

The History and the Literature: *The Women*

Diane and Stan Henderson

OLLI at The University of Cincinnati

November 1, 2024

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The History

The Different Names

- Vietnamese call it the **American War**
- Scholars call it the **Second Indochina War**
- Vietnamese Communists call it the **War of Liberation**, or Anti-US War of National Salvation
- Americans call it the **Vietnam Conflict**

French Colonialism

As the French colonized Vietnam in the 1860s, they created a society where **90% of the population worked for the colonizers**. One in four rubber plantation workers died. Traditional rule is delegitimized; a **tradition of struggle against foreigners began**.



French Colonial Architecture in Saigon

French elite women toss coins to Vietnamese children. Noblesse oblige.



Rise of a Man and a Movement



Ho Chi Minh
His approach would evict a colonial power and stymie the greatest superpower

Ho Chi Minh—Uncle Ho—joined the Communist Party in France after WWI and rejection of Vietnam during peace talks

Returning to Vietnam, he used anti-French anger to **blend communist social revolution with nationalism** and oust the French colonial regime.

His Viet Minh movement **downplayed communism to push patriotism** and attract more followers

Cold War Confrontation



Harry S. Truman

Anti-communist Truman Doctrine increased US support for French defense of colonialism from 30% in 1952 to 80% in 1954.



Joseph Stalin

Soviet Union saw **economic, political military support** as a **counter measure**, especially for Viet Minh patriotic effort.



Chairman Mao

1949 victory on mainland China **freed up aid** for Viet Minh in **fight against the French**.

Vietnam is becoming a placeholder for superpower conflict



Monument to Dien Bien Phu

The first Indochina War, France's last gasp to hold its SE Asian empire, ended in humiliating defeat.

The Great Powers agreed to divide Vietnam into north and south countries like the partition of the Korean peninsula.

The fall of French colonialism shifted potential conflict from liberation to support of Communism, supported by both the Soviet Union and China.

This gave rise to the Domino theory: if one country falls to Communism, others will follow like dominos. This became a pillar of US foreign policy as the Cold War heated up, supported by Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles.



Dwight Eisenhower
34th President



John Foster Dulles
Secretary of State

Role of Diem

He was a hopelessly austere and arrogant religious (Catholic) zealot. He alienated the rural population, turning them to the Viet Minh of the north. Eisenhower considered dumping him, but hoped US aid could build a viable South Vietnam. By 1961 the country was the US 5th largest foreign aid recipient.



Ngo Dinh Diem
President of South Vietnam



Immolation of Buddhist Monk in Saigon in protest against Diem



Map of the Ho Chi Minh Trail

Hanoi Capitalizes on Diem's Weakness

Chinese/Soviets eased opposition to renewed fighting on the part of North Vietnam.

The North began to build network of trails to funnel men and materiel into the South; by the end of 1959 the Ho Chi Minh Trail was fully operational, and a war of infiltration was underway.

The US would fail to understand and strategize against this guerilla war based on winning the hearts and minds of the population that Diem was losing.

Nuanced Support Short of War



John F. Kennedy
35th President

Kennedy advisors recommended limited war. He rejected sending troops but looked for a way to support South Vietnam and avoid appeasement. He was living with the demons of the Bay of Pigs: "There are just so many concessions that one can make in one year and survive politically."

Thinking South Vietnam could survive with aid, he planned for gradual US withdrawal; but, fed up with Diem, he approved a coup, which emboldened the Viet Minh in the north.

Throughout, he maintained a nuanced approach. It is plausible to speculate he might have pulled back rather than commit to war.

Then, Dallas, TX, November 22, 1963.

A President Uncomfortable

LBJ was insecure with foreign policy and relied heavily on JFK's advisors. He believed he must embrace the Domino Theory to ensure support for his expertise: domestic policy and the Great Society.

Plans shifted to combat troops and bombing of the north but delayed until after the '64 election: "We are not about to send American boys 9 or 10,000 miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves."

Still, he parlayed a questionable 1964 incident in the Gulf of Tonkin into Congressional action, authorizing "all necessary means." The war was on.



Lyndon B. Johnson
36th President

Early Concerns

As early as February '64, an official memo warned that the Vietnam conflict was a war America could not win:

- The Viet Cong fighters of the north were a grass roots movement identified, and infiltrating, with the local peasantry in the south.
- They were disciplined, ideological, and ruthless.
- They would fight a guerilla war at places of their choosing and without regard to losses: "The north will not count the cost."
- The north would leverage Soviet aid to counter Chinese influence in the Third World.



