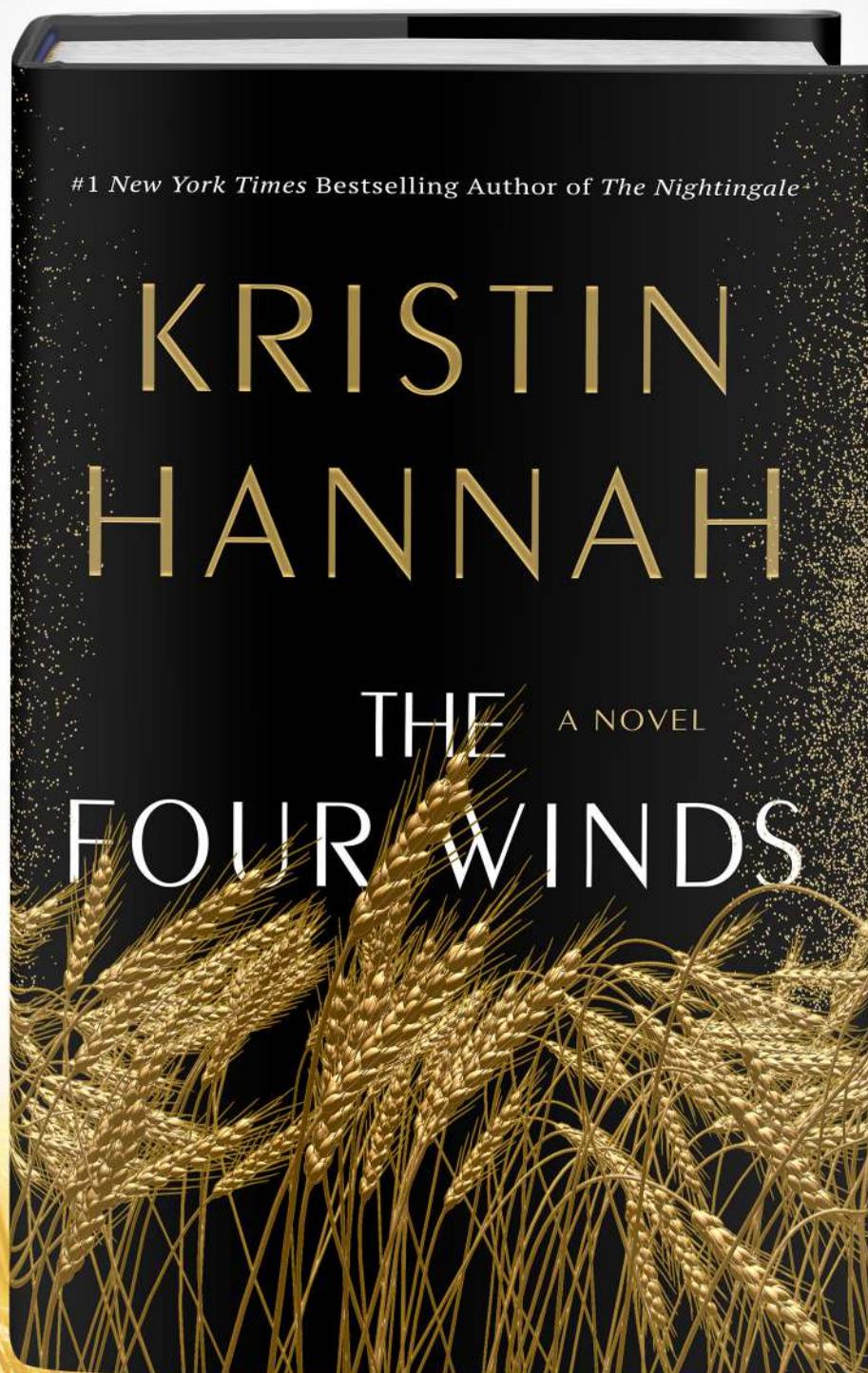


Discover a new American epic.

# THE FOUR WINDS

## BOOK CLUB KIT



ST.  
MARTIN'S  
PRESS

"Sometimes, when I close my eyes,  
I swear I can taste the dust..."

From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale* and *The Great Alone* comes an epic novel of love and heroism and hope, set against the backdrop of one of America's most defining eras—the Great Depression.

