

A short guide to: Burial Rites by Hannah Kent

written by Jonathan Wong

Author Bio

Name: Hannah Kent

Key facts:

- Australian writer
- Debut novel
- Co-founder of Kill Your Darlings (Australian literary magazine)
- Wrote Burial Rites after a stay in Iceland as a student

Mini Plot Summary:

Historical novel, set in Iceland, about a young woman named **Agnes Magnúsdottir** who has been sentenced to death. The story follows the last few months of Agnes' life, as well as the details surrounding the murders for which she has been convicted. As Agnes tells her side of the story, she gains the empathy of those around her. She has been largely condemned as a cold-blooded 'murderess', but explains how she killed out of mercy. In the end, Agnes' execution is to go ahead, and the family she has stayed with (as well as an Assistant Reverend named **Tóti**) comfort her in her last days, and accompany her until she finally dies.

Extended Plot Summary:

Burial Rites is a historical novel. It is a fictional interpretation of the life and death of Agnes Magnúsdottir, the last person to be executed in Iceland (in 1830).

The story begins with District Commissioner Blöndal sending Agnes to the farm of District Officer Jón Jonsson in Kornsó. She is to reside there until her execution, the date of which has not yet been scheduled.

Agnes has been sentenced to death (along with Fridrik Sigurdsson and Sigga Gudmundsdóttir, her purported co conspirators) for the murder of two men: Natan Ketilsson and Pétur Jónsson.

Agnes has requested a ‘spiritual advisor’ to guide her and talk to her in the lead-up to her execution. She specifically asks for a man named Tóti. He is an inexperienced Assistant Reverend.

The daughters of District Officer Jón - who are named Lauga and Steina - are furious that the ‘murderess’ Agnes Magnúsdottir will be held on their farm.

Agnes arrives at the Kornsó farm in a weak condition. She has been moved from a farm in Stora-Borg, where she was treated horribly by the residents. The wife of District Officer Jón, Margrét, notices bruises on Agnes’ face, which indicate she has been beaten.

Margrét, Lauga and Steina and Jón are initially very hostile towards Agnes, and make it clear they do not want her residing at their home.

During Agnes’ stay at the Kornsó farm, she helps the family with their chores. She is adept at all her tasks, because she has worked as a servant girl all her life.

Assistant Reverend Tóti arrives for his first meeting with Agnes. Agnes reveals that she chose Tóti as her spiritual advisor because he once helped her across a river. She is also disappointed at what she sees, noting that Tóti is still ‘little more than a child’, and ponders whether she has made a mistake in choosing him.

After a brief interlude, Tóti returns, and Agnes eventually opens up to him about her life. She tells him that she was abandoned at birth by her biological mother, Ingveldur. She also describes, in detail, an extremely traumatic event: the death of her foster mother, Inga, who died during childbirth. The child died that night, too, on account of the cold weather. Soon after, Agnes’ foster father, Björn, could no longer afford to keep her at the

farm, and she was sent to the parish to live as an ‘urchin’ and a ‘pauper’, where she is ‘left to the mercy of others, whether they had any or no’.

Tóti meets with District Commissioner Blöndal to discuss his progress with Agnes. Blöndal is displeased that Tóti has struck up a friendship with Agnes. During this meeting - to persuade Tóti that Agnes cannot be saved - Blöndal describes his version of the murders, as well as his conclusions.

Blöndal believes that the murders were masterminded by Agnes. His theory is that Agnes coerced Fridrik into killing Natan, and that she herself finished Natan off with a knife. He suspects that Fridrik killed Petur mistakenly, believing him to be Natan (or else to be rid of a witness). He tells Tóti that he believes Agnes was motivated by jealousy from the fact that Natan was interested in Sigga, who is a pretty girl of fifteen. Tóti, who is sceptical, contends that ‘women may be jealous and not murder’. He believes her ‘sincere’. He also learns from Blöndal’s servant, a woman named Karitas, that Natan was not a perfect man. Karitas tells Tóti Natan ‘toyed with people’.

Tóti returns to speak with Agnes again at the Kornsó farm. She tells him that they ‘met’ once before (prior to the meeting at the river). Her first ‘meeting’ with Tóti was seeing him in a dream, wherein he helped her across a field of snow. She believed her dream to be a sign that Tóti would help her one day.

