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Just over two years ago, I was – to put it plainly – shitting myself. It was January 2011, and the novel I needed to write, the historical novel that was to be the creative component of my PhD, could no longer be avoided. The problem was, I had no idea how to write a book.

I first heard the story of Agnes Magnúsdóttir when I was an exchange student in the north of Iceland. It was 2002, I was 17 years old, and I had left Adelaide for Sauðárkrókur an isolated fishing village, where I would live for 12 months. This small town lies snug in the side of a fjord: a clutch of little buildings facing an iron-grey sea, the mountains looming behind.

When I arrived it was January, and the days were gripped by darkness, 20 hours at a time. There were no trees. The town’s houses were hostage to snow, and in the distance the north Atlantic Ocean met the north sky in a suggestion of oblivion. It felt like the edge of the world.
I was intensely lonely. The community was tightly knit, and I was an outsider. For the first time in my life I felt socially isolated, and my feelings of alienation were compounded by the claustrophobic winter darkness, and the constant confinement indoors. I turned to writing for company, to fill the black hours. I sought shelter in libraries, consolation in books.

It was during the first difficult months of my exchange that I travelled through a place called Vatnsdalshólar. It’s an unusual tract of landscape: a valley mouth pimpled with hillocks of earth. When I asked my host parents if the area was significant, they pointed to three small hills, nestled closely together. Over 100 years ago, they said, a woman called Agnes had been beheaded there. She was the last person to be executed in Iceland.

I was immediately intrigued. What had she done? What had happened? Over time I discovered that Agnes was a 34-year-old servant woman who had been beheaded on 12 January 1830 for her role in the 1828 murders of two men. It seemed a tragic tale; Agnes had been unequivocally condemned. Retrospectively, I can only speculate that the strange, isolated place of Agnes’s death made me think of my own feelings of loneliness; that I thought of Agnes as a fellow outsider in a remote Icelandic community, and I identified with her in some small way.
When I returned to Australia, as thoughts of Agnes continued to seep through the layers of my consciousness years later, it seemed logical that I make Agnes’s story the subject of my PhD.

It was, looking back, probably one of the most uninformed and ridiculous decisions I’ve ever made. Unpracticed and unskilled in any form of novel-writing or biographical research, I publicly committed myself to writing a full-length manuscript about a historical figure I knew nothing about, set in a country not my own, in a time I was utterly unfamiliar with. Twenty-four months into my PhD I realised – with no small amount of nervous gulping – that I knew only four facts about this elusive woman: her name, the date of her death, that she was a servant, and – from Icelandic naming traditions – that her father was a man called Magnús. It hardly felt like enough to write a book about.

I applied for funding to embark on an overseas field trip in Iceland, and spent six weeks there happily holed up in the national archives, museums and libraries, sifting through ministerial and parish records, censuses, maps, microfilm, logs, and local histories. I visited the sites of the murder and execution and met several Icelanders who generously told me what they knew.
Agnes and her life’s sorry trajectory finally emerged from the shadows, and I returned to Australia in late 2010 with the kind of hysterical happiness bestowed only on the severely jetlagged research student who has been allowed to touch very old paper without gloves.

As with any high, however, there comes, inevitably, the crash. Finally in possession of the facts I had yearned after for two years, I no longer had any excuse not to write my book. Even as I write this article, my hands grow sweaty in remembrance of the trepidation and terror I felt. People speak of the fear of the blank canvas as though it is a temporary hesitation, a trembling moment of self-doubt. For me it was more like being abducted from my bed by a clown, thrust into a circus arena with a wicker chair, and told to tame a pissed-off lion in front of an expectant crowd. Sure, I had written short stories before. But that, to me, was no consolation. Just because I was a cat person did not mean I knew how to conquer a beast.

I started writing the manuscript that would be Burial Rites on 24 January, and finished the first draft on 9 May. I worked most weekdays, sitting at my desk at around eight o’clock (a time, I soon discovered, when I was at my brightest and most positive), and remaining there until I had completed 1,000 words of new writing. Some days I accomplished this by 11 o’clock, and was
then free to do other work, go for a walk, or to read; other days I was still sitting at the computer when night fell, my nerves shattered, and my confidence at a dangerous low.

Over time, my days fell into a welcome routine, and I discovered that, through experimentation, I could answer my own questions about how to write a book. But the fear of not knowing where I was headed and the best way to get there never abated. I had expected that at some point during the first draft a light would go on, and I would understand, finally, how to write a book. This never happened. The process was akin to blindly walking in the dark, feeling my way only by touch, and only recognising dead ends when I smacked into them.

