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Helmerich winner talks about the power of 'What if?' with area students

By James D. Watts Jr. *Tulsa World* Dec 7, 2018



Dame Hilary Mantel, this year's Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award winner, speaks to high school students during a presentation at Central Library. JOHN CLANTON/Tulsa World

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Event

What: Presentation and book signing by novelist Dame Hilary Mantel, the 2018 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award winner.

When: 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 8

Where: Central Library, Fifth Street and Denver Avenue.

Cost: Free. Copies of her books will be available for purchase and signing.

If you want to alter the course of history, to disrupt the fabric of reality, all one needs to do is utter two words: "What if?"

Those two words possess such inordinate power, said novelist Dame Hilary Mantel, because it is from them that all stories begin.

Mantel, whose best-selling novels "Wolf Hall" and "Bring Up the Bodies" won back-to-back Man Booker Prizes, is in Tulsa this weekend as the recipient of the 2018 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award.

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Mantel received the award — a \$40,000 cash prize and an engraved crystal book — at a black-tie gala Friday night at Tulsa's Central

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Library.

She is to give a free public presentation on her work at 10:30 a.m. Saturday, Dec. 8, at Central Library, Fifth Street and Denver Avenue. Copies of her books will be available for purchase and signing.

Friday morning, Mantel spoke to students from five area high schools — Cascia Hall, Booker T. Washington, Will Rogers, East Central and Edison — about “stories ... how they come into being, and who do they belong to.”

Most of the students at the Friday morning presentation had read Mantel’s short story collection, “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher,” and had brought their copies of the book with them.

“Oh, let’s hold them up,” Mantel said, happily. “Let me look at that headless woman,” referring to the book’s arresting cover image.

The book’s title story deals with a former member of the Irish Republican Army who enters a woman’s apartment disguised as a plumber, because it offers an ideal vantage point for a sniper.

Mantel said the apartment described so carefully in the story is her own apartment, and the view the assassin wanted is the vista from Mantel’s window.

Those real-life details, Mantel said, can give a story “a fiber of toughness,” a basis of fact that allows the reader to trust where the author is leading as the events of the story take “that jump into fiction.”

“Of course this didn’t really happen,” Mantel said. “But it does show how nearly it could have happened.”

She referred to a phrase, as the assassin closes one eye to take aim at his target, as “an easy wink of the world’s blind eye.”

“There are so many points in the whole of history where a tiny word, a casual action, could change everything,” Mantel said.

That is why she said that change is an integral part of telling stories.

Stories began, Mantel said, as an oral tradition, where people relied on memory to pass them on.

“And we know how memory is,” she said. “It changes things. So a story that is passed on that way is never an exact reproduction. And it doesn’t need to be.

“Stories are changed to suit each generation, as they look for something new” in familiar tales, she said.

She talked of her experiences with a charitable organization called Scene and Heard, which pairs children whose lives have been upended by migration and hardship with professional actors, who help the children write and stage original plays.

“They are often simple, and suited to the children’s ages,” Mantel said. “Each child sits on a kind of throne to watch as their play is presented by professional actors. And to watch their faces as this happens is something wonderful. Often, they don’t know how funny their plays are until they hear them acted out.”

The purpose of this enterprise, Mantel said, is the help building the


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children's confidence through storytelling. But she added that even these creations by young children contain some surprisingly universal themes.

"Many of them deal with having a place to call home, or lost siblings, or finding a friend, or knowing that one's family is out there somewhere across the world, and how they might get to them," she said.

These stories struck Mantel forcefully, she said, because they prove that "stories tell us what human beings need — emotional security, a sense of belonging to a community, seeing what is wrong and finding a way to make it right."



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