

# The Solution to Joan Lindsay's Novel Picnic at Hanging Rock?

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brettm@mck.com.au

## **Preface**

The novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, by Joan Lindsay, was first published in Australia by Cheshire Publishing Pty Ltd in 1967.

*The Secret of Hanging Rock* was first published in Australia by Angus & Robertson Publishers in 1987. This publication has a chapter titled 'Chapter Eighteen' that is supposedly the original last chapter of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. This was "removed" before the original novel was published and its "existence" was not widely known about until 1987.

*Time Without Clocks* is the autobiography of Joan Lindsay first published in Australia by Cheshire Publishing Pty Ltd in 1962.

The following thesis provides the solution to the mystery of what happened to the three schoolgirls and Miss McCraw. This solution is based wholly on the original publication of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* without any external reference. Note that the solution is inconsistent with *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, but we'll leave that issue for later! *The Secret of Hanging Rock* won't be referred to again in this thesis.

There have been two different typesettings of the novel that I know about. To make it easy to cross-reference I have included two page numbers for each quote. The first page number is for the 1997 Penguin Books edition (189 pages). The second number, in square brackets, is for the 1976 edition (213 pages).

References to the "Rock" can be taken to mean the whole hill or mountain.

## **My Thesis**

Since this thesis is based totally on the original publication of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* without external references, it cannot possibly give a detailed solution. It does, however, provide the solution to the mystery in general terms. That is, it answers the question of what happened to the missing people, though not in great detail.

The solution to the mystery relies on the following three important assumptions:

1. The novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is a work of fiction. It was probably loosely based on a real event, but that real event may have had little resemblance to the finished storyline in the novel. If a real incident did take place, it may not have involved schoolgirls, it may not have been under mysterious circumstances, and may not have even taken place in Australia. Because the novel is a work of fiction, Lindsay can be as descriptive or as vague as she wishes, and she uses this to her advantage in telling the story.
2. Joan Lindsay knew what happened to the missing people. It is worthwhile stating this because some people may argue that even though the novel is a work of fiction, Lindsay may have decided that the novel is about an unsolved mystery where even she didn't know what happened to the missing people. This thesis, however, assumes that Lindsay did know what happened.
3. Lindsay gives the reader clues in the novel to what happened to the missing people. If you believe the first two assumptions, it is easy to believe this one. That is, if the novel is a work of fiction and Lindsay knew what happened, then surely she would drop clues to it. This is important, because people will read a novel differently if they believe there are clues that they should be looking for!

Given the assumptions, the hard part is finding the clues. The solution becomes reasonably obvious, however, when you place importance on the similes that Joan Lindsay uses and the themes she develops throughout the novel. The interpretation of the similes are the key to finding the real solution, which is confirmed by a logical analysis of the events described in the novel.

The solution is actually quite simple, and no doubt will be an anti-climax to many people. But without doubt, this is the only plausible solution. So here we go! To state the solution simply, the three school girls and Miss McCraw were trapped or crushed under rock during a minor landslide or as a large upright slab of rock fell from one of the vertical faces of the Rock!

Given this solution, it is clear why throughout the novel the rocks at Hanging Rock are often described with negative connotations such as “nasty” and “treacherous”, and also of being “loose”. These are subtle clues! Another minor theme in particular stands out in adding weight to the solution. It is the recurring simile of small creatures or flowers being crushed by people:

*‘Whatever can those people be doing down there like a lot of ants?’ Marion looked out over her shoulder. ‘A surprising number of human beings are without purpose. Although it’s probable, of course, that they are performing some necessary function unknown to themselves.’ p34 [38].*

This is setting the scene for what follows soon after. Lindsay is openly asking us to compare ants and people! She is inviting us, or dropping hints for us, by way of the following simile.

