

"Kelli Estes passionately brings the past to life, interweaving the story of two women...whose journey toward hope is timeless."

—GWENDOLYN WOMACK, *USA Today* bestselling author
of *The Fortune Teller* and *The Time Collector*

today we go home



USA Today Bestselling Author of
The Girl Who Wrote in Silk

KELLI ESTES

Reading Group Guide

1. A major theme of the story explores the female soldier's experience. Did any of these women's experiences surprise you? If you have military experience, what are some challenges, prejudices, abuses, etc. that you experienced as a female military member or witnessed by other women in the military?
2. Emily enlisted so she could be with her brother as well as for the adventure. Willie enlisted as a means of financial support. Neither were sexually or romantically motivated, yet women discovered in Union or Confederate ranks were usually accused of such. Why do you think this was? Has this changed in society and/or the military today?
3. Emily lived in a state that declared it illegal for black people to live, work, or even visit. (Article 13 of Indiana's 1851 Constitution: "No negro or mulatto shall come into or settle in the State, after the adoption of this Constitution.") Do you think this helped or hindered her understanding of slavery and the growth of her abolitionist beliefs? Do you see any correlation

between this lack of exposure to people of a different race and how we still experience racism today?

4. Opening all military jobs to women in recent years has started the debate on whether women should be included in any future drafts/conscriptions. What do you think?
5. The epigraph at the beginning of the book reads “Home isn’t where our house is, but wherever we are understood.” Emily’s home was in Indiana, yet it stopped being the place where people truly knew her. Larkin grew up in Seattle but chose to go home to her grandmother’s house in Woodinville because that’s where she’d feel best loved. What does *home* mean to you? Where is your “home”? Why?
6. Through most of the story, Emily’s family is made up of her brother and Willie. For Larkin, it is her grandmother and cousins. Both women have other family members, but they feel emotionally disconnected from them. Who do you consider your true family, no matter if they are actual family? What is it about these people that you love so much?
7. There are people still today who don’t believe the Civil War was about slavery. What do you think, and why?
8. Were you surprised to learn that so many women disguised themselves as men to fight in the Civil War? Had you heard about any before reading this book? Did you look up any online while reading? Share what you know or learned with the group.

9. Was it a surprise to you to learn that black men were not allowed to join the Union army until 1863? That they were segregated from white soldiers and led exclusively by white officers? That they were not paid the same wages as white soldiers until June 1864? That, if caught by Confederate forces, they were usually brutally killed and never taken prisoner? Do you think the war might have ended sooner if any of these facts were different?
10. PTSD, while certainly discussed in relation to veterans, can also arise in people who have never served in the military. Even children can suffer from PTSD. Some known causes are sexual, physical, or emotional abuse; a natural disaster; a car accident; a long-term illness; etc. Do you have personal experience with PTSD (yourself or a loved one) that you can share with the group?
11. Did the information in the story about the *bacha posh* of Afghanistan surprise you? Are there any similar practices in your culture where a female takes on the appearance and social expectations of a male? Why is the practice accepted in some cultures and not in others? Is it different if the decision is that of the child rather than the parents?
12. Emily's diary directly influenced Sarah's decision to join the military. Imagine one of your ancestors left a diary detailing his or her experiences during an interesting time in history. What would you do with that information? Share with the group what you already know about your ancestor and the time he or she lived. How might learning more about this ancestor's experiences through a diary affect you?

13. After Emily's story ends, her granddaughter makes an entry in her diary that gives some clues to what happened to Emily and the children. What do you think their lives were like living on the prairie? What, especially, do you think life was like for Gabriel as a cattle rancher when there were likely very few others who looked like him?
14. Do you now think differently about women serving in the military? What are some actions you can take to support female veterans and show your appreciation for their service?

A Conversation with the Author

The main characters in *Today We Go Home* served in the military. Did you ever serve?

As a kid, I didn't think anyone in my family had ever served in the military, because it was never discussed. Only later did I learn that my father served in the National Guard. I grew up thinking that only boys served in the military, so it never crossed my mind as an option for me. But, even if I had wanted to serve, I would not have qualified, since I am totally blind in my left eye.

What inspired the story? How did you discover that women served in battle in the Civil War?

As I was searching for new story ideas, I did an online search for *strong women in history* and got a result of several names, three of which were women who disguised themselves as men to fight in the Civil War. This was the first time I had ever heard that any women had been in battle during that war, and I was fascinated to read these women's stories. This led to books, articles, and anything else I could find on the subject, and it wasn't long before I knew I had to write about these brave women. One thing that really frustrated me in my research was learning that Victorian sensibilities twisted these women's service into something somehow shameful, and I knew I had to set the record

straight. Also, right about the time I was discovering this history, I was following with great interest the political and social discussions about the changing policies regarding women in today's militaries, and I thought it would be interesting to see how a present-day female soldier might be impacted by learning about her Civil War sisters in arms and how their experiences were similar or dissimilar to her own.

