With irresistible freshness and sympathy Hannah Kent renders a world that is both recognisable and eerily strange. Set in a remote village in County Kerry, Ireland, in the years 1825 and 1826, Hannah Kent’s second novel reiterates some of the themes of her first: like her much-praised debut, *Burial Rites*, at its heart are the hardships of 19th-century rural life, hardships amplified for women on their own. However, where *Burial Rites* focussed on one woman, Agnes Magnúsdóttir, and was propelled by her approaching execution, *The Good People* focusses on not one but three women, and their efforts to care for the crippled boy Micheál.

The novel opens with the death of Nóra’s husband, Martin, who has simply dropped dead working in the fields. In their tiny cabin, Nóra and Martin have been looking after their daughter’s child, the sickly, fractious Micheál, who can neither speak nor walk. Nóra cannot manage their smallholding and care for Micheál on her own, so she goes to the hiring fair at Killarney – the nearest town of any size – and returns with Mary, a strong, hard-working girl from a large family. Mary does the washing and cooking and milking, churns the butter, and becomes the boy’s full-time carer. It’s an endless and thankless task, and Mary’s days pass in a haze of exhaustion:

> She had never felt so tired. Mary had thought that the winter days, with their lull in labour and their quiet, unfriendly weather, would be easeful after her term of working through harvest. Those days had been unceasing. She had fetched and flailed and stooped until she felt she would die, until she was spangled with chaff and her hands bled from handling flax. But the child exhausted her in a different way. He tortured her with constant, shrill
needfulness. Sometimes it seemed that he screamed his throat raw and no amount of soothing would quiet him.

Nance is the local ‘handy woman’, a combination of herbalist, midwife and mediator with the unseen. And it is the unseen – the Good People, the fairies who populate the valley and the imaginations of its inhabitants – that dominates the novel. Despite their name, the Good People generally bring misfortune – cows refusing to give milk, chickens going off the lay, stillborn babies, illness and death can all be wrought by Them (the pronoun is always capitalised when referring to the fairies).

At every turn, it seems, the Good People must be appeased and dissuaded from meddling in the villagers’ lives. They dislike iron, for example, so fireside tongs left crossed over a baby’s cradle will ensure the fairies leave the child well alone; they also dislike fire, so should a person be suspected of being a changeling, application of a red-hot poker could frighten the fairy out of them.

When the sickly Micheál cannot be healed in the usual manner, by liberal applications of potatoes and buttermilk, and when first the doctor and then the priest say they can do nothing for him, Nóra comes to believe that the Good People are to blame. The boy in her care is not her grandson at all but a changeling, a fairy left by the Good People who have taken the real Micheál.

And so she calls in Nance.

In her afterword Hannah Kent notes that the bones of her story are based on real events. Irish folklore is rich and complex, and flourished in a harsh world where people survived hand to mouth. Butter is churned but never eaten — it is sold to pay the landlord. Doctors are distant and expensive, and even a visit from the priest requires coin to pay for it. Education is something gained from working in the fields and knowledge comes from the gossips who hang around the village well. (Naturally there is no running water in these houses with rammed earth floors and straw-filled windows.)

The accumulation of detail of the daily lives of the characters creates a world that is both recognisable and eerily strange. Despite the familiarity of the witch-trial trope – for surely this is where the story is heading – Kent renders it with a freshness and sympathy that is irresistible.

It’s difficult to read *The Good People* without comparing it to *Burial Rites*. Ultimately *The Good People* has a bleaker feel to it, albeit with a more resilient ending. If *Burial Rites* was a novel of dispossession and injustice, it
was also a novel driven by passion. *The Good People* operates in a different key, its story driven by poverty, illness and desperation. Above all, this is a novel about the love for a child, and the lengths that Nóra goes to for her grandson are both shocking and deeply moving. Perhaps this is where the Good People truly reside – inside ourselves, embodying our deepest fears and desires.