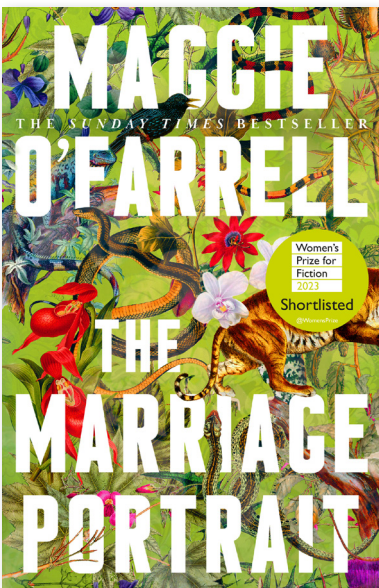


# Women's Prize for Fiction 2023



## 2023 SHORTLIST READING GUIDE

### THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT MAGGIE O'FARRELL



#### PLOT SUMMARY

Florence, the 1560s. Lucrezia, daughter of Cosimo de' Medici, is comfortable with her obscure place in the palazzo: free to wonder at its treasures and to devote herself to artistic pursuits. But when her sister dies on the eve of marriage to Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, Lucrezia is thrust into the limelight: he is quick to request her hand in marriage, and her father to accept on her behalf.

Having barely left girlhood, Lucrezia must now make her way in a troubled court where her arrival is not universally welcomed. As Lucrezia sits for the painting which is 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 secure the future of the Ferrarese dynasty. Until then, for all of her rank and nobility, the duchess's fate hangs entirely in the balance.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In O'Farrell's notes at the end of the book she explains that uxoricide – the killing of one's wife – was not an uncommon practice in sixteenth-century Italy. Lucrezia's sister, in real life, Isabella de Medici Orsini, was strangled by her husband, and their cousin Dianora was choked by a dog leash by her husband, Pietro de Medici. O'Farrell notes that both deaths seemingly had the approval of the women's families, and that neither man was ever held to account.

The theme of violence against women is present throughout *The Marriage Portrait*, because women are routinely viewed as objects to be used for male pleasure or reproduction, and, in the case of noble families, as pawns to make political alliances. Cosimo thinks nothing of initiating sex with his wife without warning in front of

her ladies in waiting, and indeed Queen Eleanor accepts that this is her lot, to produce as many heirs as possible, without complaint.

Alfonso clearly thinks nothing of marrying and raping his teenage wife, and, when she is unable to produce an heir, planning to murder her.

It is fitting that O'Farrell surrounds Lucrezia – the prey – with a hunting lodge as the place of her potential demise. In *The Marriage Portrait*, men are the hunters and women are the prey, and it seems that there is no escape: for the real-life women who died at their husband's or father's hands, there was none, but O'Farrell gives a hopeful ending to Lucrezia's story, with Lucrezia escaping with Jacopo to pursue a life of freedom.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

In the scene where Lucrezia's father, Cosimo, the Grand Duke, takes his children to the Sala de Leoni – an enclosure in the bowels of the palazzo, containing all manner of captive wild animals – Lucrezia feels a bond with the tiger:

“Lucrezia and the tigress regarded each other, for a stretched moment, the child's hand on the beast's back, and time stopped for Lucrezia, the turning world stilled.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Maggie O'Farrell** is the author of *Hamnet*, winner of the 2020 Women's Prize for Fiction, and the memoir *I Am, I Am, I Am*, both *Sunday Times* no. 1 bestsellers. Her novels include *After You'd Gone*, *My Lover's Lover*, *The Distance Between Us*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, *The Hand That First Held Mine*, which won the Costa Novel Award, *Instructions for a Heatwave*, *This Must Be the Place* and *The Marriage Portrait*.

Her life, her name, her family and all that surrounded her receded and became void. She was aware only of her own heart, and that of the tigress, pulsing inside the ribs, drawing in scarlet blood and shooting it out again, flooding their veins." (p46)

How are Lucrezia and the tiger similar? O'Farrell tells us that Lucrezia is the odd one out among the children, the rebel who yearns for freedom and doesn't want to perform the usual princess duties. Is the tiger symbolic of her? Or does the caged tiger represent the fate of all the female children whose lives will be spent locked away in palaces and dominated by violent men? What of the reference that Lucrezia has "charmed the beast" in touching the tiger without being harmed? Does this presage a kind of immunity to Alfonso's plans to murder her, later?

Or, is the tiger reminiscent of the savage threat posed to Lucrezia and her sisters by their fathers and future husbands, who will beat, rape and possibly even murder them? And, if this is the case, what is it in Lucrezia that feels a bond or an attraction to the tiger? Does it represent a power she craves, or a power that is already within her?

## QUESTIONS

What is the symbolism of the portrait of Lucrezia? Why do you think Alfonso keeps it in his bedroom after he believes he has murdered her?

Is Eleanora a good mother? Why, or why not?

How do you feel about the character of Sofia? Is Sofia the one person who has ever really cared for Lucrezia?

How does O'Farrell use the present tense, and is it effective? How does it make us feel about the characters and events?

## NEXT STEPS

Choose a portrait of a woman from history – perhaps a relatively obscure one – and study it. Go to your local gallery, if you have one, or look up images on an art gallery website, such as the National Portrait Gallery. Then write her story, without researching who she was. Imagine your way into who she might be in the present day, if she lived now. What might her interests be, her passions? What are her likes and dislikes, her fondest memories? Who does she love, and who has she lost? Create the character as fully as you can with plenty of notes and then begin a piece of writing in the present tense as "I". See if you can evoke a character voice.

Alternatively, use O'Farrell's symbol of the tiger and write a descriptive piece using the tiger as a metaphor for a woman. How are her tiger qualities expressed – her physicality, her sexuality, her desirability or wildness? Or, is your tiger caged or hunted by someone? Perhaps your tiger is the huntress, instead. You could look at William Blake's famous poem "The Tyger" for inspiration, or look up women poets such as Audre Lorde, Rupi Kaur and Carol Ann Duffy, all of whom have written about women's sexuality and identity.



'An exquisite book that explores extraordinary themes of bravery and of pure evil. I absolutely loved it.'

Louise Minchin, 2023 Judge



If you enjoyed this book, you might like to read these:

In *Hamnet*, Maggie O'Farrell tells the story of the women and children in William Shakespeare's life, and in *Catherine de Medici* (soon to be a TV series starring Samantha Morton) Leonie Frieda tells the real life story of one of 16th-century Italy's most powerful women.

BLACK BUTTERFLIES PRISCILLA MORRIS

BARBARA KINGSOLVER DEMON COPPERHEAD

JACQUELINE CROOKS FIRE RUSH

POA LALINE PAULL

MAGGIE O'FARRELL THE MARRIAGE PORTRAIT

TRESPASSES Louise Kennedy

WHICH ONE WILL YOU READ NEXT?