

Hannah, Kristin. *The Nightingale*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-312-57722-3. Pp. 448.

Reviewed by
Eileen M. Angelini
Fulbright Specialist (NY)

Kristin Hannah's novel *The Nightingale* delivers on its promise of depicting with tremendous insight and sensitivity the role women played in resisting the Germans during the WWII Occupation of France. Told through the eyes of two dramatically different sisters, Vianne Mauriac and Isabelle Rossignol, *The Nightingale* demonstrates the slow but steady progression each woman makes as she summons the necessary inner strength and courage to survive the war, especially when she is unable to protect all those around her. Vianne is the faithful wife and mother whose safe life in the idyllic village of Carriveau is turned upside down when her husband Antoine, the man she so deeply depends upon for both her emotional and physical well-being, is sent to the Front and her home is requisitioned by the German officer, Captain Beck. Isabelle is the rebellious younger sister who refuses to conform to society's ideal of a proper young woman and who is determined to be a war hero much like Edith Cavell, a nurse in the Great War. While Vianne must resist the charm of the handsome and morally ethical Captain Beck, Isabelle throws herself headlong into the active Resistance movement with such dangerous missions as leading downed Allied pilots to safety over the Pyrenees mountains. As the war continues, an unfortunate situation leads to Beck being replaced by the brute Von Richter, a man who poses even greater emotional and physical challenges for Vianne, and Isabelle is captured, tortured, and deported for being a member of the Resistance. It is here in the development of the narrative that Hannah's talent as a storyteller shines, for she helps the reader to enter into the mindset of these diametrically opposed women, who love each other despite being frustrated by each other's choice (or lack thereof) of actions. Hannah adeptly portrays the tiny moments of mental turmoil so that the reader is able to appreciate fully what it meant to be a woman in France during the German Occupation. A telling example occurs midway through the novel when Vianne is sharing her daily food ration with her Jewish friend Rachel de Champlain:

Vianne took the knife over to the table. Withdrawing the bread and cheese from her basket, she carefully cut both in half and returned her

portion to the basket. When she looked up again, Rachel had tears in her eyes. "I want to tell you not give us that. You need it."

"You need it, too." (252)

Immediately after this scene, Vianne and Rachel are warned by Beck about a round-up of foreign-born Jews (even those women who were married to non-Jewish French men born in France) that is to take place the following day:

He glanced left to right and then leaned slightly toward Vianne. "Madame de Champlain should not be home tomorrow morning," he said quietly.

Vianne thought perhaps he'd translated his intention poorly. "Pardon?"

"Madame de Champlain should not be at home tomorrow," he repeated.

"My husband and I own this house," Rachel said. "Why should I leave?"

"It will not matter, this ownership of the house. Not tomorrow."

"My children—" Rachel started.

Beck finally looked at Rachel. "Your children are of no concern to us. They were born in France. They are not on the list."

List.

A word that was feared now. Vianne said quietly, "What are you telling us?"

"I am telling you that if she is here tomorrow, she will not be here the day after." (253)

What keeps the reader fully engaged in the novel's intrigue is the fact that it begins with a present-day (specifically April 9, 1995 on the Oregon Coast) first-person narration and then continues with third-person flashbacks. Moreover, it is not until the very end that the reader knows for sure whether the first-person narrator, who intermittently interrupts the third-person narration throughout the novel, is Vianne or Isabelle. While it is definitely the many works of Charlotte Delbo that give us a firsthand account of

being in the French Resistance and having survived deportation or Marguerite Dura's *La Douleur* that analyzes the painful memories and events from the war years or Margaret Collins Weitz's *Sisters in the Resistance: How Women Fought to Free France, 1940-1945* that offers the historical framework for the role that women played during the WWII Occupation of France, it is Hannah's *The Nightingale* that sheds a contemporary light on the too often overlooked suffering endured by women during this difficult time period.