

# Living with the past

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Amanda Curtin  
THE SINKINGS

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**P**ART HISTORICAL MURDER MYSTERY, part journey towards reconciliation, at the heart of Amanda Curtin's novel, *The Sinkings*, is a figure whom we barely meet but whose existence is the key to this remarkable narrative.

Set in Ireland, Scotland and Western Australia, *The Sinkings* tracks the life of Little Jock – lost child, survivor of the Potato Famine, convict and murder victim – through the eyes of amateur historian and library sleuth Willa Samson. Grieving and guilt-stricken, Willa has abandoned her profession as an editor and immersed herself in the past in a process of comprehension and discovery. As the story unfolds, Little Jock emerges as an intriguing subject for Willa's historical navigation. Her impetus to gather evidence of Little Jock's secret also arises from a deep need to understand the experience and perspective of her own lost child, Imogen.

Born intersexed, both female and male, Imogen is a victim of medical perfectionism, a cruel corrective process for which Willa now blames herself. As readers, we receive only a glimpse of the adult that Imogen becomes. Fiercely angry with her family and the system that has caused her so much misery, Imogen has severed all contact with Willa and changed her name, rejecting her reconstruction as a girl. The overwhelming potency of gender binaries is a significant exploration in this novel. The power of gender in shaping social identity is an important exploration in this novel. The absence of a suitable personal pronoun and the difficulty of creating an accepted public persona, for someone who is neither male nor female, are among the many problems that Curtin poses through this book.

Drawing on a substantial body of research into nineteenth-century Irish and British colonial history, biography, folklore and medical practice: Curtin brings them together in a vivid, moving story. For some readers, the skeleton of information, history and social theory that shape Curtin's tale may seem a trifle too bony. References to the body of literature on gender and sexuality, although informative and well integrated, may hamper some readers. At the same time, the use of historical record in setting scenes and building the character of Little Jock provides a lively context for this unusual novel.

There is much here to enjoy. The story is well structured, keeping pace between the contemporary and historical narratives. Curtin's skill as a wordsmith is evident; her characters

are fully fleshed. There may be a slight irony in the observation that the female characters seem the most developed and convincing, notably Willa and her mother, Orla. Curtin's capacity, however, to unfold the story through many different points of view, and to capture voice, tone and feeling in different times and places, is far-reaching. The shifting narrative voice – whether the poignant cry of a child in pain, a self-accusing mother, the considerations of a self-satisfied doctor, or nineteenth-century trial and news reports of thievery and conviction – make this work vivid and absorbing.

It must be said that small sections of this book are harrowing to read. Curtin does not shirk from conveying Imogen's physical suffering and Willa's intense regret. Little Jock, too, is exploited in various ways, although he escapes becoming a subject of nineteenth-century medical spectacle. These disturbingly visceral episodes provide an essential point of view. They also serve as a reminder that the need for acceptance can be so powerful that some people seek to remake the body in conformity with a social ideal.

In spite of these discomfiting passages, I never wanted to stop reading. The opening pages are striking and immediately set the scene for what is to come. The birthing and childhood misadventures of Little Jock are beautifully written. Curtin is adept at inhabiting the fey world of ancient Irish belief.

Near nightfall a widow returns from her plot to find her high-spirited daughter too late for the priest's goodbye and a rag-swaddled infant sucking a gauze of flax soaked in weak buttermilk ... The Handywoman watches, cheated and more than a little afraid ... But this room, this room she had charmed and protected, had been fleeced and a deception played. There is nothing they desire so much as a healthy boy child. She had turned her back so briefly, no longer than it took to retrieve a coin from her cloak to handsel the newborn and that was all it had taken for them to steal the newborn and leave a copy, imperfect, in his place.

I did begin to wonder if we were about to venture into the Gothic realm of vampire novelist Anne Rice, but I was wrong. Indeed, Curtin might be said to have more in common with the richly researched sensation fiction of Sarah Waters than with Rice. The Victorian tale of Little Jock's journey to Glasgow, his transportation to Australia, his life and death in the south-west, is compelling. Yet, while it embraces aspects of genre fiction, one of the strengths of Curtin's novel is that it does not fit simply into any single publication category. While *The Sinkings* can be marketed by its publisher as murder mystery or historical fiction, the genre shifts and layers invite the reader to become involved in all facets of the narrative. Partly about the politics of identity and the scars of grief, loss and wrong decisions, this novel is also about finding a way to live with the past.