

HOME FRONT

by **Kristin Hannah**

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A Conversation with Kristin Hannah

The prologue really jostles the reader into dispelling any thoughts of “pretty daffodil borders”; this story is about battle, for love and everything else that truly matters. How hard was it for you to begin writing this book?

I began this book as I begin all of my novels, with a combination of absolute fear and boundless enthusiasm. Usually I know with some clarity where my stories will go and who will populate them. Although that original road map always gets revised along the way, this book, more than most, consistently messed with my head. The book I envisioned and researched simply didn't work. When I first began to write *Home Front*, it was about two estranged sisters brought together by the deployment. It took me a long time to really grasp that Jolene's story—and to me, she was always the heart and soul of the story, the one character who never changed—needed to be part of a bigger tapestry, that of a marriage that was tested to the limit by the wife's deployment. I literally threw away hundreds of pages before I gave in to this new version of the story. Once I created Michael and let the marriage be center stage, I knew I was on my way. The story unfolded beautifully...until I hit the ending. It took a surprising number of drafts for me to “bring Jolene home” the way I wanted to.

The prevailing themes in *Home Front* delve into perhaps the most controversial and demanding issues you've explored in your writing so far. What inspired you to take this on? And how were you, in turn, inspired in the writing of it?

Quite simply, this story was inspired by the nightly news. As the war in Iraq went on, I watched the stories—night after night—of soldiers lost or wounded in battle, and the stories of their families left behind, waiting for them to return. As a mother, I was heartbroken for the men and women and their families. So many of the young soldiers on the news were the same age as my own son, and that hit me really hard. As an American, I was grateful, and as a woman, I began to wonder what it must be like to go off to war and leave your children behind. I can't imagine anything that would be more terrifying and difficult. I realized that I had never read that story, and I wanted to. I wanted to explore the idea of a woman torn between love and honor. So I decided to write it.

I never thought about the potentially controversial nature of the themes in *Home Front*. I simply set out to write a story about a female mother and soldier who went to war. Although Michael is fairly anti-military and anti-war, the book is ultimately less political and more personal. I didn't set out to take a stance on the war itself. This was really about supporting and understanding the troops and realizing the extent of the sacrifices they make.

How was a typical day spent while writing this book? On a good day? On a bad day?

Fortunately for me, I have a lot more good writing days than bad ones. I'm really glad about that because a bad writing day is an ugly thing. Usually, a bad day means that either: I can't think of what to write about (which means that something *major* is wrong and I need to go back to the beginning to diagnose and correct the problem), or I write a scene that I end up throwing away before I even finish it.

A good day writing is a beautiful thing. It's a day when the words and ideas flow from the end of my pen and collect in a

gorgeous swirl of blue ink on



yellow paper. Yes, that's right—I write my novels longhand on yellow legal pads. I do this because I can write anywhere—on the beach, in a deck chair, in my living room. A typical day, of course, is somewhere in between. With *Home Front*, I had to stop often to do extended research, and that was often frustrating. I wanted to write a scene, knew what it was, but I needed the facts to get it all correct.

You've said that you've never had such a difficult time writing a novel. Why was it so difficult, and how did you ultimately find your way to the emotional end of this story?

There were two difficulties that this book presented. First was the burden of authenticity. It was important for me to capture the spirit of the true American soldier in my portrayal of Jolene and Tami and their colleagues. Because I knew so little about the military when I began, creating these characters, and indeed the world they inhabit, was often an uphill battle. And then, as the writing continued, I fell so in love with Jolene—she has become my favorite character of all time—that I really wanted not to “ruin” her by doing anything wrong. Second, I was fairly undone by the emotional component of this novel, and honestly, even though I have often written about difficult, heartrending situations, no story has ever affected me personally so deeply. No novel of my own has ever so consistently brought me to tears. It was difficult to maintain my balance as a writer in this one.

What about Jolene made her such a favorite for you?

In a word, heroism. I can elaborate on that, but you'll have to bear with me. At first, my answer may seem to make no sense. I have always been a geek girl at heart. I grew up reading a lot of science fiction and fantasy novels, and a quick trip to my Web site will let readers know that *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are two of my favorite stories of all time. Harry standing up to Lord Voldemort and Frodo climbing Mt. Doom with the increasing weight of the ring...these are two of the greatest reading memories for me. When you read about a hero's quest you feel it all: fear, horror, hope, faith. In a way, Jolene is my version of the hero, fighting nearly insurmountable odds, with only her heart to defend herself. We wives and mothers are heroic every day, but rarely do we get to be a *hero*. Jolene, as a Black Hawk pilot in combat, gave me a new kind of heroine.

How was it for you to write a character that was so richly nuanced in her conflicted loyalties to her family and career? Do you ever feel similarly conflicted in your own life?

I absolutely loved writing about a character as conflicted as Jolene. I think that's what real life for a woman is all about—balancing the needs of our families with our own desires. Nothing is ever easy for a working mom, or for an at-home mom, for that matter. Motherhood is a minefield of worry. We tend to live with a certain amount of guilt because we want to do so much. In that way, Jolene was very much like any other working mother. She was trying to balance the demands of her job with her responsibility to her children.

