



Burial Rites

Author Background

Hannah Kent

- Born in 1985 in Adelaide, Australia
- Enrolled in a PhD in Creative Writing at Flinders University
- Resides in Adelaide, Australia

Raised in the Adelaide Hills, Hannah Kent dreamed of having a book published by the time she was 30. Living in Iceland as a Rotary exchange student, Kent first heard of the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir when she visited the site of Agnes' execution. Returning to Australia, Kent enrolled in a creative writing degree and subsequently a PhD. The Icelandic story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir became the inspiration for Kent's PhD study and her debut novel, *Burial Rites*. (As of 2016, Kent is continuing PhD study at Flinders University on *Creative Writing: Speculative Biographies: The Representation of Historical Criminal Women in Literary Fiction*.)

On the *Australian Story* television program in 2013, Kent explained that in telling Agnes' story she wished to "stay true to all known facts", but the sparsity of information on Agnes' life meant that she had to use her imagination to fill in the gaps:

"I knew a great deal about 19th century Iceland but with Agnes, I only knew four facts. I knew her name, that she was a servant, I knew the date of her death, and I knew that her father was a man called Magnus. I started to panic because I had no idea how I could find the extra information about Agnes I needed. So what I started to do instead was imagine what her life might be like."

In 2011, *Burial Rites* won the Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award. The award led to Kent being mentored by writer Geraldine Brooks, gaining an agent and securing a publishing deal. *Burial Rites* went on to win several literary and popular awards including:

FAW Christina Stead Award 2013

ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year 2014

Victorian Premier's Literary Award People's Choice Award 2014

SMH Best Young Australian Novelist 2014

Kent's second novel, *The Good People*, is set in a remote Irish valley in 1825. In a 2014 interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kent explained how stark landscapes inspire her writing:

"I like places that are very hostile and beautiful at the same time....They shape your days, and your character in ways that other places don't ... the fact that you go out walking in a place where there's no trees, you're so conspicuous and you encounter a vulnerability that I don't when I go walking in the Australian landscape. I like writing about that."

The Good People is due for release in October 2016.

Sources: Author website; Publisher website; transcript from "No more than a ghost" *Australian Story* [ABC television]; *Sydney Morning Herald*; *The Guardian* and *The Adelaide Review*.

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Book Summary

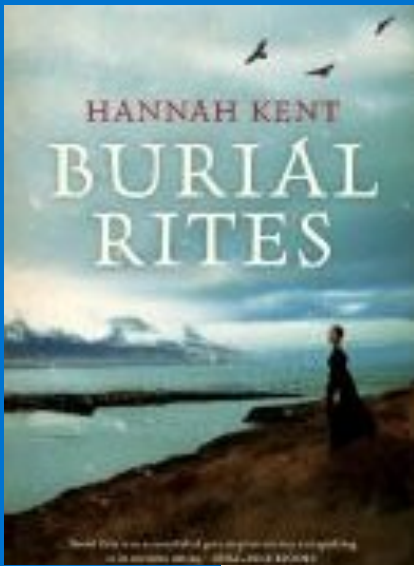
*Hannah Kent, **Burial Rites** (2013)*

In 1829 in northern Iceland, Agnes Magnúsdóttir is condemned to death for her part in the brutal murder of two men. Agnes is sent to wait out the time leading to her execution on the farm of District Officer Jón Jónsson, his wife and their two daughters. Horrified to have a convicted murderess in their midst, the family avoids speaking with Agnes. Only Tóti, the young assistant reverend appointed as Agnes' spiritual guardian, is compelled to try to understand her, as he attempts to salvage her soul.

As the summer months fall away to winter and the hardships of rural life force the household to work side by side, Agnes's ill-fated tale of longing and betrayal begins to emerge. And as the days to her execution draw closer, the question burns: did she or didn't she?

Based on the true story of the last woman to be publicly executed in Iceland, *Burial Rites* is a deeply moving novel about personal freedom: who we are seen to be versus who we believe ourselves to be, and the ways in which we will risk everything for love. Kent has woven together the facts of the case with her own creative interpretation, filling the gaps in the historical record and creating a thrilling account of a tragic story set against the moody backdrop of the Icelandic climate. Kent asks: how can one woman hope to endure when her life depends upon the stories told by others?

Adapted from the author's website and the publisher, Pan MacMillan





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Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think about the genre of “faction” (which blends fact with fiction)? What do you make of the historical documents (both fictionalised and real) that begin each chapter? How do these documents influence your reading of *Burial Rites*?
- 2) Fate and destiny are major themes in *Burial Rites* - for Agnes seems fated to have come to her tragic end. Could Agnes have escaped this destiny? Was there a turning point in Agnes’ life where she might have avoided her fate?
- 3) Agnes’ reputation is largely conjecture and is linked to her poverty. Discuss the role of gossip, rumour and prejudice in Agnes’ demise?
- 4) Agnes often comments on the ways in which she has been silenced, or had her story altered by the authorities. Why do you think Agnes has such a difficult relationship with language and stories?
- 5) Agnes goes to her death holding Toti’s hand. Is this story ultimately about the loneliness of death? Alternatively, does it celebrate the comfort that a person can bring to someone who is dying?
- 6) In the Acknowledgments, Kent calls her novel a “dark love letter to Iceland”. How do you interpret this comment? Did you read the novel in this way?
- 7) *Burial Rites* is a multi-award-winning novel—and yet it is also a young author’s debut work. In a 2013 interview with *The Australian* newspaper, Kent stated:
“I do wonder that people might not read it as a debut novel, that they might have elevated expectations. ... [However] it is a first book and I'm still learning and this is very much my apprenticeship as a writer”.