LBJ with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara

LBJ says privately, "It's just the biggest damn mess that I ever saw."

Recorded on his office taping system, May 1964

Operating Rolling Thunder: Breaking Hanoi

"No damn little pissant country could hold out forever." –LBJ

Impact of 643,000 tons of bombs on north:

- 59% of power plants gone
- 55% of bridges gone
- 10,000 vehicles destroyed
- 52,000 killed in the north

There was great psychological toll, but industrial infrastructure was not as important to the north's agricultural

After every B-52 sortie, the Viet Cong would regroup, rebuild, retool.



Cost of Bombing to US

- \$6 billion in lost aircraft (almost 1000)
- \$6.60 for every \$1.00 of damage to North in 1965; \$9.60 for every \$1.00 in 1966
- 356 captured US airmen, along with 209 other POWs
- 1 million tons of bombs, dropped on targets in the south, almost twice what was dropped on the north
- Napalm would have severe health effects for those exposed, both Vietnamese and Americans



Napalm bomb explodes to burn away foliage where the Viet Cong hid

US Ground Forces in Vietnam

- 184,300 personnel at end of 1965
- 385,300 at end of 1966
- 485,600 in 1967
- Peaking at 543,400 in April 1969
- 80% of all US troops were support personnel



Search and Destroy

This strategy was meant to minimize US casualties by using technologies such as aerial surveillance, radar, even devices that detected urine to find the enemy and then emphasize mobility and firepower to target them.

Helicopters would take the GIs to the enemy. Most firefights involved only 200 US troops.

However, this meant the Vietcong almost always called the shots on where to engage and when to withdraw, using tunnel complexes or fading into Cambodia.



The Toll on US "Grunts"

This was a war without a front line.

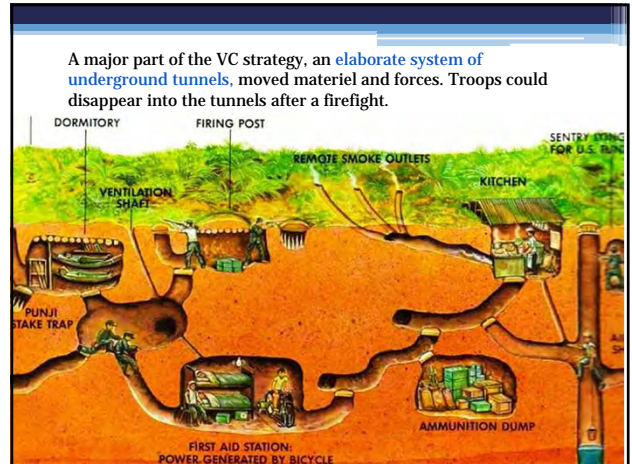
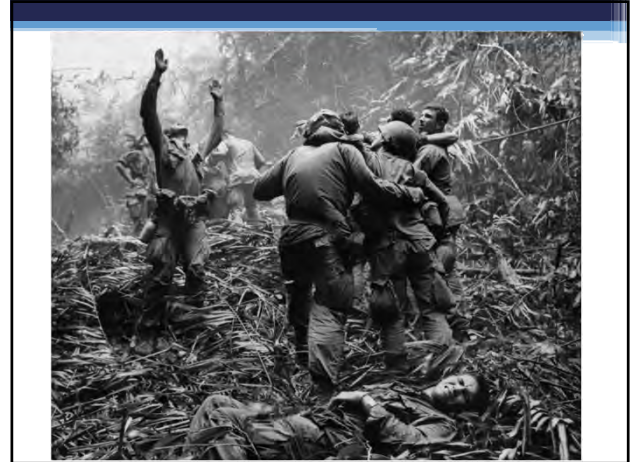
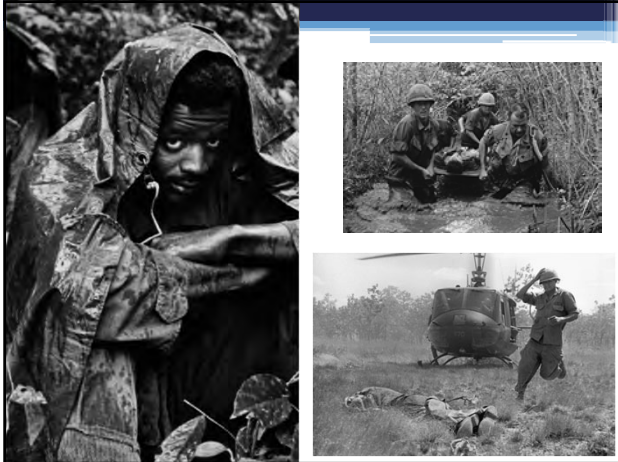
- Arduous patrolling: "humping the boonies"
- Forbidding terrain
- Soaring temperatures
- Torrential rain


