Hannah Kent has enjoyed enormous international success with her first novel, Burial Rites, a reimagining of the life and death of Agnes Magnusdottir, the last woman to be executed in Iceland for murder. Published in Australia in May 2013, the book has also been published in the UK and in the USA, and in over twenty other countries. Jennifer Lawrence will play Agnes in the forthcoming movie to be directed by Gary Ross, the director of The Hunger Games.

Hannah was born in Adelaide in 1985 and grew up in the Adelaide Hills where her family still lives. Hannah completed her BCW (Hons) in 2008 at Flinders University, where she is currently completing her PhD. Burial Rites is the creative component of that doctoral thesis and Ruth Starke, who interviews Hannah below, is her principal supervisor.

RS: Hannah, I think I taught you in your third year of your creative writing degree. You were writing poetry then, and it was so good that the English staff used to pass your poems around and say Read this, isn't she wonderful?

HK: I didn't know that! I was really interested in poetry then and gave it a lot more time than I do now. I found an old notebook recently in which I'd started writing some poems in a first-person present-tense voice about a woman who was condemned to death. But that was, I think, me writing them without realising it was going to be a longer project or without thinking anything of them.

RS: I don't recall you writing any of Agnes's story until you were looking for a subject for your Honours thesis, which you asked me to supervise. You were going to write it as a verse novel, but once I understood the scope of your project I tried to dissuade you from that idea.

HK: You did. You very clearly pointed out to me, and once I'd started researching and talking to you about it it soon became clear, that it was going to be very difficult to convey nineteenth-century Iceland in a few short stanzas [laughs].
RS: I said to you, 'Who is this woman Agnes, and why does she have such a hold on your imagination?' I guess by now you've told that story many, many times but can you recount what you told me then?

HK: I told my parents very early on that I wanted to be a writer. They were incredibly supportive and acknowledged that it was a fantastic goal to have. But they're quite practical people and I remember them saying, well, writers don't make much money and you'll probably have to do something else that isn't necessarily a career but which will bring in some money. So I'd finished high school, still incredibly interested in writing but quite anxious about the 'something else' I needed to do, and how it would affect what course I did at university, and I actually applied to do a degree in International Relations. But first I went to Iceland as a Rotary exchange student and ended up having a wonderful year there, and doing a lot of writing, and that convinced me to change my degree.

The first few months in Iceland were incredibly difficult. I've thought of this more and more lately, and I think my emotional state was very relevant. I left a very hot Adelaide summer to arrive in Iceland in January, and was sent to this small fishing village in the north which was very tightly knit. Everyone knew everyone, and I was the foreigner, the outsider, and while there wasn't any outright hostility, I felt both incredibly conspicuous and alienated within that community. I really struggled with that, and the darkness, and the claustrophobia that comes from terrible weather outside and being confined indoors. I retreated inward and became quite shy. I'm a naturally introverted person anyway, and I didn't speak the language, and it was in these difficult months that my host family took me to Reykavik, to visit some of their relatives. On the way back we drove through the most incredible landscape; I was just awestruck. I fell into a sort of reverie because it was so utterly unique, unlike anything I'd ever seen before, but at the same time there was also something intensely familiar. I forgot my shyness and started asking questions. The land in the north has these smooth old glacier valleys which are pastoral lands, interrupted by mounds, small hills really, and I was astonished by them. They looked out-of-this world and, to me, a lot like burial mounds. But I was told it was a natural occurrence and I found out later they were created by an avalanche hundreds of years before. But, my hosts said, this is the site of Iceland's last execution. I pressed them for details, but all they knew was it had occurred well over 150 years ago, and two people had been executed. The last to walk out to the block to be beheaded was a woman called Agnes. They may have mentioned that she was a servant and accused of murdering two men as they lay sleeping.

