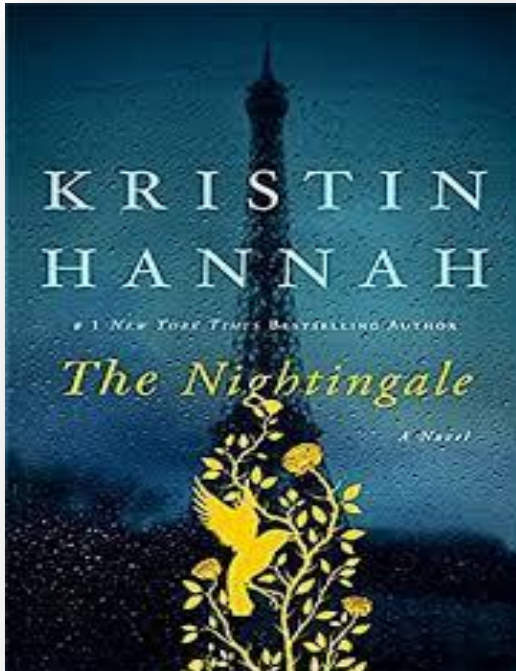


**Review of Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* (St. Martin's Press, United States, 2015, ISBN: 978-0312577223, Pp 3-448)**

By  
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*“Today’s young people want to know everything about everyone. They think talking about the problem will solve it. I come from a quieter generation. We understand the value of forgetting, the lure of reinvention.”*

Thus claims the narrator at the very opening of the novel. She is battling with cancer, feeling her life force slowly ebbing away from her. But just a glimpse of her tells the readers that her identity, though initially undisclosed, is much larger than that of an old woman who now needs assistance for performing even the meagre tasks. Kristin Hannah brings up such a topic for her novel *The Nightingale* which has been talked, written about and discussed about more than a million times; the horrors of which still haunt mankind: the Second World War.

This is a story of two sisters: Vianne, who though thrown out onto the hard and rough pavement of life, stood up and brushed herself clean and Isabelle who when first thrown into the harsh reality, had sucked at her thumb for comfort and searched for her mother. Vianne, though young had seen the Great War, had seen her father go off to the war and come back as a broken man who pushed away everyone, to the level that he left her and Isabelle with utter strangers when their mother breathed her last. Love, Vianne found it. Without searching she found it in her best friend Rachel and the man who finally promised to keep holding her hand through everything: Antoine. But *“in love we find out who we want to be; in war we find out who we are.”* No matter how much *“she wanted to bottle how safe she felt in this moment, so*

*she could drink of it later when loneliness and fear left her parched*”, her world was shattered when Antoine was called up to the front as a soldier. The picnic the happy family had by the lake soon turned grim as the father had to leave behind his beloved wife and their vivacious daughter, Sophie to join the war and fight for his country, France.

The younger sister grew up. What do humans really need to grow up? Just food? Isn't love necessary for a person to grow? Judged from this regard, Isabelle remained a dwarf. Sent away from home at the mere age of four, Isabelle had hoped that Vianne would love her. But her older sister was too wrapped up in her own world to notice when Isabelle lost her first milk tooth or when she was locked up in a dark room for “wanting too much”. At the mere age of nineteen, she has turned a rebel in her own right, running away and stealing from life as it has never treated her fair.

All novels set in this time frame talk about the sufferings of the common people at the hands of the Germans but what about the lives of those men from Nazi Germany who were forcefully torn away from their family to fight in the war for the national leader? Captain Beck was billeted in Vianne's house. While everyone saw him as the enemy tearing apart their country, he saw in young Sophie his own six-year old daughter whom he had left behind at home. The one who wielded the whip at the government's orders, helped Vianne survive the acute shortage of food by giving away some from his own part. The man who gave Sophie a whole bar of chocolate when she wailed at the bad quality of food, sat in the dim light of the oil lamp and told a much scared Vianne how he wanted to go back home to his family, how they were expecting another child when he had to leave them behind and how he lay in bed each day thinking about names for that child.

War has always taken its toll on the common people. While Vianne struggled to survive on her salary as a school teacher, Isabelle meets Gaetan in the woods while trying to run away from Paris. The newly released young political prisoner catches the attention of beautiful Isabelle. But Hannah does not make them fall head over heels in love in that magnanimous backdrop of the impending war. Starved for love all her life, Isabelle wants to embrace the war, the war within her and the one waged outside among countries which will not allow women on the forefront. Gaetan promises her that she will serve her role in the war but just as the night ends, his promises mix with the ashes left in the bonfire, as he disappears from her life.

Polar opposites in their personalities, the two sisters try to find their own solace in the war times. While Isabelle joins a revolutionary group as its messenger, Vianne tries to protect her daughter from the horrors of the war that seem to crawl in too close. There are certain mundane events that make the readers smile and even laugh. But apparently that is not what Hannah wants her readers to do. The book picks up pace and runs even faster than the trains taking the Jews for “better settlement areas”. All that was beautiful loses its virtue, all that was once pure and innocent becomes ‘aware’ and the war rages on.

I was really intrigued by the title of the novel. Why ‘The Nightingale’? When fighting for her nation, Isabelle took the code name of The Nightingale, a reformed version of her own name of Rossignol, meaning the same. But is she the only one who plays her beautiful melody amidst the ruins? The novel focuses mainly on the lives of women, the women who never knew how to handle the accounts take up responsibilities too massive for their narrow shoulders and manage them gracefully. In the streets that reek of blood and betrayal, it seems

that loss is the only thing that people can face. But they will still stand upright as “*Men tell stories. Women get on with it. There were no parades for us when it was over, no medals or mentions in history books. We did what we had to during the war, and when it was over, we picked up the pieces and started our lives over.*”

With beautiful descriptions of all places she mentions in her novel, Hannah spins the story of a father who was afraid to love his daughters after seeing the war, of a sister who drowned in her own sorrows forgot her sibling but fought tooth and nail for her when times demanded, a young lover who finally got to embrace his beloved to give her what she lacked all her life: love, only to hear her breathe her last softly in his arms, a Captain who reminisced about his family at night and who had a lot to tell them even when his breaths drew to a close. But most importantly, it is the story of The Nightingale who could see the Eiffel Tower from her window as a child and never stopped weaving beauty around it with her melodious voice even amidst the torn world, the one that the war bred and took away with it. Upon finishing the book with tears running down their faces, the readers can proudly exclaim, just like Isabelle:

“*The Nightingale has sung.*”

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Debdatta Banerjee is currently pursuing her Master’s degree in English Literature and Language from the University of Calcutta and has been a lifelong learner of how works of art mould the mind. When she is not studying, her fields of interests vary from running just for the fun of it, capturing the beauty around through her lens to reading anything that is not a part of her coursework, mostly romance, historical fiction and fantasy novels. She is very much interested in writings that bring out the indelible marks left by the waging of different wars, especially the ones that show the almost popular theme from a new, different perspective.