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## Maggie O'Farrell

### The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox



Title: The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

Author: Maggie O'Farrell

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## Description

A Selection of [Barnes & Noble Recommends](#)

"Let us begin with two girls at a dance," writes Maggie O'Farrell, and the reader is immediately pulled into a journey across continents, generations, and the hidden landscapes of the heart. The story she tells encompasses the confused present of a contemporary young woman, Iris Lockhart; the unsuspected past of Iris's grandmother, Kitty, adrift in the forgetfulness of Alzheimer's; and the long-concealed life of Kitty's sister Esme, who has spent a lifetime institutionalized for refusing to accept the conventions of 1930s Edinburgh society.

At the novel's opening, Iris's complicated life demands all her attention: Her vintage clothing shop barely turns a profit, she's having an affair with a married man, and she's never fully reconciled her intense attraction to her step-brother. But all this is pushed aside when Esme's existence is revealed to her, and she discovers that a great-aunt she never knew has been locked away for 60 years, a patient in a mental hospital that's preparing to close its doors for good. After initially refusing to do so, Iris decides to care for Esme and brings the elderly stranger into her home. As the two women become acquainted, Esme's memories -- the childhood she and Kitty shared in India, the death of their young brother, the family's migration to Scotland, and Esme's youthful rebellion against the mores of her class -- transform Iris's sense of her family's past, opening a vault of secrets that will change the character of everything she thought she knew.

With seamless narrative artistry, O'Farrell weaves an enthralling tale -- and builds page-turning suspense -- while shifting between Iris's and Esme's points of view, illuminating both with Kitty's fractured but vivid recollections. The taut fabric of the novel's telling enmeshes the reader in a tangled web of jealousy, deception, and betrayal that is shocking, heartbreaking, and unforgettable. Alive with the energy of trapped desires, *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* is a riveting work of literary imagination.

## About the Author

*The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* is Maggie O'Farrell's fourth novel. Her debut, *After You'd Gone*, a Barnes & Noble [Discover Great New Writers](#) Selection, won a 2001 Betty Trask Award from Britain's Society of Authors, which has also honored O'Farrell's work with its Somerset Maugham Award. Prior to her work as a novelist, she held positions as a teacher and an arts administrator; she also worked as a journalist, both in Hong Kong and as the Deputy Literary Editor of London's *The Independent* on Sunday.

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Of *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, O'Farrell says, "It is a novel I've wanted to write for a long time. I first had the idea -- of a woman who is incarcerated in an asylum for a lifetime -- 15 years ago. The idea never went away, and I gradually amassed more and more stories and examples of girls who had been committed in the early 20th century for little more than being disobedient or recalcitrant." As she wrestled with the imagining of Esme's stolen life, O'Farrell paid weekly visits to women who had been institutionalized for decades for such "transgressions" as trying to elope or refusing to marry. In an especially poignant exchange, one of them asked O'Farrell if she had been allowed to keep the baby she had recently given birth to.

Maggie O'Farrell was born in Northern Ireland in 1972 and grew up in Wales and Scotland. She now lives with her family in Edinburgh.

### **Praise for *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox***

#### **From Our Booksellers**

Full of emotion and mystery, this novel took off at warp speed and never let up 'til the very end.

--*Margie Turkett, Annapolis, MD*

Heartbreaking. A riveting tale of a stolen life.

--*Lynn Oris, St. Peters, MO*

A compelling read about family secrets and shortcomings. O'Farrell's unfolding tale of individuality and betrayal in the face of social expectations is astounding.

--*Sandra Guerfi, White Plains, NY*

Immediately gripping and mysterious, I devoured it.

--*Rosey McArdell, Apple Valley, MN*

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A haunting novel. I read it in one sitting! The ending was a shocker, and I have to admit, rather gratifying.

--*Angel Ramandt, Baltimore, MD*

### **From Writers and Reviews**

I found this actually unputdownable, written with charge and energy and a kind of compelling drive, a clarity and a gripping dramatic insidiousness reminiscent of classic writers like Rebecca West and Daphne du Maurier.

