

# The Crack in the Teacup: Reading Hilary Mantel

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**A**BOUT A DECADE AGO, I picked up a book because I liked the cover: bleak street, stark buildings, empty sky, a robed man, his back turned, in the distance; in the foreground, a woman in a burka looking to the left at something we can't see. When the blurb promised me 'a Middle Eastern *Turn of the Screw*, with an insidious power to grip', I bought it. It gripped. In fact, it scared the living bejesus out of me. That was my introduction to Hilary Mantel's writings. Since then, I have read nearly everything she has published.

*Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988) is about a sensible young couple who, after years of humanitarian work in Africa, decide to go to Saudi Arabia to repair their fortunes. The husband will work on a seductively extravagant building project; the wife will read, write and relax in their pleasant, if mildly claustrophobic, apartment. Then small things begin to go wrong.

I read it, reread it, read it in slow motion, read parts of it backwards and still could not see how Mantel had done it. Nothing much happens, or nothing you see, but dread comes oozing down an empty stairwell, under a sealed door, into a quiet apartment. There is nothing you can do to resist it, even on the fourth reading. Then I read the other novels. One robust reviewer declared a couple of the more gothic ones, *Every Day Is Mother's Day* (1985) and *Vacant Possession* (1986), to be comedies, and I remember laughing. At first. Others, such as *Fludd* (1989) and *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998), are overtly fables, but an insidious cruelty was their action engine, too. Finally, I arrived at the novel that Mantel had begun first, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992). Set in the French Revolution, it has characters named 'Maximilien Robespierre' and 'Camille Demouslins', so I decided not to read it. As an historian, I am snooty about historical novels. Besides, I knew the plot. Now, after reading the memoir, I will read it.

I also read Mantel's critical essays as they appeared in the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*. They kept getting better and better, in their clarity and in a rarer quality that I can only describe as intrepid intelligence. One of the most recent, on V.S. Naipaul, deepened my understanding of his writings, which is what good literary reviews are about. Her assessment revealed hidden compatibilities. Mantel values Naipaul's stylistic plainness because she practises it herself. She knows about dislocation and its costs and benefits, too. And they both know that injury is forever; that the people we damage remain forever dangerous.

Consider also this: 'Naipaul has a genius for noticing, a genius for freezing the instant when meaning is born from the accidents of the everyday.' Mantel shares that genius, though she takes a most ungenial view of accidents. Your 'accident' is waiting just for you. Sir Thomas Browne might warn: 'When all looks fair about, and thou seest not a cloud so big as a hand to threaten thee, forget not the wheel of things', but that is altogether too cosy a vision for Mantel. All is never 'fair about'. There are always stirrings: intimations of danger made more unnerving by their mask of ordinariness. And there is no regulating wheel: only the sickening lurch from the everyday into horror. If you doubt me, read *A Change of Climate* (1994).

Late in 2001 I met a reticent woman called Hilary Mantel at the Adelaide Writers' Festival, but I wasn't fooled. I knew I hadn't 'met the writer'. I knew that 'Hilary Mantel' only happened at her desk. This woman and I fell into correspondence because she liked a short piece I had written for the *London Review of Books* on life (and intimations of death) after a liver transplant. Now that I have met her on the pages of her recent memoir, *Giving up the Ghost* (2003), I know why she liked it. I was respectful of a young woman whose girlish body had been swamped in flesh through the drugs she was bound to swallow to stay alive.

The same thing had happened — is still happening —

to Mantel. The latter part of the memoir is largely to do with physical illness and its protean consequences. When she was seventeen, escaped at last to London from the constrictions of an unhappy home, embarked on a law degree and having met the man who would be her life companion, Mantel began to suffer disabling pains: pains that seemed to have the eerie power of migration around her body. Endometriosis is a condition in which cells disperse from the lining of the womb to other parts of the body: to bowel, pelvis, heart, chest wall, head — everywhere. Being what they are, the migratory cells bleed; scar tissue forms; organs malfunction; pain happens. It is not a common condition, but neither is it rare. A competent doctor would recognise it. A sequence of incompetent doctors diagnosed Mantel's problem as a severe case of female over-ambition, and dosed her with increasingly powerful psychiatric drugs, which very nearly made her mad. Ten destructive years later, she identified her condition from the books available in the public library of a dusty African town. By then it was too late: when she was twenty-seven, her womb and various other parts of her inner person had to be removed, and this in a woman with a visceral commitment to the continuity of families. (Reading this latter part, I remembered that Mantel's work is haunted by the small unquiet ghosts of babies dead, or unborn, or lost, or stolen, or somehow mislaid; that ungrounded guilt is Mantel's familiar.) The disease reasserted itself despite the surgery. After another bitter period of misdiagnosis, Mantel began the hormone-taking that first buried her slight person in surplus flesh and that continues to impose its whimsical changes on mind and body.

