

## BURIAL RITES

by Hannah Kent

### Questions for Discussion

1. What do you make of the historical documents (both real and fictionalized) that begin each chapter? How did these change or aid your understanding of Agnes's story?
2. Agnes often comments on the ways in which she has been silenced, or had her story altered by the authorities. Why do you think she has such an anguished relationship to language?
3. Fate and destiny are major themes in this novel, 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 that she might have avoided?
4. Are Steina, Lauga and Margrét changed by Agnes's time with them? Has her fate changed theirs in any way?
5. Death is a major theme in this novel, 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.
6. 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? What do you believe happened at Stóra-Borg that caused Blöndal to move Agnes to Kornsó?
7. 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.
8. Agnes goes to her death holding Tóti's hand, for they have discovered a deep need for each other. Is this story ultimately about the loneliness of our end in life? Or does it celebrate the comfort that a person can bring to the dying? Discuss.
9. Hannah Kent calls her novel a 'dark love letter to Iceland' in her Acknowledgements. What does she mean by this? Did you read the novel in this way?

### **Themes/Topics for Discussion:**

- Death Penalty
  - The death penalty and consequences of a death sentence feature heavily in this book. How does this make us reflect on the current use of the death penalty in society?
  - How was the death penalty used during this time period in Iceland? Read a brief article about the history of capital punishment in Iceland [here](#).
- Gender Roles
  - What were the roles of women and men in the households?
  - What do you believe drew Agnes to Natan, and vice versa?
- Literacy
  - The characters in the story are educated and literate. Is this surprising? How does this affect the narrative?
- Spirituality and Faith
  - Questions of spirituality and faith are central to Agnes' journey. When did she rely on faith and when did she doubt her faith?
- Icelandic Culture
  - What does Hannah Kent teach the reader about Icelandic culture? How is Icelandic culture revealed through each character, as well as the history and setting?