Texas, 1934. Millions are out of work and a drought has broken the Great Plains. Farmers are fighting to keep their land and their livelihoods as the crops are failing, the water is drying up, and dust threatens to bury them all. One of the darkest periods of the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl era, has arrived with a vengeance.

In this uncertain and dangerous time, Elsa Martinelli—like so many of her neighbors—must make an agonizing choice: fight for the land she loves or go west, to California, in search of a better life. *The Four Winds* is an indelible portrait of America and the American Dream, as seen through the eyes of one indomitable woman whose courage and sacrifice will come to define a generation.



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

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On September 6, 1936, in his fireside chat to the nation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said,

*I shall never forget the fields of wheat so blasted by heat that they cannot be harvested. I shall never forget field after field of corn stunted, earless and stripped of leaves, for what the sun left the grasshoppers took. I saw brown pastures which would not keep a cow on fifty acres.*

*Yet I would not have you think for a single minute that there is permanent disaster in these drought regions, or that the picture I saw meant depopulating these areas. No cracked earth, no blistering sun, no burning wind, no grasshoppers are a permanent match for the indomitable American farmers and stockmen and their wives and children who have carried on through desperate days, and inspire us with their self-reliance, their tenacity, and their courage. It was their fathers' task to make homes; it is their task to keep those homes; it is our task to help them with their fight.*

Their tenacity and courage. Their self-reliance. Words that describe the Greatest Generation. Words that stay with me and have deep meaning. Especially now.

As I write this note, it is May 2020, and the world is battling the coronavirus pandemic. My husband's best friend, Tom, who was one of the earliest of our friends to encourage my writing and who was our son's godfather, caught the virus last week and has just passed away. We cannot be with his widow, Lori, and his family to mourn.

Three years ago, I began writing this novel about hard times in America: the worst environmental disaster in our history; the collapse of the economy; the effect of massive unemployment. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that the Great Depression would become so relevant in our modern lives, that I would see so many people out of work, in need, frightened for the future.

As we know, there are lessons to be learned from history. Hope to be derived from hardships faced by others.

We've gone through bad times before and survived, even thrived. History has shown us the strength and durability of the human spirit. In the end, it is our idealism and our courage and our commitment to one another—what we have in common—that will save us. Now, in these dark days, we can look to history, to the legacy of the Greatest Generation and the story of our



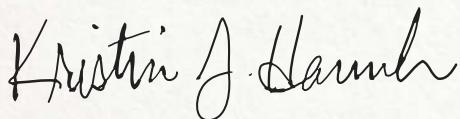
own past, and take strength from it.

Although my novel focuses on fictional characters, Elsa Martinelli is representative of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children who went west in the 1930s in search of a better life. Many of them, like the pioneers who went west one hundred years before them, brought nothing more than a will to survive and a hope for a better future. Their strength and courage were remarkable.

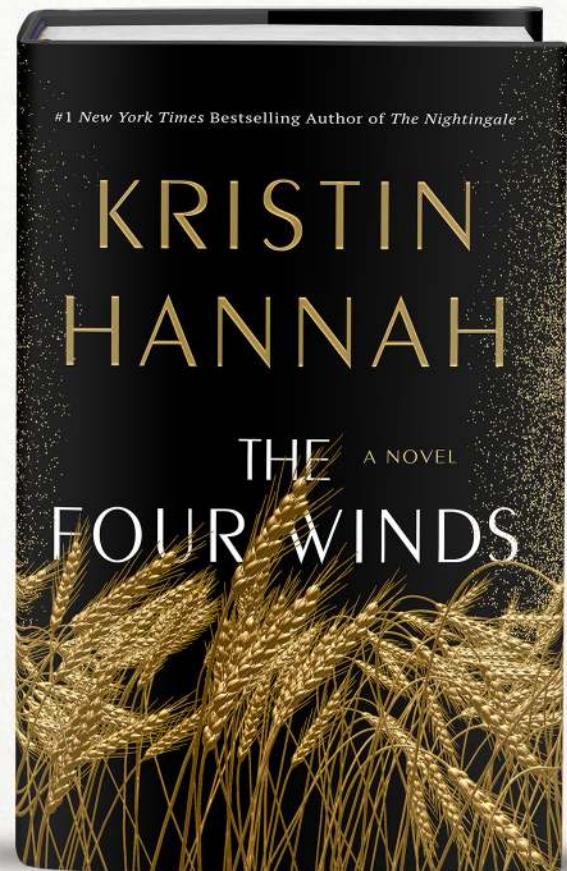
In writing this story, I tried to present the history as truthfully as possible. The strike that takes place in the novel is fictional, but it is based on strikes that took place in California in the thirties. The town of Welty is fictional as well. Primarily where I diverged from the historical record was in the timeline of events. There are instances in which I chose to manipulate dates to better fit my fictional narrative. I apologize in advance to historians and scholars of the era.

