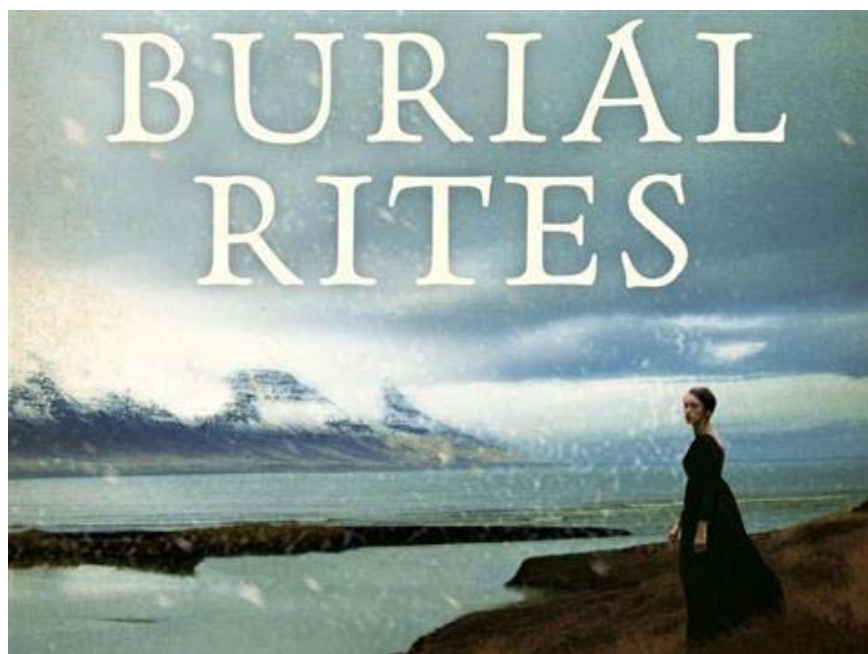


Hannah Kent: Burial Rites

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Kent succeeds in offering up a fascinating, rich character and leaves it up to the reader to decide how to feel about her fate.



Burial Rites is a grim, evocative and poetic novel set in nineteenth century Iceland. This setting, unfamiliar to many Australian readers, comes alive in the descriptions. A PhD student at Flinders University, Hannah Kent painstakingly researched every aspect of the book, reading about the history, sagas and practical aspects in order to recreate it so believably for the reader. Her effort was worthwhile; the plot is unbearably sad and gripping because it feels so real.

The novel is based on the true story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, a woman sentenced to death for her role in the murders of two men. For logistical and financial reasons – mainly, the lack of jails and an axe to perform the execution with – Agnes is sent to live with a farmer, his wife and daughters, as she awaits her execution.

The family are horrified to have a murderess, the ‘monster’, living under their roof. Kent provides pieces of the story, told through Agnes’ passionate first-person voice, as well as other characters’ points of view in third-person. At times, this has a jarring effect as the drama and intensity of the story builds just in time to switch voice. However, there are benefits to the removed, detached third-person narrative – particularly in the clues and context these scenes provide. At the same time, Agnes’s strong, mesmerising voice and poetic descriptions could have been used throughout the novel rather than offered as occasional

tantalising morsels. Kent uses translated letters and historical documents at the start of each chapter, which effectively break up the poignant and tragic scenes, guide the narrative forward with the facts and immutable details, and provide extra insights into the characters.

Despite the striking beauty of the landscape and the northern lights, it is clear to the reader how brutal and relentless life in the north of Iceland can be. The farmhouse at the centre of the novel is falling apart, and many of the characters are weak or ill. Kent, who lived in Iceland for a year as an exchange student and experienced first-hand the isolation and loneliness, is adept at conveying Agnes' desperation. Agnes is forced to continue living as normal and helping with work on the farm as she waits for her impending death. Her life returns to one of routine and chores, just as it was before the murders. As time goes on, her sense of normality returns, but it is always alongside the fear and anticipation of death.

The cruelty of many of the characters as well as the harsh weather and landscape leaves little hope or possibility for escape or redemption. Agnes has only one source of comfort, a young priest, known as Tóti, who is appointed to lead Agnes to repent for her sins and pray for forgiveness before her execution. Tóti is deeply important to Agnes, giving her the opportunity to tell her story unlike in her trial. Not many people are willing to hear her defence. Kent emphasises the injustice of Agnes' story, and it is clear that there are many others on the record who would have faced a similar tragic end.

While Kent's prose is compelling, her poetic imagery is striking and vivid. The motif of recurring ravens and Agnes' terrifying dreams that are a significant part of the plot push the novel away from the realism and the detailed descriptions of life on a farm, and into the realm of surreal and supernatural. It is an intelligent, powerful and unique novel. Kent has transformed a wealth of research into a page-turner. Taking Agnes out of the history books and offering a back story full of possibilities and explanations was an ambitious task. Kent succeeds in offering up a fascinating, rich character and leaves it up to the reader to decide how to feel about her fate.

Burial Rites has been shortlisted for the Stella Prize 2014. The prize will be announced on the evening of Tuesday 29 April.

Rating: 4 ½ out of 5 stars

Burial Rites

by Hannah Kent

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Roz Bellamy is a Melbourne-based writer, reviewer and editor, with a passion for the arts and travel.