



## Disobedience: A Novel

By Jane Hamilton

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### Disobedience: A Novel By Jane Hamilton

From Jane Hamilton, author of the beloved *New York Times* bestsellers **A Map of the World** and **The Book of Ruth**, comes a warmly humorous, poignant novel about a young man, his mother's e-mail, and the often surprising path of infidelity.

Henry Shaw, a high school senior, is about as comfortable with his family as any seventeen-year-old can be. His father, Kevin, teaches history with a decidedly socialist tinge at the Chicago private school Henry and his sister attend. His mother, Beth, who plays the piano in a group specializing in antique music, is a loving, attentive wife and parent. Henry even accepts the offbeat behavior of his thirteen-year-old sister, Elvira, who is obsessed with Civil War reenactments and insists on dressing in handmade Union uniforms at inopportune times.

When he stumbles on his mother's e-mail account, however, Henry realizes that all is not as it seems. There, under the name Liza38, a name that Henry innocently established for her, is undeniable evidence that his mother is having an affair with one Richard Polloco, a violin maker and unlikely paramour who nonetheless has a very appealing way with words and a romantic spirit that, in Henry's estimation, his own father woefully lacks.

Against his better judgment, Henry charts the progress of his mother's infatuation, her feelings of euphoria, of guilt, and of profound, touching confusion. His knowledge of Beth's secret life colors his own tentative explorations of love and sex with the ephemeral Lily, and casts a new light on the arguments-usually focused on Elvira-in which his parents regularly indulge. Over the course of his final year of high school, Henry observes each member of the family, trying to anticipate when they will find out about the infidelity and what the knowledge will mean to each of them.

Henry's observations, set down ten years after that fateful year, are much more than the "old story" of adultery his mother deemed her affair to be. With her inimitable grace and compassion, Jane Hamilton has created a novel full of gentle humor and rich insights into the nature of love and the deep, mysterious bonds that hold families together.

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## Disobedience: A Novel By Jane Hamilton Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

A wayward wife, an Oedipally obsessed e-mail snoop, a pint-sized Civil War reenactor (oops, make that living historian), and a cheerfully oblivious cuckold comprise the Shaws of Chicago, the decidedly quirky characters of Jane Hamilton's fourth novel, *Disobedience*. An unlikely family to fall prey to the vagaries of modern life, the Shaws are consumed with clog dancing, early music, and the War Between the States. But they do possess a computer, and when 17-year-old Henry stumbles into his mother's e-mail account and epistolary evidence of her affair with a Ukrainian violinist, he becomes consumed with this glimpse into her life as a woman, not simply a mother.

To picture my mother a lover, I had at first to break her in my mind's eye, hold her over my knee, like a stick, bust her in two. When that was done, when I had changed her like that, I could see her in a different way. I could put her through the motions like a jointed puppet, all dancy in the limbs, loose, nothing to hold her up but me.

While his mother (whom he refers to variously as Mrs. Shaw, Beth, and her e-mail sobriquet, Liza38), dallies with her pen pal, whom she calls "the companion of my body, the guest of my heart," Henry experiences his own sexual awakening; his 13-year-old sister, Elvira, retreats into gender-bending historical fantasy; and their father remains determinedly absorbed in pedagogical responsibilities.

Ironically (and not completely convincingly) narrated by an adult Henry, *Disobedience* has a rollicking tone somewhat at odds with the somber prospects that loom for this family. A very worldly teenager in some ways, despite the hippie wholesomeness of his family, Henry tells his tale in abundant, almost flowery prose, imagining his mother's private life with elegiac fervor. As in her earlier *A Map of the World*, Jane Hamilton writes with affection and insight about the darker side of apparently ordinary Midwestern folks. --*Victoria Jenkins*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Credit Hamilton with courage, virtuosity and a remarkable ability to reflect inner lives. Her first novel, *The Book of Ruth*, was the unsparing story of a girl trapped in woeful circumstances; the protagonist of her second, *The Map of the World*, was a woman responsible for a child's death; the narrator of *The Short History of a Prince* was a gay man. Here she again explores family bonds and tensions, the demands of sexuality and the ethics of betrayal (not an oxymoron) this time from the point of view of a teenager who discovers that his mother is having an affair. Henry Shaw is a high school senior when he intercepts e-mail messages between his mother, Beth, a musician and specialist in ancient music, and violin maker Richard Pollico. As he secretly eavesdrops on the liaison between "Liza38" and "Rpol," Henry's emotions, ranging from horror to fear of abandonment to rage to deep sadness, take on a new dimension when he himself falls in love with a girl he meets in summer camp. Meanwhile, his generally bemused and patient father, Kevin, a high school history teacher, seems unaware of Beth's infidelity, since he spends much of his time coaching Henry's rebellious sister, Elvira, 13, who is obsessed with her desire to join a Civil War reenactment disguised as a boy. A mirror image of *A Short History*'s protagonist, Walter, at the same age, Elvira displays an unhappiness with her gender that causes stress in the Shaw's marriage. As she has amply demonstrated before, Hamilton knows the nuances of domestic relationships and the landscape of teenage uncertainty. Henry's voice is exactly right: he's a thoughtful, intelligent boy whose hormones are sending him confusing messages, and whose tendency is to mock both parents with typical teen sardonic humor. Henry's funny quips are actually quite sad, because they mask his sorrow at the severing of his close bond with his mother,

and his discomfort at secretly being aware of her illicit passion. Beth's joyous reaction to physical love and her anguish at how her behavior, if revealed, might affect her family, are likewise rendered with compassion. In a miracle of empathy, Hamilton manages to grant psychological validity to all the members of this ordinary-seeming but emotionally distracted family, and to strike the reader's heart with her tender evocation of both human fallibility and our ability to recover from heartbreak choices. Author tour. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

#### From Library Journal

The Shaw family consists of musician Beth, history teacher Kevin, and their two teenage children. The narrator is Henry, who is about to begin his senior year of high school. Beautiful and precocious, his younger sister, Elvira, is a single-minded Civil War reenactor who has shaved her head. Disguised as a boy, she is a regimental drummer. By more or less accidentally reading Beth's e-mail, Henry discovers that she has begun a love affair with a fellow musician, which his father either doesn't know about or is ignoring. Henry's love life also takes off that year, offering a sweet counterpoint to his mother's angst, passion, and guilt. Hamilton perfectly captures the voice of a young man looking back, honestly but also with generosity, on his younger self and his family. Each family member attains self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the others. This warm, wise, and often very funny book is a worthy successor to the acclaimed *Map of the World* and is recommended for all fiction collections.

-DJudith Kicinski, Sarah Lawrence Coll. Lib., Bronxville, NY

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**Thomas Baier:**

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