

## Hilary Mantel writes history

The English novelist Hilary Mantel has taken what you might describe as a “small footnote” from the compelling history of King Henry VIII and turned it into a major event. She wrote three novels on the life of Thomas Cromwell, the chief minister until his beheading after his fall from grace. The first two (*Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*) have won the Booker Prize. This is a great achievement, becoming the first woman and the first British writer to win this literary award twice. She has triumphed as a historical novelist, and now “writes history” herself.

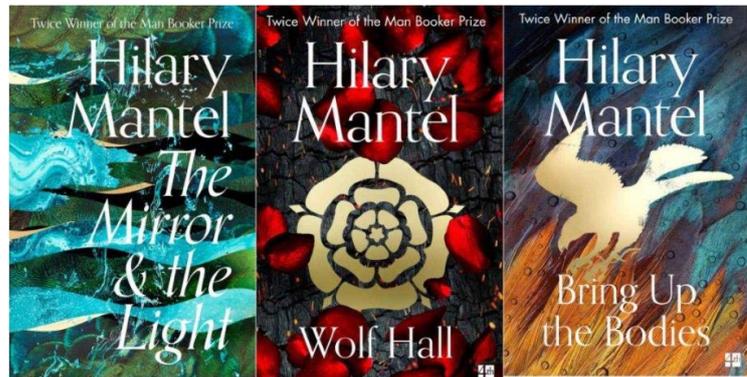
The trilogy on Thomas Cromwell concludes with *The Mirror and the Light*, a majestic book of over 900 pages. You will need a long hot summer to finish reading this book!

The story of part 3 starts with the beheading of Anne Boleyn, the first of Henry’s wives to be executed. “*Once the queens’s*

*head is severed, he walks away. A sharp pang of appetite reminds him that it is time for a second breakfast*”. Who is this man, you might wonder? Well, this is what the final book is all about. We get closer to this “footnote” in history, the son of a blacksmith who rises way above his humble origins. He becomes maybe even more human than in the previous books. There he was the mastermind of King Henry and although he now rises to his ultimate height, becoming Earl of Essex, he also faces increasing opposition from his enemies. They persuade King Henry to arrest him despite the close relation and understanding between the two men apparent in the previous books. And Henry does not even prevent his execution, making Cromwell a victim to his own deadly reputation.

These are spoilers, but since this is all well documented history, we should not care too much about that. No, the really important thing is that Mantel succeeds in creating a “new take” on history. Of course, this is all still fiction. There is no true record of any conversation between Cromwell and King Henry. And to insult on injury, she turns Cromwell in a man of flesh and blood who loses his wife and daughters to the “sweating sickness, who is close to Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More and seems to have played an important role in the break with Rome and the Pope. A man we might like or at least get to know intimately. And that is the incredible achievement of Hilary Mantel, writing three thick novels on a highly complicated history.

So, if you haven’t read the last of the trilogy, or maybe none of them, take my advice and take up this challenge. You will be rewarded with a great story. And if you feel you are not ready yet for this great exploration, try reading her short story collection *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*. You will find her a terrific writer.



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