Goal became simply to survive for 13 months

Frustrated and frightened, GIs came to view all Vietnamese with distrust, alienating local populations with aggressive behavior

Waiting for extraction after an ambush









Tunnel Rats

US "Tunnel Rats" worked in constant danger to find and clear the VC underground networks. Below left, extracting a "Rat" from a tunnel. Below right, [how challenging maneuvering in the tunnels was](#). Left, Tunnel Rats' patch.

Combatting Combat

Grunts worked to find **some semblance of normalcy** to counteract the experiences on patrol and in firefights.



In WWII Red Cross "Donut Dollies" made donuts and coffee for the GIs on the front lines. In Vietnam, they were still called Donut Dollies, but their **new role** was to set up rec programs, pass out sundry items, and **provide a touch of back home**. They travelled 2 million miles while in country.



Donuts were still available; 200 dozen per day



The great Bob Hope

USO Shows

Bob Hope brought glitz and glamour to the front, year after year.



Sammy Davis, Jr.



Phyllis Diller



Racquel Welch



Ann Margaret



From reading on a half track to shows more risqué than the USO to enjoying RC's new pop-top cans, the troops looked for distraction from the war.



There is a certain melancholy in these pictures of soldiers **doing mundane things** like getting a hair cut, cleaning a rifle, or listening to music. They were **never far from remembering that home was 11,000 miles away**.

Practicing Medicine in Combat

From battlefield triage by **medics to mobile hospitals** with doctors and nurses in harm's way to **rehab** away from war.



Above, medic providing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to injured soldier on the battlefield.

At right, a medic, himself wounded, ministers to other soldiers.



The Vietnam War dealt with wounded by **stabilizing** as best as possible **in combat** conditions and transferring wounded to **helicopters** for transport to **field hospitals** for treatment.



MUST (Medical Unit Self-contained Transportable) was the Vietnam Era version of Korea's MASH units. There were five sections: hospital, debridement ward, ICU, radiology, and dental.

This is a recovery unit in the hospital section.

Note group of nurses to the right in the picture of the MUST facility.

This gives a sense of daily work in one of the MUST Evac hospitals. The medical personnel appear to be waiting for wounded or have finished with surgery.

A scene that shows the frenetic nature of emergency medicine in combat

Once in the MUST...

This appears to be triage.

A graphic image of an OR after surgery

The most seriously wounded would be flown to larger hospitals in country for further surgery (below).

At right, transport back to the States for rehab.

Note difference in attire and conditions.

Accelerating Anti-war Sentiment



Dr. Benjamin Spock (3rd from left and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (3rd from right) march in Chicago, marking King's pivot to anti-war movement.

By end of 1967, 45% of Americans think the war is a mistake. College students, hippies, pacifists see war as both the result and impediment to needed social change.

50,000 have fled to Canada; 75,000 march in Washington, DC.

Students storming the Pentagon met by MP's.



Burning draft cards



The Tet Offensive



Sites of Attacks During Tet

Ho Chi Minh signed off on a major offensive to coincide with Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year.

Early in morning of January 31, 1968, 80,000 Viet Cong soldiers attacked 100 towns and cities in the south, including 36 of 44 provincial capitals, five of six autonomous cities, 72 of 245 district towns and Saigon. The northern forces even seized the US embassy for a short time. It was the largest military operation of the war up to that time.

The north was beaten back relatively quickly, but the Johnson administration's credibility was damaged. Only weeks before, Gen. William Westmoreland had told the public that he was "more optimistic than ever."

Policy changes and the opening of negotiations would follow.

The battle for Hue was the most intense of Tet. Viet Cong massacred over 5000 residents of the city. 5000 North Vietnamese forces were killed during fighting around the citadel (on the right). Many historic treasures of Vietnam's ancient capital were destroyed, and the city lay in ruins.



