

The Nightingale

BOOK CLUB KIT

In love, we find out who we want to be.

In war, we find out who we are.

#1 New York Times bestselling author Kristin Hannah captures the epic panorama of World War II and illuminates an intimate part of history seldom seen: the women's war. *The Nightingale* tells the story of two sisters, separated by years and experience, each embarking on her own dangerous path toward survival, love and freedom in German-occupied, war-torn France.



A Conversation with Kristin Hannah

Do you have any personal experience with the Second World War—relatives living in France, or anywhere in Europe, during that time? Family or friends who went to fight abroad? What inspired you to write about this chapter in history?

I do not have any personal experience with World War II. Maybe that's why I love the stories of women who joined the Resistance during the war. They are powerful, compelling stories of ordinary women who became heroes, some at great personal cost.

I first came across the idea for *The Nightingale* years ago, when I was researching World War II Russia. When I read about an otherwise ordinary young Belgian woman who created an escape line for downed airman, I was mesmerized by her courage and resilience. Her story was the inspiration for Isabelle, but there were dozens of women who had equally compelling stories of courage and heroism and tragedy. I knew I had to write a novel about the many women who became spies and couriers and risked their lives to save others during the war. And then there were the women who hid Jewish children in their homes. These courageous women put themselves directly in harm's way. Many of them paid a terrible price for their heroism. As a mother, I found these stories impossible to ignore. And like so much of women's history, the stories are largely ignored or overshadowed or forgotten.

Can you take readers into the process of writing this novel? What challenges did you face in terms of plotting and structure, for example?

Absolutely, the biggest challenge in writing this novel was weaving together the fictional and non-fictional worlds. Because the novel covers the entire war, it meant that every single scene had to be built upon what was actually happening, and to be honest, adhering to the factual timeline was a constant battle. I literally couldn't write a sentence or a paragraph or a scene without consulting research material. On top of that, I wrote the first draft before going to France, so I couldn't really own the landscape in my head; I couldn't envision it. I couldn't describe a tree or a road without researching it first. And then there was the burden of accurately capturing the sacrifice and heroism shown by the women of the Resistance. I thought about that all the time. These men and women had sacrificed so much for love and honor and duty; they'd risked their lives and their children's lives to save others. I wanted to honor them and get their stories right.

*Do you have a favorite scene from *The Nightingale*— a setting or incident that's especially meaningful to you?*

Honestly, there are so many parts and passages of this book that I love, but if I had to pick just one, I would say the scene where Isabelle and Gaëtan see each other again after the end of the war. I tend to be known for writing emotional books that make people cry, but I don't often have that reaction to my work. I'm too focused on the individual sentences to feel the power of the whole, but that scene made me cry every time I read it—and I read it a lot.

Is there any material that you wrote that never made it to the final draft? Can you tell us about it?

Ha! I wrote hundreds of pages that no one will ever read. Both Isabelle and Vianne gave me trouble in this book. Neither was easy to find and both went through several transformations through the writing of the novel. In one version, they were best friends and only a year apart in age, in another version, Isabelle fell in love with a downed airman. I always had the baseline of the story, and since it was set against the panorama of the war in France, I knew the basic plot and structure from the beginning, but finding the characters took more time. I had to spend so much time on the history and the timeline and the truth of the war, it ended up being a constant challenge to create real characters, who felt absolutely true, without lapsing into stereotypical heroes and villains. That was something I didn't want to do.

I knew what I had to say in this book. I wanted to explore and celebrate the bravery and courage of ordinary women in extraordinary times. It just took me a lot of time, and several drafts, to find out exactly who my ordinary women were. And then, I think, both of them turned out to be stronger and braver and more extraordinary than I'd imagined.

*How did you approach the research into this setting and era? To what extent did you stick to the facts in writing *The Nightingale*? In what ways, if any, did you take artistic liberty?*

I was terrified, plain and simple. I had never attempted a novel of such scope and importance. Everything about it was a risk: France. World War II. A sweeping historical epic told in an intimate way. A novel of war about women.

But sometimes a story sneaks up on you, hits you hard, and dares you to look away. That was the case with *The Nightingale*. In truth, I did everything I could not to write this novel. But when research on World War II led me to the young

Belgian woman who had created an escape route out of Nazi-occupied France, I was hooked.

I began as I always do: with research. It's really the research—in any novel—that informs the story. First I find out what has happened, and then I begin to extrapolate what could happen, and then I create a world that makes sense to me, an imaginary world firmly planted in truth. In this story, of course, the research was a daunting task. There was simply so much to know and understand. I started with the historical background of the war in Europe and then began to narrow my focus. My best information always comes from memoirs—in this case, memoirs of women in the Resistance, and downed airman who had escaped, and women who hid and rescued Jewish children.

