Lovereading Reader reviews of Burial Rites by Hannah Kent

Below are the complete reviews, written by Lovereading members.

Magda North

*This debut novel is heart stoppingly good. I love, love, loved it.*

Hannah Kent writes so vividly I felt as if I was in the claustrophobic croft with the murderess, Agnes, and the family housing her in 1829.

I felt I could reach out and touch the bleak landscapes of Northern Iceland where the days are long and dark. The female characters in particular are very richly drawn, partly by offering contrasting viewpoints and getting the reader to work out where our sympathies lie.

Bit by bit we learn more about Agnes and the crime at the heart of the novel. Interspersed are extracts from the case at the time, which lend gravitas to the storytelling. And it’s so tense! Nothing happens and everything happens. *I read it in a couple of days, couldn't put it down. It's rare for me to be blown away by a book; Burial Rites is exceptional. Read it.*

Phylippa Smithson

*Brilliant! Burial Rites is a very different mystery and is absolutely compulsive reading as the story is unveiled.*

The plot follows the impact of a murder through the eyes of the different people who become involved in one of the accused. However, at the heart of the story is not so much the victim, the tracking down of the killers or the trial. *The story is all about Agnes, one of the three sentenced for the murder of Natan.*

Through the eyes of Toti the priest she requests to be her ‘spiritual advisor,’ the wife of the family to whom she is housed before her execution, one of the
daughters and various other characters, we learn what has happened in the life of Agnes to see her arrive at her current impending threat of execution.

Agnes is a character to whom you warm and throughout the book I found myself questioning why such a seemingly innocent and honest character could have been driven to an act of murder. Given she was found guilty in a court of law, my only hope was that she had committed such an act by way of self defence. Yet even then, I wanted her to be innocent.

The characters around her, who are involved in the period of her final captivity, help to build a sense that Agnes is someone to trust, not a murderess.

I could not turn the final pages of the book fast enough as I desperately hoped against hope that salvation would come her way.

What enhanced this book even further was reading, on conclusion of the story, that in fact it was not a fictional plot but based on fact.

Yet another remarkably read from the ever impressive writers hailing from Iceland and the Nordics.

Elisabeth Thomas

A spell binding debut novel from Hannah Kent which takes you on an emotional rollercoaster based on the true story of Agnes Magnusdottir.

Set in Iceland in the late 1820’s, the book is based on the true story of Agnes Magnusdottir, a young woman sentenced to death for her supposed part in the murder of two men. Many of the letters and documents which start off each chapter have been translated and adapted from original sources.

Instead of being held until her execution in jail, she is sent to work on a farm. The state offers Agnes the opportunity of being allocated a minister to offer her spiritual guidance in her final months and Agnes decides to ask the Reverend Toti to visit her on a regular basis where they talk and gradually, as Agnes’ tragic story is revealed, her conviction for murder is not as solid as we originally thought.

As Agnes’ time at the farm of Jon and Margret goes on, the family (with the exception of the youngest daughter Lauga) begins to see her more as a servant than a convicted murderess awaiting execution. The story of Agnes is heart breaking and I frequently found myself wondering if Agnes’ childhood had been different, would her life have taken a different course.

The book is written in the first and third person, this means you hear Agnes’ story from her own point of view and then the narration in the third person gives a wider picture. I found I was quickly drawn into this spell binding
Nicola Foster

Burial Rites is haunting and atmospheric, a remarkable story that held me enraptured from beginning to end.

Hannah Kent’s astonishing début tells the true story of Agnes Magnusdottir, a woman in nineteenth century Iceland sentenced to death for a double brutal murder. She is sent to spend the remaining months prior to her execution working on a farm, much to the revulsion of the family there. It is only when she begins to tell her story that they realise perhaps all is not what it seems.

This was an impeccably well-researched book about a harrowing subject matter. Agnes’ first person reflections are interwoven with third party perspectives and official documents from the time, providing a glimpse into the impoverished, harsh lives led in the rural communities, as well as deep insight into the events themselves- both leading up to the murders and their aftermath.

The prose is lush and evocative, with not a single word wasted. To me, everything I read felt utterly authentic, from the masterful descriptions of the people in the small farmstead to the sights, sounds and depictions of the isolated landscapes. Burial Rites is sensory writing at its best, you can practically feel the bitter chill of winter seeping from the pages and smell the ashes on the fire; I became completely absorbed into this unfamiliar world. Though bleak, it is nonetheless powerful. Kent offers small facets of humanity around a woman who for centuries has remained well and truly condemned and finally gives her a voice.

Burial Rites is a mesmerising piece of historical fiction and one of the best début novels I have ever encountered; I cannot wait to read more by Kent in future.

