

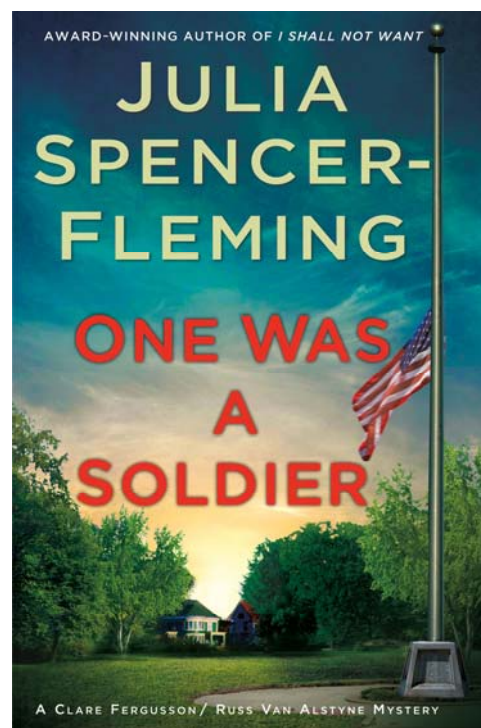


# *One Was a Soldier*

*by Julia Spencer-Fleming*

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## About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *One Was a Soldier* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *One Was a Soldier*.

## About the Book

On a warm September evening in the Millers Kill community center, five veterans sit down in rickety chairs to try to make sense of their experiences in Iraq. What they will find is murder, conspiracy, and the unbreakable ties that bind them to one another and their small Adirondack town.

The Rev. Clare Fergusson wants to forget the things she saw as a combat helicopter pilot and concentrate on her relationship with Chief of Police Russ Van Alstyne. MP Eric McCrea needs to control the explosive anger threatening his job as a police officer. Will Ellis, high school track star, faces the reality of life as a double amputee. Orthopedist Trip Stillman is denying the extent of his traumatic brain injury. And bookkeeper Tally McNabb wrestles with guilt over the in-country affair that may derail her marriage.

But coming home is harder than it looks. One vet will struggle with drugs and alcohol. One will lose his family and friends. One will die.

Since their first meeting, Russ and Clare's bond has been tried, torn, and forged by adversity. But when he rules the veteran's death a suicide, she violently rejects his verdict, drawing the surviving vets into an unorthodox investigation that threatens jobs, relationships, and her own future with Russ.

As the days cool and the nights grow longer, they will uncover a trail of deceit that runs from their tiny town to the upper ranks of the U.S. Army, and from the waters of the Millers Kill to the unforgiving streets of Baghdad.

## Praise for *Julia Spencer-Fleming* and *One Was a Soldier*

“Julia Spencer-Fleming is a rarity in this business, a risk taker and a writer of deep feeling. Few others could deliver a high-concept thriller that so perfectly captures the subtle sufferings of soldiers home from combat. A story of greed, betrayal, and wounded love, *One Was a Soldier* left me entertained, satisfied, and a shade wiser about the cost of war.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author John Hart

“This is a surefire winner, taking the linchpin Fergusson–Van Alstyne relationship to a new level, probing the personal lives of other members of the town’s police department, and personalizing the toll taken by war. Spencer-Fleming’s fans who have been waiting eagerly for her latest won’t be disappointed; this series, as intelligent as it is enthralling, just keeps getting better.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“An absolute tour de force! Both a superb murder mystery and a gripping examination of the suffering of returning soldiers.”

—Louise Penny, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Explor[es] the inescapable legacies of soldiers come home, including a crushing burden of imagined, and unimaginable, guilt.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“In the hands of a lesser writer, this novel would not fly, but Spencer-Fleming carries it off and concludes with a believable resolution. Outstanding.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

## About the Author

JULIA SPENCER-FLEMING is an Agatha, Anthony, Barry, Dilys, Gumshoe and Macavity Award winner. She studied Acting and History at Ithaca College and received her J.D. at the University of Maine School of Law. Her books have been shortlisted for the Edgar, and Romantic Times RC awards. Julia lives in a 190-year-old farmhouse in Buxton, Maine with her husband and three children.

Visit Julia online and sign up for her *News from the Kill* newsletter at [www.juliaspencerfleming.com](http://www.juliaspencerfleming.com)



Photo Credit: Geoff Green



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<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Julia-Spencer-Fleming/177457288939862>



Follow Julia on **Twitter** at <http://twitter.com/JSpencerFleming>



Join **Julia’s Reader Space**, the online community for readers of the Reverend Clare Fergusson/Russ Van Alstyne series at <http://juliaspencerfleming.ning.com>