***Home Front* is a startlingly honest account of the true costs of war. What were your views on the war in Iraq and the military in general before writing this book? Did your views change through the research leading up to and the writing of it?**

I don't come from a military family, nor do I know a lot of military families personally, so I would say that I was woefully uninformed about all of it. Prior to *Home Front*, I would have said that I understood something about their lives and their service, but I was wrong in almost everything. I only understood the



thinnest layer. I learned so much in the writing of this novel and in researching it. I went to a deployment ceremony and honestly, I think every American should attend one. Watching our soldiers preparing to go off to war, and their families standing alongside to say goodbye, really brings their sacrifice into sharp focus. It is a powerful reminder that whatever one feels about any particular war, we need to always respect and honor our soldiers and their families. Honestly, I felt a little ashamed that I hadn't attended one before. Although, boy, was it difficult. I was humbled by their pride and strength in the face of such an undertaking. It makes you truly consider what heroism is and reminds you to be grateful.

The vast dimensions and effects of PTSD must have made it a tricky subject to research. How did you go about learning about PTSD, and what were the greatest challenges in writing about the disorder?

As I mentioned earlier, *Home Front* was a research nightmare. I didn't anticipate that to be the case, either. I was actually fairly cavalier about this particular aspect. I mean, I'm a lawyer, so research is something I'm comfortable with, and additionally, I have tackled breast cancer, brain tumors, the Siege of Leningrad and World War II Russia, and DNA-testing to exonerate convicted prisoners. I didn't think that the themes and issues in this book would require any more research than I was used to. I couldn't have been more wrong. Researching and writing *Home Front*, with its military theme, was a mammoth undertaking. I was a bit like Alice, falling down the rabbit hole, into a world where nothing was quite the way I imagined it.

I think the depiction of PTSD is one of the most important and relevant portions of the book. I tried to really bring it home in a way that allowed readers to understand how it feels to suffer the symptoms. I also tried to inform readers, which was the point of the Keller trial. The reader learns the truth of PTSD along with Michael. Ultimately, one of the points of the novel is a reminder to all of us. As a nation, we have to care for our soldiers upon their return from duty. It's just that simple.

Having gained so much insight into your subject through firsthand accounts of people who entrusted you with their stories, did you find it difficult to deal with the expectations (of yourself and others) of honesty in your portrayal of Jolene's story?

I was consistently terrified that I would do a poor job in portraying soldiers and their lives and their families. I felt a very keen responsibility to "get it right." They sacrifice so much for the safety of the rest of us, so I really hope I wrote a book that resonates both with soldiers and non-military readers. I would love it if the novel sparked a dialogue about the price of war on our soldiers and our obligation to them upon their return.

You've written much about the bonds between women, and mothers and daughters in particular, in your previous books. Was it a joy or a pain (or both?) to depict Michael's changing relationship with his daughters?

Michael was really a constant surprise to me in this novel. First of all, as I've said, I spent months researching and devising a version of the story in which Michael didn't even exist. I envisioned a book about women in a family and a daughter's relationship with her distant father. Obviously none of that made it into the final draft. Once I decided to give a marriage a try, Michael appeared fully formed. I liked him from the get-go, and I liked the complexity of both his character and his relationship with Jolene. I never saw the problems in their reconciliation—as wholly one-



sided.

The twist in Michael’s story is that he fell in love with his wife while she was gone, and became a better man by becoming a better father. I loved this story arc, and I loved how he evolved from a distracted, disinterested parent into an invested one.

Who was the first person to read this book?

The first person to read this book was Megan Chance. She is always my “first line of defense.” She is an extremely talented historical fiction novelist and we have been friends and critique partners for the duration of both of our careers—more than twenty years. She’s always the first person to brainstorm with me, and to read early drafts. We have learned to share the kind of honesty that is rare in writing. She loves telling me when I’ve made a misstep or missed an opportunity—almost as much as she loves telling me when I’ve done something well.

Do you ever have conversations with your characters? Do they ever surprise you?

Well, if I had *actual* conversations with characters, I think that would be the sign of a real problem ☺. That being said, I do “listen” to them an awful lot. I can often see scenes unfolding in my mind and in those lovely moments when my subconscious is working hard, I pay very close attention. I do a lot of my best thinking when I’m actually doing something else, like running or skiing or swimming.

In a way, my characters always end up surprising me just a little. They become more real than I had anticipated, with backstories and concerns and foibles that I didn’t see when I began. I have often said that I really learn who my characters are the same way the reader does—through dialogue. It is true that we learn who people are through words and deeds, and that’s true of characters as well.

What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

At its core, *Home Front* is a novel about two ordinary people who have lost their way over twelve years of marriage and then find themselves separated. I think this is a story we can all relate to. You don’t have to be a soldier or even know a soldier to relate to the powerful emotional themes in the book. We can all imagine how it felt for Jolene to hear her husband say, “I don’t love you anymore,” and we can understand how lost Michael felt after the death of his father. A marriage is a tricky thing that hangs on hooks both big and small. Every little thing can matter. Words spoken and unspoken carry a tremendous weight, and in a way it requires as much commitment and honor to hold a marriage together as to go off to war. In that way, we all understand sacrifice. It’s no surprise that I’m a romantic, and to me, there’s nothing more romantic than a husband and wife falling back in love with each other.