A defining image of Tet and the war was the summary execution of an embedded VC operative by a police official in Saigon, captured in the famous photo (next slide) and by network video shown on US broadcasts. The executed man was accused of having butchered women and children.



The Voice of Reason Says, "Enough"



Walter Cronkite in Vietnam

Cronkite was a moderate and balanced observer of what was happening in Vietnam

However, Tet was a breaking point. "What the hell is going on?" he asked in private. On-air in February he said that it seemed "more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate."

Johnson reportedly told an aide, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America."

My Lai Massacre: A New Low in Abuses



March 1968 attack on My Lai resulted in between 347 and 504 civilian deaths. Charlie Company troops had been told that Viet Cong troops were passing through the area, and all remaining Vietnamese would be either VC or sympathizers.



Lt. William Calley was convicted of premeditated murder but served almost no time. Public opinion uniformly favored clemency.

The Fall of a President



Sen. Eugene McCarthy

Tet accelerates antiwar activism. Gene McCarthy challenges LBJ in the 1968 presidential primary and wins 42% of New Hampshire vote. Robert F. Kennedy enters the race. LBJ's Great Society is threatened; the economy cannot support both guns and butter. On March 31st, Johnson announces calls for negotiations with the north. At the end of the speech, he drops a bombshell, "I will not seek, nor will I accept, my party's nomination."



Sen. Robert F. Kennedy



Nixon's Treason

By fall of 1968 peace negotiations in Paris were going well; a deal could boost Democrat Humphrey's presidential election chances. Nixon used China Lobby figure Anna Chennault as a conduit to the South Vietnamese to argue a Nixon administration would give them a better deal. Chennault told Vietnamese ambassador to peace talks she has a message from her boss, "Hold on. We are gonna win...Please tell your boss to hold on."

LBJ had wiretaps on all the principals and told Nixon he was on to him. The South Vietnamese withdrew from the peace talks, and the October Surprise was on the Democrats.

Although Nixon's actions were a clear violation of the Logan Act, LBJ declined to prosecute, in part because the wiretaps were warrantless.



Chennault in Oval Office with Nixon and Kissinger in 1971

Nixon's Mindset; Kissinger's Strategy

"I'm not going to end up like LBJ...holed up in the White House, afraid to show my face on the street. I'm going to stop that war. Fast. I mean it!" Richard Nixon

Henry Kissinger, national security advisor (and later secretary of state) looks to a harmonious world order with American leadership. This requires victory for the US in Vietnam: a communist win would lead America's allies to question US commitments in other theatres, and a North Vietnam victory would embolden the communist bloc.

This requires convoluted new approaches:

- Escalation coupled with withdrawals
- Bold gestures and secret maneuvers

All complicated by deteriorating public opinion and rising concern in Congress.



Kissinger and Nixon Confer

Moratorium Day 1969

America still rebuffed the radicalism and violence of college protests, but there was an increasingly middle-class cast to opposition to the war emerging.

100,000 on Boston Common



2 million people across the US marched to end the war. It was believed to be the largest mass demonstration in history at the time.

Peace sign above the crowd

500,000 marched in Washington



The Madman Theory

Operating on the "Madman Theory" that North Vietnam believed that he might do anything, Nixon considers using nuclear weapons on Hanoi, and settles on an invasion of Cambodia to attack Viet Cong strongholds. The American incursions greatly strengthened the communist Khmer Rouge.

Aides cautioned that would inflame increasing protests, but Nixon goes to Middle America with his "Silent Majority" speech and exalts in its 77% approval rating. As he moves forward to announce his Cambodian invasion, his secretary of state, Bill Rogers, says, "This will make the students puke."

The announcement releases a firestorm of protest, culminating four days later at Kent State University in Ohio.



The First School Shooting



Guard take position



On May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guard troops opened fire on protesting Kent State students. Four students were killed; nine others were wounded.



Alan Canfora (one of injured students) waves flag as Guard prepares to fire.

58% of Americans believed the students were to blame; only 11% thought the National Guard was responsible.

Kent State students flee from tear gas before shootings



#1066/flickr

Mary Ann Vecchio was a 14-year-old runaway from Florida when she met Jeff Miller at Kent State on May 4, 1970. 25 minutes later he was dead, and she was crying for help over his body in one of the most iconic photos of the Vietnam era, captured by John Filo, a KSU student.