## Discussion Questions

1. Sarah Dowling reassures her participants that their attendance in her group will not go on their official records. Discuss ways in which ambivalent or negative attitudes toward mental health struggles affected each person's healing process. Does this reflect your experience of these attitudes and issues in your own community?
2. Claire's independence and helping attitude both help and get in the way of her personal and professional lives. What were some situations when her own blind spots got in the way of her investigation or own best interests? What were some ways in which these traits helped others or herself?
3. Claire is a woman in two traditionally male-dominated fields. Is this ever an advantage in her investigations?
4. The therapy sessions, where the narrator is Sarah Dowling, gives a chance for the reader to see the characters from a bystander's perspective. How did these sessions serve as a "reality check" for the reader, compared to seeing the action through the eyes of characters who were not very self-aware?
5. Church members often expect their leaders to live a transparent, moral life of example for others. And yet, the incidence of depression and addiction in the field can run very high. What factors might drive these two, parallel realities?
6. As the title implies, this book deals with those who have served in the military returning to their civilian lives: What is your experience of returning military? How do you feel the book addresses the topic?
7. The book opens with a new character, Sarah Dowling, getting ready to start a veteran's group. What do you think of her role? Of the group?
8. Who is your favorite character in the book? Why? If your favorite is either Clare or Russ, who else would you pick?
9. This book's focus is more about the personal lives of its characters and less centered in "church". How do you feel about this?
10. What do you think of the ending? What do you think will be the reaction of Russ, the congregation, and the rest of Miller's Kill?
11. Is Will's reaction to his injuries typical? Why or why not?
12. Do you feel that Dr. Stillman was right to continue practicing medicine? Would his condition be obvious to others?
13. Is Clare's use of drugs and alcohol logical? Would a woman of faith need these crutches?

## A Conversation with Julia Spencer-Fleming

### **When did you start your writing career? Did you always plan to write mysteries?**

Actually, I started out trying to write science fiction. I read science fiction voraciously in my teens and twenties and joined an on-line writers group as a lark. I got sucked into the writing--I had done lots of writing as an adult in my job as a museum fund-raiser and in law school, but I hadn't done creative writing since Star Trek fanfic and angsty poetry in my teens.

Once I was in the group, I wrote about ½ of a novel. As science fiction, it was pretty clichéd and highly derivative of better writers than I. But as a mystery, it worked just fine. I realized I was trying to plow the wrong field. I started *In the Bleak Midwinter* and never looked back.

### **You've created some wonderful characters in this series. What inspired you to choose a female priest as your protagonist?**

Partly it was a case of "write what you know"--I'm a life-long Episcopalian, so I have a pretty good feel for the culture of the church. Partly it was to have a more realistic amateur sleuth--we expect clergy to be involved in the community, to know intimate details about members of their congregation, to be there during moments of crisis. But mostly, it was because I was interested in crime fiction from the point of view of someone who wasn't interested in catching the bad guy as much as healing the damage caused by the crime. Clare is all about mending broken things--hearts, lives, integrity. Which becomes ironic, since she herself is broken in all those ways as the series progresses.

### **One of the elements in your books that I particularly enjoy is the realistic, warts-and-all depiction of small town life. I love how a minor character in one book might become vitally relevant in the next. Do you plan this in advance, or do these connections evolve as you're writing?**

The connections evolve as I write. I start thinking about the next book when I'm about half-way through, which gives me time to lay some of the groundwork. But often, a minor character stepping forward just... happens, in a way I don't consciously plan. I love having a big cast of on-going, constantly changing characters to play with. One thing I try to do as a writer is to know much more about each character than I reveal. I suspect that comes from my training as an actress, where you have a whole back story for your character who only has ten lines in Act 2.

### **You like to play around with structure in your stories (e.g.: the 24-hour format in 'To Darkness and To Death' and the parallel storylines in *Out of the Deep I Cry*). Does this stretch you as a writer?**

Yes. I want to continue to grow as a writer, so I'm always pushing myself in a slightly different direction with each book. I also like to give readers a "same, but different" experience; that is, if you pick up a Julia Spencer-Fleming novel, you know you're going to get crime, you're going to get big emotions (usually unexpressed,) you're going to get action and romance and what I hope are some very surprising plot twists. But you're never--God willing!--going to get it the same way twice.

**Clare and Russ' story arc is beautifully told. I've recommended this series to so many people but a few have been resistant to try it due to the adultery theme. However, once they gave the books a shot, they all agreed you handled it extremely well. Do you get a lot reader feedback about this?**

Most of the reader feedback has been along the lines of, "Russ' wife must go!" Seriously, they're baying for her blood.

When I started the series, I wanted to write a very realistic, very grown-up romance between two people who both have compelling reasons not to give in to their emotions. I didn't want there to be a bad guy or good guy--after we get to spend some time with Linda Van Alstyne in *To Darkness and To Death*, I had readers complaining, "But she's nice!" Yes. She and Russ and Clare are three fundamentally good human beings trying to make the best of what they've been dealt. It's a painful and fascinating and revealing love story -- and not something I could do in a million years if my books were shelved in the romance section.

**The crimes in your novel are particularly chilling because they are so realistic. Where do you get your inspiration for the mysteries?**

Don't tick me off, that's all I'll say.

Newspaper stories. Following real crime is an excellent spur to the imagination. Sometimes I stumble across the crime while researching. I was reading up on the 20's and 30's in that part of New York state to prepare for 'Out of the Deep I Cry,' when I came upon a history of bootlegging in Washington and Saratoga counties. That led me to the crime at the heart of the story.