For more information about the Dust Bowl years or the migrant experience in California, please go to my website, [KristinHannah.com](http://KristinHannah.com), for a suggested reading list.

Happy Reading,



Kristin Hannah



# A conversation with KRISTIN HANNAH

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*Why did you choose to focus the story on this time period in American history, and on Elsa's evolution? What inspired it?*

**I have been fascinated by the Great Depression for years, and I've long wanted to explore what it was like to live in that time period. I find myself continually drawn to stories that have been overlooked or marginalized, especially women's stories. Once I began researching the era, I**

**came to the place that was identified as the Dust Bowl, and I was blown away by the tenacity and determination it took to survive in that place, in those years. In writing a novel about survival, I couldn't turn away from the Great Plains and what the inhabitants endured. Of course, I had no idea when I began that 2020 would see a pandemic that changed our world and made the Depression era relevant again.**

**In truth, Elsa was a surprise to me. When I began this novel, it was Loreda's story—Loreda as a young woman, faced with the deprivation and hardship of the drought and the Depression. Elsa was a secondary character—Rafe's wife. As I wrote, Elsa simply willed herself to life in scene after scene. I kept coming back to her, this woman who had great strength but didn't know it, who'd been marginalized by both her husband and her family. Finally, after about a year, I gave up and gave in and handed the novel over to Elsa. That was really the beginning of the novel as it ended up. I simply fell in love with Elsa's endurance and her strength and her capacity for love. She is probably my favorite character to date.**



*What resources did you tap in to to get the historical setting right? When exploring records of the time or creative work, what struck you as particularly moving? Were there certain images or voices that stayed with you?*

**The research for this novel was really daunting, but the good news is that there is an extensive historical record. President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration funded artists and authors to document the era. That is how we have the remarkable photographs of artists like Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein. There are also a great number of first-person accounts and memoirs. Both the University of Texas at Austin and the University of California at Bakersfield offered helpful resources. The more I read about the people who survived this era, the more pressure I felt to get their stories right.**

*Do you find it more enjoyable or natural to explore the characters’ inner thoughts or desires, or their outer journey? In this case, the characters also undertake an extensive, exhausting physical journey.*

**I love the research that goes into the re-creation of a time and place, but in the end, it’s the characters who are the heart and soul of my novels. What I really care about is the internal journey, the change that occurs during times of hardship. I believe that hard times reveal character, and that is often my focus. I want to create characters who feel as real as anyone you know, and I hope that they teach you something along the way as well, about yourself or your world or a time that you didn’t know well.**

*Did you see parallels in migrant experiences of the past with what is in our news cycle now? How much of the past is in our present?*

**Absolutely. Part of the inspiration for this novel was the immigration situation in the United States right now. I thought it was important to highlight a time in our history when we treated fellow Americans as “other,” and denied them basic rights. The past can teach us so much about who we are and who we should strive to be. Much of the strength of America is based on ideals—diversity, equality, opportunity. History has proven that we must constantly fight for these ideals and demand the absolute best of ourselves and our elected officials.**

**Additionally, I thought it was important to highlight the Dust Bowl, which has been called the worst environmental disaster in American history. In the world today, climate change is very much front and center in the news, and I think it’s important to be reminded that man definitely has an impact on the land, on the world in which we live. Science can warn and save us, if we listen. Great care needs to be taken to preserve our world for future generations.**

*What does the book’s title, *The Four Winds*, mean to you? Why was it right for this book?*



I always loved the word *wind* for this book because of the dust storms and the constant, howling winds that battered the Great Plains, but it took a while to find the right combination. Ultimately, I came to adore *The Four Winds* because it alluded to both the wind and the effect it could have on people. There seems to me to be a kind of fate inherent in the phrase. People can come “from the four winds,” meaning, from any corner of the globe, and be whisked away, carried to another place. Certainly, Elsa and her children were swept away, to the west, and found a life they never expected. They found hardship and poverty and abuse; they also found love and friendship and something to fight for. Elsa learned how strong she could be and how powerful one woman, one voice, could be. And all of it thanks to the four winds.

