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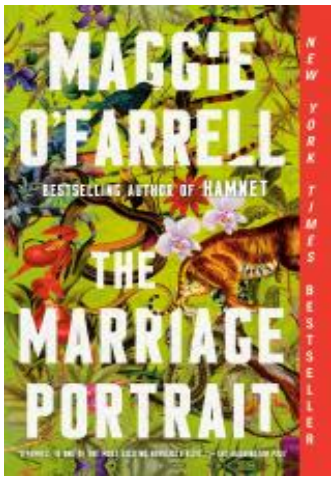
The Marriage Portrait

by Maggie O'Farrell



About the Book

The author of the *New York Times* bestseller and National Book Award winner HAMNET brings the world of Renaissance Italy to jewel-bright life in this unforgettable portrait of the captivating young duchess Lucrezia de' Medici as she makes her way in a troubled court.

Florence, the 1550s. Lucrezia, third daughter of the grand duke, is comfortable with her obscure place in the palazzo: free to wonder at its treasures, observe its clandestine workings and devote herself to her own artistic pursuits. But when her older sister dies on the eve of her wedding to the ruler of Ferrara, Modena and Reggio, Lucrezia is thrust unwittingly into the limelight: the duke is quick to request her hand in marriage and her father just as quick to accept on her behalf.

Having barely left girlhood behind, Lucrezia must now enter an unfamiliar court whose customs are opaque and where her arrival is not universally welcomed. Perhaps most mystifying of all is her new husband himself, Alfonso. Is he the playful sophisticate he appeared to be before their wedding, the aesthete happiest in the company of artists and musicians, or the ruthless politician before whom even his formidable sisters seem to tremble?

As Lucrezia sits in constricting finery for a painting intended to preserve her image for centuries to come, one thing becomes worryingly clear. In the court?s eyes, she has one duty: to provide the heir who will shore up the future of the Ferranese dynasty. Until then, for all of her rank and nobility, the new duchess?s future hangs entirely in the balance.

Full of the beauty and emotion with which she illuminated the Shakespearean canvas of HAMNET, Maggie O?Farrell turns her talents to Renaissance Italy in an extraordinary portrait of a resilient young woman?s battle for her very survival.

Discussion Guide

1. From the start, Lucrezia?s temperament is difficult for her mother to tolerate. Are Lucrezia?s intellect and willfulness a liability or a benefit in shaping the course of her life?

2. What distinctions did you notice between the way girls and boys were raised in Cosimo?s household? To what extent are Lucrezia and her siblings permitted to experience childhood innocence?

3. As you read the story of the tigress, what parallels did you see between the entrapment of trophy animals and the Duke?s quest to preserve and expand his dynasty?

4. Discuss the novel?s portrayals of motherhood. How do Eleanora, Sofia and Emilia?s mother (a cook and wet nurse) provide varied forms of sustenance to Lucrezia at key points in her life? Ultimately, who makes up her true family?

5. Did you trust Alfonso?s initial kindness toward Lucrezia? Is there any room for genuine love in Alfonso?s business of building empires?

6. In the novel, what is the role of artists? What is significant about Lucrezia?s ability to capture the imagery around her, and the imagery of her mind? How does her artistry compare to that of Il Bastianino and Jacopo, who are at the mercy of their clients? Who are the modern-day equivalents of these celebrity portraitists?

7. How does Lucrezia cope with her duty to serve as a replacement for Maria? As Lucrezia?s body matures and transforms, how is she affected by her sister?s legacy of womanhood, and by the connection between a woman?s value and her ability to sustain a pregnancy?

8. Are there many similarities between Lucrezia?s parents? marriage and her marriage to Alfonso? As Eleanora writes to her daughter with advice for establishing power within her new family, what does she fail to understand about the fundamental differences between her daughter?s situation and her own?

9. Discuss the political fallout caused by Alfonso?s mother and her history of Protestantism. What was it like to read about a society in which religion was interwoven with military might and the wealth of the ruling families?

10. How did your impressions of Elisabetta and Nunciata shift as you learned more about them? How would you have fared as their sister-in-law?

11. As the Duke?s closest companion, Leonello is loyal at all costs. Does Lucrezia have a similar ally in Emilia?

12. Read Robert Browning?s poem ?My Last Duchess,? quoted in the novel?s epigraph, and revisit Maggie O?Farrell?s note at the end of her novel. What makes the Duke and Duchess of Ferrara such intriguing subjects for creative interpretation? What are your theories about what caused the death of the real Lucrezia? How did you react to O?Farrell?s reimagining of her fate?

13. O?Farrell has been widely praised for crafting poignant, perceptive depictions of life?s unexpected turns. How does THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT amplify aspects of the human experience portrayed in her other novels that you have read?

Author Bio

Maggie O?Farrell was born in Northern Ireland in 1972. Her novels include HAMNET (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award), AFTER YOU'D GONE, THE VANISHING ACT OF ESME LENNOX, THE HAND THAT FIRST HELD MINE (winner of the Costa Novel Award) and INSTRUCTIONS FOR A HEATWAVE. She has also written a memoir, I AM, I AM, I AM: Seventeen Brushes with Death. She lives in Edinburgh.

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