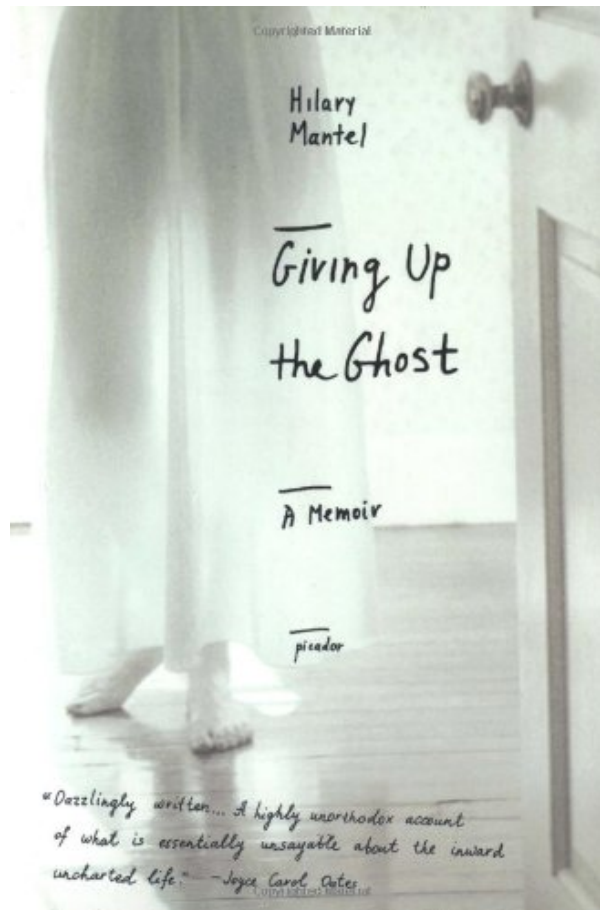
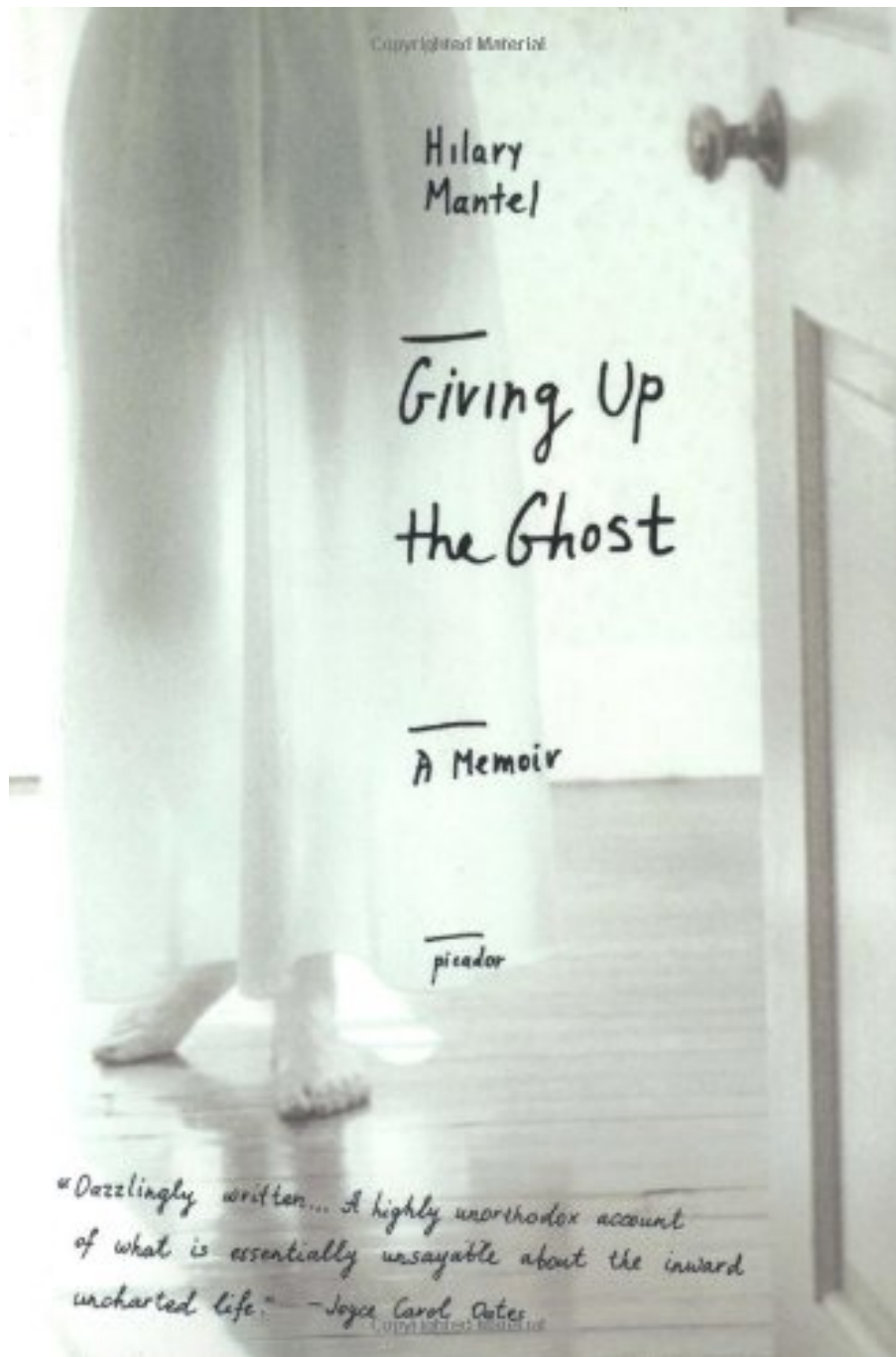