That was the entirety of the story as I first heard it. It resonated with me and I was immediately deeply curious about this woman, and I kept on thinking of her in the months afterwards. I really do think it was because ... you know how you can read a book at one stage of your life and later you go back and read it again and you get an entirely different meaning from it, or certain parts will resonate with you much more strongly? I think hearing about a woman who would undoubtedly have been on the very peripheral of her society resonated with my own experience and emotional state. That's not to compare a homesick kid with a woman condemned to death, but there was something in the story that made me really want to know a great deal more about her.
RS: You arrived in Iceland during winter, and I wanted to ask you about the weather, because that, and Iceland itself, are as much characters in *Burial Rites* as any of the humans. We’re made conscious of both on almost every page. It’s an aspect of writing that I find very difficult. I struggle to describe nature in a way that you seem to do so easily, and beautifully.

HK: It’s not easy. I always knew landscape and the weather and the natural world would have to be a strong part of this novel because in Iceland they intrude on your life in a way that doesn’t happen in other countries.

RS: In *Wuthering Heights* the Yorkshire moors play a similar role. The mood of the whole book is influenced by the landscape and the weather, and the characters couldn’t exist in any other world.

HK: Exactly. Ron Rash says ‘Landscape is destiny’, and I think of that often because the characters in this novel are completely formed by the land they live in. But in terms of writing the landscape, I really did struggle with it, in as much as I knew it had to have a very strong presence, and one of the reasons is because the landscape is unique and so striking and so memorable. Partly because its qualities are so ineffable it’s difficult to articulate what makes it special, and I wanted to do that.

RS: You employ some amazing similes and metaphors. That ability is difficult to teach. You can set exercises and try to steer students away from clichés, but I remember reading a page of your second draft manuscript and noting that it contained six startling similes and metaphors. How hard is it to come up with similes like ‘autumn fell upon the valley like a gasp’, and metaphors that echo or establish a mood? In the scene where the women and the farm hands are butchering sheep, you use, a few paragraphs later, the phrase ‘the dark intestine of the river’, which fits so perfectly with what we’ve just been reading.

HK: The first example, ‘autumn fell upon the valley like a gasp’ was just there. I remember just sitting down and writing it. I think I drew heavily on that poetic instinct I’ve always had in a way.

RS: You weren’t looking back at a notebook or journal you kept in Iceland?

HK: No, not at all. I drew a lot on memories, I drew a lot from photographs, and music – Icelandic music, and English folk musician Laura Marling who has the ability to convey so much in so few words. I was massively inspired by her to have that sort of concision and suggestive quality. But sometimes I really struggle to construct a vivid description. Take ‘the dark intestine of the river’ – I struggled over that so much! It took me days of tweaking and fussing. So it’s strange; sometimes it’s there and sometimes it’s a bloody battle to get something on the page which works.

RS: That’s the astonishing thing about your writing. Apart from the story, which draws you in and keeps you turning the pages because you don’t really know what Agnes has done, whether
she’s guilty of murder or not, what keeps you reading is an interest in the characters, an interest in the landscape which is like no other, and finally the beautiful language which pulls you up short time and again. But it was a huge risk, wasn’t it, writing a novel set in Iceland, a place you’d only lived in for a year, and set over 150 years ago, and write it so that people who live in Iceland would read and recognise it?

HK: I think I was so naïve that I really didn’t think about any of this when I started writing, but that might have been because I didn’t imagine any of the consequences and difficulties of writing a story like it and by the time I did things were too far advanced. [Laughs]

RS: Most people’s debut novels aren’t actually the first novel they’ve ever written. Usually there are two, three or more unpublished novels lying in a bottom drawer. But this really was your first attempt, wasn't it?

HK: Yes, absolutely.

RS: Yet I don’t recall that we had any serious revisions or struggles with the structure, or going back and starting again. It seemed to take shape and come together pretty much from the start. You did three drafts, I think, but the second and third were only tweaked, not greatly rewritten.

HK: That's right. Remember I was researching for about two years, and writing during that time, as you know, because I was giving you material to read, but they were only scenes, and reworked stuff from my Honours thesis, and ideas. Some of the writing was good, some of it wasn’t. I ended up putting all that aside and once I came back from Iceland with all the information after the research trip there [Hannah was awarded a grant from Flinders University to enable her to travel to Iceland to consult primary sources] I decided I really had to finish this bloody first draft. I remember in the New Year sitting down at my desk in Melbourne and writing the entire novel from the first page.

