

Book Review: The Women
By Kristin Hannah

Having read, and thoroughly enjoyed, Kristin Hannah's "The Nightingale" a few years back, I was looking forward to reading "The Women," in particular because I grew up in the 1960s amid the tumult and tragedy that was Vietnam.

But I'm sorry to say – and I know I'm in the minority here – the book was a major letdown for me.

It's 1966, and 21-year-old Frances "Frankie" McGrath is heading off to Vietnam as a nurse in the United States Army.

Why?

Because having grown up sheltered in an idyllic world on Coronado Island in Southern California; in a family with a huge naval history, not to mention her father's photographic Wall of Heroes in his home office and her older brother, Finley, having recently enlisted, Frankie believes that she can "make a difference."

She also becomes driven by the words of her brother's childhood friend, Joseph Ryerson "Rye" Walsh (trust me, you'll hate him before the story is over), that women can be heroes.

Of course, her parents are furious with her decision. Men serve in the military, her father tells her, not women. To make matters worse, the day she announces her enlistment is the day the McGraths are visited by two military officers informing them their son Finley has died in a helicopter crash.

That's a bit of foreshadowing, because from that point forward, just about every negative emotional event that could come Frankie's way does. From the moment she arrives at her assigned evacuation hospital some 60 miles from Saigon, it's one tragedy

after another. That's not to say that every day wasn't a living Hell in Vietnam, as were many homecomings at a time when PTSD wasn't even a concept. But Frankie's never-ending nightmare feels a bit over the top after a while.

What's missing, in my opinion, is more substance reflecting the book's title. At the end of Part 1 I thought, okay, now we're going to get another perspective. Perhaps more story about Barb or Ethel, the nurses who are there to support Frankie at every turn – in Vietnam and again at home. But all we get is Frankie. And if it's not something out of her control is happening *to* her, she's making yet another dumb decision and bringing about self-inflicted pain. I kept waiting for her to put a sign on her back saying, "Kick Me."

We're also asked to believe, both around midway through the book and at the end, that having died doesn't necessarily mean you're dead. I won't elaborate with too many spoilers. Suffice to say the storyline at times becomes a bit far-fetched.

Hannah certainly provides a vivid description of the Vietnam landscape, complete with heat, humidity, monsoons, blood and guts. And the book's premise – the perspective of the women of Vietnam who often provided the glue that held combat units together – is an important story to tell. In this case, however, I don't believe the execution lived up to the promise.

I'm certainly in the minority here, but I can't muster more than 2 out of 5 stars for "The Women." If you do sign up for the read, I welcome your thoughts.