This might seem to provide more than enough matter for a memoir. These days most non-celebrity memoirs seem to focus on suffering. A well-creamed face stares dolefully from a page crowned by a title like 'I Survived', evoking a silent snarl: 'Survived *what?* Eyelid surgery?' Rather too many pivot on the notion of 'resilience': the human as high-quality tennis ball bouncing back into shape, however hard you whack it. Nearly all are consolatory in both matter and tone. They assure us that suffering ennobles; that sweet resignation will be our crown at the end of weary years. I prefer the view embodied in the blues: loss hurts like a leg falling off, but you might make a good song out of it. Mantel believes that suffering is bad for you: that it makes you angry and vengeful; that injury, whether wittingly or unwittingly inflicted, is an enduring outrage. She also believes that damage is irreparable, which, given that we have only one life, is seriously bad news.

The discussion of illness, scorching as it is, remains secondary in this remarkable book. Its bulk is taken up by Mantel's first fifteen years, with the emphasis on the first seven. Mantel's childhood is a puzzle to which she has found no solution. ('The story of my own childhood is a complicated sentence that I am always trying to finish, to finish and put behind me.') Born in 1952 in the grim town of Hadfield-near-Manchester, the first child of her parents, she spent her first years at the warm core of an Irish Catholic

family of women — grandmother, aunts, great aunts, female cousins — with a grandfather as kindly patriarch. Initially, her mother seems peripheral and her father more so; both increase in importance with time.

Memoirists take a jealous interest in how other memoirists overcome the challenges they have struggled with themselves. Mantel's progress is marked by a glorious clatter of broken rules. She begins at the end, plunging into an account of the voluntary, yet somehow coerced, selling of a house. The mood is fraught. On page one, she 'sees' a ghost on the stairs and reassures us with a brisk account of what migraines can do to a sufferer's perceptions, only to de-assure us two pages later, when she tells us that she is so fond of this particular ghost (oppressive stepfather) that she 'can hardly bear to sell the cottage and leave him behind on the stairs'. She further unnerves us by describing the 'migrainous sleep' that 'steals up' on her as an ogre who 'plants on my forehead a clammy ogre's kiss' and sucks her into oblivion. She remarks that she always sleeps well in this house. And there we are, dry-mouthed, already deep into Mantel territory.

Orderly chronicling is tossed aside. In her twenties, Mantel spent some years in Botswana and a couple more in Jeddah, but she mentions Botswana only briefly and Jeddah not at all. Her concern is with her inner history, and the tracking down of the experiences that made it. After that tense beginning, the narrative flickers from present to childhood to maturity to girlhood to deep family past and back again with a filmmaker's confidence in readers' ability to hold the narrative line, and we do. The prose is utterly controlled, except for a brief moment early in the book — on page four, to be exact — when Mantel performs a small anxious jig about the tone she ought to adopt in writing a memoir. (I think this jig works psychologically as a war dance, a thought to which I will return.) The anxiety is real, but her readers do not share it. After three pages, we are ready to follow her anywhere. Why? Because of the sheer power of the writing, which, superficially, is clear, even matter-of-fact, but which has already seduced us into a previously unimagined world. Thereafter, braced for sinister experiences, seduced by a wry intelligence, nervously intuiting the rapids ahead, we commit ourselves to the turbulent current of the prose.

There are quiet waters along the way. Mantel offers a beautifully dense description of lower-middle-class English provincial life in the 1950s and early 1960s, so providing the reliable pleasures of contemplating the recent past. Younger readers can marvel at how their elders contrived to survive the squalor and deprivations of life 'back then' ('Your lavatory was at the end of the *garden?*'); the old can rub elderly backs against the pleasurable prickles of nostalgia. I had forgotten details of my own household until I met them again, immaculately described and wholly familiar in Mantel's description of her childhood. My family also was poor, provincial and aspiring to respectability. I remember the determined comfortlessness, the flagged proprieties jealously preserved, the dogged home cooking, the bumble of kin waiting to be fed their scones and jam (in Mantel's case, cheese and ham); the

energetic women in their Turkish-like domestic seclusion; the perfection of the Catholic/Protestant divide even when 'they' lived next door. I had also wondered at the startling whiteness of working men's inner arms, but being of a more secular bent than Mantel (lapsed Presbyterian versus practising Catholic) it did not occur to me, as it did to her more metaphysical mind, that they might be humans transubstantiating into vegetables. I thought they might be princesses in elaborate but sportingly defective disguise. Who else in my world could plausibly claim milk-white skin and sky-blue veins?