--*Ali Smith, author of The Accidental*

The novel is brilliant in every way . Maggie O'Farrell has written a taut, fragile mystery of relationships and deception.

--*Literary Review*

Thoughtful, warm, elegantly written and totally shocking a fantastic read, a real page-turner.

--*Daily Express*

This haunting and extraordinarily engrossing novel -- part gothic mystery, part tangled family drama -- reminded me why I love reading in the first place .

--*Carolyn Parkhurst, author of The Dogs of Babel*

### **Insightful reviews**

Ron Charles: Maggie O'Farrell's three previous novels have been respectfully reviewed, but her new one radiates the kind of energy that marks a classic. Think Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: stories that illuminate the suffering quietly endured by women in polite society. To that list of insightful feminist tales add *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*. At the heart of this fantastic new novel is

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a mystery you want to solve until you start to suspect the truth, and then you read on in a panic, horrified that you may be right.

The structure of the novel is a challenge, more like a dare, the kind of purposefully scrambled puzzle that makes you wonder if it's all just too much work to figure out who's talking and when this happened and what that means. But forge on: O'Farrell isn't merely showing off; she's forcing us to participate in a family's ghastly conspiracy of forgetting.

In the present day, we meet Iris Lockhart, a Scottish shop owner who specializes in vintage clothing. She's entangled in an unsatisfying affair with a married man and a mostly repressed relationship with her stepbrother. The last thing she has time for is a cryptic letter, then a phone call from a nearby mental hospital. It seems budget cuts have encouraged the staff to reevaluate all their patients, and some old woman named Euphemia Lennox is being released after 60 years.

"I have no idea who you people are or what you want," Iris tells them, "but I've never heard of Euphemia Lennox."

A case worker patiently explains: "It's not unusual for patients of ours to . . . shall we say, fall out of sight." Euphemia -- Esme -- is her great-aunt, a woman no one in the family has ever mentioned. Friends warn her not to get involved, but then Iris meets her in the fetid hospital: She had been "expecting someone frail or infirm, a tiny geriatric, a witch from a fairytale. But this woman is tall, with an angular face and searching eyes. She has an air of slight hauteur, the expression arch, the brows raised. Although she must be in her seventies, there is something incongruously childlike about her. . . . Without warning, Euphemia's hand shoots out and seizes her wrist. Iris cannot help herself: she jumps back, turning to look for the nurse, the social worker. Immediately Euphemia lets go. 'Don't worry,' she says, with an odd smile. 'I don't bite.' "

That mixture of sympathy, wit and menace is only part of what makes the novel so irresistible. Seeing Esme's desperation, Iris decides to help her find somewhere to live. The interaction between this thoroughly modern young woman and her great-aunt, who's just stepped from some ghastly Brigadoon, is surprisingly poignant. Released into the modern world after more than half a century, Esme has "a certain wide-eyed quality, her lack of inhibition, perhaps -- that marks her out from other people. . . . She is doing everything, Iris notices, with an odd kind of reverence. How mad is she?" They're both terrified the first night: Iris expects to be stabbed by the "mad old woman," while Esme worries she'll be sent back to that hellhole.

Modern cars, planes and radios are marvels to her, but the wind, the sea, the freedom to walk, "her first unsupervised bath for over sixty years," these are the pleasures Esme soaks up, and her wonder makes Iris reexamine everything around her.

But beneath this story, O'Farrell has written a searing indictment of the way psychiatry was used to control women and girls who refused to conform. Searching for an explanation of her aunt's incarceration, Iris finds reports in the hospital's archives that regard psychotic and perfectly ordinary behavior with equal suspicion. The medical standards sound as crazy as any of the "symptoms" being detailed: "Iris reads of refusals to speak, of unironed clothes, of arguments

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with neighbors, of hysteria, of unwashed dishes and unswept floors, of never wanting marital relations or wanting them too much or not enough or not in the right way or seeking them elsewhere. Of husbands at the ends of their tethers, of parents unable to understand the women their daughters have become, or fathers who insist, over and over again, that she used to be such a lovely little thing."

And finally she finds Esme's admission report from when she was 16 years old. It contains these weirdly innocuous details: "Insists on keeping her hair long. . . . Parents report finding her dancing before a mirror, dressed in her mother's clothes."