Sometimes, I simply ask myself, "What's the worst thing I could do to this person?" Because in real life, the worst thing is never having a serial killer come at you with baling wire and a flenser. It's losing your home, or your job, or a loved one.

**Hadley Knox was an excellent addition to your cast of characters in 'I Shall Not Want'. Will we be seeing more of her in future books?**

Thanks, I love Hadley Knox. It was fascinating to introduce a character who wasn't devoted to law enforcement and who only took the job as a cop because it had the best pay and benefits around. She continues as a major character in 'One Was A Soldier,' as does her convoluted relationship with Officer Kevin Flynn, who declared himself in love with her in 'I Shall Not Want.' She was holding him off at the end of that book because of their age difference (he's eight years younger) and experience gap--Hadley's been married, divorced and has two kids, while Kevin has scarcely been away from his home town. We get to see that gap narrow a bit in 'One Was A Soldier,' when Kevin returns from a year-long detached duty at two big-city police forces.

**Are you planning to write more stories featuring Clare, Russ and the people of Miller's Kill?**

Yes! I recently signed a contract with St. Martin's Minotaur for three more Millers Kill books. I'm already working on the next in the series, tentatively titled 'Seven Whole Days.' The story picks up about two months after the end of 'One Was A Soldier' and takes place--you guessed it--within one very eventful week. It's going to be another 'cold' book--Loads of snow and ice deadly weather. Since we're going through a bitter cold spell in Maine right now, I'm feeling very inspired!

## Essay

Crazy weather we've been having, right? What with the thunder snow, and the cyclone in Australia--and speaking of disasters, have you been reading about Charlie Sheen? And did you know there's a war on?

Yeah, I know if you click on Google News headlines, you won't see anything about it. But it's out there. Let me give you a story from a different source, KPBS in San Diego.

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) (VA) has released a new, unpublished report on Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans to [Veterans for Common Sense](#) (VCS) under the [Freedom of Information Act](#). Here are the numbers:

625,000 Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran patients have flooded into VA. That's 10,000 new patients per month, or a new patient every five minutes. 313,000, or more than half, are diagnosed with at least one mental health condition. The average lifetime cost in healthcare and benefits per patient is \$1,000,000. --- Jan. 25, 2011

Think about that for a second. In the time it takes you to read this essay, another soldier, sailor, airman or marine will have come to the VA looking for treatment. Treatment for depression. Addiction. PTSD. Traumatic brain injury. Disability due to puncture wounds, shearing wounds, shrapnel wounds. If you break for a cup of coffee, it'll be two veterans. Check your Facebook status? Three.



Chances are, though, you don't know any of these men or women. Military enlistment as a percentage of the American population has been trending downward ever since Congress ended the draft in 1973. Right now, only about one-half of one per cent of the American population is under arms. That .05% comes from economically disadvantaged families, from small rural towns, and from the south. They come from places and homes where the tradition of military service maintains a precarious toe hold.

It used to be different. Between the end of WWII and the start of Vietnam, hundreds of thousand of men (it was almost all men in those days) were drafted or enlisted. Everybody had a dad, a brother, an uncle in one of the services. Everybody had a picture of some shaved-bald young man in a starched uniform hanging on the wall or propped up on the sideboard. If you heard of a serviceman who died or who was injured, you'd think, Thank God it wasn't Eddie. Or Ralph. Or Dennis. In my mother's generation, every one of her brothers-in-law served. Her brother was career navy. She married an Air Force lieutenant--my father--whose B47 bomber crashed during a training mission in the Adirondacks. When she married again--my adoptive dad--he was an Air Force vet. My sister and I both married veterans, and two of our stepbrothers served.

But we're a rarity. Most of my friends have to go back to WWII before they can name a family member in the military. Over the past eight years, all my children have been in classrooms where everyone sends a card to "Any Soldier"--but no one in those classrooms writes to an uncle or big sister overseas.

So what happens in a country where everyone is proud of Our Armed Forces but almost no one knows a soldier? We throw wonderful parades and allow mentally-ill vets to spiral into homelessness. We slap magnets on the back our SUVs and shake our heads at news stories about the number of post-deployment suicides. We vote for politicians who wave eagles and flags and we vote for spending cuts that freeze medical benefits for veterans.

Does this bother you? It bothers me. This is what I did about it: I wrote a book about five vets from one small town in New York struggling to come to terms with life after war. I'm pretty good at writing characters, and my hope is that some of the people who read my novel leave it feeling as if they know and care about a soldier or a marine. Personally. Intimately.

What can you do about it? Consider donating to the [National Military Family Association](#) or the [Disabled American Veterans Charitable Service Trust](#). Volunteer one day a month to your area VA hospital or the local homeless shelter. Use one of the local or national job-search boards to hire a veteran. Pay attention to how your representative's votes affect services to military men and women and their families.

How long has it been? Five minutes? Okay, we've got a marine waiting. Hello, corporal. Welcome to the health care system the American people have set up for veterans. How can we help you?

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