*A procession of queer looking beetles in bronze armour were making a leisurely crossing of Miranda’s ankle when she awoke and watched them hurrying to safety under some loose bark. In the colourless twilight every detail stood out, clearly defined and separate. ... Everything if only you could see it clearly enough, is beautiful and complete. p35 [39].*

With hindsight, the simile is quite obvious. “The beetles in bronze armour taking a leisurely crawl across Miranda’s ankle,” represents “the girls in layers of petticoats and corsets taking a leisurely walk up the Rock”. “Miranda awoke and the beetles hurried for safety under some loose bark,” represents “the Rock awoke (in the geological sense, such as a rock fall) and the girls hurried to safety.” The girls, however, didn’t find safety. They ran but were trapped by the falling rock. This simile, once seen clearly, is beautiful and complete. Immediately before this description we have the following:

*... all four girls flung themselves down on the gently sloping rock in the shelter of the monolith, and there fell into a sleep so deep that a horned lizard emerged from a crack to lie without fear in the hollow of Marion’s outflung arm. p35 [38].*

Just as the lizard lies in a precarious position unaware of the danger of being crushed by Marion, the girls lie unaware of the danger of being crushed by the Rock.

This theme is continued later in the novel in the description of Mike looking for the girls:

*Fronds of curled brown velvet snapped under his touch, his boots trod down the neat abodes of ants and spiders: his hand brushing against a streamer of bark dislodged a writhing colony of caterpillars in thick fur coats, brutally exposed to midday light. From a loose stone, a sleeping lizard awoke and darted to safety at the clumping monster’s approach. The rise grew steeper, the undergrowth denser. The gentle youth, hard breathing, his yellow crest damp on his glistening forehead, pushed on through the waist-high bracken, with every step cutting a swathe of death and destruction through the dusty green. p77 [86].*

Here we have the description of Mike crushing creatures with total disregard. He does not do it deliberately, but from his perspective of both size and time it is unimportant. In the same way, as a mountain disintegrates over millions of years it shows total disregard for any “small” creatures that are accidentally crushed (i.e. the girls). The swathe of death and destruction that Mike creates is similar to swathe of death and destruction that the falling rock has as it tumbles down the hillside crushing the girls.

The previous quote also has a simile of Mike finding Irma. Mike’s hand dislodging the bark, exposing the caterpillars in thick fur coats, is likened to Mike removing loose rock and finding the girls (or one of them) in their petticoats, brutally exposing them to the midday light. Keep in mind that Lindsay wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as a mystery, but that doesn’t stop her from dropping clues to what happened to the missing people. Similes provide her with a mechanism to drop clues to the observant reader without drawing attention to them.

So what evidence is there that Hanging Rock itself is the culprit? The evidence is the living, constantly changing nature of the rock itself, which Lindsay points out to the reader:

*Confronted by such monumental configurations of nature the human eye is woefully inadequate. Who can say how many or how few of its unfolding marvels are actually seen, selected and recorded by the four pairs of eyes now fixed in staring in wonder at the Hanging Rock? Does Marion Quade note the horizontal ledges crisscrossing the verticals of the main pattern whose geological formation must be memorised for next Monday’s essay? Is Edith aware of the hundreds of frail starlike flowers crushed under her tramping boots ... p29 [32].*

Why is the human eye woefully inadequate, and what are the unfolding marvels? The human eye is inadequate because it only sees an extremely small time-slice of the life of natural formations such as a mountain. Its unfolding marvels of birth through to death takes millions of years. Imagine if you could take a million year video recording of the life of the Rock and compress it to thirty minutes. Then you would see its unfolding marvels. What would you see? Much of it would be erosion, sand grain by sand grain, but there would also be the occasional rockslide as the mountain disintegrates. How many of these events are seen? Well the girls, unfortunately, were in the right place at the right time to see one. Again we have the recurring simile: just as the Rock is not aware of the people crushed under its falling rock, Edith is not aware of the hundreds of frail starlike flowers crushed under her trampling boots. The girls are:

*... unconscious of the strains and tensions of the molten mass that holds it anchored to the groaning earth : of the creakings and shudderings ... p30 [33].*