Finishing the manuscript came as a surprise to me. I had spent most of the morning finishing the last scene, and then I realised I no longer knew what to write. There was nothing more to write. I pushed my keyboard away from me, read the last line over and over, and then – unexpectedly – burst into tears. They weren’t tears of elation, or disbelief. I was suddenly, profoundly sad. Grief-stricken, in fact. I put my head down on my desk and sobbed. The first draft was finished, and yet it felt like nothing I had expected. There was no champagne-soaked celebration or private self-congratulation. It felt like breaking up with someone I still had feelings for; I was so forlorn I could barely stand to see the document on my desktop, let alone start editing it. I cried my heart out for the rest of the day, and then put the printed manuscript under my desk. It stayed there, gathering dust, for another five months.
Occasionally I’d wonder whether the manuscript would one day be published, but it seemed a far-off possibility. Then, in early October 2011, I had coffee with a friend. I’d spent an hour moaning over my latte about my state of pennilessness when my friend interrupted to ask whether I planned on entering my book in the new Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript award. For the next few days I worked with a delicious ruthlessness, slashing and burning all superfluous material from my manuscript. It was a week of dishevelment, of long hours and poor personal hygiene. Fifteen minutes before the competition closed, I entered the novel and its synopsis.

Winning the WAUMA award was my foot in the door; it got the novel noticed and led to further opportunities. Pippa Masson, of the literary agency Curtis Brown, took me on as a client. Geraldine Brooks agreed to mentor me, and thanks to her sound and generous advice I was able to continue drafting, modifying, cutting, adding and polishing through a few more drafts until I was ready for others to read it. Pippa pitched and sent the book to Australian publishers, and from there it leaked internationally, escalating into three separate bidding wars for ANZ, UK and US rights.
I’ve been asked why I’ve had such a dream run as a debut author – particularly in times such as these – and I understand why people want to know. However, the truth is that it is a question that troubles me, because I have no answer. Was it hard work? Well yes, that was partly it, but to say that hard work won me a publishing deal is to also suggest that unpublished writers don’t work hard enough, which is untrue and unfair. What was it then? Luck? The skilful navigation of an agent familiar with the weird and troubled waters of publishing? Yes, all of these things, perhaps. I’m not sure. I don’t even know if my publishers know. These things do, occasionally, happen. All I know is that I am very grateful that it happened to me.

• You can read a longer version of this article in volume 13 of Kill Your Darlings, the journal of which Hannah Kent is co-founder and deputy editor. Burial Rites was released last month in Australia, and will be published in the UK and US in September. Translation rights have been sold to 15 countries.

http://www.theguardian.com/books/australia-culture-blog/2013/jun/04/burial-rites-writer-hannah-kent
Hannah Kent's debut novel Burial Rites is written in cold blood

THE AUSTRALIAN, APRIL 20, 2013 12:00AM

In *Burial Rites*, Hannah Kent reimagines the life and death of Agnes Magnusdottir, the last woman to be executed in Iceland. Picture: Kelly Barnes  *Source: The Australian*

IT all started because she was a girl who had never seen snow. That lack, commonplace enough in an Australian childhood, took Hannah Kent to a desolate hillside in Iceland where, more than 170 years earlier, one woman's life came to a brutal end.

It was 2003, Kent was 17 and, though she could not have known it at the time, the moment marked the beginning of her own life as an author.

A decade later, Kent is about to publish the most talked about Australian debut novel in years. *Burial Rites* reimagines the life and death of Agnes Magnusdottir, the last woman to be executed in Iceland. Sentenced to death for her part in the gory murder of two men, she was beheaded by axe on January 12, 1830, aged 33.

While awaiting execution, Agnes is held at the rural home of a middle-ranking official, Jon Jonsson, where, in Kent's telling, she slowly becomes part of the household, bonding especially
with Jonsson's wife, Margret. She is visited by a junior priest, a near-boy charged with securing her spiritual salvation before she is put to death.

To date, much of the chatter about Burial Rites has been of money, and understandably so. After Kent's draft novel won the inaugural Writing Australia Unpublished Manuscript Award, which included a mentorship with Pulitzer Prize-winning US-based Australian novelist Geraldine Brooks, there was heady bidding for the book between publishers in Australia and overseas.

In the end Kent secured an international two-book deal worth more than $1 million, an unheard-of result for a first-time Australian writer. Burial Rites will be published in Australia next month, Britain in August and the US in September.

