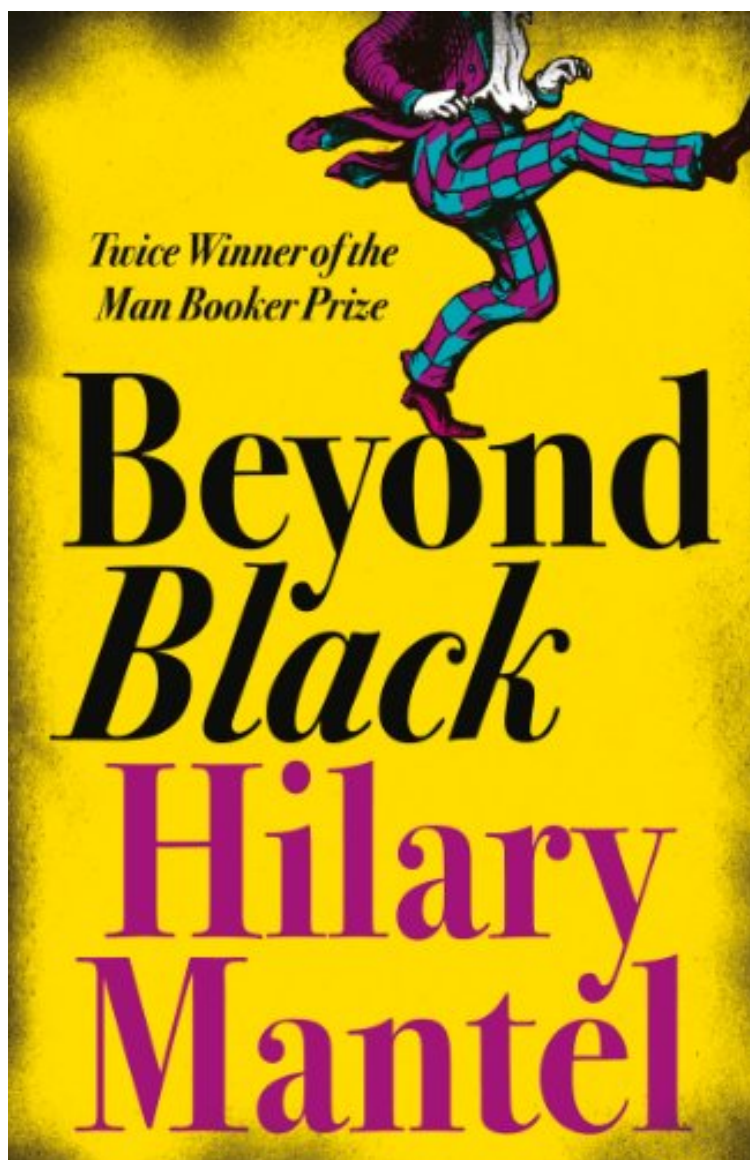


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Beyond Black



Par Hilary Mantel
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA comically sinister tale of wicked spirits and suburban mediums from the Man Booker Prize-winning author of Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies. Alison Hart, a medium by trade, tours the dormitory towns of Londons orbital ring road with her flint-hearted sidekick, Colette, passing on messages from beloved dead ancestors. But behind her plump, smiling persona hides a desperate woman: she knows the terrors the next life holds but must conceal them from her wide-eyed clients. At the same time she is plagued by spirits from her own past, who infiltrate her body and home, becoming stronger and nastier the more she resistsShortlisted for the Orange Prize, Hilary Mantels supremely suspenseful novel is a masterpiece of dark humour and even darker secrets.From Publishers WeeklyInstead of celebrating the

mystical side of "sensitives," the people who travel England's contemporary psychic "fayre" circuit, Mantel (*A Change of Climate*, etc.) concentrates on the potential banality of spiritualism in her latest novel, a no-nonsense exploration of the world of public and private clairvoyance. Colette is a down-on-her-luck event planner fresh from a divorce when she attends a two-day Psychic Extravaganza, her "introduction to the metaphorical side of life." There, Alison, a true clairvoyant, "reads" Colette, sees her need for a new life as well as her potential and hires her as a Girl Friday. As Colette's responsibilities grow, and the line between the professional and the personal blurs, Colette takes over Alison's marketing, builds her Web site, plans for a book and buys a house with her. Colette also serves as a sort of buffer between Alison and the multitude of spirits who beleaguer her. (Alison's spirit guide, Morris, "a little bouncing circus clown," proves especially troublesome.) Mantel's portraits of the two leading characters as well as those of the supporting cast both on and off this mortal coil are sharply drawn. This witty, matter-of-fact look at the psychic milieu reveals a supernatural world that can be as mundane as the world of carpet salesmen and shopkeepers. (May)

Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From *The Washington Post's Book World*/washingtonpost.com Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* is an acquired taste, and I have acquired it. The novel is original and deeply dark, but as one interpretation of its title suggests, the author tries hard to push herself past the stark grimness of the world she describes and take the reader somewhere new and compelling. The book explores the relationship between a genuine-article psychic named Alison and her assistant, Colette, as they travel through England, along with Alison's spirit guide, a lowlife figure from the past called Morris, who is forever sprawled in doorways and lounging on chairs, playing with his genitals or muttering. The obese, tormented Alison and the singularly repellent Morris are characters who (as you might expect) can be hard to take and (as you might not) still harder to turn away from. Mantel sets them into relief by including the lost Colette, who enters Alison's oddball orbit fresh from a failed marriage. Colette loosely represents the "normal" world of ordinary human unhappiness and disappointment. About her and her husband Gavin, Mantel writes: "They got married. People did. It was the tag end of the Thatcher/Major years and people held a wedding to show off. They didn't have friends, so they invited everybody they knew." Mantel's indictments of English life are planted with shrewdness and subtlety. She is particularly adept at rendering Alison's onstage conversations with audience members whose desire for knowledge of the dead is equivalent only to their desire to be important: " 'Gill, you're the sort of woman -- well -- ' She gives a little laugh and a shake of her head -- 'well, you're a bit of a human dynamo. I mean that's how your friends describe you, isn't it? Always on the go, morning, noon and night, you're the sort of person, am I right, who can keep all the plates spinning? But if there's one thing, if there's one thing, you know, all your friends say, it's that you don't give enough time to yourself.' . . . Gillian has of course been nodding since the first time Al paused for breath. In Alison's experience there's not a woman alive who, once past her youth, doesn't recognize this as a true and fair assessment of her character and potential." Alison's audience also longs for a sunny view of the afterlife, which has to be better than what they're living in now: "In Spirit World, she said, people were healthy and in their prime. 'They've all got their bits and whatsits. Whenever they were at their happiest, whenever they were at their healthiest, that's how you'll find them in Spirit World.' " There's piquant irony in her description, for no one in this book is particularly happy or healthy; the entire novel has a dissolute, seedy quality that Mantel works hard to attain. Some people here are about to die; they don't know it yet, but Alison does. Here, memorably, she foresees the imminent death of Princess Diana: " 'It's Diana,' Al said. 'Dead.' . . . " 'Suicide?' " 'Or accident. She won't tell me. Teasing to the last.' . . . " 'I'm sure it will be clearer,' Al said, 'when it actually happens.' " 'What do you mean? You mean it hasn't happened yet? . . . Al, we must do something!' " 'Like?' " 'Warn somebody! Call the police! Telephone the queen?' " Al raised a hand. 'Quiet, please. She's getting in the car. She's putting her seat belt -- no, no, she isn't.' " Alison plays the "abnormal" to Colette's "normal," or at any rate the "paranormal." She is a complicated figure, rendered both powerful and forlorn by her natural and overwhelming gifts. Beside her, Colette appears vaguer and more generic, and the marriage that the assistant has escaped from has the gritty, mumbled cadences of a BBC TV show. Most vivid are the impressionistic details of Alison's childhood, which was a Gothic horror show of grotesquerie and abuse. Alison's psychic gifts were already on display when she was young, but in her adulthood they serve as a durable outlet for the various traumas she experienced. I'm reminded of multiple-personality disorder, in which survivors of sexual abuse sometimes create fully fleshed-out characters inside themselves -- complete with names, distinct preferences and entire histories -- as a way to compensate for the burden of carrying around their own unbearable cargo of suffering. Like all good writers, Mantel understands that experience changes people, and terrible experience

changes people terribly. Trauma, she tells us, doesn't just go away but is absorbed into the fabric of the self, either destroying it or becoming expelled from the psyche in some creative, shocking way. *Beyond Black* is a daring and extravagant book, filled with as much wit as darkness. Sometimes, wit can't really replace light, and I found myself longing once in a while for the novel to take a sudden sharp turn and leave the paranormal and the traumatic far, far behind. I never got my wish, of course, which is probably just as well.

Mantel's books are boldly different from one another; her novels have taken place among missionaries returning from Africa, in France during the Revolution, and in present-day Saudi Arabia. This, her 10th, is expansive and ambitious. It is not an entirely loveable novel, nor does it seem to aspire to be. She reminds me a little of an English Margaret Atwood, going anywhere and everywhere she likes as a writer, while never losing her finely honed sensibility and ear for the way people really talk to each other. Contemporary

American audiences remain captivated by TV psychic John Edward and his ilk, indulging him as he "struggles" to pull a name of a dead loved one from the air, recount a trip, or describe a lost trinket. His admirers, like people the world over, want to believe in something beyond the very ordinary confines of their lives. Readers of fiction want something different: They long for writers to pull fully formed characters from the air and animate them, to dredge up entire histories and futures with a conjurer's panache. They will be satisfied by Hilary Mantel's abilities to perform these feats, and to imbue her writing with a unique combination of exhilaration and dread. With *Beyond Black*, she shows us how fiction can lift us into the extraordinary. ed by Meg Wolitzer Copyright 2005, The Washington Post Co. All Rights Reserved.