The Rock is presented as a changing thing, but man does not usually perceive the changes. When a hillside groans, creaks or shudders what might be happening? Lindsay is telling us, in a subtle way, that the Rock is creaking and shuddering. She doesn’t want to make the clue too obvious, but there is no doubt about what she is describing. When appreciating this description, the reader should think it quite likely a landslide is about to happen. This time the sound of creaking has been mentioned, and just before the girls go missing sound is featured again as a part of the mystery:

*Although Irma was aware, for a while, of a rather curious sound coming up from the plain. Like the beating of far-off drums. p34 [38].*

The drum-like sounds that Irma heard were probably the low and deep creakings and shuddering of the Rock as geological tensions worked their way up from deep below the surface. These tensions result in the landslide or tumbling rock. Irma thought the sound came up from the plain, but there is no mention of people at the picnic ground hearing something like the sound of far-off drums. Since the landslide was localised the people at the picnic

ground didn't hear it. It might even been possible that the time of the landslide coincided with the departure of the Colonel, Mrs Fitzhubert, Albert and Michael. The rattle of the horses and wagonette could have masked any unusual sounds from the Rock.

Another clue is the use of the word "tombstones". Just after the girls leave the creek and head towards the Rock we are given the following description:

*On the steep southern facade the play of golden light and deep violet shade revealed the intricate construction of long vertical slabs; some smooth as giant tombstones, others grooved and fluted by prehistoric architecture of wind and water, ice and fire. p29 [32].*

Imagine if rock from one of these grooved and fluted vertical slabs broke free causing the rockslide. Also imagine that one of the long smooth vertical slab remained upright, standing for the next thousand years as a tombstone for the missing girls. This is a clue! It is also significant that some of the rock is described as "grooved and fluted". Elsewhere in the novel the word "striated" is used to describe rock laying on the ground. The *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* defines striated as "marked with slight score or ridge on surface".

*Some slight disturbance of the bushes and bracken towards the western end of the rock face had been noted as early as last Sunday morning. It was now thought possible they might have been part of the track taken by Miss McCraw after leaving the rest of the party after lunch. It petered out almost at once; strangely enough, at much the same level of striated rock as certain other faint scratchings and bruising of the undergrowth at the eastern end where the four girls may have begun their perilous ascent. p69 [76].*

The faint scratchings and bruising of the undergrowth are consistent with a rock fall, being the damage done as rock tumbles downhill. Miss McCraw's footsteps petered out because the rubble covered her tracks, and ultimately her as well.

It seems clear that the girls made their ascent up to the monolith with far greater ease than the people who went looking for them. The girls even took off their stockings and shoes on the lower rock platform, where they had their rest, and walked barefoot over the "warm smooth stones" up to the higher rock platform just below the monolith where they had their sleep. Just before Mike finds Irma, he also climbs from the lower rock platform up to the monolith but has greater difficulty than the girls did on what was apparently a similar part of the rock.

*Now huge rocks and boulders blocked his path on the rising ground, each a nightmare obstacle to be somehow walked around, clambered over, crawled under, according to size and contour. They grew larger and more fantastic. He cried out : 'Oh, my lost, lovely darling, where are you?' and raising his eyes for an instant from the treacherous ground saw the monolith, black against the sun. p82 [91].*

The men that eventually rescue Irma also have a hard time of it:

*In silence they plodded uphill, following the bruised and broken fern, the doctor a little way behind, picking his urban way in too tight boots of Sunday tan. 'Beats me,' said the policeman, 'how a new chum got himself up here at all.' p92 [104].*

*They began climbing again, following the mountain trail and loudly cursing the hidden rocks and holes under foot. p93 [104].*

*Doctor Cooling... began climbing towards the source. His progress was excruciatingly slow even with the help of Albert, who had come belting downhill white in the face and babbling incoherently of a body, and was now*

*dragging him through the scrub and dreadful rocks. p93 [105].*

These last two quotes don't sound like the area that the girls casually walked up, three of them without shoes, but it was indeed the same! A rock fall obviously explains the difference.

