

# READING GROUP GUIDE

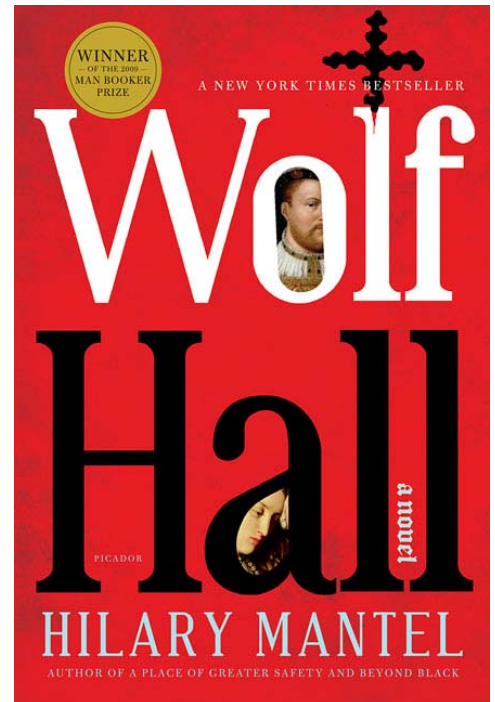
## *Wolf Hall*

*A Novel*

by **Hilary Mantel**

ISBN-10: 0-312-42998-3

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42998-0



### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Wolf Hall* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Wolf Hall*.

### About the Book

Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, winner of the 2009 Man Booker Prize, tells the story of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, of the execution of Thomas More and the English Reformation, all from a new vantage point—through the eyes of the man traditionally considered its villain. For centuries Thomas Cromwell has been widely regarded as the unprincipled and power-hungry opportunist whose influence on Henry VIII contributed to the worst excesses of Tudor England. But Mantel gives Cromwell a chance to tell his side of the story, from his humble beginnings at the hands of a drunk and abusive father, to his unprecedented rise, becoming the closest advisor to Henry VIII.

As Reformation spreads on the Continent, Henry suddenly finds himself at odds with the Catholic Church he had once so vigorously defended. Henry is without a male heir, and, the Tudor line imperiled, has pressed his advisor Cardinal Wolsey to lobby the Pope for an annulment of his twenty-year marriage. Wolsey's failure and subsequent downfall suddenly places Cromwell in a unique position of influence with the king. As Cromwell rises in Henry's esteem, he begins to turn Henry away from the idea of annulment in favor of a more radical solution—a complete break with Rome. But accomplishing such a task is a daunting political feat, and while Henry and Anne Boleyn both wait impatiently to bring about a legal union, Cromwell must plot against his enemies and prepare the country for a fundamental transformation in religious identity.

## About the Author

**Hilary Mantel** is the critically acclaimed author of ten novels, including *Beyond Black*, *A Place of Greater Safety*, *Vacant Possession*, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *An Experiment in Love*, *A Change of Climate*, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, *The Giant*, *O'Brien*, *Fludd*, and her memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost* (all available from Picador and Henry Holt). Winner of the Man Booker Prize and the Hawthornden Prize, she lives in England. Ms. Mantel reviews for *The New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of Mantel's "occult" history of Britain? How might these legendary traditions have influenced Henry in choosing to marry Anne Boleyn? What role does legend play in the perpetuation of a monarchy?
2. Why was Cromwell so attached to Cardinal Wolsey? Was Wolsey more of a mentor or a father-figure for Cromwell? What do love and loyalty mean for Cromwell?
3. Why is it meant as an insult when Norfolk calls Cromwell a "person?" What is it about Cromwell that frustrates members of the nobility so much? Why were Wolsey and Henry able to appreciate Cromwell's talents when everyone else merely saw him as an impudent schemer?
4. What is it that makes Cromwell resolve to be gentle and mild with his children? What gave him the will and the confidence to become a different man than his father?
5. What kind of a character is Thomas More in this novel? Does he come off as sympathetic in any way? Why does More choose to die rather than accept breaking away from the Catholic Church? Would Cromwell be willing to die for his beliefs?
6. What is the significance to Cromwell of seeing the woman burned at the stake as a child? How could an event such as this have influenced Cromwell in his later attitudes towards Reformation? Does Cromwell have any specific religious convictions? Or is he more driven by convictions of common decency and personal loyalty?

