



Burial rites

By Hannah Kent

First published in 2013

Genre & subject

Australian fiction

Historical fiction

Synopsis

Agnes is sent to wait out the time leading to her execution on the farm of District Officer Jon Jonsson, his wife and their two daughters. Horrified to have a convicted murderess in their midst, the family avoids speaking with Agnes. Only Toti, the young assistant reverend appointed as Agnes's 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?

Author biography

Hannah Kent co-founded and served as deputy editor of Australian literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*, and is completing her creative writing PhD at Flinders University. In 2011, she won the inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award.

Kent was included in the 2013 Waterstones 11 for her debut novel *Burial Rites*, which revisits the true story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, the last person to be executed in Iceland. *Burial Rites* was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction (2014). Kent appeared at the 2013 Edinburgh International Book Festival, Sydney Writers' Festival and Byron Bay Writers Festival. A documentary about Kent's experiences in Iceland and writing *Burial Rites* was aired on ABC1 as an episode of *Australian Story* titled 'No More Than a Ghost,' in 2013.

Discussion starters

- 'I WAS WORST TO THE ONE I LOVED BEST.' *Laxdæla Saga* This is a statement resonant with the regrets we all feel for taking for granted those whom we love; for not being careful enough or kind enough to those we care deeply for. But how does it relate to Agnes, to whom no one has been terribly kind? Discuss.
- Natan is a chauvinist and arguably typical of men at that time. eg 'Like Natan used to say, once you let it in, it doesn't leave you alone. Like a woman, he said. The sea is a nag.' (p 36) However there are several portraits of men which reveal very different attitudes. For example Jón and Tóti both seem very caring towards women. Are they exceptions to the rule?

- 'Natan did not believe in sin. He said that it is the flaw in the character that makes a person.' (p100) This is an interesting statement which might be further discussed.
- Fate and destiny are major themes in this work, for Agnes seems fated to have come to the end she does. Could she have escaped this destiny? Was there a turning point in her life which she might have avoided?
- Death is a major theme in this work, but it is also about life and living. When Agnes faces the day of her execution all she wants to do is live, despite the harrowing nature of the life she has endured. Discuss.
- A film 'Agnes' by Egill Edvardsson (1995) has been made about this story. You may be able to source that film and compare it to this novel.
- Blöndal is the real villain of this piece. His dispassionate communications with those whom he controls are filled with venom and spite. What did you make of his decision to lodge Agnes with District Officer Jón and his family? Why did he do that?
- Are Steina, Lauga and Margrét changed by Agnes's time with them? Has her fate changed theirs in any way?
- Tóti's interest in Agnes's case begins as a young cleric wanting to prove himself to his elders, to a sincere desire to defend a condemned woman. His growth in compassion and his readiness to stand up to his seniors is one of the most significant themes in this novel. Discuss.
- Gossip, rumour and prejudice determine Agnes's end. She is 'hung' on the strength of a reputation which is largely conjecture and linked to her poverty. Discuss.
- Agnes goes to her death holding Tóti's hand, for they have discovered a deep need for each other. Is this a story then about the loneliness of our end in life? Or does it celebrate the comfort that a person can bring to the dying? Discuss.

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