England, Hilary Mantel is a fierce, self-possessed child, schooling herself in "chivalry, horsemanship, and swordplay" and convinced that she will become a boy at age four. Catholic school comes as a rude distraction from her rich inner life. At home, where fathers and stepfathers come and go at strange, overlapping intervals, the keeping of secrets becomes a way of life. Her late teens bring her to law school in London and then to Sheffield; a lover and then a husband. She acquires a persistent pain-which also shifts and travels-that over the next decade will subject her to destructive drugs, patronizing psychiatry, and, finally, at age twenty-seven, to an ineffective and irrevocable surgery. There will be no children; instead she has "a ghost of possibility, a paper baby, a person who slipped between the lines." Hormone treatments alter her body beyond recognition. And in the middle of it all, she begins one novel, and then another. Hilary Mantel was born to write about the paradoxes that shimmer at the edges of our perception. Dazzling, wry, and visceral, *Giving Up the Ghost* is a deeply compelling book that will bring new converts to Mantel's dark genius.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In her memoir, *Giving up the Ghost*, Hilary Mantel obliquely tackles a subject much debated in psychoanalytical circles of a century ago and revisited by feminist literary critics from 1968 onward: To what degree is female ambition and achievement in the arts (or any field, for that matter) a compensation for an unfertile womb, and in what way is artistic creativity in women related to mental instability and even madness? In our post-feminist era such suggestions sound outrageous, reactionary. We are accustomed to thinking that we can and will have it all. But slip back fifty, then one hundred years or more and examine the lives of great women writers and poets. Virginia Woolf insisted that without leisure time, education, private income, and a space to write, a woman could not produce literature, hence the demands of motherhood and marriage might be a serious obstacle. Emily Dickinson, a spinster, withdrew from the world, Charlotte Bronte died of a pregnancy related illness with her unborn first child, Elizabeth Bishop was gay, Sylvia Plath found both marriage and motherhood devastating. Mantel reminds us that in her formative years, a time not so long ago, women were expected to stay home and to become homemakers, and though England already had a long tradition of penwomen, it was no easy journey to become a writer. This memoir is about how a poor, "neverwell" child of Irish origins, from a disadvantaged family became one of the world's most celebrated novelists, twice winning the Man Booker prize, an unprecedented feat. Home was drab lodgings without a bathtub, with few books, where her mother maintained an unusual ménage living, for a time, with both her husband and lover.

As one who has experienced history come to life before her eyes, at the talented hands of Hilary Mantel, I was curious to know more about this author, who had the ability to make historical fiction pass for history. The sophisticated reader obviously knows, however, that this book, though a good facsimile, cannot possibly be actual history, since, obviously, Ms. Mantel was not a fly on the wall, at the time the events were happening. Thus, the reader must conclude that a mighty imagination is at work here. Having read both *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, I was fascinated by the clarity of description of 16th century England during the reign of King Henry VIII, fascinated by an author who could write with such authority, and alter her writing style to convey great power, on the one hand, and delicacy and discretion, on the other, an author who possessed such an incredible eye for detail, that every curtain, every costume, every table setting, every horse ride, and every falling off of horse, is depicted so vividly that the reader feels as if he or she were there. Aware of this author's uncanny ability to recreate the interior monologues of both male and female characters, from those of the poorest, most obscure backgrounds to those who are born to believe themselves superior as

members of the British aristocracy, I continually marveled at the way Ms. Mantel could mysteriously slip from bawdy humor, at one moment, to sheer terror, at the next, through the utterances and confessions of her characters and the scenes in which she sets them. But I set aside my curiosity, until, one day, while browsing online, I came across an ad for the book, *Giving Up The Ghost: A Memoir*, by Hilary Mantel. I could hardly believe it. My prayer was answered. I could now read about Ms.

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