As far as complete accuracy and artistic license, of course I took a few liberties—it's fiction, after all—but I did it all with an eye toward telling a story that felt as true as possible.

In your research of WWII, what was the most interesting/surprising/shocking thing you learned?

I was continually amazed and awed at the risks ordinary French women took to keep their children safe and help strangers and preserve their way of life. And for women, it is rarely just our own life we are risking; it is our children's lives. In the midst of such great horror, it must have been beyond terrifying to reach out to help someone.

What do you hope readers will learn from your own novel?

As I researched this book, I found myself consumed by a single, haunting question, as relevant today as it was seventy years ago: When would I, as a wife and mother, risk my life—and more important, my child's life—to save a stranger? That question is the very heart of *The Nightingale*.

I hope readers will ask themselves that same question: What would I do?

Reading Group Questions

01. *The Nightingale* opens with an intriguing statement that lays out one of the major themes of the book: “If I have learned anything in this long life of mine, it is this: In love we find out who we want to be; in war we find out who we are.” What do you think the narrator means by this? Is love the ideal and war the reality? How does war change the way these characters love? How does love influence their actions in the war? On a personal level, has love affected your life choices? Have those choices affected who and how you love?
02. Take a moment to talk about the narrative structure of *The Nightingale*. Why do you think Kristin Hannah chose to keep the narrator’s identity a secret in the beginning and end of the novel? Were you surprised by who it turned out to be? Did you go back and reread the beginning of the novel once you finished? Were you satisfied when you discovered who was narrating the novel?
03. Many characters chose to construct a secret identity in *The Nightingale*. How did pretending to be someone else determine each character’s fate, for better or worse? And what about those who had no choice, like Ari and Julien?
04. The sisters Isabelle and Vianne respond to the war in very different ways. Isabelle reacts with anger and defiance, risking her life to join the resistance against Nazi occupation. Vianne proceeds with caution and fear, avoiding conflicts for the sake of her children. Who do you admire—or relate to, or sympathize with—more, Vianne or Isabelle? Discuss your reasons. You may choose to share your own stories and experiences as well.
05. The book captures many of the era’s attitudes about men and women. Isabelle, for example, is told that women do not go to war. Vianne is confused by her new wartime role as provider. Their father, Julien, is cold and distant, unwilling to fulfill his parental duties after his wife dies. Have gender roles changed much since World War II? Have women always been strong in the face of adversity, but not recognized for their efforts? Vianne says that “men tell stories...women get on with it.” Do you agree with her?

06. Isabelle's niece, Sophie, admires her aunt's courage: "Tante Isabelle says it's better to be bold than meek. She says if you jump off a cliff at least you'll fly before you fall." Do you agree? Is it better to take a risk and fail than never try at all? Do you think you could have acted as heroically as Isabelle under such horrifying circumstances? Who is more heroic in your mind—Isabelle or Vianne?
07. Perhaps one of the most chilling moments in the book is when Vianne provides Captain Beck with a list: Jews. Communists. Homosexuals. Freemasons. Jehovah's Witnesses. We know now how wrong it was to provide this list, but can you understand why Vianne did it? What do you think you would have done?
08. Each of the sisters experiences love in a different way. Vianne's love is that of a mature woman, a wife and a mother devoted to her family; Isabelle's love is youthful and impulsive, more of a girlish dream than a reality. How did Isabelle's feelings of abandonment shape her personality and her life? How did Vianne's maternal love lead to acts of heroism, saving the lives of Jewish children? How did love—and war—bring these two sisters closer together?
09. Take a moment to talk about Beck. Is he a sympathetic character? Did you believe he was a good man, or was he just trying to seduce Vianne. Did he deserve his fate?
10. When Isabelle works with Anouk and other women of the French resistance, she notices "the wordless bond of women." What does she mean? Do you agree that women who come from different backgrounds but share a common path can create a silent bond with other women? Why do you think this is so?
11. Vianne recalls her husband, Antoine, telling her that "we choose to see miracles." What does he mean by this? Is it his way of telling his wife he knows the truth about their son's biological father? Or is it his way of looking at life, of coping with the terrible events they've lived through? Is seeing the beauty in the world an active choice? Is it possible to find miracles in our lives, if we look for them?
12. Discuss the scene in which Ari is taken away. What do you believe is the right answer in this situation—if there is one? What would you have done in Vianne's position?

13. Do you think Julien had a right to know who his real father was? Would you have made the same decision Vianne did?
14. Finally, a show of hands: Who cried—or at least got a little choked up—while reading this book? Which scenes moved you the most? Which character's fate would you say was the most tragic? The most poignant? The most harrowing? Did the book give you a better understanding of life under Nazi occupation during World War II? Did it move you, inspire you, haunt you? And finally, what will you remember most about *The Nightingale*?

