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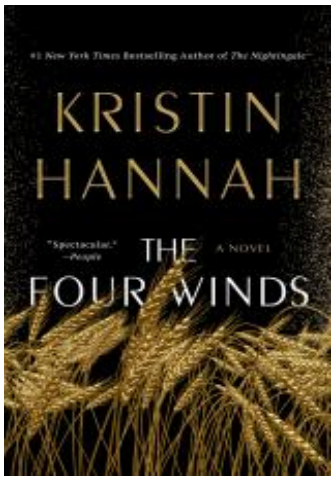
The Four Winds

by Kristin Hannah



About the Book

From the #1 bestselling author of THE NIGHTINGALE and THE GREAT ALONE comes a powerful American epic about love, heroism and hope, set during the Great Depression --- a time when the country was in crisis and at war with itself, millions were out of work, and even the land seemed to have turned against them.

?*My land tells its story if you listen. The story of our family.?*

Texas, 1921. A time of abundance. The Great War is over, the bounty of the land is plentiful, and America is on the brink of a new and optimistic era. But for Elsa Wolcott, deemed too old to marry in a time when marriage is a woman?s only option, the future seems bleak. Until the night she meets Rafe Martinelli and decides to change the direction of her life. With her reputation in ruin, there is only one respectable choice: marriage to a man she barely knows.

By 1934, the world has changed. Millions are out of work, and drought has devastated the Great Plains. Farmers are fighting to keep their land and their livelihoods as crops fail, water dries up and the earth cracks open. Dust storms roll relentlessly across the plains. Everything on the Martinelli farm is dying, including Elsa?s tenuous marriage; each day is a desperate battle against nature and a fight to keep her children alive.

In this uncertain and perilous time, Elsa --- like so many of her neighbors --- must make an agonizing choice: fight for the land she loves, or leave it behind and go west, to California, in search of a better life for her family.

THE FOUR WINDS is a rich, sweeping novel that stunningly brings to life the Great Depression and the people who lived through it --- the harsh realities that divided us as a nation and the enduring battle between the haves and the have-nots. A testament to hope, resilience and the strength of the human spirit to survive adversity, THE FOUR WINDS is an indelible portrait of America and the American dream, as seen through the eyes of one indomitable woman whose courage and sacrifice will come to define a generation.

Discussion Guide

1. ?Hope is a coin I carry?. There were times in my journey when it felt as if that penny and the hope it represented were the only things that kept me going.? (1) What is the significance of the fact that it is an American penny? In what ways does hope anchor us in the moment, and in what ways does it push us forward? Do you or your family have any keepsakes that represent your family?s hope for the future?

2. ?But we women of the Great Plains worked from sunup to sundown, too, toiled on wheat farms until we were as dry and baked as the land we loved.? (1) The stories of women have largely gone undocumented throughout history, and this era is no different. It is changing, slowly, and women?s courage and determination and victories are being brought to light. How are women?s stories different? Why do you think they?ve gone unreported for so long? Do you think sharing these stories will make a difference to future generations?

3. Life was very different for unmarried young women in earlier generations. Expectations for their future were sharply defined. How is Elsa shaped by these expectations and her failure to meet them? Do you think it would have been the same for her in New York City? Did you feel compressed by expectation when you were growing up? Do you think these societal mores were designed to keep women ?in their place?? How difficult is it to defy both family and society in a small town?

4. ?She wished she?d never read THE AGE OF INNOCENCE. What good came from all this unexpressed longing? She would never fall in love, never have a child of her own.? (8) Literature is, quite honestly, the opening of a door. Through that door, Elsa saw whole other lives, other futures. What books influenced you when you were growing up? Did any novel and/or character change your perception of either yourself or the world? Did you identify with Elsa and her journey throughout this book? In what way?

5. ?She had to believe there was grit in her, even if it had never been tested or revealed.? (9) This sentence highlights Elsa?s essentially hopeful nature, even though she doesn?t believe in herself. Her family and her world have pared her down to inconsequence. Does this idea resonate with you? Have you seen it at work in other people? In yourself?

6. In 1920s America, there was significant prejudice against Italians; we see that prejudice in Elsa?s own family. What does Rafe represent to Elsa on the night they meet? Is it simply sex and loneliness? Or do you think there?s something deeper involved? Another small defiance against her parents? small-mindedness? What does it say about Elsa that she went with Rafe so willingly?

7. ?My land tells its story if you listen. The story of our family. We plant, we tend, we harvest. I make wine from grape cuttings that I brought here from Sicily, and the wine I make reminds me of my father. It binds us, one to another, as it has for generations. Now it will bind you to us.? (51) How are people connected to the land that they occupy? What

about the land they farm? Describe that unique and complicated connection.

8. Motherhood changes Elsa in almost every way. What does she learn by becoming a mother? What does she learn about motherhood from Rose? How does motherhood strengthen a woman? How does it weaken her? How does Elsa remain ?herself? after giving birth? How does she change?

9. Few things can break a woman?s heart like motherhood. ?Elsa grieved daily for the loss of that closeness with her firstborn. At first she?d tried to scale the walls of her daughter?s adolescent, irrational anger; she?d volleyed back with words of love, but Loreda?s continuing, thriving impatience with Elsa had done worse than grind her down. It had resurrected all the insecurities of childhood.? (66) If you?re a parent, did this passage resonate with you? Why?

10. The adolescent years can be especially difficult on mothers and daughters. Did you dislike Loreda during these years? Did you understand her?