Did you commence reading *Burial Rites* with raised expectations (because of the awards and publicity it has received) or were you ready to make allowances for the relative inexperience of the author?

Just for fun:

- 8) Kent first heard about Agnes’ story whilst living in Iceland as an exchange student. On your travels (or youthful adventures), have you come across any local stories or characters that might inspire a great novel?

Some questions adapted from LitLovers [online] and the publishers Pan MacMillan and Little Brown



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Reviews

The allure of the tale is obvious and one can see why Kent was haunted by it. The dynamics of a small group of people on an isolated farmstead are disrupted by the arrival of a disturbing stranger who turns out to be uncomfortably familiar. The landscape of northern Iceland casts its spell and the tension of Agnes Magnúsdóttir's approaching death builds from the first sentence: "They said I must die. They said that I stole the breath from the men, and now they must steal mine." However, there are also the challenges of writing a novel set nearly 200 years ago, in a country foreign to the writer and based on an infamous and thoroughly documented event. Kent further compounds these problems by using multiple narrators and presenting chunks of archival material as epigraphs in an already deliberately disjointed narrative. Almost all of the time, *Burial Rites* pulls it off.

The Guardian (Australia)

One of the best "Scandinavian" crime novels I have read, *Burial Rites* is the work of an Australian who visited Iceland on a cultural exchange. Based on a true 19th-century story, this powerful book has the stark and tragic trajectory of the sagas, where a veneer of Christianity cannot conceal a bleak and stoic belief in the workings of fate. Old superstitions are rife, convicted murderers face the barbaric penalty of death by beheading with an axe, yet the rites of Christianity are enforced.

The Independent

[I]t is the mellifluous voice of Agnes, a voice whose softness belies her rocky experience, that hums gently through this novel. ...Her descriptions of the landscape deserve savouring: "darkness poured in like oil"; "autumn fell upon the valley like a gasp"; "only the outlying tongues of rock scarred the perfect kiss of sea and sky"; the dark "has settled down in these parts like a bruise in the flesh of the earth". You may be lured to this book by its lurid subject matter but you will stay for these delicate incantations of an inhospitable place.

There was a period years ago when Kent's choice of subject matter might have raised eyebrows. Once upon a time, young Australian novelists were expected to write about Australia and maybe there was a season when this liberated readers and writers. But Kent is to be commended for being drawn to a story and a character rather than any narrow cultural agenda. *Burial Rites* is far removed from us in time and place and, ironically, this fact makes it an intimate experience. It draws close to the bones and sinews of human experience as it gives voice to a yearning for more than the law can provide.

Sydney Morning Herald



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Reviews (continued)

Facts, events, even names are revealed as provisional in a tale that coils back on its brutal central events with measured and intricate self-regard. Kent's concern is as much with storytelling, of a culture bred on sagas and epics, as with Agnes. Our heroine emerges in a smudgy collage of events and impressions as a sort of Icelandic Cousin Rachel, though lacking something of the elusive charm of du Maurier's maybe-murderess.

Historical fiction was recently described in the New Yorker as “a pioneer country, without fixed laws”. With Hilary Mantel as sheriff, this outlying, unfashionable literary landscape is experiencing something of a seachange. It's a movement that Kent's debut catches at its turn. Her second book, another historical novel, this one set in 19th-century Ireland, will be a revealing follow-up to a debut whose literary grasp can't quite equal the ambition of its reach.

The Monthly

While the tensions and evolving relationships between Agnes and her host family are generally well realized, Kent's Reverend Toti remains a stereotype: meek, callow, indecisive and given to pious, predictable counsel. The author tries to build him into something more complex, but it's hard to tease fullness from what starts out flat. As the novel proceeds, Kent simply reverses Toti's initial generic traits — he becomes less meek, more decisive — but these changes are too schematic to generate a layered character....

Best of all, Kent offers a wealth of engaging detail — from how to make blood sausage to why it's necessary to swing a newborn lamb — without showing off or distorting her story to accommodate these nuggets. Instead, the research is naturally embedded in the narrative, always a sign that an author has a deep and sympathetic knowledge of her subject.

New York Times

Hannah Kent received a seven figure advance comprised of offers from three publishers for *Burial Rites* as part of a two-book deal. ... A first-time novelist is already a difficult assignment for a reviewer. With the fact of the cash hanging over it, a judgement of literary value is all the more tricky: a positive review might look like commercial complicity, a negative one mean-spirited. ... All of the critics see that it is a novel with clear strengths, even if there is no agreement about what these are. Certainly, there is no favouritism for Kent as a first-time novelist attracting international attention – she is not ‘our Hannah’ yet. The hype over the advance is present, but it could not be judged to have greatly skewed consideration. The sense emerges across the reviews of a competent-to-skillfully written historical novel on a compelling theme with some unevenness in style and characterisation.

Sydney Review of Books— “Critic Watch”