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## I SIMPLY FELL IN LOVE WITH ELSA'S ENDURANCE AND HER STRENGTH AND HER CAPACITY FOR LOVE.

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*Did you wish anything different for these characters than what the actions of the story brought them?*

Well, the most obvious answer to that is found in the ending. It was really difficult to write. As I said earlier, I ended up loving these characters, and admiring them, and I wanted the world to give them everything they wanted. I guess, in a way, it did. Elsa became everything that she could be. She found a way to believe in herself, love herself, and to be a champion for others. In learning all of that about herself, she taught her children the greatest lesson in life: to love and to be courageous.

*What is next on the horizon for you?*

Honestly, I have no idea! I have a few thoughts poking around, beginning to take shape, but I haven't been able to really wrangle any of them into that special something. I know that I am really interested in what happens next to Loreda.

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KRISTIN HANNAH is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than twenty novels, including *The Nightingale* and *The Great Alone*. A former lawyer turned writer, she lives with her husband in the Pacific Northwest.

## Readers' Group Questions for Discussion

# THE FOUR WINDS

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1. “Hope is a coin I carry. . . . There were times in my journey when it felt as if that penny and the hope it represented were the only things that kept me going.” (1) What is the significance of the fact that it is an American penny? In what ways does hope anchor us in the moment, and in what ways does it push us forward? Do you or your family have any keepsakes that represent your family’s hope for the future?
2. “But we women of the Great Plains worked from sunup to sundown, too, toiled on wheat farms until we were as dry and baked as the land we loved.” (1) The stories of women have largely gone undocumented throughout history, and this era is no different. It is changing, slowly, and women’s courage and determination and victories are being brought to light. How are women’s stories different? Why do you think they’ve gone unreported for so long? Do you think sharing these stories will make a difference to future generations?
3. Life was very different for unmarried young women in earlier generations. Expectations for their future were sharply defined. How is Elsa shaped by these expectations and her failure to meet them? Do you think it would have been the same for her in New York City? Did you feel compressed by expectation when you were growing up? Do you think these societal mores were designed to keep women “in their place”? How difficult is it to defy both family and society in a small town?
4. “She wished she’d never read *The Age of Innocence*. What good came from all this unexpressed longing? She would never fall in love, never have a child of her own.” (8) Literature is, quite honestly, the opening of a door. Through that door, Elsa saw whole other lives, other futures. What books influenced you when you were growing up? Did any novel and/or character change your perception of either yourself or the world? Did you identify with Elsa and her journey throughout this book? In what way?
5. “She had to believe there was grit in her, even if it had never been tested or revealed.” (9) This sentence highlights Elsa’s essentially hopeful nature, even though she doesn’t believe in herself. Her family and her world have pared her down to inconsequence. Does this idea resonate with you? Have you seen it at work in other people? In yourself?



6. In 1920s America, there was significant prejudice against Italians; we see that prejudice in Elsa's own family. What does Rafe represent to Elsa on the night they meet? Is it simply sex and loneliness? Or do you think there's something deeper involved? Another small defiance against her parents' small-mindedness? What does it say about Elsa that she went with Rafe so willingly?
7. "My land tells its story if you listen. The story of our family. We plant, we tend, we harvest. I make wine from grape cuttings that I brought here from Sicily, and the wine I make reminds me of my father. It binds us, one to another, as it has for generations. Now it will bind you to us." (51) How are people connected to the land that they occupy? What about the land they farm? Describe that unique and complicated connection.
8. Motherhood changes Elsa in almost every way. What does she learn by becoming a mother? What does she learn about motherhood from Rose? How does motherhood strengthen a woman? How does it weaken her? How does Elsa remain "herself" after giving birth? How does she change?
9. Few things can break a woman's heart like motherhood. "Elsa grieved daily for the loss of that closeness with her firstborn. At first she'd tried to scale the walls of her daughter's adolescent, irrational anger; she'd volleyed back with words of love, but Loreda's continuing, thriving impatience with Elsa had done worse than grind her down. It had resurrected all the insecurities of childhood." (66) If you're a parent, did this passage resonate with you? Why?
10. The adolescent years can be especially difficult on mothers and daughters. Did you dislike Loreda during these years? Did you understand her?
11. "Tony and Rose were the kind of people who expected life to be hard and had become tougher to survive. . . . They might have come off the boat as Anthony and Rosalba, but hard work and the land had turned them into Tony and Rose. Americans. They would die of thirst and hunger before they'd give that up." (76) Do you think this attitude is a common thread in those who across generations have come to chase the "American Dream"? Why is land so important to that dream? How does one "become American"?
12. There is a strong thread running through this novel about man's connection to the land. During the Dust Bowl, while many families went west in search of work and a better life, most of them stayed behind on their parched farms. Why do you think that is?
13. What bonds Loreda and her father? What dreams do they share? Do they intend to exclude Elsa, whom they perceive as just a workhorse? Or is she partially to blame for being ostracized? How does her lack of self-esteem color her relationships with her husband and eldest child?



