

Book & Bake

14th June, 2025

The Women by Kristin Hannah

WOMEN? IN THE VIETNAM WAR??

YES....A BIT OF BACKGROUND



A little known fact.....11,000 American women were stationed in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Some were there during the 1950s but as the war escalated, the US created a campaign to attract women to serve during the Vietnam War. It was named “Operation Nightingale” and the goal was to glorify nursing to women, with the outcome of finding a husband while there. Some women went with the hopes of indeed, finding romance while others sought adventure. Nurses such as Francis (Frankie) served out of patriotism and perhaps, (and we can talk about this) to seek the praise of her parents.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

Conditions for American nurses in Vietnam were just as brutal as those for the soldiers. They stayed in housing units called “hootches” that were often infested with rodents, insects, and mold. They faced illness, injury, and life-long health issues due to napalm and other hazardous chemicals such as Agent Orange.

Women also faced the same challenges as the male soldiers upon returning to the USA after their tour ended. Anti war sentiment was harsh, alienating, and perpetuated the trauma for these veterans.



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CHARACTERS

FRANCIS (FRANKIE) MCGRATH



Frankie is an intelligent rule follower who has an incredibly close bond with her brother, Finley. After college, she is hesitant to become the socialite that her parents want her to be; she feels lost and without purpose. These feelings, along with her longing to be closer to Finley, fuel her decision to join the Army and serve as a nurse in Vietnam. This changes the course of Frankie's life and she soon learns that rule following is not always the right thing to do. Frankie's skills as a nurse are strengthened as she works to become a surgical nurse and faces the horrors of the Vietnam war. She grows a tough outer shell to survive but upon return to the states, she is faced with challenges that eventually break her, forcing her to pull from her inner strength to emerge from the ashes left from all of the pain and loss she has suffered.

THE MCGRATH FAMILY

Bette, Conner, and Finley are key characters in that they seem to drive Frankie's intentions. As siblings, Finley (Fin) and Frankie had a strong bond and Frankie's motivation to serve in Vietnam is rooted in her desire to be there with him. Even after his death, Finley continued to be a strong presence in her life.

Conner McGrath was unable to serve in the military, much to his disappointment as that is how he sees male honor...through military service. He took great pride in Finley going to Vietnam to serve yet had no fatherly pride for Frankie. This is evidenced often by his behaviors toward her upon arriving home. "I have no idea who you are anymore."

Frankie's parents are depicted as traditional and concerned with societal expectations. Her father Conner, in particular, takes pride in military service and holds a reverence for it, as seen in his admiration for Finley's graduation from the Naval Academy. Bette McGrath is a typical socialite with a sharp, sometimes witty tongue. Both parents struggle to accept Frankie's decision to serve in Vietnam, as it contradicts their traditional views on gender roles. They prioritize reputation and are ashamed of Frankie's service, preferring to present her in a more traditional feminine light.



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ETHEL AND BARBARA



These two seasoned nurses are jaded by war when Francis first meets them and act as a foil early on to naive Frankie. Despite their differences, they support Frankie by providing advice regarding love interests Jamie Callahan and Rye Walsh. Overall, they cope with trauma by making jokes, drinking alcohol, and dancing. It doesn't take long for strong bonds to form that end up lasting a lifetime.

Ethel volunteered to serve to follow her first love, George, who died. She served two tours in Saigon, and by the time she left, she knew there was nothing she couldn't face. "*I want it all, Frank.*" Upon return to the states, she returned to veterinary school, found love, and lived on a ranch in Virginia.

Barb is considered the best surgical nurse in the Thirty-Sixth Evacuation Hospital. The bond that forms between Barb and Frankie is especially strong. When Frankie is transferred to Pleiku (71st Evacuation Hospital), known for heavy fighting, Barb transfers along with her, to keep her close. After returning home, Barb encourages Frankie to find a new purpose in her civilian life. For Barb herself, this takes the form of anti-war protests—especially after the death of her brother in a riot. She eventually confesses to Frankie that she, too, suffers from nightmares of the war.

JAMIE CALLAHAN

American surgeon stationed in Vietnam, Jamie was the first man with whom Frankie connected. Her moral compass kept their relationship on the level, so to speak, since he was married and had a child back home. Jamie's respect for Frankie's decision is an indicator of his character and the two of them built a strong friendship bond. Professionally, they were in sync and under Jamie's guidance, Francis gained invaluable experience as a surgical nurse. Early in Frankie's stay in Saigon, she witnessed Jamie die in an evacuation chopper resulting in a second devastating personal loss.

