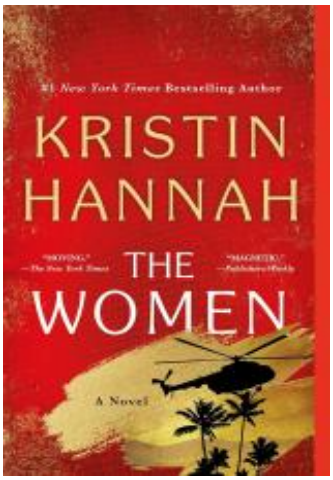
The Women

by Kristin Hannah



About the Book

From the celebrated author of THE NIGHTINGALE and THE FOUR WINDS comes Kristin Hannah's THE WOMEN --- at once an intimate portrait of coming of age in a dangerous time and an epic tale of a nation divided.

Women can be heroes. When 20-year-old nursing student Frances ?Frankie? McGrath hears these words, it is a revelation. Raised in the sun-drenched, idyllic world of Southern California and sheltered by her conservative parents, she has always prided herself on doing the right thing. But in 1965, the world is changing, and she suddenly dares to imagine a different future for herself. When her brother ships out to serve in Vietnam, she joins the Army Nurse Corps and follows his path.

As green and inexperienced as the men sent to Vietnam to fight, Frankie is overwhelmed by the chaos and destruction of war. Each day is a gamble of life and death, hope and betrayal; friendships run deep and can be shattered in an instant. In war, she meets --- and becomes one of --- the lucky, the brave, the broken and the lost.

But war is just the beginning for Frankie and her veteran friends. The real battle lies in coming home to a changed and divided America, to angry protesters, and to a country that wants to forget Vietnam.

THE WOMEN is the story of one woman gone to war, but it shines a light on all women who put themselves in harm?s way and whose sacrifice and commitment to their country has too often been forgotten. A novel about deep friendships and bold patriotism, THE WOMEN is a richly drawn story with a memorable heroine whose idealism and courage under fire will come to define an era.

Discussion Guide

1. ?Women can be heroes.? Frankie believes her future as a wife and mother is set in stone until Rye says this. It is a

small comment that tears a big hole in Frankie?s perception of the world. These words, and her brother?s enlistment, inspire Frankie to join the Army Nurse Corps. It is a decision founded on the patriotism of the post-World War II era and her family?s proud history of service.

Why do you think Frankie?s parents were so appalled by her enlistment in the Army? Was it simply her sex? Or was there more to it? Discuss how the ?conformity? of the 1950s caged women and the ?freedom? of the 1960s changed the perception of where women ?belong.? How do you think Bette and Connor?s own family history of service impacted their opinion of her choice?

2. Frankie arrives in Vietnam filled with idealism and hope. She wants to ?make a difference.? But almost instantly, she is thrust into the truth of war: the trauma, the heartbreak, the fear. She thinks that she is too inexperienced and that she has made a mistake. It is Ethel who talks her through this and gives her comfort. How does this friendship change and grow over time? How do Ethel and Barb change Frankie?s view of the world?

3. Throughout the novel, characters listen to the pop music of the 1960s by such bands as The Beatles, The Doors, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Cream. Classic Rock is now more than 50 years old, and artists from that era continue to tour and sell out arenas. Why do you think the 1960s music that reflected the counterculture and changing mores continues to appeal to so many generations of fans? Are the lyrics of these songs and the stories they tell still relevant in the 21st century? Are you a fan of Classic Rock? Which songs? Which artists? What do they mean to you and why?

4. During her Tour of Duty, Frankie evolves from sheltered young woman into hardened combat nurse. As wounded flood into the hospital, she begins to question the American government?s involvement in the war. She sees the truth behind the lies that are being told in the media and at home. The Vietnam generation was fueled by dreams and lost on the battlefield. Discuss how the political climate changed the war and how disillusionment with the government changed Americans? minds.