14. What do you think about Rafe? Was he as trapped by his family's expectations as Elsa had been by her own? Did you expect him to leave?
15. How would you describe the Texas landscape the author paints? With its dust storms and earth dry and zigzag cracked, is it like any you've known?
16. "Even if they didn't speak of their love, or share their feelings in long, heartfelt conversations, the bond was there. Sturdy. They'd sewn their lives together in the silent way of women unused to conversation. Day after day, they worked together, prayed together, held their growing family together through the hardships of farm life." (90–91) Do you share a similar bond with the women in your life—either as a mother, a daughter, or a daughter-in-law? With your friends? Why do you think female bonding is so important to women?
17. Why does Rafe leave and what is he chasing out west? Do you have sympathy for how broken he felt by the poverty and hardship? Should Elsa have agreed to go with him? How does Elsa aim to fill his void, and why does she believe she loves him even after the abandonment?
18. Why does the Martinelli family stay under such brutal conditions—the heat, the dust storms, the lack of food, and the dying livestock? Does it reveal anything about the grit that literally fills their bodies? What choices do they have, and what might you have done during the drought? Were you surprised that Elsa set off without her in-laws? Would you have had the courage to do the same?
19. How have the Dust Bowl and "going west" been treated by the American imagination (perhaps in song or cinema)? What has been glamorized, and what grittiness has been left out or effectively captured? Elsa compares them to the early pioneers in their covered wagons. Is that an accurate comparison?
20. Life in California is not at all what the migrants expected, what advertisements had led them to believe. The locals treat them badly, are afraid of them. Why is that? How does the treatment of migrants in California during the Great Depression mirror the treatment of immigrants today? How is it the same? How is it different?
21. How do Elsa and her family remain unbroken even while enduring crippling poverty, food and shelter insecurity, and living in a town that is hostile to them? Would they have fared better in Texas?
22. What do Jack and the Communist union organizers offer the migrant workers, and Loreda in particular? Why is it a risk to associate with them and what is Elsa's hesitation?



23. In the 1930s, communism and socialism were on the rise, partially in response to the grinding poverty, joblessness, and despair. The Communists claimed that “communism is the new Americanism.” Can you understand why people believed in that? What do we know now that people didn’t know then? How do you think these perceptions have changed over time?
24. Discuss the shift in thinking that happens between generations—the freedoms longed for and the sacrifices required. The Greatest Generation was shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. They willingly sacrificed for each other and did what they could to help. How is the modern world different? How do we face our own dark times?
25. How does the Great Depression setting of *The Four Winds* compare to America during the pandemic? What lessons of resilience and healing might be embedded in this story? How might others’ struggles inspire us? Do you have any family stories from the Depression?
26. They say that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Americans were faced with many of the same challenges of the Great Depression. Did we learn from previous generations? What differences can you see in the two difficult times? What similarities? How do you think future generations will judge the America of today?
27. “Courage is fear you ignore.” Discuss this. How do Elsa’s and Loreda’s actions embody this idea?
28. Fighting for any kind of social equality or radical change often requires great personal sacrifice. How does Elsa represent the courage it takes to stand up and make trouble and be counted?
29. Why was it so important for Loreda to get her mother back to Texas, even if at such a high cost? How did she finally come to understand her mother and her choices through a new lens?
30. Did you find the end of Elsa’s and her family’s journey satisfying? Where do you think Ant and Loreda ended up? How do you see Loreda’s life being like her mother’s? How will it be different?