In the four days that followed the Kent State killings, there were a hundred or more student strikes each day. By the 10th of May, 448 campuses were either still affected by some sort of strike or completely closed down. Some 158 institutions were reported to be on strike "indefinitely."

An estimated 4.35 million students at 1,300 universities and colleges, or 44 percent of the nation's total, protested the war in Southeast Asia and the murder of their fellow students, closing many universities in the process.

Vecchio and Filo at 39th commemoration of Kent State shootings, 2009. Filo won a Pulitzer Prize for the photo.

Let the Sunshine In


Drip, Drip of Offenses Tips Public Opinion

58% of Americans by early 1970s saw the war as morally wrong; 60% favored withdrawal even if all of Vietnam would go communist.

John Kerry: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

William Calley and My Lai

Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers showed government had lied about Vietnam; leads to strengthened free press Supreme Court ruling.




North Vietnam Targets

1972, North Vietnam launched an Easter Offensive with 122,000 troops and scored quick successes.

Nixon sees 1972 election imperiled as well as outreach to China and the USSR. He would not let this "little shit-ass country" block his historic diplomatic breakthroughs.

Operation Linebacker sets up a decisive blow to end the war on Nixon's terms.



"The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time." –Richard Nixon

"The Terror of War"




Myths about the picture:

- Napalm in this attack dropped by South Vietnamese, not US
- Did not end war (went on three more years)
- Did not change opinion (already negative)
- Not widely shown in US: of 40 major outlets, 14 did not run it (frontal nudity); only 3 editorialized about it: Boston Globe, NYT, and NY Post


Nick Ut, June 1972
Pulitzer Prize winner

"The picture of the children will never leave anyone who saw it."
--NY Post



Above: Phan Thi Kim Phuc with Photographer Ut one year later.

Right: Phuc and Ut in Canada 40 years later.



Ut transported Kim to a military hospital in Saigon, where doctors did not think she would survive her third-degree burns. She had surgeries and treatments for 14 months and laser treatments later in life after she sought asylum in Canada. She and Ut have remained close.

Peace Is at Hand



Kissinger forges peace deal with the north that sets up a National Council of Reconciliation to resolve the south's future. Essentially, it removes the Americans, which will allow for the north to take over the entire country.

South rejects the deal, and Nixon supports them and orders Operation Linebacker II, the Christmas bombings of 1972. Hanoi agrees to reopen negotiations.


Hanoi was under pressure from China and USSR to settle and would have come back to the table anyway. International community compares US to Nazis and the Holocaust.

Peace With So-called Honor

Nixon accepts virtually same deal as before the Christmas bombings and forces Saigon's acceptance. And declares peace with honor.

"We didn't win a war...Nobody surrendered." Capt. H. Carter

In two years, Saigon would be Ho Chi Minh City.



Le Duc Tho and Kissinger, January 1973

For Americans, far from honor, the war left not only physical scars but also deep social cleavages and pervasive anxiety about national decline.

...And the knowledge that Henry Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize.





A Time to Heal

And in Rye's words ...

“Women can be heroes, too.”



Sources

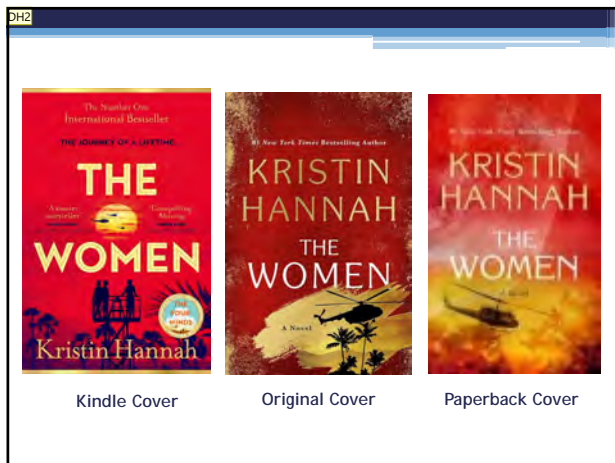
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- Ward, Geoffrey and Burns, Ken. *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017

Credit

- Lawrence's book is an excellent overview of the Vietnam War. While I have chosen not to use quotation marks on the individual slides (except where necessary for clarity or attribution), much of the information in the slides is taken directly from his book.

