

# READING NOTES

From the bestselling author of  
**BURIAL RITES**

# Hannah Kent

# DEVOTION

'Utterly original'  
**HEATHER ROSE**

'So beautiful and so raw'  
**EVIE WYLD**

PICADOR



# BLURB

## PRUSSIA, 1836

Hanne Nussbaum is a child of nature – she would rather run wild in the forest than conform to the limitations of womanhood. In her village of Kay, Hanne is friendless and considered an oddity . . . until she meets Thea.

## OCEAN, 1838

The Nussbaums are Old Lutherans, bound by God’s law and at odds with their King’s order for reform. Forced to flee religious persecution the families of Kay board a crowded, disease-riddled ship bound for the new colony of South Australia. In the face of brutal hardship, the beauty of whale song enters Hanne’s heart, along with the miracle of her love for Thea. Theirs is a bond that nothing can break.

*The whale passed. The music faded.*

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA, 1838

A new start in an old land. God, society and nature itself decree Hanne and Thea cannot be together. But within the impossible . . . is devotion.

This long-awaited novel demonstrates Hannah Kent’s sublime ability with language that creates an immersive, transformative experience for the reader. *Devotion* is a book to savour.

‘I absolutely love this book. Hannah Kent writes some of the most transcendently beautiful prose I’ve ever read.’

MAGDA SZUBANSKI

‘A glorious, heartbreaking love story of infinite beauty’

HEATHER ROSE

‘I fell in love with language again reading it. *Devotion* is impossibly good’

EVIE WYLD

‘Such a glorious love story. A mighty impassioned cry to love and the land’

SARAH WINMAN

‘Rare and exquisite, both beautiful and muscular in its portrayal of love found and denied’

KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

# ABOUT HANNAH KENT

Hannah Kent's first novel, the international bestseller, *Burial Rites* (2013), was translated into over 30 languages and won the ABIA Literary Fiction Book of the Year, the Indie Awards Debut Fiction Book of the Year, the ABA Nielsen Bookdata Bookseller's Choice Award, the Victorian Premier's People's Choice Award and the FAW Christina Stead Award. It is currently being adapted for film by Sony TriStar. Hannah's second novel, *The Good People* (2016), was also translated into many languages and is currently being adapted for film by Aquarius Productions.

# A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO *DEVOTION*

**\*\* Please note, this introduction contains spoilers \*\***

Hanne Nussbaum has always been different. In her strict Old Lutheran village of Kay in Prussia in the 1830s, she is brought up to obey the word of God and follow the Bible to the letter. The trouble is, when she looks for God she finds only the wonder of the natural world and instead of God's word she prefers to listen the endless song of life in the forests and rivers of her homeland.

Although she has a twin brother, Matthias, to whom she is very close, Hanne has never had a proper friend until Thea Eichenwald moves to Kay with her parents. Hanne soon realises that Thea, like Hanne, 'dances to her own music' (page 33). The pair form a close friendship which, over time, becomes something much stronger.

Meanwhile, after years of persecution for their Old Lutheran ways in a changing world, most of the villagers of Kay decide to take up the opportunity to emigrate to South Australia where they believe they will have a new life of religious freedom. As one of the elders of the village, Hanne's father is at the forefront of this decision. They pack everything they can carry and travel overland towards the ship that will take them across the oceans: the *Kristi*.

The voyage is an ordeal. The passengers must subsist in unhygienic, cramped conditions with limited food and tainted water. There is soon an outbreak of typhus, and eventually, Hanne and Thea both contract it. Though seriously ill, Thea recovers, while Hanne passes away.

Except that she doesn't. She 'wakes' to discover that although she has died, she is still present in the world of the living. She is still onboard the *Kristi*, and can see and experience everything as in life, except that nobody apart from the very young, the dying, and animals, are aware of her presence. Confused and lost, Hanne tries to work out the boundaries of her new existence and remains close to Thea for the rest of the voyage.

The ship finally reaches the colony of South Australia and so begins a new life for the living – and for Hanne. She stays with the congregation, watching but unable to take part in or influence anything that happens. Until she realises that there is, in fact, something she can do. She is able to merge with trees and plants and, eventually, animals. But these living things pay a price for this: they wither and die after Hanne leaves them.