GIVING UP THE GHOST : A MEMOIR (JOHN MACRAE BOOKS) BY HILARY MANTEL



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From Publishers Weekly

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From The New Yorker

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From Booklist

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GIVING UP THE GHOST : A MEMOIR (JOHN MACRAE BOOKS) BY HILARY MANTEL PDF

In postwar rural England, Hilary Mantel grew up convinced that the most improbable of accomplishments, including "chivalry, horsemanship, and swordplay," were within her grasp. Once married, however, she acquired a persistent pain that led to destructive drugs and patronizing psychiatry, ending in an ineffective but irrevocable surgery. There would be no children; in herself she found instead one novel, and then another.

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- Brand: Mantel, Hilary
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- 240 pages

From Publishers Weekly

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Most helpful customer reviews

26 of 27 people found the following review helpful.

glimpses of otherness

By LitCrit101

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 infertile 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. The latter would be the one to rescue Hilary and her family, giving them the dignity of a real home and a new name. At school this pale, phlegmatic child was at times picked on, grudgingly admired, avoided. As she fashions her story, she gives us echoes of other stories we know and love. The rage that bubbles within her at school recalls Jane Eyre's (and indeed she claims, Jane Eyre is the story of all women writers). Her descriptions of the strange visions that sometimes inhabit her psyche echo moments of *Turn of the Screw*, in which she is both the governess and the malignant child, other moments, such as the eerie revelation of evil she glimpses in the yard might have been drawn from Stephen King filtered through Mary Butts.

Ever since her childhood, she has been subject to visions, "seeing things" that "aren't there," she confesses, well aware that the inclusion in quotes somehow makes these ghostly presences more explainable or more

acceptable to contemporary minds. Like Henry James, she never lets us know her own explanation for the ghosts she regularly sees: are they metaphors, the product of ophthalmic migraines, or projections of her own psyche? She suggests all these possibilities, tying in hormonal issues as a further explanation. The heart of Mantel's memoir focuses just on these issues, and the debilitating condition with which she battled for years, undergoing an early hysterectomy. The surgery turned out to be useless, as replacement estrogen worsened her symptoms and led to uncontrollable weight gain. The medical establishment had no remedy but was convinced she was the problem, not her disease. For many years she was given pain killers, antidepressants, antipsychotic drugs. Struggling to come to grips with herself, her pain, her changing and changed body, she starts writing again, but her doctors do not approve. Why not she asks. The chilling reply is simply "because." This was all happening ten years after Germaine Greer published *The Female Eunuch*. But luckily for us, Mantel kept at it, six years later published and was paid for her first story. At one point, she realized that she was unconsciously waiting for children who would never come. Empty bedrooms, an overfilled pantry, presses packed with sheets for too many beds were the telltale signs. Once she brought her mourning to the light, the unborn ghosts of her womb became novels.

There is no self-pity in this memoir, which is poignant, unexpectedly funny at times. If anything there is too much self-control, and even minute traces of self-loathing. In handling the sections of her childhood, she shapes the story to the child's half understandings. The male figures, father, step-father, brothers, husband, are at best presences. Yet every sentence, every phrase in this book is breathtaking, artfully crafted, subtly shaped. We almost forget the message given at the beginning. If you want to be a writer " Rise in the quiet hours of the night, prick your fingertips, and use the blood for ink." But what we have read has been written in blood, product of pain, sacrifice, self-control, distance from oneself and from one's own ghosts. A real achievement.

25 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating glimpse into the life of a great contemporary writer

By Penny

I love the way Hilary Mantel writes. Her imagery and descriptions are so true, so evocative, sometimes I need to put on a sweater or snuggle deeper into the duvet just to cope. She strings me out and keeps me roped in. I have no other way of expressing just how fine her writing feels to me. When I'm reading her work, I feel that she has tapped into the great reservoir--the man-made basin brimming with pain and suffering, dreams and devils. This book is haunting and grim--yet one identifies so strongly with the author, risk and all.

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

intimate and engrossing

By carolinaislandgirl

This memoir for me was what I look for in a memoir: revealing, analytical, self-deprecating and helping the reader come to know the author as a person. When the memoir is written by someone who has only been known to the reader as an admired author, but not at all on a personal level, and the memoir draws the character of the writer so indelibly, it can only be a very satisfying read. And that's exactly what it was for me. I wondered who in the world could write the novels she has written and now I find out a bit about the woman, her interior world and her life, in a very well wrought piece.

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From Publishers Weekly

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