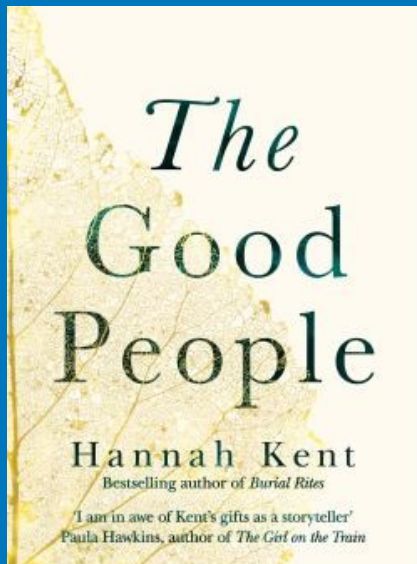


The Good People



Author Background

Hannah Kent

Born: Adelaide in 1985

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 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 at Flinders University. The Icelandic story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir became the inspiration for Kent's debut novel, *Burial Rites* and her PhD study on *Creative Writing: Speculative Biographies: The Representation of Historical Criminal Women in Literary Fiction*.

In 2011, *Burial Rites* won the Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award.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.

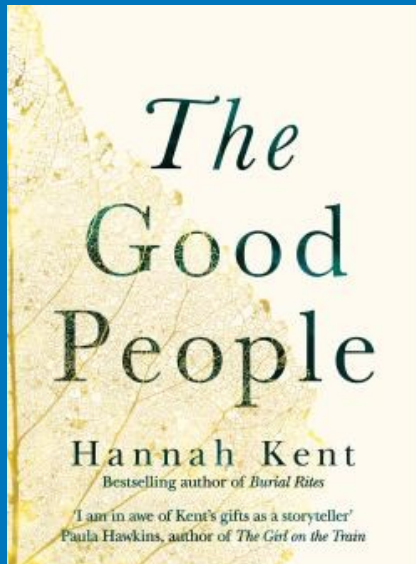
Whilst researching *Burial Rites*, Kent scanned historical newspaper archives for trial reports. During this research Kent came across a reference to a woman called Anne Roche who had an unusual defence for committing a serious crime:

*"She said that she couldn't be held accountable, that she was not guilty, because all that she had been trying to do was to banish a changeling. She also described herself as a fairy doctress, and I thought, 'Goodness me. Who is this woman?' I ended up writing it down in my notebook ... and then I picked it up later when a publisher asked me if I had an idea for a second novel."*¹

When Kent found some further reports on the Anne Roche case, she found reference to the victim's grandmother and her servant girl, and so Kent was inspired to create the three main characters of her second novel, *The Good People*. Set in a remote Irish valley in the 1820s, *The Good People* was published in 2016 and has been shortlisted for numerous literary awards.

¹ Hannah Kent quoted in Courtney Lawler, "Interview: Hannah Kent", *Feminartsy* [online], 21 February 2017.

The Good People



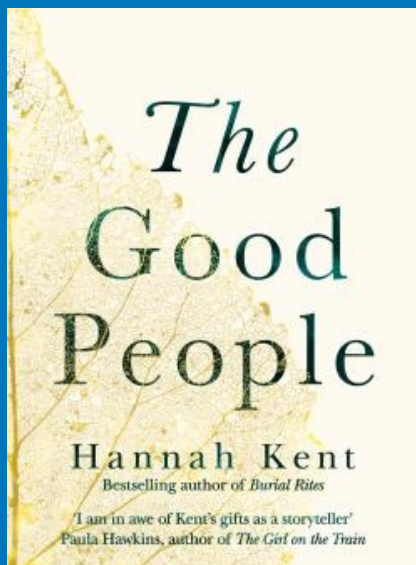
Book Summary

Nóra Leahy has lost her daughter and her husband in the same year, and is now burdened with the care of her four-year-old grandson, Micheál. The boy cannot walk, or speak, and Nora, mistrustful of the tongues of gossips, has kept the child hidden from those who might see in his deformity evidence of otherworldly interference.

Unable to care for the child alone, Nóra hires a fourteen-year-old servant girl, Mary, who soon hears the whispers in the valley about the blasted creature causing grief to fall upon the widow's house.

Alone, hedged in by rumour, Mary and her mistress seek out the only person in the valley who might be able to help Micheál. For although her neighbours are wary of her, it is said that old Nance Roche has the knowledge. That she consorts with *Them*, the Good People. And that only she can return those whom they have taken.

The Good People



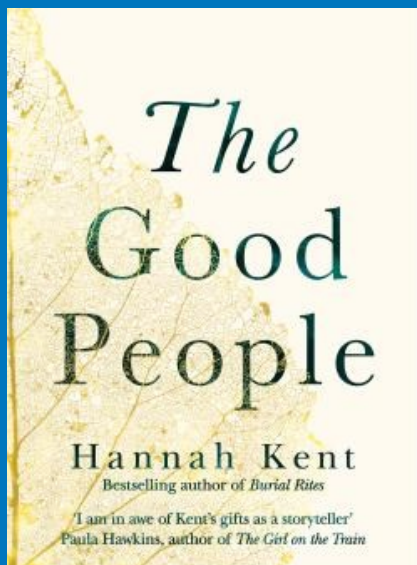
Discussion Questions

1. How did you feel while reading *The Good People*? What emotional response did you have to the novel?
2. The events of the novel are revealed through the different perspectives of Nóra, Mary and Nance. Whose perspective did you find the most intriguing?
3. Hannah Kent is meticulous in detailing the place and time of her novel. Did you find the level of historical detail in *The Good People* compelling, overwhelming, or dull?
4. What aspects of nineteenth century Irish life did you find most surprising?
5. “Soft in the head or hard in the heart” - what do you think motivates Nance in recommending a harsh course of treatment for Micheál? Why does Nóra persist with the treatment despite Mary’s protests?
6. What were your impressions of the trial? Were you surprised by the outcome?
7. Discuss the ways in which fear and hope, superstition and belief, pervade life in the valley. Do you think there are any parallels in contemporary society?