What was the scene like where Irma was found? When found, Irma's feet were bare and clean. Her shoes and stockings were not found. This indicates that she hadn't been walking around the countryside, and hadn't suffered from the dreadful rocks like the men.

*The little dark one with curls was lying face downwards on a ledge of sloping rock directly underneath the lower of the two boulders, with one arm flung out over her head, like a little girl fallen asleep on a hot afternoon. Above the bloodstained muslin bodice swarms of tiny flies clustered. The much-publicized ringlets were matted with dust and blood. p94 [105].*

*There were no signs of a struggle, or any violence. The girl, so far as the doctor could see without a thorough examination, was apparently uninjured. The feet, strange to say, were bare and perfectly clean, in no way scratched or bruised, ... p94 [106].*

Irma's clothes were torn and dusty, yet her feet were clean. This is totally consistent with being trapped under a rockslide. However there was another surprise concerning her appearance:

*The fine cambric petticoat drawers and camisole, 'all trimmed with real lace, poor lamb!', were so torn and dusty that the good woman took it upon herself to put them under the copper where they were burned on Monday morning. Greatly to Mrs Cutler's surprise the lamb had been brought in just as she had been lying on the Rock, without a corset. p94 [106].*

So what happened to the corset? Irma obviously wasn't killed instantly, though maybe the others were. While trapped under rubble or a slab of rock, she would have been greatly restricted by the corset she was wearing, so if possible she would have attempted to loosen it. She would have slid out of it as she dug her way free (maybe with the help of Mike), leaving it where she was trapped. The Police didn't investigate the missing corset because they didn't know it was missing, and didn't realise that her petticoat drawers and camisole were badly torn and dusty. Had they known these facts, the Police may have realised what had happened.

In the following quote, Lindsay openly states that the missing corset is a clue to what happened to the girls:

*Thus the valuable clue of the missing corset was never followed up nor communicated to the police. p95 [106].*

At first glance this sentence seems insignificant, but it is actually very important because it virtually confirms the three assumptions made at the start of this thesis. Lindsay is telling the reader about a clue to the solution of the mystery that the Police missed, confirming assumption three. For her to do this, she must have known what happened to the girls, confirming assumption two. The novel is written as though it is a true story about a mystery that has not been solved:

*Thus the College Mystery, like that of the celebrated case of the Marie Celeste, seems likely to remain forever unsolved. p189 [213].*

If Lindsay knew what happened to the girls, however, the novel cannot be an unsolved mystery, unless of course it is a work of fiction, which confirms assumption one.

Foul play, especially of a sexual kind, can be ruled out as a possibility:

*The body was unblemished and virginal. After careful examination Doctor Cooling pronounced the girl to be suffering from nothing more serious than shock and exposure. No broken bones, and only a few minor cuts and bruises*

*on the face and hands. On the hands, especially, the nails were badly torn and broken. p95 [107].*

Here we also see that Irma's fingernails were damaged, again consistent with digging herself out from under the rock slide.

Why didn't people recognise the rock fall? The problem is not recognising a rock fall, but rather recognising when it happened. That is, one might easily recognise that rock fall has occurred, but the untrained eye might not know if it had happened the day before or two years before. Tell-tale signs can be damaged undergrowth, but recall that this was in fact noticed by people searching for the missing girls. We also know that it had been a long time since people had been to that particular part of the rock.

*There are no tracks on this part of the Rock. Or if there ever have been tracks, they are long since obliterated. It is a long time since any living creature other than an occasional rabbit or wallaby trespassed upon its arid breast. p30 [33].*

Thus, few people, if anybody, would have had a memory of what the area might have looked like before a rock slide.

