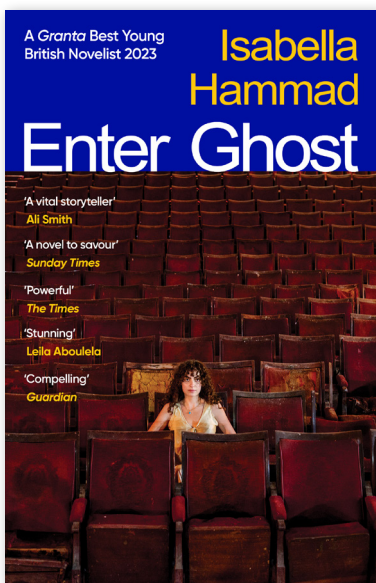


# Enter Ghost

by Isabella Hammad



## PLOT SUMMARY

After years away from her family’s homeland, and reeling from a disastrous love affair, actress Sonia Nasir returns to Haifa to visit her older sister Haneen. While Haneen made a life here commuting to Tel Aviv to teach at the university, Sonia remained in London to focus on her acting career and now dissolute marriage. On her return, she finds her relationship to Palestine is fragile, both bone-deep and new.

When Sonia meets the charismatic and candid Mariam, a local director, she joins a production of *Hamlet* in the West Bank. Soon, Sonia is rehearsing Gertrude’s lines in classical Arabic with a dedicated, if competitive, group of men. As opening night draws closer and the warring intensifies, it becomes clear just how many obstacles stand before the troupe. Amidst it all, the life Sonia once knew starts to give way to the exhilarating possibility of finding a new self in her ancestral home.

Timely, thoughtful and passionate, Isabella Hammad’s highly anticipated second novel is an exquisite story of the connection to be found in family and shared resistance.

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Themes of ghosts and haunting are notable in *Enter Ghost*, which feels appropriate in a story about difficult and confronting histories. On a personal level, Sonia is haunted by the loss of her baby and her marriage – she describes Marco, her ex-husband, as opaque, which is in itself a ghostly reference – and then her love affair with Harold. On a familial level, Sonia and Haneen are part of a divided family which seems to be haunted by their father’s past. On a social level, the war between Israel and Palestine continues, overshadowing daily life for everyone.

>



Shortlist  
2024

“The story of Sonia, a British Palestinian actor, who gets involved in a production of *Hamlet* on the West Bank. It’s a gorgeously written, very nuanced, deeply layered book . . . and I absolutely loved it.”

MONICA ALI, 2024 JUDGE



Shortlist  
2024

Sonia is haunted by her past in London, and finds a new life in Haifa. Yet, Palestine is itself haunted by its past as well as the continuing difficulties that the Palestinian people face in being oppressed by Israeli authorities. Sonia takes a long time to feel at home in Haifa, feeling like a ghost who doesn’t belong, as a half-Dutch, half-Palestinian woman who has always lived in London apart from summers at her grandparents’ house.

When Sonia visits Aunt Rima and Uncle Jad, she observes that, ‘I felt that she was not looking at me but through me, as though I were an emissary, a medium for a ghost, not understanding what I channelled’.

In this case, it seems that Sonia feels as though she is representing her absent father and trying to build bridges with her aunt and uncle.

On a cassette tape of her grandparents from 1994, Sonia hears her dead grandmother’s voice say, ‘Even if I cannot live in it, my soul will reawaken if there is a Palestinian state.’ In that moment, she is listening to a ghost voice expressing a poignant sentiment.

By the end of the book, though, it seems that Sonia has found a sense of belonging in the work of the play, and feels like less of a ghost in her new life. Ending the novel in such a dramatic scene, Hammad seems to suggest that Sonia is no longer alienated from reality. She is now an important part of political resistance, and no longer a ghost.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

In *Enter Ghost*, it could be said that Hammad uses the Shakespeare play *Hamlet* as a reference for the wider dramatic events happening between Israel and Palestine, and as a metaphor for the various personal ups and downs in the lives of the actors in Mariam’s play.