"I do recognise I'm in a very privileged position," Kent says. "I have no idea why it happened, but I'm grateful that it did."

At the same time Kent, a smart and self-possessed 27-year-old, says she doesn't feel under any extra pressure because of the eye-popping advance.

"When I write, I write for myself and I have high expectations ... so I'm just trying to meet those. I'm not going to distract myself with other people's expectations."

Having said that, she hopes people will remember Burial Rites is a first book. "I do wonder that people might not read it as a debut novel, that they might have elevated expectations. I'm not deluded, I don't think everyone will like it, but it is a first book and I'm still learning and this is very much my apprenticeship as a writer."

In the same spirit, Kent, who is also deputy editor of the newish literary journal Kill Your Darlings, declares herself unconcerned about the reviews: "I'm looking forward to them. I'm hoping they'll tell me things I haven't recognised myself yet, so I can incorporate them as constructive feedback."

We are talking over lunch at a cafe in the Adelaide Hills, where Kent grew up and has spent most of her life. Her father is a super fund manager ("But not a typical accountant," she says), her mother is a primary school principal and her sister Briony is a budding actor who had a small role in the recent Australian film Beautiful Kate.

She describes an idyllic childhood: "I spent the weekends running around in paddocks, building cubbies, playing under oak trees. It was wonderful, magical."
"I was a very imaginative child and my parents were very encouraging of that. My sister and I would put on plays; I would write my own stories. I was the typically nerdy, bookish kid you would probably imagine someone who wanted to be a writer would be at that age."

Kent is warm and vivacious, easy to talk to. She tells a story about writing her first work of fiction at age six, about a fish who, shocked when family members start disappearing to supply a new fish and chip shop, devises a cunning plan to save the piscine community. When I suggest it's a redemptive story, Kent rejoins: "Yes, but tragic as well." While she - like so many - cut her reading teeth on Enid Blyton (The Magic Faraway Tree and The Naughtiest Girl in the School being favourites), as an older reader she gravitated towards "anything that was a bit grim: all the Russians, Hardy, Jude the Obscure, that sort of stuff".

Grim can be hard to shake, and Kent says Brooks's most important contribution to Burial Rites was to encourage her to "let a little light in". "She helped me take a huge step back and look at the broader themes in the novel," she says. "We reworked the ending, which is still extremely grim but was even more so back then."

Brooks agrees, saying when she first received the manuscript, "I felt slightly fraudulent". "It was an accomplished, sophisticated and utterly engaging piece of work. My only significant input perhaps was to encourage Hannah to free herself to let a little more light and warmth into the northern chill.

"The version I saw implied the power of love and connection is a season of loss and despair, but did not fully open up to this narrative impulse."

And so we circle back to Agnes Magnusdottir. Kent made that first trip to Iceland on a Rotary exchange, having decided to take a year off after finishing high school.

"I had an interest in Scandinavian countries because I'd never seen snow. When I was doing the interviews with the Rotary people, I think I was the only person who was enthusiastic about the prospect of snow and cold and 24-hour darkness ... and that's how I found myself leaving a 40-plus degrees Adelaide summer and landing smack bang in the middle of an Icelandic winter."

Kent says she immediately fell in love with the barren landscape. Indeed, more than that: "The closest I can begin to describe the grip it had on me is that it felt like a homecoming when I saw it. I still don't know why exactly but I do think people can have a spiritual connection to landscape, and I certainly did in Iceland."
Kent's affinity for the landscape resounds on every page of Burial Rites: it is not backdrop or scenery but a character of its own, demanding yet indifferent, the dominant influence on the lives of everyone in the story. Here is a brief example, a moment from Agnes's last day on earth:

Now comes the darkening sky and a cold wind that passes right through you, as though you were not there, it passes through you as though it does not care whether you are alive or dead, for you will be gone and the wind will still be there, licking the grass flat upon the ground, not caring whether the soil is at freeze or thaw, for it will freeze and thaw again, and soon your bones, now hot with blood and thick-juicy with marrow, will be dry and brittle and flake and freeze and thaw with the weight of the dirt upon you, and the last moisture of your body will be drawn up to the surface by the grass, and the wind will come and knock it down and push you back against the rocks, or it will scrape you up under its nails and take you out to sea in a wild screaming of snow.

"Landscape is destiny," Kent says, quoting Ron Rash, the American writer of the Appalachians. "These characters are as much formed by the landscape and they are by the social mores of their time."