5. In Vietnam, Frankie saves lives. During her service, she is aware of the protests going on ?back in the world?: the flag burnings and the sit-ins and the marches. She wonders why people can?t oppose the war but support the soldiers. Even so, when she returns home after two tours in Vietnam, she is stunned by the lack of welcome she receives. She is spit on at the airport and has trouble finding a cab to take her home. Once there, she learns that her parents are so ashamed of her service that they lied to their country club friends about it. She realizes quickly that Vietnam veterans are not respected; there is no thank-you for their service. The only way to survive is to ?disappear? into the landscape and not talk about the war.

How did this impact a generation of Americans? What would it feel like to have served your country in wartime only to be spit upon when you came home? How did this treatment affect the veterans in both the long and short term? How did it affect Frankie? Can you understand her trauma?

6. Explore and discuss the theme of honor in the novel as it relates to Frankie?s decisions about the war, about her life after the war, and about Jamie and Rye. What is her moral code? Other nurses tell Frankie that in Vietnam, ?men lie and they die.? How does this statement reflect the events of the novel?

7. ?There were no women in Vietnam.? When Frankie returns stateside, she encounters people who refuse to take her

service and her experiences seriously and ignore her requests for help. Today, women continue to fight for their health rights against a medical system that fails to actively listen and address women?s health concerns. Have you ever felt dismissed by a doctor or a hospital when discussing your health? Do you think gender plays a role in how doctors treat their patients?

8. Clearly, Frankie suffers from PTSD after the war. At that time, there was very little understanding of the effects of PTSD, and both the military and the medical community dismissed the notion that a woman could suffer from the effects of war. Frankie herself believes that she ?wasn?t in combat.? Was she? How do you define being in combat?

9. Over the years, Frankie is more and more affected by her PTSD, although she has no way to understand it and no one to help her deal with it. Her symptoms make her feel more alone, more of a failure. But she tries valiantly to ?soldier on.? It isn?t until her miscarriage and Rye?s return from the Hanoi Hilton that she really begins to spiral out of control. This is when her mother gives her drugs to ?take the edge off.? These highly addictive drugs were advertised and prescribed to women as ?Mother?s Little Helpers.?

Why do you think such ads existed? What purpose did they serve? How did you feel about Frankie?s coping behavior? Was there ever a time in your life when you felt so alone and helpless that you didn?t know what to do? How did Frankie?s mental and emotional health journey make you feel?

10. The stigma of mental illness remains prevalent today, and many people would rather suffer in silence than seek help. What do you do to maintain your mental and emotional health? Do you have a supportive group of family and friends to turn to in times of crisis?

11. About her time at war and her understanding of it, Frankie writes: ?It?s hard to see clearly when the world is angry and divided and you?re being lied to.? This sentiment applies to many eras throughout human history, including our own. What lessons can we learn from the Vietnam era? Why do you think the world is so polarized now? How much difference does truth make, and consensus, and community? The end of the war was the beginning of healing for America in the time of the novel. What would begin to heal America today? How can individuals make a difference?

12. What do you think was Frankie?s darkest moment in the book? What do you think ?broke? Frankie? Was it her service and the horrors she witnessed? Was it PTSD? The miscarriage? Or was it breaking her own moral code --- having an affair with a married man? What should Frankie have done when she learned that Rye was alive? Did you see his betrayal coming? Should Frankie have seen it? What were the clues she missed? Do you believe Rye loved her?

13. In the novel, Frankie goes from sheltered California girl to hardened combat veteran to woman at peace with herself and the world. Her peace is hard-won and continually fought for. In the end, what was it that healed her? Was it friendship? The creation of The Vietnam Veterans Memorial to honor Vietnam veterans? Therapy? Sobriety? How did you feel about Frankie at the end of the novel? Where do you think she goes after the end of the novel? What does the rest of her life look like?

14. At the end of the book, Frankie realizes that ?remembrance mattered.? What does she mean by this? Discuss the history of Vietnam-era veterans --- their service and their treatment upon coming home --- and ask yourself what you have learned from this story. What do we owe to our veterans and their families? How can we truly thank them for their service and their sacrifice?

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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