RS: I vividly remember you reading the birth scene to our postgrad writing group, and when you finished we all sat there stunned, unable to offer you a word of criticism.

HK: [Laughs] Oh, I think I got quite a bit of useful feedback from that group. But that was one of the scenes that was ‘tweaked’. If you remember, the woman dying in childbirth was originally Agnes’s mother, as I wanted to explain her absence, which later turned out to be true, but for different reasons.

RS: You had to make certain suppositions about your characters in the beginning, about Agnes’s background, for example. Then you went to Iceland to do research and made some discoveries.

HK: It was an extraordinary process. I was quite advanced in my PhD by the time I was able to go, and I had made certain speculations about the characters based on logic and common
sense. For instance, the farmer's wife who was Briet and then Seiggir and finally Margrét, I always knew that she would be a very stoic country woman like many I'd met in Iceland, and common sense told me the response of a woman like that, with children and a family, to having this convicted criminal foisted upon her household.

HK: Yes. Her name was really Sigridur, which is the same name of the other woman convicted with Agnes, so that was changed to Margrét. I'd already written some early scenes, including the one when Agnes is first brought to the farm, and then I found the list of everyone who lived at the farm, which was called Kornsá. Listed was Sigridur, her age, the fact that she was the farmer's wife, the names of the servants in the house, and the names and ages of her two daughters. There was also a son, who had to be cut in the novel because there were simply too many characters. The relationship between the sisters came from just a little source: next to that list of names was a short description of everyone's behaviour in the household, sometimes as brief as 'Fine', and a comment on their standard of literacy. Steina, the elder sister by one year, was described in the equivalent of 'She's fine, well-behaved, her reading is pretty good', but against the name of her younger sister, Lauga, the priest had written pretty much the equivalent of 'Oh, my gosh, this woman is amazing, she's so talented and she reads so well!'. I have a younger sister and I thought, what an interesting dynamic. It was enough to suggest perhaps a power struggle between the two sisters.

RS: I remember discussing with you the relationship between Margrét and Agnes and saying that whatever happened in real life, in fiction it had to change during the course of the novel, so by the time we get to the end it's a different Margrét and a different Agnes.

HK: Yes, you need that transformation. Because as much as you have that external story with the crime and the murders, to me the novel is much more about what it means to be human and how we desperately try to be understood by others, even if it's in an incomplete way. So you're right, and that's the natural fictional trajectory, to have the characters warm to each other. But I don't think it would be possible to live with someone you've despised in such close quarters and for such a long period and not have some change of heart. I really don't think that's possible. So as much as it works in terms of fiction, it's also not so far from real life.

RS: Some of the research you did in Iceland actually confirmed the leaps of faith you'd made early on in the writing process when you knew so little about your characters and were filling in the blanks, as it were. That must have been satisfying.

HK: The first reaction is that it does seem quite spooky and strange that so much, about 90 per cent actually, was supported by later research. But I got quite obsessive with the research and a lot of my guesses were informed guesses, so I don't like to read too much into it.
RS: You've had many responses from psychics who suggest you might be channelling the spirit of Agnes Magnusdottir.

HK: Yes, I've had a lot of people say that, which is really interesting, and of course I respect their interpretation of it all.

RS: But?

HK: I'm very reluctant to try to explain it, whether to be completely rational and say 'Oh, that's ridiculous', or to go the other way and say, 'Yes, I was guided'. I gave a paper at a London conference on Jung's theory of synchronicity, about meaningful coincidences and so on, and to some extent I still subscribe to that, because there's something about that which is rational and at the same time deeply personal. It's this weird mix of objective research and likelihoods and statistically what's probable and these creative hunches that you get that you can't explain.

RS: Sometimes you hear writers saying that their characters 'got away' from them, that they set off on paths the writers hadn't originally planned. That's not something I've ever experienced. Did you?