7. What kind of a king is Henry VIII in this novel? What motivates him? Are his preoccupations solely self-interested, or does he have the good of the country in mind as well? What is it that makes him so susceptible to Anne Boleyn's seductions?
8. In conjuring Cromwell on the page, what does Mantel create, and what does she re-create from this historical record? Along those lines, how does historical fiction influence the way we look at history?
9. What is it that makes Cromwell so driven? Does his ambition stem from a desire to do good, or is it just a survival instinct based on his past? How is Cromwell both personally ambitious and yet generous and unselfish?
10. Is Cromwell attempting to realize any particular political vision for the country, or is he just reacting to the situation at hand? Does he strive to bring about a more egalitarian society, or is it more a matter of being unconsciously influenced by his experiences as a commoner?
11. What is the significance of Guido Camillo's "memory machine?" Why is Cromwell interested in it? Does he see it as some sort of potential weapon, or is he driven by a desire for knowledge?
12. Is there something tragic about the fate of Elizabeth Barton the prophetess? Was she merely deceived by the monks, or was there something cynical about her? Did it seem that she ever believed in her visions? If she had not been exploited for political gain, might she have made a genuine contribution to spiritual life at the time? Or was she simply a fraud?
13. What is the source of Cromwell's antipathy for More? What is it about More that outrages him? Is there something personal in it for Cromwell, or does More simply represent a particular type of villainy to him?
14. Later in the novel we see Cromwell come to the realization that his home now is either where there's business to be done, or with the king. How is this a personal transformation for him, considering what life was like when his wife and daughters were alive? In the lively Austin Friars, full of extended family and wards and guests, Cromwell seemed the consummate family man. Why did he change? Is there something sad about this change in him?
15. Did Cromwell truly want to spare More from being executed? Did he do everything he could to save him? What made More so inflexible? Was it related to his desire to always live life in the public eye?
16. As the novel ends and Cromwell is at the height of his power, is there anything in his actions that foreshadow his later downfall? Has he become too much like Wolsey? Would the mercurial Henry VIII have been likely sooner or later to turn on Cromwell anyway?
17. Is there any indication in the portrayal of Jane Seymour in *Wolf Hall* of the role she would later play? What might motivate Seymour to foster high ambitions? How might Seymour be similar to Cromwell?

## Timeline

<b>English Monarchy</b>	<b>Reformation</b>	<b>Life of Thomas Cromwell</b>
<p><b>1399</b> - Henry of Bolingbroke rebels against his cousin King Richard II in order to reclaim his rights as Duke of Lancaster. A popular revolt ensued in which Richard was deposed. Henry was crowned King Henry IV, interrupting the direct line of the House of Plantagenet and establishing the House of Lancaster on the throne.</p> <p><b>1413</b> – Death of Henry IV; his son Henry V made King of England.</p> <p><b>1422</b> – Death of Henry V; his son Henry VI made King of England.</p> <p><b>1453</b> - Henry VI has a mental breakdown and becomes unfit to rule.</p> <p><b>1454</b> - Richard, Duke of York, is regent of England while Henry VI convalesces.</p> <p><b>1455</b> - Henry VI recovers. Richard of York is replaced and excluded from the Royal Council. Growing disaffection with the corruption and incompetence of</p>		

Henry's reign leads to an attempt to assert the claim of the House of York to the throne, due to Richard's descent from Lionel of Antwerp, the second surviving son of Edward III.

**1455** - War of the Roses between the House of York and the House of Lancaster for the right to the throne.

**1460** - Battle of Wakefield. Richard of York is defeated and killed. However, the powerful and influential Earl of Warwick captures London for the Yorkists. In the battle of Northampton Henry VI is captured by Yorkists.

**1461** - Battles of Mortimer's Cross and Towton. Richard's son, Edward of York, defeats the Lancastrians and becomes King Edward IV, establishing the House of York on the throne.

**1465** - Henry VI imprisoned by Edward IV.

**1466** - Warwick quarrels with Edward IV and is concerned by outside influences in the court. Warwick is

defeated and flees to France.