What research did you do to bring this novel to life? Did you visit any Civil War sites?

Coming from a place of very little knowledge about the military, I had a steep learning curve. I read dozens of books about today's military, especially women in the military. I also read dozens of books about the Civil War and about a handful of books (all I could find) on women who fought in those battles. Once I knew Larkin would have served in Afghanistan and befriended an Afghan girl, I also read a number of books on women in Afghanistan. Clearly, I did a lot of reading! Oh, and I mustn't forget all the videos and documentaries I watched on Netflix and YouTube on various subjects having to do with the Civil War, the war in Afghanistan, and the U.S. military.

Beyond that, my family and I took a weeklong trip to Tennessee, where we spent a day walking in the steps of my characters on the Shiloh Battlefield, as well as visiting other Civil War and antebellum sites around Nashville. I visited the Tennessee State Capitol building on the day before Thanksgiving (not smart planning on my part) to discover that the information desk was not staffed. Fortunately, the state troopers on duty were incredibly knowledgeable about the history of the building and were very helpful in answering my questions. Our day in Nashville also included a visit to the Tennessee State Museum and hours of wandering the streets with me trying to imagine it as it was in 1862.

As for other research, I live in Woodinville, Washington, so the present-day setting did not pose too many challenges.

Larkin's PTSD did, however, send me to more reading (books, articles, websites...). I was very lucky to find several people, including veterans, mentioned in the acknowledgments who were so generous with their time and knowledge and who answered all my random questions. I owe a lot to each of those individuals.

How long did it take you to write *Today We Go Home*?

It is sometimes difficult to quantify how long it takes to write a book because I spend so much time researching a vague plot or character idea before I ever put words to paper. I am also a plotter, which means the bulk of my research and story plotting is done before I ever type *Chapter One*. In general, I developed the idea for the story while concurrently doing research on the topics and themes for about one year. Writing the first draft took me four months, followed by roughly seven months of revisions and edits (with some breaks for holidays and travel). All together, that adds up to about two years.

How did you choose the settings: Woodinville, Washington; Stampers Creek, Indiana; and the movements of the 9th Indiana Infantry?

For me, setting is very important, and I spend a lot of time thinking about how the setting impacts the characters. Because this book was so research-heavy for me, I decided to set the present-day story in the town where I live: Woodinville, Washington. As for Stampers Creek, Indiana, I found the tiny town (which really isn't a town anymore) on my family tree many generations back, and I wanted to learn more about it. I make a point to follow my curiosity, and it always leads to fascinating discoveries. Because Emily came from Indiana, I looked up Indiana regiments and found that the 9th Indiana Infantry was the first regiment to leave for battle and they were present at the Battle of Shiloh, which clinched the deal for me.

Are there any other Civil War women you wish you could have fit into this story?

Oh boy, are there! Hundreds of them. First, there's Jennie Hodgers, who lived most of her life, even after the war, as Albert D. J. Cashier. She served three years in the 95th Illinois and was never discovered to be a woman until near the end of her long life while living in an old soldier's home. She was buried with full military honors, as a man.

And then there's the unnamed woman with the 20th Army Corps who fought in the Battle of Stones River while five months pregnant who was only discovered when she gave birth in her tent four months later. Similarly, a corporal in a New Jersey regiment who had served in at least three significant battles became severely ill while on picket duty. After being carried by his officers to a nearby farmhouse, he gave birth to a baby boy. I also mustn't forget the unidentified woman in the 29th Connecticut Infantry who gave birth in the trenches during the siege of Petersburg.

Florena Budwin enlisted with her husband, and both were captured and sent to the gruesome Andersonville Prison, where her husband was killed by a guard. Revealing her true gender would have secured her release, but she kept her secret. When Union forces were advancing into Georgia, Confederate authorities moved some prisoners to Florence, South Carolina, Budwin among them. She kept her secret for a year until she fell gravely ill and the prison doctor discovered she was a woman. Although she was moved to a private room and given care, she died of pneumonia one month before all sick prisoners at Florence were paroled and sent north.

The story of a woman known only as Charlie really sets my imagination on fire. In May 1863, the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported that Charlie followed the man she loved into the 14th Iowa Infantry (although the newspaper may have recorded her regiment incorrectly). When she was discovered to be a woman and she realized she would be sent away from her lover, she took his revolver and shot herself in the heart on the parade ground.