Mantel's descriptions also tempt us into the disreputable game of identifying 'real' images and moments in the novels, where they live refracted and transformed. One example: her grandfather's brothers would come *en masse* to visit, always without warning, because 'this is the time before telephones, or before anyone went anywhere, to be out when you called'. I remember those times, too, when our suburban fortress would suddenly be overrun by unannounced hordes of kin. Mantel's great-uncles, 'in many woollen layers', their caps still on their heads and 'coughing wetly', would sit on upright chairs 'set at each end of the sideboard, symmetrical, at the back of the room, as if an opera were about to burst out in front of the fireplace'. As I laugh, I think 'so that's where those Ghazzah chairs come from', and eye my own furniture arrangements queasily: what unseen guests are sitting in those empty chairs, waiting for some invisible show to begin — or, worse, already playing? Eager fans might also spot the childhood springs of *Fludd*. *Fludd* is Mantel's revenge on the Catholic Church: a realistic fable of a liberating Devil, disguised as a priest, seducing and thus saving a healthy young nun from convent life. In her memoir, Mantel confesses that her knowledge of convents came from a single penetration into a dark convent interior made when her mother sent her to deliver a message to a cluster of whiskery old nuns. Her child's eyes had gulped down everything.

As for the shape of her childhood, in pre-school years Mantel was small in stature but large in hopes, a cheerful, ambitious child in a family where adult arrangements were lovingly stretched to meet her flaring imagination: a teepee pitched on her grandmother's floor, a great-aunt confiding her sins to her five-year-old niece as priest. From preliterate days, she was already a passionate consumer of stories, a reverse Ancient Mariner waylaying passing kin and requiring them to read her a single chapter from 'King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table' (just one: Mantel was an honourable child, jealous of her own rights, respectful of others').

From those stories, she came to trust in the reality of benign transformations. Had not her mother told her that she had been born with long black hair, though her hair was now fair? Might she not have been, and so was destined to become, a Red Indian? Born female, she was emphatically unfeminine in her rejection of female constrictions, in her vigour, audacity and taste for battle toys. Therefore, when she was four or thereabouts, she would turn into

a boy and assume either of the two destinies — Arthurian knight or Indian brave — for which she was preparing herself. Her rigorous child's logic only increased the reach of her vaulting imaginings.

Transformation came at four, but not one of her own choosing. As her well-muscled body etiolated to splindly frailty, a series of shattering fevers saw her long heavy hair cut off and replaced by feathery fluff. Transformed from warrior-in-waiting to pallid girl-child, she knew her destiny had been altered without her consent. Soon after, she was ejected from her home into the tedium and torment of 'school', a place of impenetrable questions from teachers ('Do you want me to hit you with this ruler?'), and more casual violence from students. Primary schools were not the Technicolor Edens they appear to be now. Mine was the most violent society I have known. Both Mantel and I learnt to punch to defend our dignity from the dominant males, the 'big boys' who saw small girl-children as their natural prey. I have a potent memory of my big brother, pillow across his middle, giving me instruction. 'At the first hint of trouble, step in *close*, short-arm jab to the solar plexus *right, left, right*, with your weight behind it; step back. And if you have to go in again, keep your head down, step in and *keep punching*.' These instructions proved shockingly effective. I haven't had to hit anyone since I was eight, but it has been a useful, ongoing lesson in how to deal with bullies. Mantel's grandad taught her much the same routine, although he favoured one hard blow to the middle, followed by a fast slap across the chops.

The defensive strategies came later. At first, this tough, inventive and verbal child swiftly declined into silent weeping and unspecific illnesses, to be dubbed by a complacent doctor — the first of that ominous line of medical fools — 'Little Miss Neverwell'. Mantel, already persuaded of the magical power of words, furiously resented that casual (and prophetic) 'naming'.