The solution to this puzzle comes slowly in two vastly different and much older stories that O'Farrell weaves through the description of Iris's nervous weekend with her long-lost aunt. It's a challenge, but you'll eventually learn to recognize these disparate voices -- and come to see the brilliance of mixing them like this. In one, an omniscient narrator tells brief, Gothic anecdotes about Esme's adolescence. She was the precocious daughter of a wealthy Scottish family that had lived in India. We see her parents mostly on the periphery: They are deeply perturbed by her irreverence, her bookishness, her refusal to participate appropriately in the social customs of their rank. "The Oddbod, they called her," but she doesn't care. Esme cannot abide the "nervous men with over-combed hair, scrubbed hands and pressed shirts" who come for tea with her and her sister. "The whole thing made Esme want to burst into honesty," which, as O'Farrell suggests, is the last thing refined society can tolerate.

Then there is a third narrator, the strange, pained, truly mad voice of Esme's sister, Kitty, whose mind is ravaged by Alzheimer's. She lives in a posh rest home just a few miles from the prison-like hospital where Esme spent all those unspeakable decades. Torn by crosscurrents of guilt and self-justification, Kitty's narrative starts and stops in mid-sentences. "But I never meant for her to -- " These shards of confession don't make any sense at first, but slowly a horrible image of what happened in their house begins to develop. It's a breathtaking, heart-breaking creation.

Even a sympathetic reader, though, might wonder if, like Esme's release, this novel is 60 years too late. After all, the feminist writer of today confronts a challenge that Gilman, Rhys, Chopin or even Virginia Woolf never had to face: the threat of easy acceptance. Nowadays, we already understand how Bertha ended up in Rochester's attic; we expect Edna to take that final, liberating swim; we know who's trapped behind the yellow wallpaper. Is there really anything that would shock us about the abuse of psychiatry and medicine in the service of chauvinism and class?

The modern-day frame of this novel provides an insightful and troubling response to that objection. Of course, budget cuts and civil rights lawyers have largely dismantled the kinds of places that held people like Esme, but young women still find themselves straitjacketed by subtler forms of restraint. After all, Iris looks so free, so sexually liberated, but she's trapped, too, incapable of acting on her desires for fear of condemnation and disapproval. In O'Farrell's fierce, engrossing novel, the crimes of the past rear up with surprising vengeance. Esme Lennox won't vanish again anytime soon.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>

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Shannon (Giraffe Days): Every now and then you come across a book so perfectly *whole*, so *complete* in itself, that you marvel as you read. It has such flow, such control of style, such effortless prose, that it's almost impossible to put it down. Such a book is *The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox*, which I could have easily read in one sitting except I had to go to work.

*The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox* is the story of three women and the burning secrets that affected them all. Iris Lockhart is a young, single, modern woman living in Edinburgh, having an affair with a married man and pretending to herself that she didn't once have a secret relationship with her step-brother, Alex. But it's her life, and when she gets a call about a great-aunt locked up in a mental institute - an aunt she never knew existed - she wants none of the responsibility. Apart from her grandmother, Kitty, who has Alzheimer's, Iris is the only family member left.

The great-aunt, Esme Lennox, is Kitty's younger sister. She's been locked away in Cauldstone for the last sixty years - since she was sixteen. Why? That is Esme's story to tell. But she was locked away, and vanished, and forgotten. Now she enters Iris' life, and what was started all those years ago must find an ending, a resolution.

Esme's story is gripping. Esme the girl comes across strongly, vividly, an immediately familiar presence. An odd child, she grew into a modern teen who eschewed marriage and wanted to go to university. She didn't abide by the family's class-conscious values and was always going out without a hat on, or would forget her gloves. These weren't her only crimes. There's also a boy, and where there's a boy, there's trouble.

The novel revolves around Esme's past, from her childhood in India to her school life in Edinburgh, and her early experiences in the asylum. Her story is complemented by Iris's messy life and Kitty's meandering thoughts as she strays randomly through the paths of her memories. Like an intricate tapestry, the scenes from the past weave together to make a whole, a powerful, moving story that's simple, cruel and tragic.

