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AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS



Hannah Kent



BURIAL RITES

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

'Everything I said was taken from me and altered until the story wasn't my own.' (p 100)

'God has had His chance to free me, and for reasons known to Him alone, He has pinned me to misfortune, and although I have struggled, I am run through and through with disaster; I am knifed to the hilt with fate.' (p 84)

Burial Rites is a deeply moving account of a convicted woman's last days as she struggles to maintain her equilibrium whilst confronting her death. Telling stories is one way of doing this, as Agnes preserves in these memories her claim to be remembered. God has not been kind to Agnes, whose life has been blighted by fate, and yet she is blessed with a fierce intelligence and a will to survive. Her search for the love she has been denied has resulted in her conviction. In this fictional work, Hannah Kent draws on the story of the last woman to be publicly beheaded in Iceland. She has woven together the facts of the case with her own creative interpretation, both to fill the gaps and to create a thrilling account of this tragic story set against the moody backdrop of Icelandic extremities of weather. It is also about how records both reveal the facts, and obscure the humanity of what actually happened, and how someone like Agnes might have found herself in this place and time. Rites for the dead or for the living? This novel is an elegy to Agnes and to all those whom life has treated with scant care and attention.

In 1829, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, together with teenagers Fridrik Sigurdsson and Sigga (Sigríður) Gudmundsdóttir, was accused of the brutal murders of Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson at Illugastadir in Iceland. After preliminary proceedings, the District Commissioner Björn Blöndal then resolved to lodge her with the family of Jón Jónsson (District Officer), his wife Margrét and daughters Steina (Steinvör) and Lauga (Sigurlaug) at Kornsa in the months leading up to her death. The family is shocked and deeply concerned about the plan, but cannot refuse the official order. Ironically, Agnes had been fostered to this house as a child and now at 33 has returned. 'But poverty scrapes these homes down until they all look the same, and they all have in common the absence of things that ought to be there. I might as well have been at one place all my life.' (p 71) The Commissioner also informed Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson that Agnes had specifically requested him as her spiritual advisor; so Tóti became her confessor, and resolved to offer her salvation: 'We are all God's children ... I will save her.' (p 32) He later defends his decision to allow her to tell him her story: 'It has become apparent to me that the condemned requires means other than religious rebuke to acquaint herself with death and prepare for her meeting with the Lord.' (p 165) Meanwhile, Fridrik awaited execution elsewhere, and Sigga was advised by Reverend Jóhann Tómasson, and was later pardoned at the intervention of Blöndal to remain in prison. Jón told Tóti that Jón Bjarnason wanted to execute the killers, but that Gudmundur Ketilsson, Natan's brother, was the man whom Blöndal wanted to swing the axe (p 106). Each of Blöndal's decisions evinced his brutally dispassionate wielding of power, and were calculated to achieve both emotional and physical pain.

Agnes has not had a happy life. She was abandoned as a child by her mother who had had a series of illegitimate births, and was taken in as a foster child and servant by a number of families. Agnes tells Assistant Rev. Tóti that Jón Bjarnason, a farmer, was her father, not the hapless servant Magnús Magnússon who was named on her birth record (p 109). Once abandoned, her sibling Jóas was lost to her and baby Helga (pp 120-2) later died. Her only happy memory is of the foster family Inga and Björn at Kornsa (p 122), where ironically she now resides with Jón Jónsson's family. She did meet her brother Jóas (p 186) again but he later decamped with her savings. She then went to Illugastadir to work for Natan, with whom she had embarked on a passionate affair. There she was greeted by the teenage servant Sigga (pp 225-6) who shocked her by informing her that she was to be the servant to Sigga (p 228). Meanwhile, Rósa Gudmundsdóttir (p 180), Natan's former married lover, left baby Thóranna (p 250) with Natan, Agnes and Sigga. Agnes gradually realised that Natan was sleeping with Sigga as well, and when he began to spurn her advances and to threaten her, Agnes found herself once again at the mercy of cruel fate, and was forced to flee with nothing. Her involvement in the murder was based on circumstantial evidence, and thus she found herself again dependent on strangers.

Ambivalence and truth lie at this novel's heart, for the two narrative accounts of Agnes's life leading up to the murders lie on shifting ground. 'Nothing is simple.' (p 67) Both accounts are truthful, but in one she chooses to leave out those private things she doesn't wish to tell Tóti. The public at large believe in a third narrative - that she is a conniving murderess rather than a victim of circumstances. 'No such thing as truth,' Agnes said, standing up. 'I've told the truth and you can see for yourself how it has served me.' (p 110) Similarly, records of life histories of people like Agnes are often oblique in what they reveal, and her actions are not easy to read. The 'gnarled family trees that grow in this valley, where the branches rope about one another, studded with thorns' (p 120) are fraught with secrets and lies. After months living with the family, an official arrives to take the names of those in the Jónsson household and carelessly records her name as Agnes Jónsdóttir (p 232) for the Parish register, as yet another example of how records are not always accurate or precise.