Just for fun

8. If you were creating a Hollywood version of *The Good People*, who would you cast and where would you set the film?

The Good People



Reviews

Kent, a natural writer with a talent for metaphor, has military command of her research. *The Good People* might be *Wuthering Heights* gothic without the psychological speed, a novel in black and grey, but for those who enjoy slow-burning melodrama and their history re-enacted in hi-res minutiae, this will please.

Helen Elliott, *The Monthly*

The original versions of Kent's characters would have spoken Irish, but Kent is Australian, writing in English. And so we have a problem, similar to that faced by the Anglo-Irish proponents of the cultural revival. How do you write about a culture that's not yours? How do you communicate its logic when you don't know its language?

At times in *The Good People*, particularly in the dialogue peppered with the likes of 'tis, 'twas and begged, the tension this question raises pulls at the narrative's seams. I couldn't help thinking of the lost-in-translation Oirishness of J.M. Synge on the page. ...Yet this problem, while partly offset by Kent's impressive scholarship and evocative nature imagery, also resonates strangely appropriately with the novel's themes.

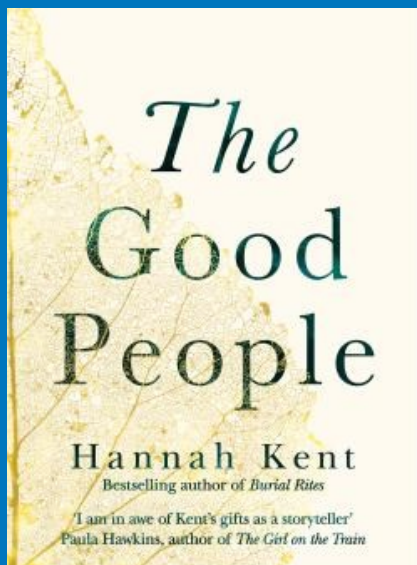
Mia Gallagher, *Irish Times*

It's a fascinating story but a thin one, bulked up by the three points of view of Nóra, Mary and Nance, which occasionally repeat each other. There are huge chunks where the story doesn't move at all. There's a very good novel lolling within these pages, however, and even the flab is elegant and interesting: Kent is no literary wunderkind in love with the sound of her own voice. The research is impeccable and convincing but there's just so much of it. As a sociological study of daily life in those times, it's an exemplary work and readers at all interested in pagan traditions or herbal medicine will love these sections. There are plenty of historical fiction fans, also, who read for this kind of close and intricate exploration of the lives of the past.

The pace of the story, however, is painfully slow, and the ending, though true to the story and not softened, speeds up alarmingly. Over and over we hear about Nance's past and Nóra's state of mind and have descriptions of the valley and references to the fairies and the curses and the herbs and their preparation, long after all these things have been elegantly established. Contrary to accepted wisdom, sometimes novelists need to tell, not show, in order to give a story energy and momentum.

"LS", *The Saturday Paper*

The Good People



Reviews (Continued)

The Good People is a novel about how competing systems of thought – religious, medical, folkloric and, eventually, legal – attempt to make sense of the bad stuff that happens. ...

Kent has a terrific feel for the language of her setting. The prose is richly textured with evocative vocabulary – *skib*, *spancel*, *creepie stool* – and despite occasionally straining a little too hard for poetic effect, the overall result is to transport the reader deep into the rural Irish hinterlands. This is a serious and compelling novel about how those in desperate circumstances cling to ritual as a bulwark against their own powerlessness.

Graeme Macrae Burnet, *The Guardian*

Kent continues a strand of rural gothic writing in Australia ... which is interested in the physical containment of people experiencing extreme psychological states. In these two novels, women are trapped in dark houses full of smoke and bodies. They are trapped due to the weather, yes, but also due to opprobrium and shame. These houses harbour people who are the focus of prurient interest: a murderer, a grieving widow, a severely disabled child. Against this backdrop of small communities so invested in gossip and fear, Kent explores inter-generational relationships between women, and the particularities of women's stages of life. [W]hile *The Good People* offers many of the same pleasures as *Burial Rites* – suspense, lyricism, tragedy – it uses them in more interesting and challenging ways.

Julieanne Lamond, *Sydney Review of Books*

The poet W.B. Yeats spoke of Irish history as a great tapestry. Even looking closely at its folds, he argued, it was impossible to tell where Christianity began and paganism ended. In *The Good People*, Hannah Kent takes us to a time and place where Christianity and paganism overlap, the two abiding in a tense co-existence, the cracks and deficiencies in one caulked by the other. If it isn't the fairies that sweep a body away, then it's the Devil, and oaths to the Good People are fused with prayers to God. I admired *Burial Rites* without being moved by it. *The Good People* gave me chills. It reminds us how persistent the human spirit is in its yearning for answers, and the tragic consequences that may come when superstitious faith — even in good people — transmutes into blind action. It's a haunting novel, shrewdly conceived and beautifully written.

Diane Stubbings, *The Australian*