**1470** - Warwick forms an alliance with Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI. Warwick turns his support to the House of Lancaster. He defeats Edward IV and restores Henry VI.

**1471** - Edward IV re-enters London with little resistance and captures Henry VI. In the Battle of Barnet he defeats and kills Warwick; Henry VI dies. With Warwick gone, Edward reclaims the throne for the House of York.

**1483** – Sudden death of Edward IV. His 12 year-old son is made Edward V, King of England. Edward V's uncle, Richard Duke of Gloucester was named Protector for the duration of Edward's minority. A dispute over the legitimacy of Edward V causes Parliament to name Richard the rightful king. Richard holds Edward V and his younger brother Richard of York in the Tower of London. Neither child ever emerged. Richard is crowned king as

**1483**- Birth of Martin Luther

<p>Richard III.</p> <p><b>1485</b> – Henry Tudor, claimant for the house of Lancaster, invades and defeats Richard III at the battle of Bosworth. Henry is crowned king as Henry VII and marries Elizabeth of York, daughter of the Yorkist king Edward IV. This marriage unites the two warring dynasties and effectively ends the Wars of the Roses.</p> <p><b>1509</b> – Henry VIII becomes king. Marries Katherine of Aragon, widow of Prince Arthur, his elder brother. Katherine and Henry have several children but only one, Mary, survives infancy.</p> <p><b>1521</b>– Anne Boleyn appears at the English court.</p>	<p><b>1509</b>- Birth of John Calvin</p> <p><b>1516</b>- Publication of Erasmus’s New Testament in Greek with an original Latin translation.</p> <p><b>1517</b>- Luther’s Ninety-five Theses.</p> <p><b>1518</b>- Luther defends his theological views in a disputation at Heidelberg.</p> <p><b>1521</b>- Luther excommunicated.</p> <p><b>1521</b>- Henry VIII awarded title Defender of the Faith by Pope Leo X for his treatise against Luther.</p>	<p><b>1485</b> – Born in Putney, near London, son of brewer and blacksmith Walter Cromwell.</p> <p><b>1500</b> – Joins the French army as a mercenary.</p> <p><b>1504</b> – Finds work as a banker’s clerk in Florence, later a wool trade agent in Antwerp.</p> <p><b>1512</b> – Back in England, marries Elizabeth Wykys, a widow and wool merchant’s daughter.</p>
--	---	---

<p><b>1529</b> - Henry VIII dismisses Cardinal Wolsey for failing to obtain the Pope's consent to his annulment from Catherine of Aragon. Thomas More appointed Lord Chancellor.</p> <p><b>1532</b> - Sir Thomas More resigns over the question of Henry VIII's annulment.</p> <p><b>1533</b> - Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn and is excommunicated by Pope Clement VII; Thomas Cranmer appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.</p> <p><b>1535</b> - Thomas More executed for refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy.</p>	<p><b>1522</b>- Luther produces German translation of New Testament.</p> <p><b>1523</b>- King Gustavus Vasa begins a gradual process of reformation in Sweden.</p> <p><b>1525</b>-Zurich removes images from churches and puts an end to the Catholic Mass.</p> <p><b>1526</b>-William Tyndale's English translation of the New Testament.</p> <p><b>1529</b>- Iconoclastic riots in Basle. Abolition of the Mass in Strassburg.</p> <p><b>1530</b>—Augsburg Confession setting down the basic principles of Lutheran Christianity.</p> <p><b>1531</b>-Formation of the Schmalkald League among Protestant cities for the purpose of mutual defense against the Holy Roman Empire.</p> <p><b>1534</b>- Act of Supremacy in England, acknowledging Henry VIII as the supreme head of the English Church.</p>	<p><b>1523</b> – Made a member of parliament and is working for Cardinal Wolsey.</p> <p><b>1530</b> – Wolsey is arrested but dies before he can reach London. Cromwell joins the King's council.</p> <p><b>1534</b> – Cromwell becomes the King's secretary and, in effect, chief minister</p>
--	---	--



For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:

Call: 646-307-5259

Fax: 212-253-9627

E-mail: [readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com](mailto:readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com)

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: [www.picadorusa.com](http://www.picadorusa.com)

**P I C A D O R**

What to Read Next<sup>®</sup>