Life moves on: both Matthias and Thea grow up and marry. Realising the powerlessness of her predicament, able to affect nothing but remaining devoted to those she loves, Hanne decides to leave the settlement. She travels the land, watching the *Eingeborene*, the First Nations people, and losing track of time and place.

But eventually she hears a voice calling her home. It is Thea. Hanne travels back to the new village as fast as she can, where life has 'flown on, unstemmed' (page 377). Hanne sees the great changes wrought on the landscape, as well as her brother and his family, her parents, Thea's parents and husband. Thea has summoned Hanne, unable to bear the thought that Hanne is truly gone, and for a moment, Thea sees her in the room. Hanne embodies Thea's husband Hans's body and she and Thea make love. Thea falls pregnant. Even though Hanne has taken possession of Hans, he survives the experience, though only after falling desperately ill and Thea saves him.

Thea's baby is born, a healthy boy. However, when he is still a babe in arms, Thea is bitten by a snake and dies. Hanne hopes desperately that she will be reunited with Thea in the afterlife she is living, but Thea is not there. Taking herself into the bush, Hanne tells her story. Returning to the village, she watches Thea's funeral. When the mourners leave, Hanne is once more 'alone. Devoted still' (page 412). Then, behind her she hears a voice. Turning, she sees Thea, and the two are finally reunited.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are three epigraphs preceding the novel (page xi): 'Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' 'For a small moment I have forsaken thee, but with great mercies will I gather thee.' 'Love is your last chance. There is really nothing else on earth to keep you there.' How has the author woven these ideas into the novel?
2. Hanne tells us early on that '[t]he testimony of love is the backbone of the universe. It is the taproot from which all stories spring.' (page 5) Do you agree? Is it true of the events of this novel? Why or why not?
3. Devotion of many kinds and to many things is a fundamental theme of the book: devotion to people, to God, to nature, to family, to the land, to a particular way of life, for example. Are there other examples? Discuss the significance of the title to this novel.
4. One important theme of the novel is devotion to the Christian God and to religion as a way of life for the people of Kay. However, the main characters of the novel express this in very different ways. Hanne finds evidence of the divine in the natural world, while her father finds he is brought closer to his God through suffering the hardships of the ocean journey and the new land. Hanne's father's version of heaven is of a golden paradise; Hanne and Thea both profess to want something much simpler: 'ordinary apples . . . [t]hings born of soil' (page 174). Anna Maria's values and beliefs are different again. In what ways? What issues do these religious differences raise for the characters?
5. On page 14, Hanne says, 'I often walked that way to collect kindling and would sometimes stop and think how wonderful it was that, emptied of people, a building would inevitably reach for the elements that made it. Clay, wood, earth, grass. Disintegration as reunion.' What other connotations might the idea of 'disintegration as reunion' have in the novel?
6. Anna Maria is considered different from the moment of her arrival in Kay. She is set apart from the other villagers, being a 'Wend' (a European Slavic minority). Even though she speaks German, has married a German, and is often the only one who can treat the sick and deliver the village's babies, some of the congregation seem determined to exclude her and have her cast out. Why is this, in your opinion? Discuss society's treatment of people who are 'different', then and now.