Agnes also tells Tóti how she came to work at Natan’s farm. She worked at a number of farms prior, and was often sexually assaulted. During her time at the farm of a man named Worm Beck, she met Natan. She already knew of him, because he was ‘famous for all sorts of things’, and he had a reputation for being a ‘sorcerer’ and a ‘thief’. She describes him as being ‘not handsome’, but ‘easy in his address’. They became friends, and then lovers, soon after which Natan asked her to live with him as the head housekeeper. However, at Natan’s farm, she discovered Sigga, who claimed to already be the head housekeeper. Natan cleared this up by informing Agnes (in private) that Sigga was young and confused, and that Agnes was the head housekeeper and that Sigga is just a servant.

Agnes helps deliver the baby of a woman named Róslín. By this point, Margrét and Steina have grown attached to Agnes, although Lauga hates her; she is incredulous that her family has taken a liking to the murderess.

Tóti falls ill and cannot visit Agnes for a number of weeks.

Agnes tells Margrét about her relationship with Natan, and about what happened regarding the murders. She tells her how Natan was obsessed with dreams about his own death, and that she was in them. He became erratic and violent.

Agnes tells her that she soon discovered Natan was sleeping with Sigga. (Meanwhile, Fridrik and Sigga were to be wed, with Natan's permission). Agnes confronted Natan about Sigga, and told him she forgave him, but Natan responded that he was aware that she knew about the affair. Soon after, Natan throws Agnes out into the snow. She goes to Fridrik's house for shelter. They soon return to Natan's farm, to take Sigga away, but Natan has reneged on his permission and will not let Sigga marry Fridrik. Fridrik discovered at that point that Natan has been sleeping with Sigga.

Fridrik murdered Pétur and inflicted grievous bodily harm on Natan. Agnes then killed Natan, with a knife, out of mercy.

Agnes' execution has been set for 12 January, which is soon. Tóti pushes through his illness to keep Agnes company prior to the execution date. The whole Jonsson family comfort Agnes during this short period (six days). Even Lauga feels great empathy, and agrees to give Agnes her brooch on execution day. Margrét tells Agnes she is 'not a monster', and that '[they'll] remember [her]'.

Fridrik is executed first, out of the view of Agnes. Then Tóti leads Agnes through the snow to the chopping block, comforting her and saying prayers. Agnes is scared, and says she isn't ready, and asks if they can wait. Tóti, who understands her execution is inevitable, tells Agnes that he 'won't ever let go', and he holds her hand as she dies.

Overarching Themes:

- *Truth & Perspective*
 - Agnes is initially condemned as a heartless killer, but her conversations with Assistant Reverend Tóti, and also Margrét Jonsson, result in them seeing another side to Agnes' story

- Tóti and Margrét realise that the circumstances of the murders were more complicated than first thought, and that Agnes - who killed Natan out of mercy - does not deserve to be executed
 - District Commissioner Blöndal is staunch in his condemnation of Agnes, and refuses to see Agnes as anything but calculating, deceptive and cold
 - The truth does not serve Agnes well. In her court cases, she told her side of the story, but her words were manipulated and picked apart by a judge, jury and community who were already extremely prejudiced against her
- *The oppression of women*
 - Agnes describes her life throughout the story, which was tough from the very beginning. She grew up isolated, and in poverty, abandoned first by her biological mother, and then by her foster-father. She lived as a 'pauper', moving from farm to farm as a servant, often the subject of sexual abuse and rape.
 - Gender roles in 1800s Iceland were archaic - and seemingly accepted - with the women in the community relegated to household chores, including cooking every meal for their husbands, sons and brothers
 - Agnes describes her physical and emotional abuse at the hands of Natan, who dominates her in power, wealth and status
- *Misogyny & prejudice*
 - People are distrustful of Agnes, because she is an intelligent woman, and somewhat old (33), and are quick to believe she masterminded the murders of Natan and Pétur
 - The sisters Lauga and Steina are viewed differently. Lauga is seen as 'better', because she is prettier and subservient, whereas Steina is less beautiful and more strong-minded.
 - People refuse to believe that Sigga, a young, pretty girl of fifteen, would be able to commit murder. This opinion does not extend to Agnes, who is older and smarter.
 - The entire Jonsson family are prejudiced against Agnes when she first arrives at their farm, having heard rumours of her being a 'murderess'.
 - Agnes is initially prejudiced against Tóti on account of his youth
- *Religion, superstitions & dreams*

