

FICTION BOOK REVIEW

The Hand That First Held Mine

Maggie O'Farrell. London, UK: Headline Publishing Group, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0-755-30846-0. Price £7.99. Pages: 384 (paperback)

The novel starts as two independent stories that initially are told in alternating chapters. The first is a passionate love affair set in Soho in London in the 1950s. The couple meet in Devon, over a garden fence, but the scene swiftly moves to the capital and Lexie, a young impressionable graduate, moves in with Innes, a self-confessed hedonist and a journalist. They live for several years in Hampstead, working together on a magazine whose office is in Soho. Innes is separated, his wife and daughter loathe Lexie, and they exact a terrible revenge for his betrayal. O'Farrell describes the fashions, lifestyle and even the weather of the times beautifully.

The other story, set in the present time, involves Elina and Ted. Elina has just discharged herself from hospital following the traumatic delivery of her first child. There follows a most insightful description of a mother, slowly recovering from an emergency Caesarean during which she lost a lot of blood, coping with the demands of a newborn baby. Her partner, Ted, bewildered, riddled with guilt and anxiety, becomes increasingly withdrawn. I have never read such a sympathetic account of the partner's response and emotions following a complicated delivery. I believe that O'Farrell herself had a difficult time during childbirth, which may account for the eloquence of the writing.

The affair ends tragically and Lexie becomes a successful journalist travelling the world. Elina recovers but Ted becomes increasingly disturbed, the baby provoking flashbacks from his own childhood. The two stories eventually connect

and we see how the events of 50 years ago have had a profound effect on the lives of Elina and Ted. As the novel ends there is hope but no certainty that they will survive as a family.

O'Farrell explores the effect of jealousy, grief, loss and new parenthood. At times she draws back from the novel into a narrative and tells the reader how the buildings lived and worked in by Innes and Lexie have changed over the 50 years and how they now feature in Ted and Elina's lives. She also provides insights into the plot. This is a skilful novel and a good read. I found myself thinking about it for days afterwards.

Reviewed by **Gillian Robinson**

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