A Rite of Passage | An Interview with Hannah Kent

The title, Burial Rites instantly conjures up a creepy, sinister mood or feeling. Pair that feeling with the cold and austere Icelandic environment and you’ve got the makings of one chilly tale. In her extraordinary debut, Hannah Kent reintroduces Agnes Magnusdottir, a woman sentenced to death by beheading after being found guilty of murder. Long since forgotten and washed away by the tides of history, Hannah empowers Agnes in a way that no one has before; giving her a voice, a reason and an unforgettable story to tell.

Here, I ask Hannah why she thinks history is terrified of powerful women, how to make sense of the hypocrisies of religion, and how she approached the Unreliable Narrator in her book.

- Courtney McCarroll, Marketing & Communications Manager

CM: After interviewing Colm Toibin for The Testament of Mary, I was struck by the same notion that these powerful women were largely rendered silent throughout history. Many sources proclaim over and over that Agnes was a witch, but Burial Rites paints a much more sympathetic portrait of her life. Why do you think history is so terrified of powerful women?

HK: It’s a good observation and certainly one I had myself, not only when researching Agnes Magnusdottir’s life and conviction, but also when reading about other historical, criminal women. Quite early on in my research, I noticed that women who deviated from the socially accepted and expected roles for women (the innocent virgin, the devoted wife, the mother), or behaved in a way that was deemed to be masculine or disharmonious with ‘feminine’ virtues,
were thought to be one of two things: unequivocally wicked, acting out of their inherent monstrosity; or they were the duped victims of men who forced them to be ‘bad’. The former were unforgiveable and threatening, the latter – who were essentially passive – inspired pity, however distasteful their actions. The only way to rid society of these women would be to silence the former, and rehabilitate the latter, who were largely silent anyway.

CM: What does Burial Rites say about religion and religious practices as they’re mandated in civil societies? There’s a pretty scathing scene in your book where Agnes directly points out the hypocrisy of the court sentencing her to the very same punishment she was ultimately on trial for.

HK: It’s a hypocrisy that still exists, and one that I am horrified by. To sanctify the killing of another in the name of Christ is oxymoronic to my mind: it seems a desecration of his teachings. Of course, whenever church and state rule together, you encounter such hypocrisies. I hope, however, that Burial Rites also shows the goodness that can come from religious practice, particularly sincere practices that embody the selflessness, acceptance and compassion at the heart of many religious beliefs. Toti, in my mind, is a character that I hope shows an alternative representation of Christianity. For all his flaws, he is one of the few characters that does not inflict judgment on Agnes.

CM: What was the thought process behind switching back-and-forth between narratives? Agnes understandably gets to tell her side of the story from her own words, but by switching back to the third-person narrative, there’s a bit of ambiguity in truth and perspective. How important was it for you balance the varying types of truth surrounding this story?

HK: It was extremely important. When I decided that I would write a book about Agnes Magnusdottir, I told myself that I would do everything in my power to make her as ambiguous as possible. I was never interested in protesting her guilty conviction – I didn’t want to make her innocent, because I don’t believe she was: to portray someone as inherently good is, to my mind, just as much of a disservice as making them evil. I wanted to subvert the common stereotype of her as a monster by introducing complexity instead. My approach was one of empathy, rather than sympathy. I wanted to explore her flaws, but see them as behavioral, and a consequence of social and circumstantial influences, rather than intrinsic or characteristic.

The first person narrative allowed me to create a unique voice for Agnes; a private narrative from a woman who has not been able to author her public identity, and whose story has largely been wrested from her. Her thoughts are all she has left, and they give us an understanding of what’s going on inside her mind when, to the other characters, she’s silent and inscrutable: it is a wholly interior narrative. Combining Agnes's first person ruminations with third person narrative also allowed me to explore the differences between what she privately thinks, and what she says. She’s unreliable and slightly manipulative, but as the story unfolds you realize that this is understandable and necessary. She lies to others and to herself because she has to. It makes her human, not wicked.

CM: I understand that you’ve done quite a bit of research on Agnes and this case, so I’m curious to know if you have been able to put this story to rest. Are you satisfied with the book you’ve written and the voice you were able to give to a woman long forgotten?
HK: I am as satisfied as I'll ever be with *Burial Rites*. As a debut novel I recognize its flaws, and hope to improve upon them, but I'm proud of the work that I've done, and overjoyed at the response it's been met with. In regards to whether I can put this story to rest, I'm not so sure. I've certainly finished writing about Agnes, but that isn't to say that I'm ready to leave her and move on. I think I'll always carry her, in the same way we always carry the people whom we have grieved for.

The voice that I have given Agnes isn't definitive. My retelling of her story, although it has intentionally subverted previous narratives, may be just as inaccurate as the accounts it undermines. It's informed speculation at the end of the day. That said, I hope that books like these, in their alternative interpretations of narratives that have long been unquestioned, open up further interpretations, further possible truths. They acknowledge the fallibility of historical records, and make space for ongoing speculation and doubt. That's important.

*Don’t forget to join us on Tuesday, April 8 at 7 pm when we welcome authors Hannah Kent and Emma Donoghue to R.J. Julia Booksellers.*