ReadingGroupGuides
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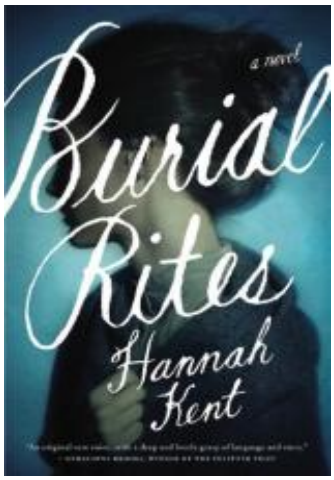
Burial Rites

by Hannah Kent



About the Book

Set against Iceland's stark landscape, Hannah Kent brings to vivid life the story of Agnes, who, charged with the brutal murder of her former master, is sent to an isolated farm to await execution.

Horrified at the prospect of housing a convicted murderer, the family at first avoids Agnes. Only Tóti, a priest Agnes has mysteriously chosen to be her spiritual guardian, seeks to understand her. But as Agnes's death looms, the farmer's wife and their daughters learn there is another side to the sensational story they've heard.

Riveting and rich with lyricism, BURIAL RITES evokes a dramatic existence in a distant time and place, and asks the question: How can one woman hope to endure when her life depends upon the stories told by others?

Discussion Guide

1. ?I was the 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 --- ?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). Discuss this statement.

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.

Author Bio

Hannah Kent was born in Adelaide in 1895. Her first novel, BURIAL RITES, has been translated into nearly 30 languages and was shortlisted for the Baileys Women?s Prize for Fiction (formerly the Orange Prize), the *Guardian* First Book Award and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Hannah is also the co-founder and publishing director of Australian literary journal *Kill Your Darlings.* THE GOOD PEOPLE is her second novel.

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