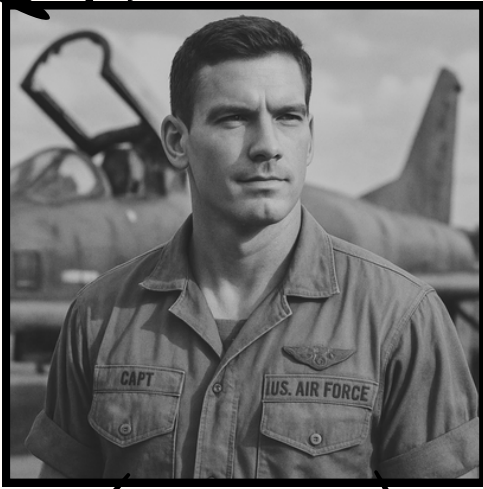


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RYE WALSH



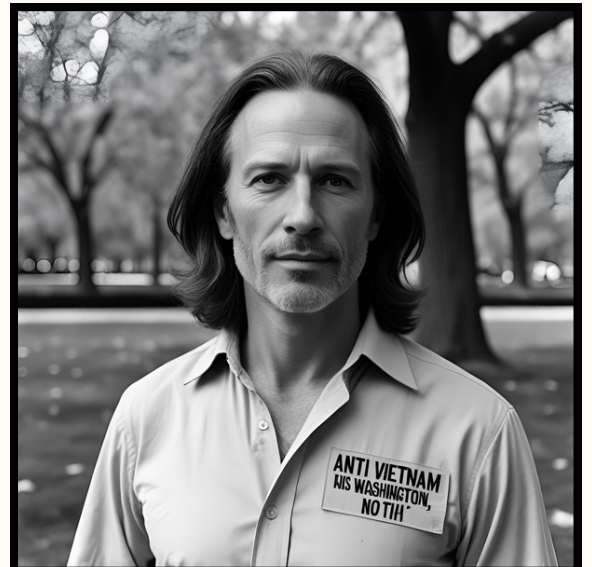
Rye is a friend of Finley McGrath. He is confident, handsome, and served as a respected Captain in Vietnam. He is certainly a defining person in Frankie's life as he is the first person to tell her that women can be heroes too. He recognizes her intelligence and potential which, at the time, is not something Frankie (or women in general) heard from men.

When the two connect in Vietnam for the first time, Rye pursues Frankie, even though he is "engaged" but Frankie, again following her moral compass, turns him down. Later when they meet in Hawaii (thanks to Rye), he swears to Frankie that he is no longer engaged. This is the beginning of their physical relationship and Frankie falls hard for him, thinking that they will build a life together after they return home.

The romance is brief as Rye is allegedly killed in action. After the war, Frankie learns that Rye was captured and kept as a prisoner of war. She is again devastated when she discovers that he was married with a child before he left for Vietnam. Rye's deception is soul crushing to Frankie.

HENRY ACEVEDO

Henry is a psychiatrist who opposes the war but supports veterans. He is warm and caring. He and Frankie first meet at a veteran's march in Washington D.C. As a psychiatrist, Henry recognizes Frankie's PTSD and respects her boundaries, though he does fall in love with her. When she becomes pregnant, Henry is happy and hopes to build a life with Frankie moving forward. Even after their romance fails, Henry (who is hurt) continues to care for Frankie following her rock bottom experience though his rehabilitation center for veterans.



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THEMES TO EXPLORE

DISCOVERING ONE'S PURPOSE



In 1960s America, a woman's purpose and place were widely accepted to be in the home. Frankie desires a career and a purpose beyond being a wife and mother. Specifically, she wants to help others through emotional support and healthcare, as reflected in her college major in nursing. By following in her brother's footsteps, Frankie *attempts* to align her desire for a life of purpose with her parents' values and beliefs.

Upon returning home, Frankie experiences the negative impact of losing one's sense of purpose. She is given only menial tasks as a nurse due to her lack of civilian experience. She feels the work has little meaning and impact and this contributes to her decline in mental stability.

QUESTION: FRANKIE REBELS AGAINST GENDERED NORMS FOR HER ERA, FIRST BY FOCUSING ON PURSUING A CAREER AND THEN BY ENLISTING TO GO TO VIETNAM.

- **HAVE YOU EVER MADE A DECISION THAT WAS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT PEOPLE AROUND YOU EXPECTED YOU TO DO?**
- **WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO DO SO? DID THE DECISION HAVE THE OUTCOME YOU HOPED FOR?**

WOMEN AS HEROES

Rye tells Francis in chapter one that women can be heroes. This seems a revelation to Francis and she is determined to prove him right. Her family reveres military service; Frankie assumes they will feel the same way about her military service as they do the other members of the hero wall. This is not the case and Frankie is further shocked when, upon return home, she is told that there were no women in Vietnam. Her father lied about her whereabouts, and male veterans deny her the support she desperately needs stating the supports are just for the men who served in Vietnam; there were no women there. By the end of the novel, a decade has passed since the war ended, and female veterans finally receive some of the recognition they deserve.

