



FLY AWAY

by Kristin Hannah

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A Note from Kristin Hannah

“[Firefly Lane]
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In a lot of ways, *Firefly Lane* is the book that changed my career. Before it, I had already written eighteen novels, and really, I thought I knew who I was as a novelist. Then along came Tully and Kate. Following their story changed the way I saw my work. For the first time, I wrote a novel that spanned decades and touched on popular culture and delved into the relationship between best friends. The only viewpoints in the novel were the womens'. Sure, there was a love story in *Firefly Lane*, but that was secondary. The real heart of *Firefly Lane* was the friendship between the women. The story incorporated a huge amount of my own life and my own history. It took me several years to write the novel.

When I finally finished, I was honestly exhausted.

But I always knew there was more to the story. It's the first and only time I've ever felt that way after finishing a novel. Usually, when I come to the final edit, I am ready to let the characters go into their happy endings world. *Firefly Lane* was different. Tully and Cloud, in particular, haunted my thoughts, tugged at me. I couldn't quite let them go, even when I went on to write other novels.

One day, I just knew it was time to go back to *Firefly Lane* and check in. You'd think it would be easy to step back into a world you'd created, but it was surprisingly difficult to find my way back to this story and these characters. I should have seen the troubles coming. We all know how tough it can be to come home after years away, and that's what I found when I began *Fly Away*. There were too many stories to tell, too many ways for the characters' lives to go. It really threw me off my game. I tried draft after draft, story after story. I wrote so many versions of Tully and Cloud and Marah and Johnny that my head couldn't hold them all. I felt lost in the forest of too



many choices. Every road I chose ended up leading me in the wrong direction. And then I realized what was missing: Kate. I simply couldn't write about these characters without Kate. In her life, she had been the glue that held them all together; without her, there was no way I could revisit her world. Of course, that presented a bit of a problem, since she died in *Firefly Lane*.

Fortunately, I am a spiritual person and I believe in much more than what I can see. So, once I realized what was wrong, I knew how to fix it. Even if it was a little...unorthodox, even if it asked my readers to accompany me on an extraordinary journey. In that moment, *Fly Away* took shape in my mind. It became a novel about what happens when the one person who matters to you—the person who holds a whole family together—is lost. The funny thing is that I should have known it all along. After all, I wrote *Firefly Lane* as a tribute to my mom, who died of breast cancer when I was young. In Kate, I found a way to remember my mom. So, of course, I should have known that the sequel was about how you go on when the one you love is lost. When I found that theme, and the structure that accompanied it, I was able to do what I really wanted to do: write an emotionally powerful novel about familiar characters that stands on its own as opposed to a pure sequel. I don't think you have to read *Firefly Lane* first, but if you do, I think *Fly Away* is that much richer and more compelling.

Kristina Hannah

*In Her
Own Words*



A Conversation with Kristin Hannah

“My books tend to be about women coming into their own and triumphing and living their best lives.”

When it was first published, you described *Firefly Lane* as the book that hit closest to home for you. What is it about the story of Kate and Tully that continues to be so meaningful to you?

Of all the books I've written, *Firefly Lane* has the most of me on every page. I grew up in the town where the novel is set; I lived in the house that was described. I was very much of that era. I went to the University of Washington, and got the same degree as Kate and Tully did. The world of *Firefly Lane* is very much my world. Also, I lost my own mom to breast cancer. That's a very personal story that I wanted to tell. Writing *Firefly Lane* was my way of looking back on the loss of my mom and understanding it as a woman. Additionally, I wanted to give readers some information about what to look for with breast cancer that maybe they didn't know. So the book has a really important and personal message for me, too.

You seem unafraid to make your characters suffer. Is that hard for you? Do you suffer along with them?

Actually, I love to put my characters in really difficult positions. In writing about women in the worst years in their lives, I allow my characters to really discover who they are at their core. I guess when it's all said and done, I believe in the power of transformation. I believe that hard times both shape us and reveal us. It's a stressful and dangerous world out there, and we women try to do so much. So much of fiction—and the nightly news—focuses on the negative situations that exist around us. I guess it feels important to me to remind people that optimism matters and effort can be rewarded. We can survive really difficult times—and not just survive but ultimately triumph. My books tend to be about women coming into their own and triumphing and living their best lives.



You have a lot of fans, readers who feel they *know* the people who populate your novel. How do you create such memorable characters? Do *you* know them before you write about them? Do you hear their voices? Talk to us about your literary imagination. How do you bring your characters and stories to life?

You really just set out, as a writer, to write the truest, most honest character that you can come up with. For me, that tends to begin with back story. I believe that we are the sum of our experiences in life; this tends to be true for fictional characters as well. It's very important that I know about their childhood, the defining moments in their lives, their losses, what their hopes and dreams are—all of these are important details for creating an honest character.

As for their voices: Well, I don't hear their voices. I think I'd need some kind of medication if that were the case! But I do begin, after a lot of research and a lot of writing, to discover them. It's like an archaeologist uncovering the spine of a dinosaur in the sand; slowly, bit by bit, the bigger truth is revealed. That's how I discover characters, by writing about them. Before I begin, I create lots of biological information. But the magic really happens when I start writing the scenes from a character's viewpoint. I am often surprised by the voices they give themselves, and the way their dialogue happens—how they speak and what they have to say. Also, I see who the characters are by their sense of humor. When I find what a character thinks is funny is when I actually begin to know them.

