

Hannah's 'The Women'

remarkable historical fiction

"It's always the same thing. 'You don't belong. You're a woman. There were no women in Vietnam.'"—from "The Women" by Kristin Hannah

In her best-selling novel *The Women*, Kristin Hannah sets the record straight: there were plenty of heroic women in Vietnam.

This remarkable work of historical fiction tells the harrowing story of one woman's Vietnam experience and provides an insightful look into the nation's consciousness in the Vietnam era.

The book's protagonist, Frankie McGrath, the daughter of a millionaire developer who lived on Coronado Island off the San Diego coast, decided on a whim to join the army after her brother Finley was killed in Vietnam.

Despite her mother's difficulty in accepting her decision and her father's outright anger, Frankie's tale provokes all the emotions of Vietnam, both of those who served and those who were opposed—and, perhaps predictably, those who first served in a war that they came home to contest.

The book begins by revealing the dark complexities of the McGrath family and transitions quickly into the jungles of Vietnam. But, with Kristin Hannah, like all great writers, it is always the relationships that carry the drama.

McGrath's relationships with two men she met while in Vietnam are a constant source of drama and unpredictability in *The Women*. Like the men in most of her other novels, including *The Great Alone*, they provide a striking, albeit unpredictable, contrast to McGrath's "good Catholic girl" roots that she brought to Vietnam.

While most of Hannah's female protagonists find a heroic path in her novels, the men in her novels are, predictably, unheroic (although spoiler alerts will not allow me to describe the nature of her romantic relationships fully).

Besides the men in this book (whom you might look on charitably as misguided), it's her lifelong friendships with two other women nurses, Ethel and Barb, who become critical players in Frankie's life long after Vietnam.

Her experiences and support for Ethel and Barb poignantly remind us that it is our close relationships, be they family or friends, that carry us through our most difficult days. There are many moving passages, like this one:

"Frankie held on to her best friend's hand and listened to her stories, her pain, which was like her own. They talked for hours until night fell slowly around them..."

You might remember the tragic struggles of the Allbright family in Hannah's novel *The Great Alone*, where the father, a Vietnam vet and former POW, takes his family to Alaska to escape the rest of the world. Or the tragedies endured by Vianne and Isabelle, the two sisters in "The

Nightingale."

In *The Women*, you have another strong, fearless woman, as there are very few 'weak' women in Hannah's novels.

Frankie, who wanted so desperately to follow in her brother's footsteps by joining the war effort, finds a sort of peaceful reckoning, a moral purpose in her life, as the book's narrative takes you through her heroic life-saving efforts in the jungles of Vietnam. Here's an example:

"At 0300 hours, a red alert siren blared through camp. Then came the sound of incoming choppers. A swarm of them. One Dust Off after another landed in the pouring rain, full of wounded. Frankie and Barb and Ethel stumbled out of bed and ran to the helipad, helping to offload them. Frankie spent the next eight hours...going from one surgery to the next, until she was so tired she could barely stand."

If you are over 60, you will find this book to be a page-turner of memories. It will take you back to the days of Vietnam, of war protests and government corruption, of Bob Dylan, The Doors, The Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, and the songs of a generation. It will remind you of the young people who were trying to find a way forward, both those who served in the war and those at home who lost loved ones.

It is also a family story—a family that reaches a breaking point and its long road toward reconciliation—a reconciliation aided by both time and circumstance. Ultimately, love returns to Frankie and her parents, albeit love of a different kind—a love that is more honest than it had been decades earlier.

Hannah, a former attorney, told Carol Fitzgerald of bookreporter.com (a great website you should check out) this past March that she began writing *The Women* in 1997 and was told by an editor that "...the world was not ready for this kind of story" and that she should put it away until later in her life.

Then, more than 20 years later, amid Covid and living in the remote Pacific Northwest, she began to see the enormous sacrifices made by nurses and doctors during the pandemic.

Hannah felt "they were sacrificing so much for us and not getting the support they deserved and needed." Continued Hannah, "At that moment, I realized I wanted to write this story about the nurses."

Hannah's novels have sold more than 25 million copies across 50 countries.

If you have 'meant' to read a Kristin Hannah book but haven't quite gotten around to it — do it now. You will be richer for the experience.

David R. Altman, a 2024 finalist for the Georgia Author of the Year Award, lives in Hoschton with his wife, Lisa. He enlisted as an Army Reservist in 1972, but his unit was never activated during Vietnam. He can be reached at altmandavidr@gmail.com.



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