And it is here that the Australian sensibility comes to the fore, the understanding of a land that can produce beauty and terror. "I think any people who live in a country that can be beautiful and hostile at the same time have a particular awareness of that and it comes through when we write about it," Kent says.

"We pay homage to how gorgeous it is, but we also respect how dangerous it is."

Kent says the "best fiction should be universal" and laughs at the mention of the Miles Franklin Literary Award, with its stipulation that eligible books must reflect "Australian life in any of its phases". "Oh, I don't think I'll have any luck there," she says.

For Brooks, though, it's no laughing matter. "This business of books by Aussies having 'nothing or almost nothing to do with Australia' is a narrow and blockheaded idea," she says.

"Hannah and I are fortunate enough to have grown up in and been educated in a country that is turned out to, and fascinated by, the wide world.

"Australianness, especially the rich multicultural stew of ordinary suburban life, empowers us to feel a stake in diverse cultures and histories. I think all of my novels, whatever their setting, are profoundly Australian books, and I think Hannah's is, too."

WHILE Iceland was love at first sight for the teenage Kent, she struggled in her first months in
the country. Boarded with an older couple who left her to her own devices, shy and unable to speak the language, she felt homesick and awkwardly alien. "I'd be walking to school in the snow and cars would slow down and everyone would have a good look out the windows at the exchange student, but no one would speak to me," she recalls.

Kent eventually moved to another host family, one with four young children. This "resembled my life in Australia a little bit more" and also helped her learn the language. She joined a local theatre group and, six months into her year-long stay, started to feel at home.

Yet it was during those bereft first months that she first heard Agnes's story, and it had a deep impact. She and her hosts happened to drive past the execution site one day.

"They told me it was a woman - I don't even know if I heard her name at that stage - who had been beheaded for the murder of two men," Kent says.

"Besides the natural curiosity I think everyone has about executions and murders, there was something about the idea of this woman who was in a small community, isolated yet very conspicuous, that resonated with my own intense feelings at the time."

Kent continues with a laugh: "Not that you can compare our situations, I know! One is a lonely exchange student and the other is a woman condemned to death ... but there was something there, a personal connection, that made me want to learn more about her story."

That curiosity became a project when Kent, back in Adelaide and doing a creative writing degree at Flinders University, had to write a section of a novel as part of her honours thesis. "By that stage I knew I wanted to write about Iceland, because it had such a profound impact on me and I had so many questions about this woman that I wanted to explore," she says.

She received the green light from her supervisors and started to research Agnes's life. She was immediately struck by the stereotypical portrayal of her as "this scheming, scorned woman, a witch weaving a web of deceit". "It's the idea of women as either monsters or angels, with no middle ground," she says.

So Kent set about turning Agnes into a human being.

There's an obvious parallel here with Hilary Mantel's blockbuster Tudor England trilogy - Wolf Hall, Bring up the Bodies and the work in progress, The Mirror and the Light - in which a character largely caricatured by history, Thomas Cromwell, is brought to life as a man of extraordinary intensity and complexity. And Mantel's books do feature quite a bit of beheading.
Kent read widely about 19th-century Iceland - "everything from dry academic articles on sheep grazing to statistical accounts on infant mortality to works on the implications of illegitimacy" - to build a picture of the time in which Agnes lived. She returned to Iceland to study the public records, including official accounts of the crime and its aftermath. She makes good use of such documents throughout the novel, such as a Danish official's letter instructing the axe be returned to Copenhagen after the executions had been carried out (Iceland was then part of the Kingdom of Denmark).

But historical research will take a fiction writer only so far. How did Kent, who shifts in the novel between Agnes's first-person account and a third-person narrative, find her protagonist's voice, tap her emotional life?

"I think a lot of fiction writing, a lot of characterisation, is just empathy, and that's how she came about," she says. "It was the result of having thought about her more or less constantly for 10 years - obsessed is the word my family use - and asking myself what it would be like to be in her position."

We know how Agnes's story must end, so Kent looks elsewhere to create suspense, gradually building a gripping story of what might have happened on the night of March 13, 1828, when Natan Ketilsson and Petur Jonsson were stabbed and bludgeoned to death.

"I was more concerned with the story of Agnes's life than in her execution or even the murders," Kent says. "So I forgot about the execution when I was writing it and I hope the reader does too."

Agnes emerges as a strong woman in a book full of them, Margret especially. But Kent says everyone in Iceland at that time had to be strong to survive. "It's not like I set out to write a feminist novel. I just wanted to write a novel where the characters' strength was a direct result of their necessary stoicism in the face of so much hostility."

