# *Wolfe Hall* by Hilary Mantel

## Synopsis

England in the 1520s is a heartbeat from disaster. If the king dies without a male heir, the country could be destroyed by civil war. Henry VIII wants to annul his marriage of twenty years, and marry Anne Boleyn. The pope and most of Europe opposes him. The quest for the king’s freedom destroys his adviser, the brilliant Cardinal Wolsey, and leaves a power vacuum.

Into this impasse steps Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell is a wholly original man, a charmer and a bully, both idealist and opportunist, astute in reading people and a demon of energy: he is also a consummate politician, hardened by his personal losses, implacable in his ambition. But Henry is volatile: one day tender, one day murderous. Cromwell helps him break the opposition, but what will be the price of his triumph?

In inimitable style, Hilary Mantel presents a picture of a half-made society on the cusp of change, where individuals fight or embrace their fate with passion and courage. With a vast array of characters, overflowing with incident, the novel re-creates an era when the personal and political are separated by a hairbreadth, where success brings unlimited power but a single failure means death.

## Discussion questions

1. What does Holbein's portrait capture about Thomas Cromwell's character that even Cromwell, himself, recognizes? What kind of man is Cromwell? In the rapacious world of Wolf Hall, do you find him a sympathetic character, or not?
2. What effect did Cromwell's upbringing have on his character and his later views about the privileged society that permeates the court? H
3. What does Cromwell mean when he tells his son that "it's all very well planning what you will do in six months, what you will do in a year, but it's no good at all if you don't have a plan for tomorrow"?
4. Comment on Cromwell's observation regarding an earl that "The world is not run from where he thinks. Not from his border fortresses, not even from Whitehall. The world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from places he never imagined." What does Cromwell mean...and in what sense is his statement a very modern view of the world?
5. Why does Cromwell dislike the Catholic clergy? What are his motives for helping Henry marry Anne Boleyn and sever ties to the Pope? What larger goals does he hope to achieve in helping ? Are they selfless...or selfish?
6. How does Cromwell perceive Anne Boleyn? How does she come across in this book? Consider his observation when she is in the presence of the king's friends: "Anne is brittle in their company, and as ruthless with their compliments as a house-wife snapping the necks of larks for the table." Also talk about the danger he sees for Anne as he thinks, "Any little girl can hold the key to the future."
7. Mantel is writing a sequel to Wolf Hall—The Mirror and the Light. Do you think you'll want to read it when published?

*Discussion questions from https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-reading-guides/fiction/1171-wolf-hall-mantel?showall=1*