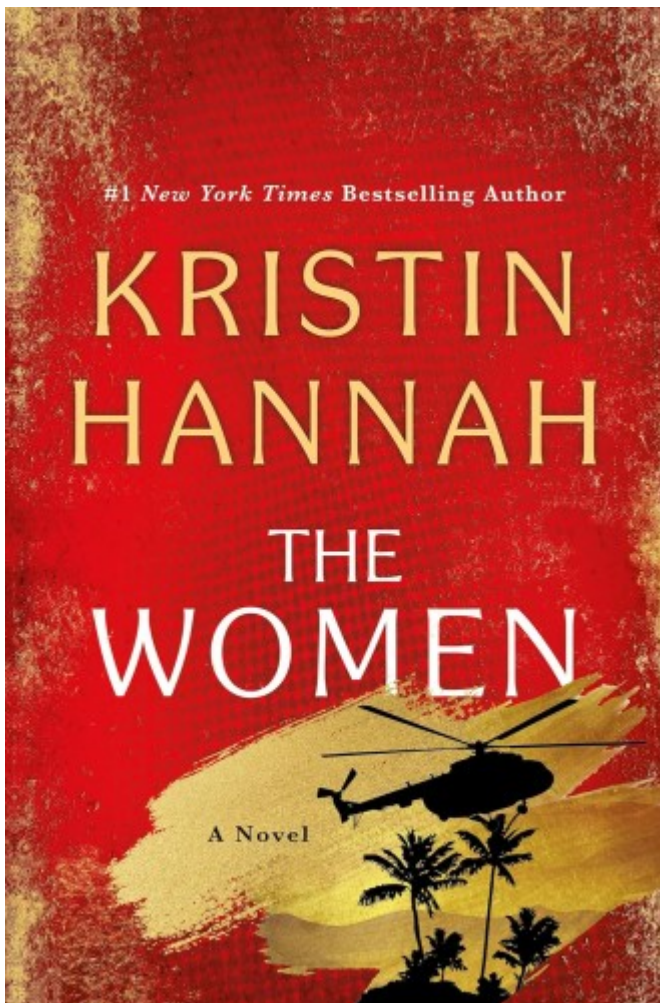


The women who would be war heroes

Kristin Hannah's novel is based on military nurses' firsthand accounts of their experiences in Vietnam.

by [Grant Wacker](#) in the [January 2025](#) issue
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In Review



The Women

A Novel

By Kristin Hannah

St. Martin's Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

For many Americans, the tears never stopped. While the 1973 Paris Peace Accords stilled the guns of the Vietnam War, they did not still the legacy of atrocities on all sides nor the record of leaders' lies on all sides—including those told by three US presidents.

Neither did the accords still our systemic pretense that women played little or no role in the conflict. Granted, women formed only a fraction of the combatants (roughly 10,000 of 3.1 million) and only a tiny fraction of the fatalities (eight of 58,000). But those data obscure a deeper truth. Ninety percent of the women who served in Vietnam were nurses, and they saved thousands of lives. Not without cost: all eight of the women killed were nurses.

The Women is a novel, but Kristin Hannah bases it on sustained research into military nurses' firsthand accounts of their experiences in Vietnam. She constructs one Frankie McGrath to symbolize all of them. Frankie is a White Catholic college graduate when she joins the Army Nurse Corps and ships out to Vietnam. She hopes to serve her country while becoming a war hero like the men in her family.

Frankie, like the nation, careens from naïveté to idealism to disillusionment to despair to remorse and finally to (a sort of) redemption, but not in clean stages. Complications and ironies punctuate her life at every turn, including the plain fact that war heroes are men; women need not apply.

For Frankie, the fundamental reality of daily life in the combat zone is suffering—bloody, unremitting suffering:

Medics ran in and out, carrying men on litters: one lay screaming, his own severed leg on his chest; another had no legs at all. . . . Frankie was overwhelmed by the horror of it. The screaming, the smoke, the shouting. A medic saw Frankie standing there and shoved a boot into her arms. She stared down at it, saw that a foot was still inside.

The nightmares that haunt Frankie's life in Vietnam only grow worse when she returns home. "Go back to Vietnam!" someone yells at her. "We don't want you baby killers here." Although she too has become disillusioned by the government's justifications for the conflict, she wonders why Americans can't support the soldiers while hating the war. "Freedom isn't free, asshole," Frankie shouts at one protester. "How come you aren't in Canada?"

Fortunately, flashes of humor lighten the narrative. "Doctors aren't gods here?" Frankie asks her hutch mate when she arrives in Vietnam. "Of course they are. Just ask them," is the reply. Frankie's letters home speak worlds: "Please send some hand lotion, tampons (they sell out in the PX because the men out in the bush use them to clean their rifles), shampoo, crème rinse, and . . . perfume. The boys love it when I smell like the girls back in the world."

The sisterhood forged in the emergency and operating rooms looms in Frankie's memory. When she considers her closest friends among the nurses—one a sort-of-radical Black activist, the other a sort-of-traditional farm girl, and herself, still a sort-of-good Catholic girl—she marvels that back home they "might never have met each other, might never have become friends, but this war had made them sisters." They know the score with men, too. Just as at home, the men in Vietnam try to run everything. Frankie quickly learns that men are not always gentlemen. "You gotta be careful," a veteran nurse warns her. "Over here, the men lie and they die."

Hannah says nothing about chaplains, although with 600 in service and more than a dozen killed, they formed a major presence during the war. They ministered to the wounded and the dying not only on the field but also in the hospitals, alongside the nurses. Including a chaplain in Frankie's story may not have changed much, however, for chaplains too were creatures of their time and place.

The Women is Hannah's 25th novel, and it has been wildly successful. It sold 2 million copies (in various formats) within four months of its publication. Hannah—a lawyer turned writer—clearly knows how to touch chords in the wider culture.

The reasons are easy to see. One is the prose. Hannah writes with crisp verbs, memorable adjectives, and phrases to take to the bank. She also has an uncanny ear for the rhythms of daily speech. She chooses her words carefully, for words are, as Frankie observes at one point, "creators of worlds." Hannah's artistry lies in the

appearance of artlessness.

The book's moral punch is another reason for its grip on the market. *The Women* opens readers' eyes to the unconscious and conscious ways our culture eclipses women. Though the life of the church falls outside Hannah's focus, for many it stands front and center. Women have long played leading roles, faithfully attending, greeting, visiting, teaching, tithing, testifying, consoling, preaching, and, yes, baking. Across the theological spectrum, however, women usually get billed as part of the supporting cast.

The book's moral punch takes another form too. Hannah echoes the wisdom of the psalmist: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Ps. 92:12, KJV). She makes the point differently but no less forcefully. "Life over here is short and regret lasts forever," one character remarks. "Maybe happy now, happy for a moment, is all we really get. Happy forever seems a shitload to ask in a world on fire." The Vietnam War, like all wars, reminds us that "there was never enough time with the people who mattered." Numbering our days instills perspective.

In 1960, millions of thoughtful Americans truly believed that either we stop the communists in Saigon today or we stop them in Honolulu tomorrow. That narrative—which I too embraced at the time—set the context for another one, narrower in scope but just as tragic in its import: the persistent occlusion of women.

Until now, that is. "The women had a story to tell," Hannah writes, and "their story began with three simple words. *We were there.*" The message of *The Women* is clear. It is time for women to be no longer viewed but seen.