What makes this story so beautiful and flow so well, is the prose. Told mostly in present tense, it shifts to past effortlessly, usually without me even noticing. That's actually hard to do - shift seamlessly, that is! I did have to read the first two pages twice, to get into the flow of how it was written, but after that it was like being picked up on a breath of memory and carried along, weightless, but ever observant. There are no chapter breaks, only section breaks to separate voice, and this adds to that feeling of flow, that great momentum that the story has. From the first page, you need to know what happens, and what happened.

It is fitting to use present tense, to create a sense of timelessness, a sense of every memory having relevance. Kitty's memories don't stick out and jar, told as they are in Kitty's confused, muddled voice - confused but clear; that kind of paradox that's hard to describe but can be created nonetheless. Her voice is distinct, different from Esme's troubled mind. Again the use of present tense works to allow their memories to merge, to show how lost they are in these memories. It's like music, a song being played, the instruments breath and memory and loss and hope.

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It's horrible to think how easy it was to lock up your wayward daughter or reluctant (or "over-sexed") wife or troublesome sister. Esme wasn't an exceptional case. And this carried on well into the twentieth century. It is just one kind of crime against women. You'd like to think that it couldn't happen anymore but it does, in various forms.

Some people found that there were too many loose ends, and the ending was too vague and open. I didn't find that there were any loose ends. Everything came together satisfactorily, and without any padding (it's a pretty short book, especially with how fast you can read it). And the ending, the ending was so right for the story. Yes it is somewhat open, but enough is shown to see where it will probably go, for good or worse.

I wanted to share some quotes, as examples of prose. As usual, I didn't mark any exceptional quotes - this time because I was so caught up in the story it was hard to stop reading. I would share some drawn randomly, but I find that without context the magic falls away and the words become just ... words. Interesting how that happens.

As a last note, my thanks to those who recommended this book. You were right!

Malia: I've read O'Farrell's 'After You'd Gone' some time ago, and remembered liking it well enough to try another. 'The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox' is a strange book. The story shifts around in time and from one PoV to another, which I rather enjoyed, even if it was a bit confusing sometimes. O'Farrell didn't use chapters either, which added to the confusion, though I think, in the end, the choice was made to aid the slightly befuddled flow of the story. The characters are confused and maybe the reader should be, too:-)

The story is told largely in flash-backs, by Esme, Iris, and Esme's sister, Kitty. I liked this way of slowly unfolding the story, adding a glimpse and moving on before too much is exposed at once. However, this also served to make none of the characters feel particularly real to me. You get these heightened moments that tell the story, but make the characters seem almost unreachable. I could not connect to them, though one cannot help but feel for their situations. This book was interesting, and I cannot find any great flaw, yet I cannot say I enjoyed it either. It was one of those books that makes you a little uncomfortable, and leaves you a little dissatisfied.

Carol: should you like your books linear than this would possibly not paintings for you. informed in 3 voices, there is a lot of leaping round and also you may well simply end up wasting the rhythm and series of events. keep it up and you are in for a good story. one of many crucial topics is the facility to dedicate ladies to associations for almost any trumped up reason. All it took used to be a signature of a physician and stale she'd go. O'Farrell states "It is a singular I have desired to write for a protracted time. I first had the idea—of a lady who's incarcerated in an asylum for a lifetime—15 years ago.... the assumption by no means went away, and that I steadily accrued progressively more tales and examples of ladies who were devoted within the early twentieth century for little greater than being disobedient or recalcitrant." As she wrestled with the imagining of Esme's stolen life, O'Farrell paid weekly visits to girls who have been institutionalized for many years for such "transgressions" as attempting to elope or refusing to marry. In a particularly poignant exchange, one in every of them requested O'Farrell if she were allowed to maintain the newborn she had lately given delivery to. one of many major characters,