As the actors discuss the significance of *Hamlet* and share different readings of the play – revenge, political allegory – they also consider how performing the play in Arabic changes its interpretation. George suggests that the character of Gertrude might represent Palestine, which has been looted and betrayed. Yet, as Amin says, perhaps the play is more generally about people struggling, and about Hamlet as a young man having a hard time.

How do you think *Hamlet* is relevant to Sonia’s story, to the other characters in the book, and to the wider Israel-Palestine context? How well does it work as a metaphor or framing device? Does theatre provide a way for people to understand politics and the world around them, better? In what way, if so?



## QUESTIONS

How did you feel about the sections of the book where Hammad represents the dialogue and action of the story as if it was a play? How did this affect your reading experience?

At one stage, Sonia describes Mariam as possessing a, 'straightforward, repugnant, magnetic light'; how does Sonia feel about Mariam, and how would you describe their relationship?

Is Sonia and Hannan's relationship a typical sibling dynamic? Did it feel authentic to you?

What does Hammad seem to be saying about men and masculinity with her representations of the male actors in Mariam's production of *Hamlet*?

## NEXT STEPS

Sonia thinks, 'I wondered if mothers existed forever in their children's minds as jumbles of features, colours, smell, touch...' Did this line make you think of something in particular? What jumbles of features come to mind when you think about your own mother – or a woman who might have been a maternal influence in your life? Could you paint or draw her, trying to capture those feelings?

Alternatively, find a copy of *Hamlet* at the library and read some (or all!) of it. Do the female characters get many lines? What do you make of Ophelia and Gertrude? Might you write some additional dialogue for them in some scenes, or perhaps a soliloquy for either one of them, expressing her feelings and thoughts at a key moment? Might you change their character a bit by doing so? ■

If you enjoyed this book try some of our recommended reads on the next page.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Isabella Hammad** is the author of *The Parisian*; *Enter Ghost* is her second book. She was awarded the Plimpton Prize for Fiction, the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Palestine Book Award and a Betty Trask Award. She has received fellowships from MacDowell, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Lannan Foundation.



# If you enjoyed this book...

## RECOMMENDED READS

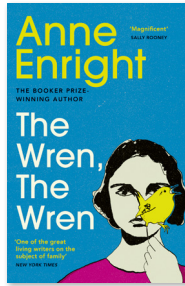
In Isabella Hammad's novel *The Parisian*, Midhat Kamal leaves Palestine in 1914 to study medicine in France. But Midhat soon discovers that everything is fragile: love turns to loss, friends become enemies and everyone is looking for a place to belong.

Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* is a different take on Shakespeare and his most famous play, with the playwright's wife Agnes as narrator. In fact, William Shakespeare and his work do not appear on the page; everything is delivered through Agnes, haunted by the death of her child. *Hamnet* won the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2020.

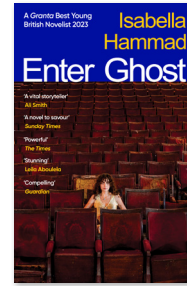
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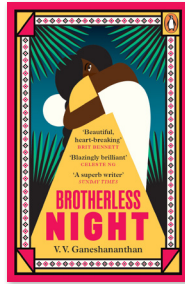
## EXPLORE THE 2024 SHORTLIST



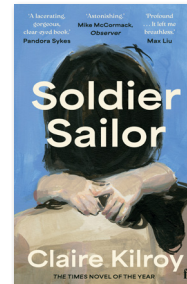
**The Wren, The Wren**  
by Anne Enright



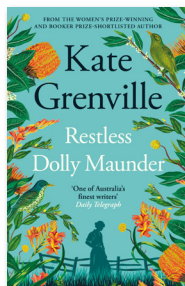
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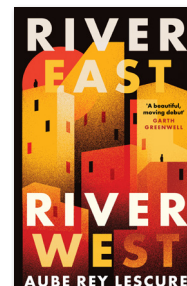
**Brotherless Night**  
by V.V. Ganeshanathan



**Soldier Sailor**  
by Claire Kilroy



**Restless Dolly Maunder**  
by Kate Grenville



**River East, River West**  
by Aube Rey Lescure

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discusses the impact they have had on her life and career.

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