7. Anna Maria's hidden book, *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, is a real text that caused contention in the 1800s. What role does this grimoire play in the novel, both figuratively and literally? How does it create tension? Compare and contrast this book of 'spells' and the Bible. What do these similarities and differences symbolise?
8. What are some of the signs early on that Thea might not be like the other village girls, and might better understand Hanne's idiosyncrasies and 'peculiarities'? What is it about Thea that makes her more open to Hanne, and vice versa, do you think?
9. The idea of 'the endless song' comes up several times in the novel: Hanne often 'hears' the natural world through what she experiences as its song; she dreams that she speaks to her walnut tree in Kay about it (page 173), and at Thea's funeral (page 412) she tells us, 'The endless song, I think, as the mourners turn from the grave and walk away. I want to sing the endless song.' What do you think she means by 'the endless song'? What is the author suggesting (or hoping?) about death, and about devotion of people to one another in life?
10. "Owe no one anything, only love one another: for she who loveth hath fulfilled the covenant." Never was scripture so beautifully rendered to my heart.' (page 176) Why do you think this piece of scripture resonates so clearly with Hanne? What allowances does it offer for the love she has for Thea?
11. Hanne's surname, 'Nussbaum', translates as 'nut tree' or 'one who lives near nut trees'. Trees comes up again and again in the novel. The walnut tree in the Nussbaums' orchard in Kay is also significant. Discuss some of these references and their symbolism in the novel.
12. After her death, Hanne tells us, 'If [the congregation] were devotion's tide, I was rock. I was unmoved. Each assurance of grace felt like a lie.' (page 231) What does Hanne mean here? How might she view her fellow travellers' devotion to their God from the other side of death?
13. Death brings new insights to Hanne. Upon observing her father, she says, 'He sees nothing but the desires of his own mind.' (page 239) What do you think she means by this? What are some examples that support this observation?
14. Similarly, Hanne sees not the stoicism and hardness she expected from her mother but evidence of great love and an unfathomable grief for the loss of two children. What are some other examples of a mother's love in this novel? How is this love expressed, in line with or in spite of the religious strictures that govern the community?

15. On page 277, Hanne tells us, 'Nature had always been my whetstone, had always made me keener, and after the congregation reached the foothills, I felt myself sharpen to life. The landscape on the ascent to the ranges was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I had thought the pine forest back in Kay a place of divinity, but this country was infinitely more sovereign.' What do you think Hannah means here? What is it about the new landscape that is 'infinitely more sovereign' to her?
16. 'If others are here, as I am, we are as unseen to one another as the living. The lonely dead, wishing for ghosts of our own.' (page 310) Why do you think Hanne remains a lone earthly presence while other people die around her? What is she suggesting about other people who die?
17. Why do you think the author chose to tell Hanne's story from the perspective of a ghost? What does the ghost symbolise?
18. When she leaves the village and walks the land for a time, Hanne has this experience: 'That afternoon, walking along the coast, I saw an Aboriginal woman half in the water and half out of it. *She fled the island*, the sea said as it flowed through her hair. *She wanted to return home. We carried her the distance she could not swim.* I knew nothing of those things when I first came to the valley. I had no understanding of the world.' (pages 311–312) What things is Hanne talking about? What do you think has happened to the Aboriginal woman?
19. Why do you think the living things Hanne inhabits, such as trees and the vegetables in the Radtkes' garden, die once she has embodied them? Why does Hans survive the embodiment with the help of Thea's Book of Moses, do you think? And what do you think of Hanne's embodiment of the pigs bound for slaughter?
20. There are many references to encounters between the German immigrants and the Indigenous people of South Australia. For example, on page 311, 'I passed a place where river met sea, and there were many people living there who read the country like my father read his Bible: in assurance of its graces and knowledge of how they might be found.' What does this passage suggest about the different ways devotion is expressed by different cultures? What are the consequences of such fundamental differences in different cultures' worldviews, in your opinion?



21. The love shared by Thea and Hanne contravenes the religious laws by which they are compelled to live. Both know instinctively that the extent of their devotion to one another must be kept a secret. What do you think might have happened if Hanne had survived the voyage? How might the future have played out for Thea and Hanne in South Australia? Do you think things would have been easier or harder had they been men? Discuss. Similarly, why is it important that stories like Thea and Hanne's are explored in fiction?
22. There are three starkly different settings in the novel: the centuries-old village of Kay in Germany, the ship the *Kristi* and the ocean voyage, and the wild landscape of South Australia. How does each setting contribute to and shape the story?
23. Hannah Kent has chosen to tell this story in the first person through the character Hanne (Johanne), while switching between the events of the present (in present tense) and the past (in past tense). How does this narrative style shape the reader's understanding of Hanne as we piece together what happened in the past, and what is happening 'now'?
24. During Thea's wedding to Hans, Hanne stands by Thea and tells her over and over, 'Love is as strong as death.' She tells the reader, '[Thea] was ever my song of songs.' (page 361) In what ways do these ideas resonate throughout the novel?