HK: I had my characters pretty clear in my mind. With the editorial process with Picador, and the other [overseas] publishers, I was surprised there weren't more structural problems, just minor scenes added towards the end. The main characters didn't change, although a couple of the names did.

RS: How did writing this novel within the context of a PhD help?

HK: To this day I really don't think I would have even started such a project had I not had the structure that a PhD in creative writing provides, with its deadlines and meetings and obviously your support. I felt at the beginning of the degree that I had enough research skills to do it well and for it to be exhaustive, but I was very nervous about writing a novel of 75,000 words. If it had been me on my own, doing a different degree or in a job and trying to get this project done, I think I would have just kept deferring it. Having the support and at the same time the demands of the university really helped.

RS: During this time you were also working at quite demanding jobs, such as editing and teaching undergraduates. Was it disruptive? How did you find it, coming back to your work and having to get yourself back into the mood of the novel each time?

HK: It was difficult. The research I was able to balance with much of the contract work I was doing. I was really fortunate in getting a postgraduate scholarship so that when I did spend six months or so at the beginning of 2011 writing that first draft I had only one casual job – not teaching, which would have been a huge distraction – and I had a partner who could support me financially. And I didn't have any other commitments – no children, for example.
RS: Your twenties are really an ideal time to write a novel, it’s just that most people at that age haven’t got the life experience to write an interesting novel. In your case, a story sort of landed in your lap when you were seventeen, although you had to go half way round the world to find it.

HK: [Laughs] It’s true.

RS: Did writing Agnes's final moments upset you?

HK: Oh yes, absolutely! I was writing the novel in a linear fashion and so I knew when I was getting close to the end. I’d always thought that when you finished your first book you’d celebrate and there’d be a great release, a relief, but for me it was the opposite. I wept as I wrote the ending and I was useless after I’d finished it. I was incredibly upset, to the point where I was scaring myself about how emotionally loose I was. I called my partner and sobbed down the phone, and then curled up in bed all day. It was only later that I realised what that feeling was, and it was grief.

RS: Hermione Lee, the biographer of Virginia Woolf, said that after she’d sent her into that river she came downstairs bawling her eyes out, and when her husband asked her what on earth was the matter, she sobbed, ‘I've just killed Virginia!'

HK: I was exactly the same. Harry, my partner, was on the other end of the phone and I guess anyone’s first reaction on hearing nothing but sobs on the other end is to ask ‘Who died?’. And I replied, ‘Agnes’. I couldn’t even look at the manuscript. I printed out the last pages and shoved it all under my desk and I couldn’t look at it for months, wouldn’t talk about it at all.

RS: That is a little extreme.

HK: I know! I still to this day can't explain it. You know we can all, to some extent, rationalise our emotions in some way and I couldn’t do that. I didn’t look at the draft again because I was worried that I’d have the same emotional response.

RS: You won the inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript award for Burial Rites, which gave you $10,000 and $2,000 for your chosen mentor. You chose Geraldine Brooks. Why?

HK: Because I never thought I would win, I hadn’t given any thought about that aspect of the prize, and I hadn’t read the small print, so when I was asked to name an Australian writer I wanted as my mentor I was like, God, what a choice, where do I start? I admire so many Australian writers, but I nominated Geraldine Brooks because I really enjoyed The Year of Wonders and March and I felt we were doing something similar in terms of taking real historical events and incorporating research into it. Writing Australia thought it would be a great match, even though originally they hadn't been thinking of a writer mentor at all. They
were going to set me up with an editor, because they thought the manuscript was close to finished and I would benefit more from having an editor's feedback.

RS: Geraldine Brook's initial reaction was much the same, wasn't it?

