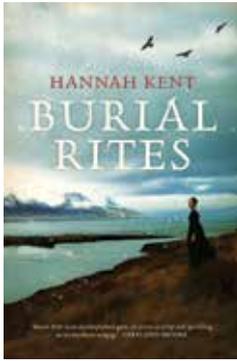


Notes on *Burial Rites*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2014 STELLA PRIZE



Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn't my own.

Hannah Kent, *Burial Rites*

SYNOPSIS

Agnes Magnúsdóttir has been sentenced to death for her part in the murder of Natan Ketilsson and Petur Jonsson. She is sent to await her execution on a farm where she spent much of her childhood. Under the damp roof of District Officer Jon Jonsson, his wife Margret and their daughters, Lauga and Steina, she waits to hear on which day she will be killed, and gradually tells her story to the young Reverend Toti.

At first the story she tells Reverend Toti is one of her childhood. She was abandoned by her mother, and even as a young child required to work as a maid to find a home. She did not object to hard work, and there were several times when she found a kind of happiness only to lose it, but other times when she was subjected to cruelty and misery. When she worked for a farmer named Worm, she was reasonably content. Agnes had been given an amount of money, and she was saving it with the hopes of one day being mistress of her own farm. When her brother reappeared, she vouched for his character. He stayed for a while, but eventually disappeared, taking her money with him.

Reverend Toti is young and, though certain in his faith, unsure of the best way to lead Agnes to redemption before her death. As she recounts her story to him, while knitting or churning butter, he begins to love her. Although he doubts his own abilities, he is unable to stay away. Toti starts to question whether Agnes deserves her fate at all. Her story is a tragic one, as we discover when she finally opens up and the details of the events leading to the deaths in question spill out. During her time at

Worm's farm, Agnes started up a friendship with Natan, a mysterious man with as much of a reputation for healing as for his relationships with women. In love with him, and with the idea of perhaps finally taking on a more valuable role in a household, Agnes leaves Worm's farm and makes the cold journey to Illugastadir on foot. But when she arrives she is drawn into Natan's emotional and manipulative games. Here she encounters Sigga and Fridrik, her eventual partners in crime. The likelihood of these three teaming up is improbable from the beginning. Agnes dislikes Fridrik from the moment they meet, feeling a sense of wrongness coming from him, and noting the enjoyment he takes in the slaughter of animals. At this point, it is easy to doubt whether she committed the crime at all, although she does not deny it.

As Natan's behaviour becomes more erratic, Agnes starts standing up to him, questioning his relationship with Sigga, and his paranoia towards the infrequent visitors and workers on the farm. Although Natan tries to brush her off, tensions build as his power is threatened by a developing relationship between Sigga and Fridrik, and these tensions boil over when Sigga accepts Fridrik's marriage proposal. Agnes finally reveals the events of the night that Natan was killed, and we learn that she is responsible for the stab wound that killed him, although we discover that her part in the events was driven first by sympathy for Natan, who had been mauled beyond redemption by Fridrik, and then by panic and blackmail.

Toti's misgivings regarding Agnes's fate are shared, although not immediately, by Margret and her daughters. Despite strong objections when they first hear that they are required to take her into their home, Steina then Margret and, finally, Lauga warm to Agnes. Steina feels that, like Agnes, she is the odd one out, a misunderstood young woman shunned for her differences. Agnes responds to her somewhat warily, not wanting to cause trouble in the household. Margret is fearful and resentful of housing a murderess, and at first she imagines Agnes slitting their throats while they sleep. Lauga is more influenced by gossip and opinion, and layered on top of her fear of living with a murderess, she is afraid that any appearance of sympathy towards the woman will diminish their standing in the community and decrease her chance of finding a good husband.

Margret is not a simple or petty woman, but a complex character whose fear for her daughters is influenced by her own ill health and resentment towards their bleak surroundings. She grows to respect Agnes's silence and her strong work ethic. Gradually, the women bond, sharing the knowledge that they are both close to death. By Agnes's final moments, Margret has become more than a confidante, almost taking on a maternal role towards the doomed woman. There is a tender scene where she gathers the few items of great beauty that they own and lays them out so that Agnes may walk to her execution shrouded not in the grey clothes of a servant but in the warmth of clothing and accessories that show that she was someone, that she belonged.