Sarah Harper

Burial Rites is not the sort of book I would normally read and, to be honest, I found the Icelandic names and places a little daunting at first. How was I ever going to be able to follow a plot when the characters names were so alien to me? How would I remember who was who? However, I should not have been concerned.

In Burial Rites, Hannah Kent has crafted a truly gripping and immersive tale based on a true story and the Icelandic language she uses only serves to add to its authenticity. It is a bleak and brutal existence for the inhabitants of rural
Iceland in 1829 and as we follow the last days of the convicted murderer, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, we are given a glimpse into the abject poverty and misery of her desolate life. The characters are exceptionally well written, their lives expertly described so that you can almost taste the stench of the dark, dank and fetid hovel with mould dripping from its dung hewn walls.

Full of stomach gripping fear and the tentative beauty of newly kindled friendship, I was uncertain of Agnes’s fate until the very end. A terribly poignant, brilliantly written tale which will linger in your thoughts long after you have turned the last page.

Megan Olwen Williams

Hannah Kent has undertaken an admirable project in her rendering of Iceland in the 1800s in her debut novel ‘Burial Rites’. Agnes Magnúsdóttir is a woman convicted of murder and while she awaits her execution she is sent to spend her last few months at a farm where she is made to work for her keep. Although the family that are forced to receive her are initially as harsh and as bitterly cold as the Icelandic winter towards her, they eventually thaw as Agnes’s true story comes to light and they realise that all is not as it first seems.

Hannah Kent’s novel is a tale of tragedy and hardship, which is bravely portrayed with unforgiving detail. Although the novel is based around true historical facts, it is Kent’s imagination that structures the tale and gives it emotion and depth. This is not a novel for those looking for a light-hearted summer read, but definitely one for those that want to escape into the more cooling intriguing labyrinth of a life led by a convicted murderer in the bleak Iceland of the 1800s. It is an intriguing and interesting read.

Kath Thornton

This haunting story set in Iceland in 1829, is of Agnes Magnúsdóttir, who was condemned for killing her former employer Nathan Ketilsóhn, along with two others. It is full of emotion and atmosphere; you feel the fear and isolation of the characters in the book which is due to the remarkable descriptive writing of Hannah Kent.

Agnes is sent to a farm of the District officer Jon Jonsson and his family to spend her final days. The farm is actually in the area where Agnes grew up. The family find it hard to cope and so does Agnes. Her living conditions and weather can only be associated with Iceland - very sparse and very, very cold.

A young assistant priest Toti has been appointed to visit her and try to save her soul. He is her only friend. Agnes finally reveals all the story to Toti and also to Jon Jonsson’s wife Margaret who has become close to Agnes and they both
discover all is not as it first seemed and neither is Agnes. The ending is very thought provoking as is the book from page one.

Lesley Hart

Hannah Kent has a true talent for building a vivid picture of the personalities, setting and lifestyle for her characters, bringing them to life for the reader through her accomplished, thoughtful, attention-to-detail. As a result, this haunting book has stayed with me for a long time after reading.

The storyline never loses its focus throughout and can be likened to a flower gradually opening to reveal itself, petal by petal.

Based on the true story of Agnes, a housemaid from Iceland, in 1829 and the murders, and subsequent arson, in which she finds herself, unwittingly, involved. The story develops so that Agnes - who has become used to throughout her trial to her every word being twisted against her, so that she cannot recognise herself through their retelling - gradually opens up to the family, who have been forced to house her before her sentence to death, and to the priest she has requested to be her spiritual guide.

The true story of the murders is eventually revealed, but is it too late for Agnes? You'll just have to read this book yourself to find out! It is a wonderfully written story of a person who never loses their compassion for others, despite the physical and emotional abuses suffered throughout their life and whilst incarcerated awaiting execution.

I would definitely recommend this book, a wonderful debut from a compelling writer.

Jane Pepler

Burial Rites is a fascinating look at real life characters and events from Iceland's rich history. A fantastic debut novel which was difficult to put down.

This fantastic book was an enthralling read with much vivid description of Iceland and it's bleak landscape. It is very evident that years of research are behind this book. I enjoyed reading the historical documents that started each chapter - they are fascinating.

It is a story based on true events that occurred in Iceland in the 1820's and gives a real insight in to what a tough life Icelanders lived in this period of time, trying to tame a wild and desolate land thwarted constantly by its harsh weather.
The story is of Agnes Magnusdottir who was convicted of murdering her lover Natan. Agnes is sent to live and work with a farming family in the period of time leading up to her execution. Her story is told through the eyes of the family she is sent to live with and the priest who is assigned to guide her through the waiting time to execution. Agnes seems to eventually find a real home with Jon and Margret and her daughters - sadly something that she has not really experienced before. I really enjoyed the developing relationship between Agnes and Margret.

For a first novel this is a fantastic work, I am expecting great things in the future from this stunning new author.