When I ask if she likes Agnes, Kent replies: "I do, but 'like' seems a strange way to put it. I'm intensely interested in this woman. I think it's her ambiguity that draws me more than anything. She exemplifies how we are all capable of loving and hating and doing bad and doing good ... without being bad or good people."

Mantel has spoken wistfully of the fact she and Cromwell will have to part company at the end of her next book, when he will part company with his head.
Kent, who is at work on another historical novel, says she is "ready not to write about Agnes" but "will always carry her".

"I don't think I need to let go of her," she says. "She's someone who still interests me and you don't answer your own questions about something simply by writing a book about it."

**Stephen Romei** is The Australian's literary editor.

**Hannah Kent** will be a guest of the Sydney Writers Festival, May 20-26. [www.swf.org.au](http://www.swf.org.au)

**Burial Rites** is published by Picador on May 1.

Hannah Kent answers reading group questions

Friday, 30 August 2013

We’re so excited about *Burial Rites* that we had a book club to talk about it to our hearts’ content. We had a few questions for author Hannah Kent; read her answers here.

**How much is Agnes’s story part of Icelandic history? Is it a local tale or part of the national consciousness?**

It’s certainly a story that most Icelanders are familiar with, although to varying degrees. Nearly all of the Icelanders I have spoken to over the years, whether local or from the south, have been familiar with the basic details of Agnes’s crime and execution, with some knowing a great deal more about the circumstances surrounding her conviction, and others having a more personal, familial connection to the story.

What I have noticed, however, is that many Icelanders assume that Agnes plotted and orchestrated the murder in cold blood. This version of the story – not entirely historically substantiated – where Agnes is the monster behind it all, seems to me to have been mythologised in Iceland. And as with any historical event that is turned into myth, individuals have been exaggerated and idealised. Just as most Australians are familiar with the mythologised version of the bushranger Ned Kelly (the heroic rebel, fighting for the recognition of his people, rather than the more complex criminal), many Icelanders are familiar with Agnes the myth, rather than Agnes the woman.

*How can we ever know another if we do not hear their story? But then, how can we ever trust what they tell us, when we understand ‘truth’ as subjective?* Hannah Kent

**Why did Agnes’s story resonate with you so much?**

While I may not fully understand why I initially found the idea of this condemned woman so compelling, the more I learnt about the crime, and the more research I conducted, the more I
became perplexed and frustrated at the way in which Agnes was spoken of as being unequivocally evil. It made me reflect on the ways in which so many people, particularly women in the past, were unable to author their public identity. Women who transgressed, or deviated from the norm, or otherwise seemed not to fit into the accepted – yet limited – roles for women (the mother, the daughter, the virgin, the victim) were seen as suspicious: if you are not an angel, then you must be a demon. It was a cruel dichotomy.

I decided to write *Burial Rites* not only because I was drawn to Agnes as a seventeen-year old, but because I wanted to represent her ambiguity. My interest was not in researching the crime to somehow prove her innocence, but to discover something of her complexity, and in that, her humanity.

**How important is the idea of truth in *Burial Rites***? *We want to discover Agnes’s secrets and the extent of her guilt but can these ever be known in a world where people are intent on spinning their own narratives?*  
This is the beating heart of the novel.

How can we ever know another if we do not hear their story? But then, how can we ever trust what they tell us, when we understand ‘truth’ as subjective? Is there a difference between factual and *emotional* truth, and if so, which do we privilege and why? How can we ever truly be understood when self-representation is made impossible, or when others actively seek to misrepresent us? These are the questions that form the pulse of *Burial Rites*. These are questions I still struggle with.

**What do you hope readers gain from reading the novel?**  
I hope that readers gain an understanding of, or become curious about, Iceland. It’s such a remarkable place, and it forged the person I have become, as dramatic as that may sound. *Burial Rites* is first and foremost my paean to this place where beauty and horror and tradition and deprivation not only coexisted but were all woven together. It is a country of extremes. This is what draws me to Iceland, and this is what I hope readers will similarly be compelled by.  
I also hope that readers are prompted to consider the fallibility of any form of history or storytelling composed by a human capable of bias, self-interest, and the influence of prevailing ideologies. For every story we hear, there is another side that may be as equally, subjectively true.