AUTHOR BACKGROUND



HANNAH KENT was born in Adelaide in 1985. As a teenager she travelled on a Rotary Exchange to Iceland, where she first heard the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir.

Hannah is the co-founder and publishing director of Australian literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*, and is completing her PhD at Flinders University. In 2011 she won the inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award.

Burial Rites is her first novel. It has been translated into twenty languages and has won and been shortlisted for a number of awards.

www.hannahkentauthor.com

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THEMES

History
Death
Belonging
Capital Punishment
Family
Manipulation
Fear
Friendship

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Burial Rites calls for the exploration of capital punishment within the framework of **ethical understanding**. Students should be able to articulate their thoughts on this challenging issue clearly, and be able to look at and present arguments from more than one side of the discussion.

Literacy is 'developed through the specific study of the English language in all its forms, enabling students to understand how the English language works in different social contexts'¹. Language plays a vital role in this story and its many uses – to withhold the truth, to manipulate, to plead, to condemn, and so on – offer much to analyse.

READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Why has Agnes been sentenced to death?
- ◆ Who else has been charged with the crime?
- ◆ Why has she been sent to live with Jon and Margret?
- ◆ What elements apart from Agnes's narrative does the author use to tell the story? What impact does this have?

¹ <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/general-capabilities>

- ◆ How do Margret and her daughters first respond to the news that Agnes will be staying with them? How do their attitudes towards her change over the course of the book? How does Agnes earn their respect?
- ◆ How does Agnes know the house so well?
- ◆ Why does she choose to tell her story to Reverend Toti?
- ◆ How does the author introduce Natan before Agnes starts talking about him? What is your opinion of him?
- ◆ Why is Agnes so enamoured of Natan? How does he treat her? In what ways does he manipulate each of the characters? Does this make him deserve his death?
- ◆ What part does Agnes play in Natan's murder? Why? Is her punishment fair?
- ◆ Why does Sigga receive a pardon?
- ◆ How do you feel knowing that this book is based on real events, and that the characters are based on real people? How does this change your reading of the book?
- ◆ What are the benefits of telling this story as historical fiction rather than just a factual history?
- ◆ Why doesn't Agnes fight against her fate?
- ◆ What is Reverend Toti's job? Which responsibilities does he fail to achieve? Why does he still feel that he is doing a good job?
- ◆ How does Agnes find peace?
- ◆ In what ways are Margret and Agnes similar? How does this unite the two women?
- ◆ Why does Steina feel so drawn to Agnes? Why does Lauga hate her so much? Do both of their attitudes towards her change? How?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Write your own piece of historical fiction. Good historical fiction draws as much from fact as possible, but creates a personal voice based on the available information. Choose a historical event and one or two figures from it. Find out as much information

about their lives as possible. Look for not only historical accounts of the event, but any pictures or art you can find, examples of the political and social climate (what were they struggling against, living through, eating etc.). Write a short piece of historical fiction (1000–1500 words), weaving these details into a more personal story.

Follow this up with 200–300 words on the way you approached the exercise, which elements you added yourself, and why you made the decisions you did based on the information you found.

(This exercise could be done as a vlog or blog to enhance **ICT capabilities**.)

2. Agnes's death was seen as unfair by many of the characters, and hers was the last example of capital punishment in Iceland. Run a mock trial for Agnes using contemporary Icelandic laws and the facts of the case that you can find in the text. Present both sides of the argument as fully as you can. Discuss how things would have been different if they had happened today. Would the outcome of her trial have been fairer?

3. One of the challenges that Hannah Kent would have faced while writing this book was being so far away from her subject. She was inspired by her time spent in Iceland, and this² photo essay tells a story in itself. Choose a topic that is important to you and create a photo essay. In pairs, swap photo essays and produce a short creative response on each other's photographs. Compare stories. Has your partner's story captured what you expected?

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