



TRACEY ENERSON WOOD

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

the WAR NURSE

A Novel

*"The War Nurse shines an important light on
a woman whose story was, until now, lost to time."*

—Kristin Harmel, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Book of Lost Names*

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. How much did you know about nursing (particularly World War I-era nursing) before reading this book? What was the most surprising thing you learned?
2. If you were told that your entire workplace was uprooting to support a war effort, what would your first reaction be? Did Julia have a real choice when it came to shipping out?
3. Both Julia and the doctors she assists can be territorial about their authority. How does this affect their working dynamics? Are there any consequences for the patients the team treats?
4. Julia and Dr. Murphy discuss the ethical and procedural challenges of authorizing nurses to perform lifesaving procedures on their own. Compare the benefits and drawbacks of strictly following protocol to the consequences of a nurse performing whatever procedures she feels are best.
5. Dr. Murphy compares the doctor's role to that of a car mechanic and gives the majority of the healing credit to nurses. What do you think is a nurse's most important role? How would you rank their importance next to doctors?

6. Julia hesitates in her relationship with Fred, not wanting to feed the rumor mill. How does outside opinion influence relationships? Compare the rumor mill of Base Hospital 21 to today's social media. How do their relative positions affect their willingness to "let the chips fall where they may" when they begin seeing each other more seriously?
7. What did you think of Julia's choice to keep her skin condition a secret? Do you think she was right to fear dismissal? What were the consequences of her decision?
8. How does the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak compare to the 2020 novel coronavirus? Are there lessons that can be learned from the way Julia and her nurses battle their pandemic?
9. Did Julia do the right thing by violating protocol to operate on Private Dempsey? What would you have done in her place?
10. What did you think of the final scene of the book? Can you think of a moment you wanted to bottle up and keep forever? What do you think is next for Julia and Fred?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did Julia Stimson evolve as you started to relive her story?

First, I read the collection of her letters in *Finding Themselves*. This gave me a good idea of her voice and perspective of the events. I realized that what she wrote home was probably censored, both officially and by her, so as not to upset her family too much with how difficult a situation she was in. So I continued my research, reading diaries of other World War I nurses, along with other historical references. One reference, a letter from one of the real doctors to his wife, spoke glowingly of Julia: her organizational skills and positive relationships. This enabled me to fill in the blanks and hopefully present a more realistic view of what Julia went through. She became a more three-dimensional person in my mind, with hopes and fears, regrets and insecurities—most of which she had kept to herself.

How does working with a true historical figure change the process of getting to know your characters?

I think it is more difficult to work with a true historical figure, because you are limited in many ways, such as time and geography. I would have loved, for example, to put Julia in more physical danger from the war, but that would be too far from documented facts. But in some ways, true characters are more rewarding to work with, because you have bits and pieces of their lives and true anecdotes that are fun to work into a scene.

When writing relationships like Julia and Fred's, how do you strike a balance between character motivations and historical accuracy? Do you have any rules for when to exercise creative license?

My basic rule is that what I write about the relationships—and other parts of the story—either happened or *could have* happened as far as I know. In historical fiction, we are filling in the blanks: the emotions, the dialogue, the motivations that don't get documented and therefore are not included in nonfiction accounts. But these very things bring a story to life and, for me anyway, make it more enjoyable to read.

There are times when I break this rule, and that is usually when I have to move events in time or place a bit to better fit with the arc of the story.

That said, it must be remembered that this is a work of fiction. There is no way to research every piece of documentation in existence. That is why I have the caveat *as far as I know*.

Like any historical novel, *The War Nurse* required a great deal of research. What kinds of sources did you rely on most? How did you find the resources you needed?

As previously mentioned, *Finding Themselves* was an invaluable resource. Another was *Nursing through Shot and Shell*, the memoir of Beatrice Hopkinson, a British nurse. Washington University in St. Louis has extensive online documentation of Base Hospital 21. Harvard and Vassar databases also provided insight on Fred and Julia.

But the most enjoyable and perhaps most important research was actually visiting Rouen and the surrounding area and taking tours with historians throughout Belgium and France. Not only did I learn a lot from them but they led me to other sources I wouldn't have found on my own. I found museum bookstores to be a treasure trove for finding obscure, narrowly focused information.

What were the most surprising things you learned while writing?

I guess the most surprising thing I learned was Marie Curie's involvement in the war and of the extensive accomplishments of her daughter, Irène, who, with her husband, also went on to earn a Nobel Prize.

I also noted how so many things never really change. Sure, we have better treatments for most illnesses and injuries, but the human body and its frailties are the same. And while we think we are seeing something new with COVID-19, we are not.

Were there any interesting facts that ended up not being included in the book?

I learned much about World War I history, but I purposely avoided including too much of it. There are plenty of books about wars, both nonfiction and novels. I wanted to focus not on the battles and destruction and weapons but on the personal experiences—the human story, through the eyes of Julia. I also underplayed the horror of it. I believe there is only so much gore my readers want to see. There needed to be enough to set a scene, but I didn't repeat the very unpleasant things the nurses were dealing with. As a nurse myself, I know how they learn to ignore what they need to in order to help their patients and get through the day.

Did the COVID pandemic change the way you wrote about the Spanish flu outbreak?

Since the Spanish flu would have been mostly a problem of fall 1918, slightly after the story takes place, I hadn't planned on it being as important in the story, other than the character arc of Charlotte Cox. But with the parallels of COVID, I realized its relevance to current events, so I made it a larger subplot.

The 1917–1918 pandemic killed at least fifty million people worldwide. In my research, I found an interesting comparison between how St. Louis and Philadelphia handled the Spanish flu pandemic. Philadelphia ignored the warnings and proceeded with a planned parade to raise funds for the war. Two hundred thousand people crammed the sidewalks to view it. Afterward, the city's hospitals were full, and there were soon 2,600 deaths. In contrast, St. Louis banned gatherings, closed businesses, and treated the sick at home. It was able to “flatten the curve,” as we say today, resulting in a lower death rate than Philadelphia.

I didn't find an explanation for why the cities handled the situation

so differently, but it certainly seems reasonable that they followed the advice of people at the war front, where the situation first became critical. Hence, this inspired the standoff between Julia and Dr. Valentine regarding sending advice back home.

What lessons from 1918 did you apply to your own life?

That just when things look the bleakest, change will come and some equilibrium will be restored. We ourselves will have grown and changed, become stronger and more resilient.

Which books are on your bedside table right now?

Kristin Harmel's *The Book of Lost Names* and advance reader's copies of Greer Macallister's and Marie Benedict's upcoming books, *The Arctic Fury* and *The Mystery of Mrs. Christie*.