

The Women, by Kristin Hannah

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

The Vietnam War has been the subject of several recent novels including *Dust Child*, by Nguyen Phan Que Mai, and *The Red Lotus*, Chris Bohjalian's mystery thriller. In her new bestseller *The Women*, Kristin Hannah focuses on the dedicated American nurses who served in Vietnam.

The Women begins in May 1966 at a party given by Connor and Bette McGrath in their elegant Coronado, California, home. Their son Finley, a newly commissioned Navy Ensign, is bound for service in Vietnam. In the family's den, a "Heroes' Wall" features framed photos of McGrath military men. Wanting to follow her brother to Vietnam, 20-year-old Frances, nicknamed "Frankie," impulsively signs up to join the Army as a nurse.

Arriving in Vietnam, Frankie immediately is sent to the Thirty-Sixth Evacuation Hospital, 60 miles from Saigon. "From here," the head nurse tells Frankie, "the lucky ones go to the Third Field Hospital for more specialized treatment; the unlucky ones go back to their units; and the really unlucky ones go home in a box."

Frankie is unprepared for the daily trauma, and she dreads the distinctive drone of helicopters signaling incoming casualties. The two veteran nurses who share her Quonset hut take Frankie under their wings. Ethel Flint, a red-headed nurse from Virginia, reminds her that "many of the soldiers we treat go back to their families because of us." No-nonsense Barb Johnson, a Black woman from Georgia, however, warns Frankie, "Men here, they lie and they die."

Despite Barb's admonition, Frankie embarks on a heart-breaking romance. Extending her tour of duty to a second year, she felt "competent and important. This place would forever hold a piece of her heart, and she was afraid that "home" was no longer the place she wanted to be." Frankie's reentry into her parents' country-club world would be challenging.

Those of us who came of age in the '60s will recognize cultural references of the era scattered throughout the novel, such as the songs "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and "Like a Rolling Stone" played at the Officers Club. It is disappointing, nevertheless, that the author's historical research is spotty at times, with some inaccuracies popping up in the narrative.

The Women—a must-read novel—is a long-overdue tribute to the heroic nurses and their valiant service. Returning from Vietnam, Frankie sought to share their experience: "The women had a story to tell, even if the world wasn't quite yet ready to hear it, and their story began with three simple words: *We were there.*"