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Euphemia Lennox (Esme) is dedicated as a tender lady within the early 30's and is because of be published within the 90's as the establishment is to be closed. Esme's closest relative, her sister Kitty, is afflicted with dementia, so her grand niece, Iris is approached to deal with her. basically Iris does not even understand Esme exists. speak about kin secrets; this can be like locking up the batty aunt within the bell tower and throwing away the key, yet not anyone is familiar with why. tried via a much less expert writer, Vanishing Act may have fell flat on its face. O'Farrell's services with plot, characters and construction suspenseful pressure propels us on a horrifying, haunting trip with an finishing that's perfect. It actually made me squirm. studying problems with psychological illness, the plight of women, relatives secrets, betrayal, jealousy and duty; it is worthy a learn and even perhaps a re-read to solidify simply what happened. cannot wait to listen to what my booklet crew thinks. they are both going to like it or hate it. both means it's going to be a full of life discussion.

Dem: The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox is a fantastically written and haunting tale a couple of lady who has been unjustly incarcerated in a psychological health center at a truly younger age and has remained there for over sixty years. The medical institution is now final down and the population need to be rehoused. the tale is decided among the Nineteen Thirties and the current day. The tale is intelligently advised and the plot is basically well-thought out so there have been adequate twists and turns to maintain me engrossed and intrigued. the best way Maggie O Farrell writes is simply exquisite, so fantastically descriptive that i used to be over excited and felt completely drawn into the tale and lifetime of Esme Lennox. the nature improvement is ideal and occasionally in a booklet you return throughout a personality that you simply thoroughly fall in love with and that i fell in love with the nature of Esme. This is a quick novel however the writer doesn't waste a unmarried word, she particularly is ready to express such a lot of feelings in each one chapter. I love haunting and interesting novels and The vanishing Acts of Esme Lennox was once precisely what I love. I did locate myself having to re-read sure paragraphs during this publication specially the narrative of Kitty as this is often a kind of books the you must beware whereas interpreting otherwise you may well get a bit lost. Re-read this booklet for a ebook membership learn and that i loved this booklet far and wide again, i actually loved the characters of Esme and Kitty and enjoyed the parallels drawn among Iris and Esme's life. stay up for the dialogue in this one.

Laura: Man, i admire to read. establishing a e-book through an writer you have got by no means learn is like having a airplane price tag to an unknown destination. you do not know the place you are going, or precisely whilst you will arrive. you simply need to belief the pilot to get you there in a single piece, expectantly with a grin in your face. Maggie O'Farrell does not disappoint, allow me simply inform you. I don't believe i might have ever further this booklet if I paid plenty of realization to the name or the cover. either make me think about a frilly-froo-froo kind examine girls who like to store and/or care approximately fashion. that's pretty well the UN-me. Quoting now from web page one, so this is often no spoiler: allow us to commence with ladies at a dance. ... or even not. probably it starts off earlier, ahead of the party, prior to they wearing their new finery, earlier than the candles have been lit, sooner than the sand used to be sprinkled at the boards, prior to the 12 months whose finish they're celebrating began. Who knows? both method it ends at a grille masking a window with every one sq. precisely thumbnails wide. I wish the writer or writer reads this review. For the affection of God, please, please unencumber one other version of this ebook with a brand new cover: a close-up of that

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window with an eye fixed pressed to it, peering out. simply an eye. within the corner. And watch the revenues skyrocket. the canopy of the e-book I read, that is a woman taking a look down at her fancy blue costume slightly tiptoes round the fringes of what the booklet is about. you need to draw a reader who will delight in this book? switch the cover, and boom. during this book, you are going to glide during the minds of numerous people. of them may be very disjointed of their thoughts. She places you correct there. you'll event everything. this is not precisely a simple read. it is a quick read, yet you cannot support yet recoil from time to time because the horribleness starts to unfold. Still, it really is tough to place down. you are going to pass from prior to present, and from one personality to the next, with none bankruptcy breaks at all. She easily skips a couple of traces and offers you with one other scene. enjoyed the audio functionality too, through Anne Flosnik. Highly recommended. permit me be aware of what you're thinking that of this one. this may be an exceptional ebook for a gaggle discussion. ETA: be cautious you do not learn too many stories ahead of the book. the fewer you know, the better. i actually simply desired to attempt to persuade humans to seem past the horrid conceal and title.

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