Meanwhile, there was deepening malaise at home. Her mother, herself resentful of poverty and the stifling dictates of respectability, rebelled, moving her family (now there were two little boys) from the contiguous kin households to an echoing house on a windy hill. There she took a male lodger first into her house, then into her bed, so reducing her husband to lodger status. The child became an anxious ghost roaming the house, watching closed doors, struggling to comprehend what was happening — kept, as she bitterly remembers, in the dark.

When she was seven, Mantel took instruction and then the Catholic sacraments, and waited hopefully for her infusion of grace. (This was a smart child. She had understood the bleak message that mere wanting would have nothing to do with it: that God's decision was arbitrary and without appeal.) Instead, one ordinary morning, something else came: a vile something 'as high as a child of two' which manifested as a vaporous movement in a patch of grass near the new house. It roused instant terror and revulsion. She begged it to stay away; 'within the space of a thought' it invaded her body, and 'grace runs away from me, runs out of my body like

liquid from a corpse'. Mantel acknowledges that, after this event, she was 'always more or less ashamed and afraid'.

When Hilary was ten, her parents' shell of a marriage finally broke. Her mother decamped to another city with her lover and her children, to begin what she was determined would be a new life. Mantel never saw her father again, and contact with her beloved grandparents was intermittent. The company of two little brothers, so young at the time of the family rearrangement that they came to think the usurping stepfather was their father, could not mitigate her isolation.

Mantel marks the family rupture as ending her childhood. During those years, she learnt the high cost of other people's freedom. She also absorbed, after her infant dreams of autonomy, the helplessness of children in an adults' world. In exchange, she gained a peaceful school run by intelligence-tolerant nuns, a domineering stepfather and a burden of silent, obdurate memories. Seven moderately calm years later, intelligence and fierce will had delivered her to London and the first year of a law degree. She found a man she loved (but about whom we learn nothing — I like that). And then the pains began.

Mantel's account of her younger self explodes our sentimental notions of childhood, replacing them with a stack of bladed memories and probably unanswerable questions. What is childhood? Lewis Carroll's 'nest of gladness': edenic prelude before the bread, sweat and tears? Or the dooming time when fatal dies are cast, with everything to follow sad iteration? Are children new-washed slates waiting for the adult world to scribble and over-scribble its gnomic messages until they can decipher the minimal requirements for adulthood in that particular society? Mantel remarks, with uncharacteristic wanness, that her unhappy childhood was nobody's fault: she was simply 'not suited to being a child'. I doubt that anyone is suited to being small, powerless and ignored, especially at the time when, all character and no experience, we must somehow learn to survive in a world run by dangerously unpredictable and wholly disingenuous giants. I suspect that it is only the giants who confuse childhood, that state of chronic under-employment, humiliating ignorance and total dependence on a whimsical authority, with 'happiness'.

The Mantel case suggests that as infants we are our truest selves. Then comes the bruising world, and with it the realisation that not only other people but our own bodies, even our minds, can fail us; that 'experience' can and will rewrite character. Yet what most struck me, reading Mantel,

was how continuous her temperament was from infant to adult. She was bloodied, yes, but not broken, indeed not even much bent by her experiences. Of course, those experiences affected her. For example, the world concocted her ambitions from her observations of the world around her. Consider her infant conviction that she was 'by nature' male. This was not the manifestation of some immutable genetic sexual predilection, but a conclusion drawn from her own observations. In her time and place, as in mine, women's lives were acknowledged to be dull and trivial, while men's were respected, even potentially glamorous. To discover that one was irremediably a girl was a body blow to aspirations towards an honourable autonomy.

I share more than gender and class background with Mantel. At a sufficient distance, our life profiles seem to have followed similar trajectories. Both our mothers left school for the factory at fourteen, and resented it; both married and regretted it; both mistrusted the world. Our primary schools were lawless places where apprehension first rendered us mute and incredulous, then warily aggressive. At secondary school, we both learnt that literacy and a fluent tongue were better weapons than fists. We both escaped to university, suffered the isolation of prolonged illness and its consequences, and struggled to keep body and soul together by writing.