- Blöndal is not pleased when he hears that Tóti calls Agnes by her Christian name. He clearly believes a murderer should not be entitled to this privilege.
 - Natan is judged for his dissociation with religion, and it is rumoured his mother named him 'Natan' after 'Satan', only changing the 'S'.
 - Agnes places importance on a superstition passed down from her foster-mother regarding a stone. She was told that putting a stone under her mouth would allow her to speak to birds, and she describes how she believed in her youth that a flock of birds were members of her dead family.
 - Agnes recounts a dream in which Tóti lead her through the snow, a dream which meant a lot to her.
 - Natan is haunted by dreams of his death, which he believes to be foreshadowings and premonitions.
- *Class inequality*
 - District Commissioner Blöndal lives a far more luxurious life than those on the Kornsa farm. He has significant wealth and power.
 - In contrast to Blöndal is Agnes, who is extremely poor, with almost no possessions to her name. Agnes' lower class and poverty renders her powerless when opposed to a rich, prejudicial Danish judge.
- *Compassion & empathy*
 - The value of compassion and empathy are highlighted through the characters of Tóti and Margrét in particular. (Steina too). Their kindness towards Agnes provide her some comfort in the lead up to her execution. They understand that Agnes is extremely unfortunate to have been condemned for the murders.
 - In contrast to this is Natan, who is cruel towards Agnes and Sigga. He treats them like playthings. He is self-interested and controlling. And despite this, Agnes shows Natan compassion by killing him out of mercy.

Key Characters:

- *Agnes Magnúsdóttir*
 - Protagonist

- Convicted murderer, sentenced to death, held on a farm as she awaits her execution
- Unlucky & unfortunate in life: poor, the victim of abuse, sentenced to a penalty she did not deserve
- *Natan Ketilsson*
 - Well-regarded, because of his medical abilities, though scorned for his lack of religion
 - Owns his own farm, Illugastadir
 - Cruel and controlling
 - Died at the hands of Fridrik (who inflicted grievous wounds) and Agnes (who killed him out of mercy)
- *District Commissioner Björn Blöndal*
 - Was friends with Natan (Natan healed his wife)
 - Prejudiced against Agnes
 - Rich and powerful
- *Assistant Reverend Thorvardur Jónsson (Tóti)*
 - Agnes' spiritual advisor, and eventually her friend
 - Shows Agnes compassion by listening, and talking, and providing her company in the lead up to her death
- *Margrét Jonsson*
 - Initially prejudiced against Agnes, but once she gets to know her (and her story) she becomes compassionate and kind

Other characters:

- Steina (The less-beautiful, more headstrong Jonsson daughter)
- Lauga (The prettier, subservient and more prejudiced Jonsson daughter)
- Fridrik (Sigga's fiancée, 17, the killer of Natan and Petur)
- Sigga (15, young and naive and involved with Fridrik and Natan)

Key quotes:

‘It seems that with each passing day I become more like an animal to them.’

‘I understood that these people did not see me. I was two dead men. I was a burning farm. I was a knife. I was blood.’

‘They will remember me as I was - as a baby, as a child, as a woman running from farm to farm - and then they will think of the murders and that child, that woman will be forgotten.’

(Re: Sigga) ‘Too young and sweet to die’

(Toti) ‘Women may be jealous and not murder’

‘It seems wrong to call her by a Christian name, Margret thought.’

‘But, Agnes, actions speak louder than words.’ (Toti) ‘Actions lie’ (Agnes)

‘All my life people have thought I was too clever. Too clever by a half, they’d say.’

(Blondal, judgemental): ‘You call her by her Christian name.’

‘To know what a person has done, and to know who a person is, are very different things.’

‘It’s not fair. People claim to know you through the things you’ve done, and not by sitting down and listening to you speak for yourself.’

‘Any woman knows that a thread, once woven, is fixed in place; the only way to smooth a mistake is to let it all unravel.’

‘I was worst to the one I loved best.’

‘They see I’ve got a head on my shoulders, and believe a thinking woman cannot be trusted.’

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

‘No matter if you tried to do what was best. No matter if your innermost self whispers, ‘I am not as you say!’—how other people think of you determines who you are.’

‘No doves come from ravens’ eggs.’

‘It is the waiting that cripples.’