HK: She was very positive, which was a huge relief! It wasn't so much a mentorship – and I guess that depends on how you define the word – but a conversation. Because she's based in the United States we wrote to one another by email. I didn't get an annotated manuscript back from her or anything like that. She read the book as a reader, with fresh eyes, which was really useful because many people, including yourself, were thinking of other things, like PhD requirements and, in my agent's case, whether it would interest publishers, but Geraldine just read it to decide whether or not it was entertaining and engaging. She also looked at it very much as a whole work because by that stage I think I was quite bogged down with things at sentence level, trying to cut extraneous material and superfluous description, and so on. She liked a great deal of it which was hugely validating for me but she was concerned about the ending. It was very dark, as you'll recall. I mean, it's a dark story, but she was concerned that the ending would be alienating for the reader and she said – and it was the best advice she could possibly have given me – 'You need to let a little more light in'. She left it up to me as to how to interpret that but as a result, a lot of the relationships between the characters, Agnes and Margrét in particular, were changed over the course of the next couple of edits, and I added more scenes between the sisters.

RS: You added, I think, that lovely little scene at the end where Margrét gives Agnes her treasured silver brooch to wear to her execution.

HK: I did, and this is where research comes in again. I was actually struggling with the knowledge that Agnes and Margrét needed a moment, or a gesture, without it being sappy or too contrived, and I came across this little story about when they'd moved Agnes's bones some one hundred years after she'd died they discovered a silver brooch, a traditional Icelandic brooch, that she'd been buried with. And people at the time said, Oh, how tragic, that she'd dressed up for her execution. But my mind was going back to the official paper I'd read in which every single one of Agnes's belongings was listed and everything, including a sack filled with what was described as 'crap' was taken from her, so where would she have got such a brooch from? It wasn't hers. It just all fell into place. Of course it was Margrét who gave it to her.

RS: Agnes has been with you now for some considerable time, since you were a teenager, and you'll be with her for quite some time to come as you go round the world doing your book promotions. Are you writing a second book?

HK: Yes, and it'll be similar in that it's historical fiction, but set in a similar time, early 1800s, in Ireland, with three strong female characters. While it's very early days and I'm waiting to find out what the research will reveal in terms of the characterisation, it'll be different from
Burial Rites, and the protagonist will be someone with a lot more agency than Agnes. The ambiguity will still be there because that's something that interests me as an author.

RS: How did you come across this particular story?

HK: It was while I was reading old English newspapers to find out if Agnes's execution was mentioned in any of them. It wasn't but I came across this interesting story involving superstition in the south of Ireland and a crime associated with that, and I was immediately fascinated. I cut it out and put it in a notebook, and then when Burial Rites was being sold and people were talking about a two-book deal, I immediately thought of this story and pitched that and people seemed very receptive to it.

RS: That's why you should never have other people do your research. Because they don't know what will spark your interest and curiosity along the way.

HK: Exactly! For me the research has been almost the best part. You can sometimes have the most intimate and amazing creative moments when you're doing research, not necessarily during the writing. In many ways writing can sometimes be the most straightforward aspect of it all, but research hinges much more on creative instinct, I think.

RS: To say that there was no pressure in writing your first novel isn't true, of course. You were writing it as a PhD creative project and so were always under pressure to produce writing at regular intervals. But after its great success, is there any fear attached to writing your second novel?

HK: I actually forget about the book's success and all that on a day-to-day basis. What I'm really excited about and what really makes me incredibly grateful that all this has happened is that the book got published. That was always my goal. I always wanted to be published before I was 30 and I didn’t really care under what circumstances. But I think you’re right, I wrote the first novel under pressure and in many ways this second book will be written under similar circumstances. I’ll have deadlines and people I won’t want to let down, like my publishers and editors, and I know I work well now under those circumstances, so I'm not actually too fussed. And at the end of the day, I write to satisfy myself. I write for an audience only at the re-write stage. The first draft is for me. You’re a writer so you’ll know what the feeling is like when you’re struggling to express something and then the exact meaning you want to convey is there on the page. And that's a world apart from any success the book might have. That’s all I’m trying to do, and all I'll be trying to do with this next book.

Ruth Starke has published over 25 books for young people and is presently writing a personal biography of Don Dunstan, former Premier of South Australia. A former Chair of the SA Writers Centre, she reviews books for ABR, Viewpoint and Transnational Literature and is a judge of the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature.

In Conversation with Hannah Kent. Ruth Starke. Writers in Conversation Vol. 1 no. 1, February 2014
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/