There are instructive divergences. My parents stayed together, with no hope of happiness and not much liking. I used to think that was a wrong decision (were it anything so formal as a decision), but now I think it was probably right. Tolerance grew with the years, and their children grew up in a household secure to the point of dreariness. Local modes of gender discrimination also mattered. There was sport at my secondary school, none at Mantel's, nuns not doing that kind of thing. It is only now as I am losing my sense of physical competence that I realise how good a companion it has been through life, especially during illness, when the memory of it keeps me hopeful and ambitious. For Mantel, after all those childhood fantasies of intrepid horsemanship and swordplay, it has been a grievous and continuing deprivation. I was handed a free university education; Mantel had to go hungry for hers. For both of us, there was prolonged

illness and its chronic aftermath, but my medicos proved to be wise men, while Mantel's were neglectful fools. Above all, I have children. She has none.

Those vague experiential approximations yielded quite different accommodations to the world. I am a child of the

Enlightenment. For me, nightmares, like neighbours or nature, are there to be analysed, and ghosts dispersed by steady looking. Now, after inhabiting Mantel's world for several months, I can feel an expansion into an unfamiliar way of seeing, a temptation to yield to the sense that we are shadow-twins, that I have somehow contrived to live an earlier, sunnier, antipodean version of her life, and that I have somehow stolen her luck. But that, for me, is a kind of game, playing grandmother's steps with a different account of the world.

What are we to make of those lurching destabilisations in Mantel's experience: her 'ghosts'? Physiological disturbances signalling the onset of migraine? And the thing that took physical possession of her child's body: was that a 'realisation' of Catholic teachings, exacerbated by a child's shame at the masked improprieties within her own household? Another parallel experience helped me to understand the shame generated by her visions. When I was very ill, I was assaulted by sustained and horribly realistic hallucinations. I told neither my family nor my doctors. The prohibition was absolute: I would have died rather than tell. I did not 'decide' not to tell. The necessity was, simply, there. Why?

I think it was because I felt that secret experience marked me as an exile from, even a traitor to, the unshadowed world the well inhabited. Because I had seen what they had not, I was no longer of their kind. Read from that angle, our shared dread springs from the isolating terrors of social disconformity.

So is the adult Mantel's distinctive sensibility explained by that confluence of infant sorrows: harsh schooling; Catholic teachings (which to my secular mind looks more and more like the psychological equivalent of foot-binding, with gangrene a serious possibility); the hidden horrors of 'respectable' marital breakup? Perhaps. But there is an archaic dimension to Mantel's sensibility, a sense of weird forces moving under the surface of things, which makes these brisk explanations seem glib. I doubt that her particular spirit (and by analogy ours) can be so easily caught, pinned and classified.

Consider again that early anxiety jig or, in my preferred account, war dance: 'the preliminary working-up of courage and energy before a major exploit'. Cultures accommodate different experiences and different temperaments, with different degrees of comfort. The infant Mantel thought she was, had been or would become a Plains Indian. The poignancy is that she would have made a good Indian, with her touchy sense of honour, her zeal for self-testing, even her concern for appearance — had she been born male. Even as a female, she would have found both words and a respectful audience for those moments when a piece of the seen world seems to liquefy and rearrange itself into wavering, supernaturally compelling phantoms. Plains Indians would have welcomed her visions as insights into the 'really real', not dismissed them as physiological derangements or symptoms of induced guilt. They could have been a source

of social power rather than a disabling, secret shame.

Mantel was early persuaded of the possibility of transformations. I think this was because of her belief in the truth of words. She attaches a time to her first invasion by a chronic sense of unworthiness: 'From about the age of four I had begun to believe I had done something wrong ... there was something inside me that was beyond remedy and beyond redemption.' At four, she had fallen ill and somehow botched her transformation into a boy? Then, at seven, came her experience of her physical invasion by quintessential evil in response to intolerable pressures, some of them theological. Nonetheless, from the evidence of the memoir, I would say that her ability to see the world from a de-arranged angle — to experience 'enchantment', malign or benign — was present

before school, before instruction in the faith, and when the alienation between her parents was still a shadow. In a more superstitious age, I might have said she had been born with a caul.

Mantel insists that her memories are not a clutter of foxed snapshots faded to sepia, but vivid short films playing in her head, as sensuously complex as the actuality that generated them, so, to this point, I have been

treating *Giving up the Ghost* as an archive of authentic experience. My library, however, catalogues her book as 'autobiographical fiction'. How much fabrication is there in memory honestly recalled? A.S. Byatt declared autobiography to be the most inventive form of fiction, but A.S. Byatt is a cynic. The psychologist Jerome Bruner brings us closer to a useful understanding when he asks us to reflect on the interdependence between experience and imagination displayed in a universal activity of which we are less than unaware: the work we put into 'the rough and perpetually changing draft of our autobiography that we carry in our minds'.