...and the Literature

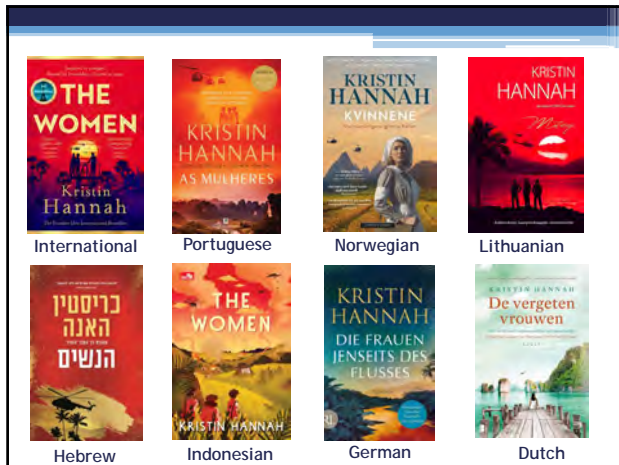
The Women
Kristin Hannah



Kindle Cover

Original Cover

Paperback Cover



Film Adaptation in the Works

- Warner Brothers Motion Picture Group acquired rights
- They purchased rights before the book was published – publication date February 6, purchase of movie rights was announced January 18

- #1 New York Times Bestseller
- #1 USA Today Bestseller
- #1 *Washington Post* Bestseller
- #1 *Los Angeles Times* Bestseller
- #1 Barnes & Noble Bestseller
- #1 Publishers Weekly Bestseller
- #1 Indie Bestseller
- #1 Amazon Bestseller
- #1 Audible Bestseller
- Book of the Month Club Main Selection
- Indie Next Selection for February
- Library Read Hall of Fame Selection for February
- Goodreads Readers' Most Anticipated Pick for February
- Amazon Spotlight Pick
- *New York Times* Featured Book Coming in February
- Today Show Books We Can't Wait to Read in 2024
- *Time*: Most Anticipated Books of 2024
- ET Best Winter Reads for 2024
- Nerd Daily: Most Anticipated Books of 2024

About Kristin Hannah

- Born 1960 in Garden Grove, California
- Bachelors in communication from University of Washington
- Worked in advertising
- Received law degree from Puget Sound Law School
- Practicing attorney in Seattle before writing career
- First novel published in 1991
- Currently lives on Bainbridge Island, outside Seattle



Her Novels

1. *A Handful of Heaven* (July 1991)
2. *The Enchantment* (June 1992)
3. *Once in Every Life* (December 1992)
4. *If You Believe* (December 1993)
5. *When Lightning Strikes* (October 1994)
6. *Waiting for the Moon* (September 1995)
7. *Home Again* (October 1996)
8. *On Mystic Lake* (February 1999)
9. *Angel Falls* (April 2000)
10. *Summer Island* (March 2001)
11. *Distant Shores* (July 2002)
12. *Between Sisters* (April 2003)
13. *The Things We Do for Love* (June 2004)
14. *Comfort and Joy* (October 2005)
15. *Magic Hour* (February 2006)
16. *Firefly Lane* (2008)
17. *True Colors* (2009)
18. *Winter Garden* (2010)
19. *Night Road* (March 2011)
20. *Home Front* (2012)
21. *Fly Away* (2013)
22. *The Nightingale* (2015)
23. *The Great Alone* (2018)
24. *The Four Winds* (2021)
25. ***The Women* (2024)**

How We Got to This Novel

- I am a devotee of historical fiction, so it is a constant exploration and *The Women* popped up
- I agreed with Beatriz Williams in the *New York Times*:
A few chapters into “The Women,” I experienced a wave of déjà vu... the Vietnam redemption arc [is] imprinted on your gray matter
- And Hannah takes “up the Vietnam epic and re-centers the story on the experience of women”

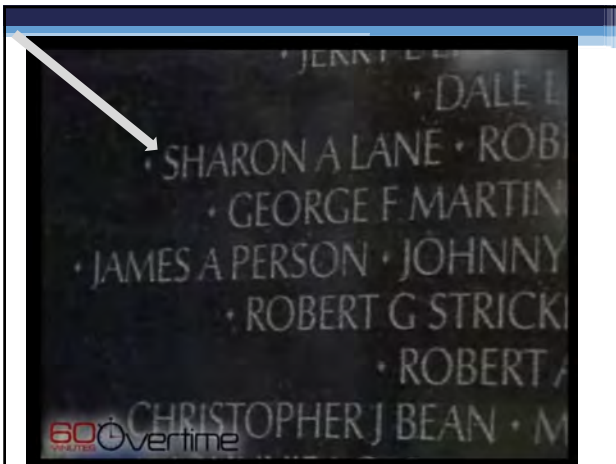
But in the end ...

