

HOMING INSTINCT

Best-selling novelist Kristin Hannah gives setting a key role in her narratives

By Kristianne Huntsberger

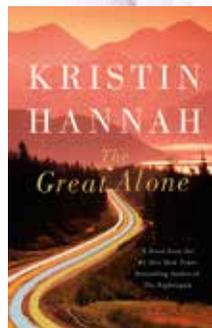
» **“Part of life is finding** the landscape that matches your inner journey,” says Kristin Hannah, best-selling author of *The Nightingale* (2015) and *The Great Alone* (2018). She is sitting on her living room couch while, outside the window, sailboats bob on the bay and thin clouds drift over treetops near her house on an island located near Seattle. Living close to water is pivotal to Hannah’s sense of home, which is why she splits her time between the Puget Sound area and Hawai‘i. It’s also why, every other year, she visits Alaska, which she calls one of her top-10 favorite places on the planet. Alaska, Hannah explains, “changes who you are and how you relate to the natural world.”

Hannah set *The Great Alone* in a fictitious homesteader town outside Homer. She felt the larger-than-life landscape of Alaska demanded equally big characters with complicated histories (often marked by a momentous move to the 49th state). As the novel’s protagonist, Leni, notes, “Everyone up here had two stories: the life before and the life now.”

In her own “life before,” Hannah was an attorney, but a period of bed rest while pregnant with her son opened a possibility for writing, and she took it. “I’ll try for five years, and if I haven’t sold anything by the time he goes to first grade, I’ll go back to the law,” Hannah recalls saying at the time. “I sold my first book when he was 2.”

Today, Hannah is the author of more than 20 novels, including *The Nightingale*, about sisters at the time of the World War II French Resistance. Hannah’s books often require extensive research, but for her most recent, focused on a teenage Leni and her family trying to make new lives in Alaska, Hannah used her personal experience of the landscape around her family lodge on the Kenai Peninsula. “Place is kind of the star of the book,” says Hannah, who also wrote bits of her own childhood into the main character’s. “I’m the same age today that Leni would have grown to be. So there’s my experience in the mid-1970s and what it was like to move around, to go to different schools, to not quite fit in sometimes—and how books kept me going.”

In *The Great Alone*, as in *The Nightingale*, women’s stories are central. Alongside the rigors of off-the-grid



» **Kristin Hannah chose Alaska as the main setting for her recent best-seller, *The Great Alone*.**

life in Alaska, Leni and her mother face the challenges of living with Leni’s increasingly unstable father. “I didn’t realize that I was writing about strong women overcoming and surviving difficult odds until everyone started telling me that I was,” says Hannah, with a chuckle.

Echoing the blockbuster success of *The Nightingale*, *The Great Alone* was, as of mid-November, one of Amazon’s Top 20 Best Books of 2018 and also in the running for a 2018 Goodreads Choice Award.

Both books have been optioned for films, driven by women-led writer-director-producer teams, and set to enter production soon. This excites Hannah: “I think, as a moviegoer, I’m ready to see a movie about World War II that is about the women,” she says, “and a movie about Alaska that is about women surviving and thriving.”

For more information, visit kristinhannah.com. ✕