That recognition made, autobiography becomes for Bruner 'an extension of fiction rather than the reverse ... the shape of life comes first from imagination rather than from experience'. That feels close to right. My one quarrel with Bruner concerns his suggested sequence. With Mantel, we seem to watch imagination transfiguring experience as it happens. Remember that this was a child peculiarly sensitive to language: bewildered by the idea of lying, threatened by riddling speech, enraged by casual misrepresentation. Like the young Janet Frame, she knew that words had power ('Little Miss Neverwell') and ought to be treated with respect.

Now consider the following example of the dense interweaving of action and 'subject interpretation'. As a toddler, Mantel would occasionally be taken to Manchester to visit her father's grandparents, first by both parents, then, as the marriage withered, by her father alone. Once there, a large boy cousin would be prevailed upon to walk her to the park. She tells us: 'I do not remember Geoffrey's face at all, only his huge legs in flapping flannel shorts, the blunt bony bulk of his knees.' We brace ourselves for sexual tamperings. But big,

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good-hearted Geoffrey did something rather worse: 'back at the house [he] would trap me between items of furniture, sticking out one of those huge legs to prevent me toddling the way I meant to go, then when I turned back barring me with an outstretched arm, so I revolved about and about in a tearful muddle ... I saw myself through his eyes, silly, frilly, too tiny to outwit or hit him, baby fist clenched in exasperation.' We have all stood by and watched toddlers teased to helpless fury. Mantel tells us how the scene looked from the inside: 'this picture dismayed me, so far was it at odds with my own image of myself ... my judgement of Geoffrey was that only the accident of my small size concealed my great superiority to him in every way. And this made it doubling galling, that I was stuck in an alley between armchairs.' (The difficulty with Mantel is that you want to give up this foolish business of reviewing, and simply go on quoting until the book is done.)

It sometimes seems as if Mantel's life has been scripted by Mantel, pivoting as it does on a series of malign transformations of self and circumstance that might have been inflicted less than deliberately (fevers, abandonment to cruel teachers, the surgical excision of her father, the medical blunders that blocked her ambitions as surely as Geoffrey's broad knees had blocked her infant explorations), but which damaged and continue to damage her. That is, my suspicion is that the sinister reading was not, or not fully, inscribed in the events, but rather inherent in the experiencing sensibility.

Consider the one doll that Mantel chose to cherish. It had been named for her dimpled cousin Beryl. The doll was not dimpled and had been conjured out of 'grubby green satin, with satin stumps for hands and feet, features inked onto a round of calico for her face, and her pointed head of grubby green satin also'. Grubby satin, stumps for limbs, vestigial face, pointed head. And there it is: the authentic Mantel shiver. Now for Mantel's first memory. She was still in a pram, so she was probably twelve to eighteen months old:

I am sitting in my pram. We are outside, in the park called Bankswood. My mother walks backwards. I hold out my arms because I don't want her to go. She says she is only going to take my picture. I don't understand why she goes backwards, back and aslant, tacking to one side. The trees overhead make a noise of urgent conversation, too quick to catch; the leaves part, the sky moves, the sun peers down at me. Away and away she goes, till she comes to a halt. She raises her arms and partly hides her face. The sky and trees rush over my head, I feel dizzied. The entire world is sound, movement. She moves towards me, speaking. The memory ends.

And there it is again: the shiver — and the fast slither from the mundane into terror. The crack in the teacup that opens to swallow the world.

There is nothing confessional about this scalding memoir, and no pleas for sympathy, either. Mantel remains unreconciled to the injustices of the world, especially those visited on the ill, the poor, the over-fleshed, above all on children, whose dignity and intelligence are routinely insulted. This is not a story of the making or the deformation of a character. It seems that the mind — active, brave, rancorous — has been there from the beginning, along with the abraded sensibility and the ferocious will.

It is also the story of the making of a writer. Despite its flayed feelings, the memoir exhilarates because of its marvelously supple prose. Awareness of the power of words might have come early. What must have come slowly is Mantel's power over words, through years of dedication, in the harshest circumstances, to the craft of writing. Mantel tells us that she wrote the memoir to lure memories of childhood from their hiding places and so to exorcise them: to give up her ghosts. I think they will not go away, because they constitute her being. Instead, she has given us a gift. She has always been a good writer. This memoir demonstrates she is now a great one.