- **HOW DOES THE FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE WOMEN SERVICE IN VIETNAM IMPACT THE FEMALE CHARACTERS' SENSE OF IDENTITY AND BELONGING?**
- **ARE THERE MODERN PARALLELS IN HOW WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS ARE ACKNOWLEDGED ACROSS VARIOUS FIELDS TODAY?**

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EMOTIONAL TOLL OF WAR

- **HOW COULD TODAY'S APPROACHES TO MENTAL HEALTH HAVE ALTERED FRANKIE'S POST-WAR EXPERIENCE?**
- **CAN FEMALE HEROISM IN WARTIME SETTINGS, AS DEMONSTRATED BY FRANKIE AND HER FELLOW NURSES, BE CONSIDERED EQUALLY SIGNIFICANT AS MALE HEROISM ON THE BATTLEFIELD, OR DO SOCIETAL BIASES CONTINUE TO DIMINISH THE RECOGNITION OF THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS?**

The setting of the novel plays a key role here. We know more now about mental health than we did back in the 60s, right? It is also a good idea to note how the media was not really sharing the real story during the Vietnam war....the paper, *Stars & Stripes*, reported that we were winning the war and that wasn't the case at all. Frankie's experiences illustrate that not only does war negatively impact the mental health of those who live through conflict, but also that the effects on emotional and mental well-being can be highly isolating: Frankie's challenges with her mental health are heightened because she is forced to face them alone.

It is finally at the rehabilitation facility that Frankie is encouraged to confront her painful memories through journaling and counseling.



Bonus:
A real hero!

THEIR STORIES MATTER.....



First Lieutenant Mary Breed enlisted after losing her brother in Vietnam in 1968. She worked at the 18th Surgical Hospital and the 95th Evacuation Hospital. She recalls a conversation with a male veteran who recognized her in a store.

"He said, 'You were my nurse in Vietnam,'" she said. "He told me I took off his leg. I took off so many legs. I asked him how he recognized me, and he said, 'When you're dying, you remember the last person you heard. You said to me, 'I'll take good care of you.'"

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QUESTIONS TO PONDER



1. How did Frankie's idea of a hero change throughout the novel? How did your views shift if at all?

2. Discuss the difference between Frankie's post war experience and that of Barb and Ethel.

3. What were your thoughts and feelings about Bette and Connor McGrath? How did their treatment of Frankie impact you? (We know the impact it had on Frankie.)

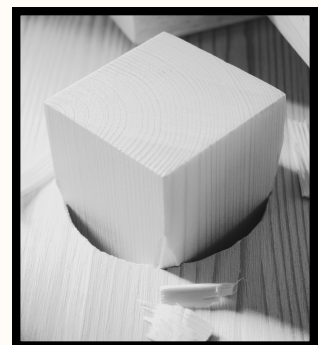
"Can someone please explain to me how bouncing breasts advance the cause of freedom?"

~Bette McGrath (p. 75)

4. Let's talk about Rye Walsh.

- At what time during the course of your reading journey, if ever, did you feel a bit of compassion for Rye despite his lies to Frankie?
- Do you feel Rye was ever genuine regarding his feelings for Frankie?
- What was your reaction when Rye greeted his wife at the airport?

5. Were you "pulling for" Frankie and Henry as a couple? Why or why not?



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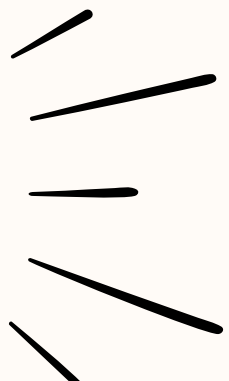
QUESTIONS TO PONDER

6. How did the evolution of Frankie's letters home (from optimistic to critical of the war) mirror her personal evolution?



7. The "Heroes Wall" in Frankie's house serves as a symbol of sacrifice and pride. Frankie was so hurt when her father initially excluded her. Describe your feelings about this, and reflect....what is *your* "Heroes Wall"?

8. How did your feelings about Rye and Jamie *differ*? Both men were married. Both wanted to be intimate with Francis. Further, why does it seem that infidelity was common (at least in the story's context) during the war?



"I swear I'm not engaged."

~Rye Walsh (p. 186)

9. How long did you trust Rye?

10. So....what happened with Jamie and Frankie?



11. Share your thoughts on the evolution of Conner McGrath.