Marion's pencil and notebook were never found. They also were buried under the rubble:

*Marion, who had immediately produced a pencil and notebook, tossed them into the ferns and yawned. p35 [38].*

The policemen in the novel never seem to give any consideration to the possibility of a rock fall. Indeed Lindsay has a bit of a joke with the reader at the expense of Jim the policeman, who says he is trained to look at every angle, but fails to look at the mystery from the angle of loose stones:

*'... We policemen are trained to look at every angle in a case of this kind.'*

*'You had better look where you're going, young Jim, or you'll be over the edge – that rock ahead is the one they call the monolith.'*

*'I'm aware of that,' said the policeman, tripping over a loose stone, ... p93 [104].*

A wallaby provides a link between two important events in the novel. The first event is Edith's last sighting of the three schoolgirls that go missing:

*If her terrified cries had been heard by anyone but a wallaby squatting in a clump of bracken a few feet away, the picnic at Hanging Rock might have been just another picnic on a summer's day. Nobody did hear them. p36 [40].*

The second event is when Mike arrives at the platform of rock that he falls asleep on just before he finds Irma.

*A few yards from where he had stopped to extricate one foot from an apparently bottomless cleft a little wallaby came hop-hopping out of the ferns on a zig-zag course that suggested some kind of natural track. There were certain things that animals knew more about than people – Mike's cocker spaniel for instance was aware of cats and other enemies half a mile away. What had the wallaby seen, what did it know? Perhaps it was trying to tell him something as it stood looking down at him from a ledge of rock. There was no fear in its gentle eyes. It was easy enough to hoist himself up on to the ledge but not to follow the little creature's leaping progress through the scrub where it disappeared. The ledge where he found himself abutted on to a natural platform of striated rock ringed with stones, boulders and clumps of wiry fern, shaded by straggling eucalypts. p81 [90].*

Lindsay seems to be telling the reader that the wallaby knows what happened to the girls, which makes sense if it was the same wallaby from the previous quotation. The wallaby also

seemed to be encouraging Mike to come up the ledge of rock. Something very important happened on that ledge. It is where Mike laid down to rest while looking for the girls, but woke up with a cut his forehead, and then proceeded in a frantic daze to search for the girls, which led to the discovery of Irma:

*He laid his head on a stone and fell instantly into the thin ragged sleep of exhaustion, waking with a sudden stab of pain over one eye. A trickle of blood was oozing on to the pillow. p81 [91].*

This is the fulfilment of a prophecy from a few pages earlier:

*It might even end, if it ever did end, in a sudden unexpected finding that had nothing to do with all this purposeful seeking. p77 [85].*

So what actually happened to Mike as he slept on the rock? It is probable that a rock fell from above and hit him on the head. This triggered a thought that made him realise that the girls were trapped by a rockslide. In his half-awake state, he was dreaming of being under water, of hearing voices, and of drowning. Being trapped under water has many similarities to being trapped under rock. It is even possible that someone was trapped under the ledge of rock that he was sleeping on. Whatever it was, it led to the discovery of Irma. Before this event took place, the tracker dog certainly showed interest in a ledge of rock:

*The dog, who had proved equally unsuccessful at picking up the scent of the three missing girls earlier in the week, was greatly hampered by the well-meaning army of voluntary searchers having effaced the first elusive imprints where a hand had rested perhaps on a dusty boulder, a foot on springy moss. The animal, however, did raise some false hopes during Thursday afternoon, by standing for nearly ten minutes growling and bristling on an almost circular platform of flat rock considerably further towards the summit, whereon the magnifying glass disclosed absolutely no signs of any disturbance more recent than the ravages of Nature over some hundreds or thousands of years. Bumper, scanning his meagre notes in the failing light of the cab, had hoped that part or all of the teacher's purple silk cape would have been found stuffed into a hollow log, maybe, or under a loose rock. p69 [77].*

The ledge may have been part of a vertical slab of rock that toppled over trapping the girls or Miss McCraw. Once again, the phrase “loose rock” is used. Here Lindsay is making the connection for us, enticing us, with the thought that some, or more importantly all, of the teacher's clothes might be under the rock! It is subtle but clever!