**How much did the Icelandic sagas inform your research and storytelling?**  
The sagas informed both my research and storytelling a great deal. Anyone who wishes to understand Iceland should read the sagas – they give you an extraordinary insight into the way early Icelanders lived and the codes they honoured, and to this day you can travel the country
and see where the events they describe took place. I read the sagas not only to become further acquainted with a country I already loved and knew, but also because I understood that people in Agnes’s time were very familiar with the stories.

**What sagas, if any, particularly influenced you? Can you briefly describe them?**

Quite early on in the research of the novel, I saw a particular relevance to Agnes’s plight in the Laxdæla Saga, with its famous line ‘I was worst to him I loved best’. I decided to make Agnes and a few other characters, such as Margrét, aware of this relevance in the novel. The sagas are always mentioned very intentionally within the narrative.

Laxdæla Saga was written around 1245 and, while it covers 150 years in the lives of a community of Icelanders in the Breiðafjörður district, is most memorable for its story of Guðrún Osvifsdottir. Guðrún is a beautiful, intelligent and reflective woman who is forced into an unhappy marriage, and later destroys the only man she truly loves – her husband Bolli’s best friend Kjartan. Regarded as unusual for its focus on a woman, the saga is extremely poetic and moving in its depiction of murder, regret and intense love. The events at Illugastadir in *Burial Rites* mimic, in many ways, the conflict, desire and betrayal at the heart of Laxdæla Saga. It is hard to believe also, that Agnes, a bright woman familiar with the sagas, would not have considered her own experience in relation to this classic story – and the different way she and Guðrún are punished for the similar actions.

**Cup of Tea With Hannah Kent, Author of Burial Rites**

**By Cassie Mercer, 30 October, 2013**

Here, **Hannah Kent** tells us what drew her to the story of the last woman executed in Iceland in 1830. Her book, **Burial Rites**, is a brilliant debut novel. 

The focus of **Hannah Kent** is a woman called Agnes Magnusdottir. What prompted you to tell Agnes’ story? 

Ten years ago, I lived in northern Iceland for a year as an exchange student. While I had a wonderful experience, my first few months there were quite difficult. The town where I lived was fairly isolated, the community was very tightly knit, and while everyone knew who I was, I felt very much ‘the outsider’. It was during this time that I was driven through the site of Iceland’s last execution, where a servant woman called Agnes Magnusdottir had been beheaded in 1830 for her role in a brutal murder. For reasons I can’t quite comprehend now, I felt an immediate, unrelenting curiosity about this woman. Perhaps I saw something of my own isolation, my own conspicuousness in her story. As the years drew on, and I discovered more about the murders and execution, I became frustrated by the way in which Agnes was continually represented as a monstrous stereotype. My decision to write Burial Rites came from a desire to create a more complex representation of her character. While it is fiction, every single thing is rooted in some way to research, and Agnes’s life is as likely as I could make it with the sources available.

**What were some of the challenges of conducting research in Iceland?**

The first challenge was stepping through the door: it took me 18 months before I could fund the trip to Iceland (with the assistance of Flinders University in Adelaide). Once there, I found a lot of material about the murder quite quickly. But even though I have a fairly good level of fluency in Icelandic, it took me a great deal of time to translate the material. Sometimes I’d translate documents, only to realise they were completely irrelevant, or told me facts I already knew. There was nothing for it but to move onto the next source.

**How did you resolve conflicting accounts of events in Agnes’ story?**

In every instance of conflicting information — and there was a fair bit of it — I’d use my broader research into 19th-century Iceland and logistical sense. In 90 per cent of all cases, research would support one account and dismiss the other. With the other 10 per cent, I looked for bias or obvious ideological contexts to work out why such discrepancy occurred, then selected the most likely scenario.
If you could track down one thing that you haven’t yet found, what would it be?
Agnes had an extraordinary talent for reading and writing, and is often called a poet. Unfortunately, there is only one poem available that is attributed to her. I would love to find her other poetry.

What’s your best tip for researching and writing about lesser-known historical figures?
Persist! It can be a bone-achingly slow process, and there are many times where you feel you’re making no progress whatsoever, but persist and you’ll eventually see it all fall together. And if you can’t find anything about the historical figure you are researching, turn your attention to the times in which they lived. That way, as soon as you discover a fact about them, no matter how small, it will be immediately contextualised — socially, historically, culturally, politically.

We look forward to your next novel, set in Ireland. What can we expect?
It’s early days, but I can say that it’ll be set in County Kerry in the 1820s. There’s something about these rural places and the people who live in them that captures my imagination — the landscape, the folklore, the political and social tensions. It’s heady stuff.