Many people including women, children and the poor at this time, and in this place were brutally dispossessed. 'The uninhabited places are as cruel as any executioner.' (p 70) Agnes is one of the lost souls in this landscape of deprivation and poverty, for from her abandonment as a child she has been abused and neglected in an unequal society that often treated pauper children badly. Her life before the murder was desperately impoverished. She reveals (p 178) the extent of her physical and sexual abuse at the hands of those who imprisoned her: the inventory of the two female prisoners' possessions (pp 140-1) is pathetic in its paucity; her abuse is clear in her bruises, and in her filthy condition, and the lack of proper institutional care for inmates is evident in the fact that when she is taken to her final placement they travel all day with no food or water.

Death is the subject of this novel which in effect delivers the last rites to the woman at its centre. 'I have been in the killing pen for months.' (p 203) Agnes has harboured guilt over her statement that she wished she could die, after Inga died, and feels guilt too that perhaps she hugged the baby too closely and caused its death (p 150): 'Good thing, then, that there is no one left to love. No one left to bury.' (p 150) Death and images of the grim reaper are prevalent given the looming beheading of Agnes: 'I watch you, says the scythe' (p 104), and Tóti 'looks like a skeleton' (p 315) Agnes tells Natan that the space between the stars is the 'Soul asylum' (p 220) which is a powerful expression of her belief in the spiritual. She speaks of the fresh-faced Steina who 'knows only the tree of life. She has not seen its twisted roots pawing stones and coffins.' (p 178) In contrast, Agnes has seen too many deaths in her life.

Dreams, portents and superstitions are rife in this work. Natan may be a genius or a charlatan. Agnes is suspected of being a witch. Wisdom may be simply old wives' tales. Dreams may be portents or simply dreams. Reality and superstition are intimates, since for every magic proposition there is an explanation which reflects reality. Agnes is regarded by several locals as a witch because of her healing powers and her reputation as a murderer. Ingibjörg suggests that Róslín's baby and family are at risk (p 116); Steina and Lauga are opposite in their reactions to Agnes (p 117), for whereas Steina is intrigued by Agnes, Lauga is fearful of her and blames her for (p 210) tainting the family and ruining their marriage prospects; Agnes dreams of Tóti (pp 183-4); Lauga relates Natan's dreams (pp 213-4); Natan sees 'death waves' and feels premonitions (p 261). The novel is a maelstrom of references to death and loss.

This Icelandic landscape is bleak and unforgiving and yet eerily beautiful, and in this novel acts as a metaphorical backdrop to all that befalls Agnes. Exteriors are treacherous with freezing ice, snow, and gale-force winds, and interiors are just as threatening with damp, mould, and a fetid atmosphere created by the constantly smoking fires which are fuelled by dried dung. Margrét is literally dying from the environment in which she lives; pregnant women such as Róslín are endangered; even young Tóti may not survive another winter. But when the novel describes the beauty of this landscape it is just as memorable. The beauty of the northern lights (p 143) or the days outside in the whiteness are evocatively descriptive of the spiritual hope which keeps Agnes going.

This novel considers a patriarchal society in which male bureaucrats dominate the local economy, religion and politics. 'María told me that men might do as they please, and that they are all Adams, naming everything under the sun.' (p 192) Blöndal had complete power

over his constituents and the events which unfold are largely due to his intervention and unyielding belief in his own infallibility. To a certain extent, impoverished women like Agnes had little control over their lives.

Storytelling and the power invested in the telling of tales and memories is a strong theme in this novel. 'But these times are not saga times, Margrét had thought. This woman is not a saga woman. She's a landless workmaid raised on a porridge of moss and poverty.' (p 52) Despite her impoverished background, Agnes loves reading, poetry (p 190) and telling stories. Further examples include Natan's story (p 191); and the various references to the power of Poet-Rósa's poetry: 'Her poetry made lamps out of people' (p 248). There's a strong suggestion that Agnes might have enjoyed book learning had she been given the opportunity, as she is clearly well-educated despite her neglected upbringing.

Yearning for love is a central theme in this story. Agnes has been seeking her lost mothers all her life. She was abandoned by her birth mother of whom she has only vague memories (p 111), and then lost her foster mother Inga to childbirth (pp 145-9). She was later hardened by enduring years of loveless foster placements and then met Natan (p 103) who awoke in her a desire for love. 'For the first time in my life, someone *saw* me, and I loved him because he made me feel I was enough.' (p 221) 'I cannot remember not knowing Natan. I cannot think of what it was not to love him. To look at him and realise I had found what I had not known I was hungering for.' (p 194) His betrayal and death made her even steeper: 'I am determined to close myself to the world, to tighten my heart and hold onto what has not yet been stolen from me. I cannot let myself slip away.' (p 29) But Agnes sees herself as doomed for being too clever (p 131) and too unlucky in life: 'I thought I could pretend' (p 128). Her chats with Tóti are painful, as 'talking to him only reminds me of how everything in my life has worked against me, and how unloved I have been.' (p 120) Agnes's life has always been heading in this direction. For 'if no one will say your name, you are forgotten. I am forgotten.' (p 320)

Fate and destiny have determined Agnes's end. 'There was nowhere else to go.' (p 265)

WRITING STYLE

1. **Faction is the deliberate extrapolation on a real event or story written in a fictional voice.** Hannah Kent has researched the background to this story exhaustively and then added the novelist's perspective by imagining Agnes's musings on her own life, and by developing imagined characters based on the historical documents and accounts written by or about some of these characters. How does this imaginative use of history extend our understanding of the actual events?