The first paragraph of chapter ten puts things into perspective and makes clear one of the main themes of the novel, which is time: the timing of many events in our lives can be dramatic, and can have far-reaching consequences; the timing of an event can be much more significant than the event itself. The consequence of the girls and Miss McCraw being in the wrong place at the wrong time leads to almost the complete story in the novel: two girls and a school teacher are killed in a rock fall, one is almost killed. As a consequence, students are withdrawn from the college by parents, Dora and her brother are killed in a fire, Sara commits suicide, Mrs Appleyard commits suicide, and so on. One key event sends a ripple out in all directions. If the girls had walked up the Rock just ten minutes later than they did, there would be no story. If the letter from Sara's guardian arrived a day earlier she wouldn't have jumped out the window. If the window was closed the fire that killed Dora wouldn't have started, and so on.

*The reader taking a bird's eye view of events since the picnic will have noticed how various individuals on its outer circumference have somehow become involved in the spreading pattern : Mrs Valange, Reg Lumley, Monsieur Louis Montpelier, Minnie and Tom – all of whose lives have already been disrupted,*

*sometimes violently. So too have the lives of innumerable lesser fry – spiders, mice, beetles – whose scuttlings, burrawangs and terrified retreats are comparable, if on a smaller scale.*

*...it was still spreading...*

*the inhabitants of Lake View, unaware of their allotted places in the general scheme of joy and sorrow, light and shade, went about their personal affairs as usual, unconsciously weaving and interweaving the individual threads of their private lives into the tapestry of the whole. p111 [125].*

Again, the simile of small creatures being crushed by people has been presented. Lindsay has made the connection quite obvious this time. The terrified retreats of the lesser fry compare to the terrified retreats of the missing girls and Miss McCraw during the rock fall.

The girls were going to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and they were doomed, just like the “boy who stood on the burning deck” that Irma mentions:

*‘Doomed to die, of course! Like that boy who “stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled, tra ... la la ...” I forget the rest of it.’ p33 [36].*

In what seems like an incredible coincidence Mr Hussey’s and Miss McCraw’s watches both stopped at twelve o’clock (midday) just before the girls go for their fateful walk. Why did the watches stop? An explanation may be found in Lindsay’s autobiography titled *Time Without Clocks* which was published five years before *Picnic at Hanging Rock*:

*There were certain days when I sat at my typewriter in the empty green-aired room feeling like a deep-sea fish suspended in its natural element. Not only in my fish tank but outside in the sheltered valley all natural objects seemed in a state of suspension as they do immediately before an earthquake. It was a characteristic of the Marsh and perhaps had something to do with the old volcanoes seething and boiling so far below the earth’s crust that even the geologists hadn’t discovered them. p124 (Time Without Clocks)*

Keep in mind that this quote is from Lindsay’s autobiography. She is saying quite clearly that she believes natural objects seem to be in a state of suspension immediately before an earthquake. So when setting the scene for the impending rockslide, which may be the result of an earthquake deep underground, Lindsay uses the watches stopping to help describe this eerie state of suspension that all of nature seems to be in. (See also the quote above referring to page 30.)

One final clue: Edith saw a red cloud as she ran down from the rock.

*‘Only this one was a nasty red colour and I remember it because I looked up and saw it through some branches ...’ p58 [64].*

What was the red cloud? The cloud was probably the red dust thrown up during the rockslide. As Edith was running down the Rock she saw Miss McCraw in the distance, and then something made her glance behind her and she caught a glimpse of the red dust through the trees. We know that the area was dusty, and we also know the area had “red” dust:

*The sun bore down on the shiny black roof of the drag, now covered with fine red dust that seeped through the loosely buttoned curtains into their eyes and hair. p15 [17].*

## **Conclusion**

If you believe that Joan Lindsay wrote *Picnic at Hanging Rock* knowing what happened to the missing girls and Miss McCraw, then the solution documented here, or a close variation of it, can be the only plausible solution. This solution is consistent and believable, and can be justified by numerous quotes from the novel.

The mystery does not have to be explained using inconsistent, supernatural, or far-fetched reasoning! Attempts at doing this degrade the reputation of both Joan Lindsay and of the novel itself, which has charmed readers since 1967.

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