11. ?Tony and Rose were the kind of people who expected life to be hard and had become tougher to survive?. They might have come off the boat as Anthony and Rosalba, but hard work and the land had turned them into Tony and Rose. Americans. They would die of thirst and hunger before they?d give that up.? (76) Do you think this attitude is a common thread in those who across generations have come to chase the ?American Dream?? Why is land so important to that dream? How does one ?become American??

12. There is a strong thread running through this novel about man?s connection to the land. During the Dust Bowl, while many families went west in search of work and a better life, most of them stayed behind on their parched farms. Why do you think that is?

13. What bonds Loreda and her father? What dreams do they share? Do they intend to exclude Elsa, whom they perceive as just a workhorse? Or is she partially to blame for being ostracized? How does her lack of self-esteem color her relationships with her husband and eldest child?

14. What do you think about Rafe? Was he as trapped by his family?s expectations as Elsa had been by her own? Did you expect him to leave?

15. How would you describe the Texas landscape the author paints? With its dust storms and earth dry and zigzag cracked, is it like any you?ve known?

16. ?Even if they didn?t speak of their love, or share their feelings in long, heartfelt conversations, the bond was there. Sturdy. They?d sewn their lives together in the silent way of women unused to conversation. Day after day, they worked together, prayed together, held their growing family together through the hardships of farm life.? (90?91) Do you share a similar bond with the women in your life --- either as a mother, a daughter, or a daughter-in-law? With your friends? Why do you think female bonding is so important to women?

17. Why does Rafe leave, and what is he chasing out west? Do you have sympathy for how broken he felt by the poverty and hardship? Should Elsa have agreed to go with him? How does Elsa aim to fill his void, and why does she believe she loves him even after the abandonment?

18. Why does the Martinelli family stay under such brutal conditions --- the heat, the dust storms, the lack of food, and the dying livestock? Does it reveal anything about the grit that literally fills their bodies? What choices do they have, and what might you have done during the drought? Were you surprised that Elsa set off without her in-laws? Would you have had the courage to do the same?

19. How have the Dust Bowl and ?going west? been treated by the American imagination (perhaps in song or cinema)? What has been glamorized, and what grittiness has been left out or effectively captured? Elsa compares them to the early pioneers in their covered wagons. Is that an accurate comparison?

20. Life in California is not at all what the migrants expected, what advertisements had led them to believe. The locals treat them badly, are afraid of them. Why is that? How does the treatment of migrants in California during the Great Depression mirror the treatment of immigrants today? How is it the same? How is it different?

21. How do Elsa and her family remain unbroken even while enduring crippling poverty, food and shelter insecurity, and living in a town that is hostile to them? Would they have fared better in Texas?

22. What do Jack and the Communist union organizers offer the migrant workers, and Loreda in particular? Why is it a risk to associate with them, and what is Elsa?s hesitation?

23. In the 1930s, communism and socialism were on the rise, partially in response to the grinding poverty, joblessness and despair. The Communists claimed that ?communism is the new Americanism.? Can you understand why people believed in that? What do we know now that people didn?t know then? How do you think these perceptions have changed over time?

24. Discuss the shift in thinking that happens between generations --- the freedoms longed for and the sacrifices required. The Greatest Generation was shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. They willingly sacrificed for each other and did what they could to help. How is the modern world different? How do we face our own dark times?

25. How does the Great Depression setting of THE FOUR WINDS compare to America during the pandemic? What lessons of resilience and healing might be embedded in this story? How might others? struggles inspire us? Do you have any family stories from the Depression?

26. They say that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans were faced with many of the same challenges of the Great Depression. Did we learn from previous generations? What differences can you see in the two difficult times? What similarities? How do you think future generations will judge the America of today?

27. ?Courage is fear you ignore.? Discuss this. How do Elsa?s and Loreda?s actions embody this idea?

28. Fighting for any kind of social equality or radical change often requires great personal sacrifice. How does Elsa represent the courage it takes to stand up and make trouble and be counted?

29. Why was it so important for Loreda to get her mother back to Texas, even if at such a high cost? How did she finally come to understand her mother and her choices through a new lens?

30. Did you find the end of Elsa?s and her family?s journey satisfying? Where do you think Ant and Loreda ended up? How do you see Loreda?s life being like her mother?s? How will it be different?

Author Bio

Kristin Hannah is the award-winning and bestselling author of more than 20 novels, including the international blockbuster, THE NIGHTINGALE, which was named Goodreads Best Historical Fiction novel for 2015 and won the coveted People?s Choice award for best fiction in the same year. Additionally, it was a selection of the Reese Witherspoon Book Club in 2023. It was named a Best Book of the Year by Amazon, iTunes, Buzzfeed, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Paste* and *The Week*. In 2018, THE GREAT ALONE became an instant *New York Times* #1 bestseller and was named the Best Historical Novel of the Year by Goodreads.

THE FOUR WINDS was published in February 2021 and immediately hit #1 on the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and Indie bookstores? bestseller lists. Additionally, it was selected as a book club pick by the both "Today" and the Book of the Month club, which named it the best book of 2021.

THE NIGHTINGALE is currently in production at Tri Star, with Dakota and Elle Fanning set to star. Tri Star has also optioned THE GREAT ALONE, and it is in development. FIREFLY LANE, her beloved novel about two best friends, was the #1 Netflix series around the world, in the week it came out. The popular TV show starred Katherine Heigl and Sarah Chalke, and season two concluded the series in April 2023.

A former attorney, Kristin lives in the Pacific Northwest.

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