2. This novel is **structured as alternate or dual narratives** in which Agnes's story is told in **third person** and her own view of her life and incarceration is told in **first person**. When she comes to tell Tóti her story she relates a different version to her own memories; she keeps private her passion for Natan. Discuss the effect this alternating view and perspective has on thematic development and plotting suspense in the work.

Read the interview with Hannah Kent (*Bookseller and Publisher* 8 February 2013 <http://www.booksellerandpublisher.com.au/DetailPage.aspx?type=featureitem&id=26248>) She explains how she wrote this and makes some surprising observations about the process.

3. A variety of other texts including letters, official documents and poems are included in the novel as well: Blöndal's Public Notice (p 3); Letter to Rev. Jóhann Tomasson (p 4); letter to Assis. Rev T. Jónsson (pp 5-7); brief report on Agnes noted in the Ministerial records by P. Bjarnason (p 33); note from the Supreme Court Trials (p 57); letter to Deputy-Governor of North-east Iceland from B. Blöndal. (pp 85-6); Poet-Rósa's poem to Agnes (p 113); Poet-Rósa's to Natan (p 197); Anonymous Poem (p 223); Rosa's testimony (pp 243-4); Clerk's account of interview (p 267); Laxdæla Saga (p 293); letter re execution (pp 304-7); Blöndal's order to district to attend execution (pp 308-9); letter to Blöndal from Pétursson (p 310); Icelandic burial hymn (p 311); Epilogue containing Blöndal's dispassionate report on execution (pp 329-30). Choose one of these texts and discuss in relation to the overall themes of the novel.

4. This novel **personifies landscape** in a visceral way. Eg 'The cut grass makes a gasping sound' (p 103); 'the wind hurling ice at our home' (p 144); 'Autumn fell upon the valley like a gasp.' (p 198); 'the dark intestine of the river in front of us.' (p 207); 'huge tangles of seaweed float in the bay and look like the hair of the drowned.' (p 227); 'The dark comes; it has settled down in these parts like a bruise in the flesh of the earth,' (p 254); 'the clouds hang still in the air like dead bodies.' (p 322) Human actions are alternately expressed in extremely **organic language** as well: 'it was only later that our tongues produced landslides' (p 22); 'Memories shift like loose snow in a wind, or are a chorale of ghosts all talking over one another.' (p 111); 'He would give me springtime' (p 222); 'the way he grappled for my body like a buoy in the water.' (p 256); 'we are all underwater and I cannot swim.' (p 323) The bleak and yet verdant landscape of Iceland is ever present thematically in the novel: 'Snow lay over the valley like linen, like a shroud waiting for the dead body of sky that slumped overhead.' (p 324) Discuss.

5. **Aphorisms** in this novel are drawn from the lore of the Icelandic past, and the wisdom of such stories and fables is a strong riff or current throughout the work: eg 'They pick a mouse to tame a cat.' (p 10); 'A witch often has fair skin.' (p 52) 'No doves come from ravens' eggs' (p 117); ' "The treachery of a friend is worse than that of a foe," ' (p 175) Choose one of these, or other aphorisms mentioned in the text, and discuss its meaning and relevance to the novel as a whole.

6. **Symbols are significant in this novel.** Fire and ice, for example, are opposite and yet twin poles of the suffering endured by Agnes. 'It was the drop of the match. I did not see that we were surrounded by tinder until I felt it burst into flames.' (p 195) 'The burnt child fears the fire.' (p 251) 'Flames were licking at his skin, smoke pouring into his mouth.' (p 252) Margrét tells Agnes that her mother believed that as long as a fire was burning in a house it meant the devil couldn't get in (p 271). What other symbols did you notice in reading this work?

THE AUTHOR

Hannah Kent was born in Adelaide in 1985. As a teenager she travelled to Iceland on a Rotary Exchange, where she first heard the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir. Hannah is the co-founder and deputy editor 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. See her website for further information. <http://hannahkentauthor.com/>

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. '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.
2. Read the passage 'I remain quiet ... I will not be there.' (pp 28-9) What does it reveal about Agnes and how she perceives the world's view of her?
3. 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?
4. '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.
5. 'Most good people are soon enough underground.' (p 137) Good works don't guarantee longevity. Discuss.
6. 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?
7. 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.
8. Discuss the notion of capital punishment. Read a brief article about its history in Iceland. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capital_punishment_in_Iceland
9. 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.
10. 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?
11. Are Steina, Lauga and Margrét changed by Agnes's time with them? Has her fate changed theirs in any way?
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. Hannah Kent calls her novel a 'dark love letter to Iceland' (p 337) in her Acknowledgements. What does she mean by this? Did you read the novel in this way?
15. 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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