- A dramatic, vividly detailed reconstruction of a little-known aspect of the Vietnam War
• Kirkus Reviews
- I was struck not by the way “The Women” radically reshapes the contours of our Vietnam narrative, but instead by how vividly the novel affirms them.
• Beatriz Williams, New York Times

And then there was this ...

“We were unheralded. We were unwanted. We were unwelcomed, and we were painted as crazy veterans who lost the war. During the 10 years I fought for the Vietnam Women’s Memorial, I was labeled a femi-Nazi, a radical feminist using the Vietnam dead to further my cause...and told that women didn’t deserve a memorial.”

“Now, we are heroines. We are heralded, we’re coveted, we’re welcomed... I feel like this audience really cares about us, us women who served, and (Hannah’s) book has brought this to the surface to millions.”
• Diane Carlson Evans



And It Is Historical Fiction

- Defined as a genre of literature, film, etc., comprising narratives that **take place in the past** and are characterized chiefly by an **imaginative reconstruction of historical events and people**.
- Transports readers to another time and place, **requiring a balance of research and creativity**, and while it often includes real people and events, the genre **offers a fiction writer many opportunities to tell a wholly unique story**.
- “The line between fact and fiction is blurry by design”
• Lisa Grunwald, The Evolution of Annabel Craig

Key Elements of Historical Fiction

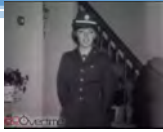
- Setting
- Plot
- Characters
- Dialogue
- Conflicts
- Written contemporarily about events that happened 50+ years ago
or written by someone not alive at the time the events in the novel took place

Hannah’s Research

- Identified the memoirs written by Vietnam vets, male and female, but primarily the nurses’ memoirs
- Interviews with veterans – nurses, Red Cross workers, and even a decorated helicopter pilot

Diane Carlson Evans ...

- Hannah said she “stalked” Carlson Evans until they finally made contact. ... [Carlson] assisted with many details and nuances in her research, and her husband, retired VA surgeon Mike Evans, helped make the book accurate from a medical perspective. Carlson Evans also helped Hannah find others who were in theater to review her work.



Hannah with Diane Carlson Evans -



Diane Carlson Evans

- An Army nurse who served in Vietnam
- The founder of the Vietnam Women's Memorial Foundation and the first president of its board
 - One of the Foundation's goals is to “education about the service of women in the war”
- A ten-year struggle to “complete the circle of healing” for the women of the war
 - She incorporated the foundation in 1984
 - Memorial was dedicated November 11, 1993
 - Author of *Healing Wounds: A Vietnam War Combat Nurse's 10-Year Fight to Win Women a Place of Honor in Washington, D.C.* (2020)

Vietnam Nurses Memorial Project

- Original name for the Vietnam Women's Memorial
- Statue of the nurse proposed for the memorial, circa 1984



VIETNAM NURSES MEMORIAL PROJECT



The “10 Best” Vietnam Novels



Our History and Literature Novels

1. *City of Thieves*, David Benioff
2. *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr
3. *The Night Watchman*, Louise Erdrich
4. *The Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet*, Jamie Ford
5. *Varina*, Charles Frazier*
6. *Lessons in Chemistry*, Bonnie Jo Garmus
7. *Matrix: A Novel*, Lauren Groff
8. *The Women*, Kristen Hannah
9. *The Invention of Wings*, Sue Monk Kidd
10. *This Tender Land*, William Kent Kreuger
11. *The Librarian of Burned Books*, Brianna Labuskes **
12. *The Great Believers*, Rebecca Makkai
13. *The Good Lord Bird*, James McBride
14. *The Curse of Pietro Houdini*, Derek B Miller
15. *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien *
16. *Hamnet*, Maggie O'Farrell
17. *Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Sanders
18. *The Summer Before the War*, Helen Simonson
19. *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Amor Towles
20. *The Lincoln Highway*, Amor Towles
21. *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren *
22. *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead
23. *How Much of These Hills Is Gold*, C. Pam Zhang

* Novels we would not repeat

** In development