

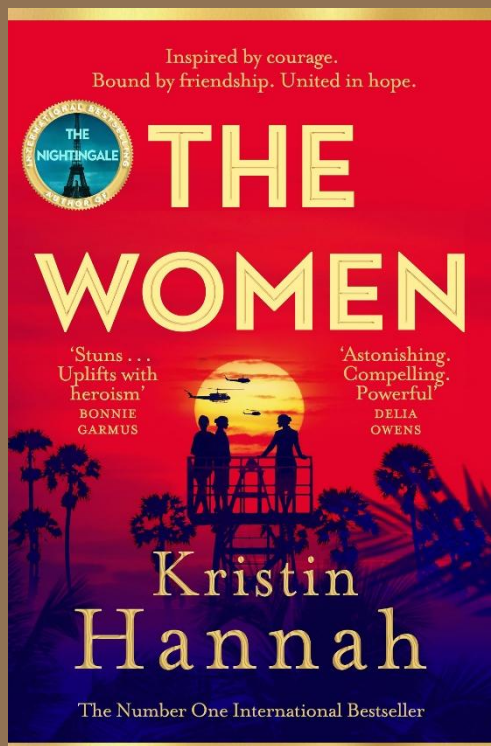
ACJournalism

The Women: Book review

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The Women by Kristin Hannah



'Women can be heroes, too.' When twenty-year-old nursing student, Frances "Frankie" McGrath, hears these unexpected words, it is a revelation. Raised on California's idyllic Coronado Island and sheltered by her conservative parents, she has always prided herself on doing the right thing, being a good girl. But in 1965 the world is changing, and she suddenly imagines a different path for her life. When her brother ships out to serve in Vietnam, she impulsively joins the Army Nurses Corps and follows his path.

As green and inexperienced as the young men sent to Vietnam to fight, Frankie is overwhelmed by the chaos and destruction of war, as well as the unexpected trauma of coming home to a changed America. Frankie will also discover the true value of female friendship and the heartbreak that love can cause.

My thoughts

The Women is a historical fiction depicting the events of the Vietnam war through a female lens. We follow Frances "Frankie" McGrath throughout her time at war where she serves as a nurse for the United States Army. Frankie grew up privileged and she led a very sheltered life. Her whole life changed at her brothers send off party. It's here where the famous words 'women can be heroes too' were spoken to her. From this moment Frankie knew this was something she wanted to be a part of too.

The first half of the book is about Frankie's time in Vietnam. She arrives as a naïve, innocent young girl but by the end she is an integral part of the team. The character development is indeed intentional, to convey how traumatic and life changing the war is. The second half of the book explores Frankie's life post war. When she arrives home from her tour, life is not the same and themes of mental health and PTSD are present. Frankie quickly learns that she is not okay, and she wants to seek help, unfortunately she is met with rejection after rejection as no one took women seriously at this time. Hannah's storytelling in this segment taught me that a lot of Americans failed to recognise women's existence in war, they only believed men served.

Frankie's female friendships are what helps navigate her through post war life. Ethel and Barb, who also were prevalent characters during the tour, help Frankie by taking her in. Their shared experiences allow them to relate to each other.

This book was a real page turner. Hannah's fluency combined with such an interesting topic made me never want to put the book down. Hannah explored various themes that each held great importance, and she executed each one perfectly. We had friendship, which was depicted so beautifully and honestly between Frankie, Ethel and Barb. Intertwined with this, Hannah explored grief which is rife during a novel based on war. We saw how grief affects people in different ways. One of the main themes however was shame and perhaps ignorance. One of the main catalysts for Frankie wanting to serve was because she wanted her face on her father's heroes' wall. This wall was full of male veterans in their family. However, when she arrived home, Frankie was met with shame in her father's eyes and told women don't belong on this wall. Her father had even lied to the community, telling them Frankie had been on a trip overseas. The fact Frankie is constantly dismissed as a female veteran, as discussed above, is another depiction of shame.

While I had high expectations of this novel, with other book reviewers often rating it 5, I ended up giving it solid 4 stars. The reason being, I found the romances too predictable and while relatable, I think they were unnecessary in a novel that is focusing on such an important issue and historic event. I didn't appreciate how a novel that was supposed to focus on women, their experience and the empowerment of women needing to be heard, kept turning back to an irrelevant story about a man. Although typical in society, it could've been left out of this book. Perhaps that's the irony and my misunderstanding...

The very final page saw Frankie staring at the memorial wall that had been built for the men that served. Frankie was disappointed that no woman had been noticed. However, immediately after this thought, she saw a man she thought was killed and the focus went straight back to their reunion and. Another point on this, it lacked 5 stars for me due to the unrealistic narrative that appeared throughout regarding army men coming back to life.

Regardless of this, I thought it was an amazing piece of fiction; one that was greatly educational. As a girl from the UK, I didn't learn any American history at school, so this topic was entirely new to me. I

didn't even realise the war lasted 10 years until this book! I could tell how much time and research Hannah had put into this and it really was a topic of great importance that needed to be covered. I also love feminist novels, so the genre itself appealed to me.

Themes: War, mental health, friendship, romance, bravery, history