Some voices come to me very naturally and some voices are very difficult. Kate, for example, is the character most like me: She came to me very easily. Tully's was the most difficult voice that I needed to get right

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“[Fly Away] turned out to be one of the hardest undertakings I’ve ever done as a writer.”

because she is the farthest from me—absolutely my opposite in almost every way. And teenagers are difficult. I really wanted to get the nuances right—both in the teenage mindset and voice and dialogue. Marah had some moments when I really had to dig deep and find out who she was. Johnny, surprisingly, always came pretty easily for me—I’m not sure why!

Do you ever miss your characters after you’ve finished writing about them?

It takes me between a year and two years to write a novel, with fourteen months being about average. Over the course of it, I do a lot of prep work—and a lot of drafts. So, by the time I get to the end of a novel, I really feel like I’ve created the best version of the story, and the best characters within that framework. Once I’ve done what I set out to do, I am ready to move on to something else. *Firefly Lane* is the one exception. That’s why it’s the only follow-up novel I’ve ever done. Because I did keep Tully and Cloud, in particular, in my head. And I really wanted to know what happened to them after the loss of Kate.

Is it hard for you when a character you’ve created dies?

It’s harder for me to write the emotional reaction scenes. In other words, it was harder to write about Kate’s death from Tully’s perspective or Marah’s than from Kate’s. Because, frankly, nobody ever accidentally dies in my books; I know from the beginning who’s going to live and who’s going to die. So I am guarding against that emotion. But I’m often surprised, after the book is done and I read it, that it can be really emotional for me—although it’s never the death that catches me off guard, it’s the little moments that get me. In *Fly Away*, it was Kate thinking about her sons—just sentences really, but they hit home.



Kate tells us, from beyond the world of the novel, that Johnny will fall in love someday. Tully, too. Readers are no doubt wondering: Can we expect a follow-up to *Fly Away*?

I hope not! (Laughs.) I really thought that writing a sequel would be easy. Knowing all my characters, I thought it would be straightforward and simple to do. It turned out to be one of the hardest undertakings I've ever done as a writer. So I think I'm going to stick with when a novel is done, it's done from now on.

What do you hope readers will take away from this novel, or from any of your novels?

I guess I hope, first and foremost, that my books are the sort of books that once you start you can't put down. I just love a book in which you're dying to know what happens, and how the end comes about. So I hope that mine make them feel that way, and that they learn to care deeply about the characters. And I hope that my novels reaffirm the importance of family and motherhood and caring for each other. In the world right now, it's so important that we put the positive emotions front and center. If there's a lesson at the heart of *Fly Away* it is that you can't run from your problems or your failures; and, sometimes, if you stand your ground and dare to forgive, life can turn on a dime. You can make a second chance for yourself and the people you love.

Is there anything you've always wished a reader would ask you? What is that question—and how would you answer it?

Yes! I wish one reader one day would ask me to please write more slowly. Because what I get constantly is: "Can't you write any faster?"

Behind the Novel



Kate and Tully's Playlist

Dancing Queen, Abba
Daydream Believer, The Monkeys
Stairway to Heaven, Led Zeppelin
Taking Care of Business, Bachman-Turner Overdrive
Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Elton John
American Pie, Don McLean
Don't Give Up on Us, David Soul
Thank God I'm a Country Boy, John Denver
Shout, The Isley Brothers
Brick House, The Commodores
Twistin' the Night Away, Sam Cooke
Louie, Louie; The Kingsmen
Love is a Battlefield, Pat Benatar
Jessie's Girl, Rick Springfield
Purple Rain, Prince
You Can't Always Get What You Want,
The Rolling Stones
Call Me, Blondie
Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This), Annie Lennox
Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?, Culture Club
Here Comes the Bride, composed by Richard Wagner
Crazy for You, Madonna
I'm Every Woman, Whitney Houston
I'm On Fire, Bruce Springsteen
Desperado, The Eagles
A Moment Like This, Kelly Clarkson
Didn't We Almost Have it All, Whitney Houston
Papa Don't Preach, Madonna
Bohemian Rhapsody, Queen
When Will I Be Loved?, Linda Rondstadt
You've Got a Friend, James Taylor
One Sweet Day, Mariah Carey and Boyz II Men



I truly believe in book groups. What's better than busy women taking an evening—or an afternoon—to gather together and talk about life and love and family...and books? What's not to love about this?

For your *Fly Away* meeting, here are a few suggestions to liven up the discussion:

It all started with *Firefly Lane* and friendship, so how about everyone brings a photo of their best friend and talks about how they met?

How about a little Seventies or Eighties style? Maybe each of you can dress in the style of your youth. For me, it was bell bottoms and tie-dye and banana clips and shoulder pads. What were you wearing when you met your best friend?

How about the food? I think it would be fun to bring appetizers from Dorothy's youth. You can find all sorts of recipes on appetizers from the fifties. Vienna sausages anyone? Onion soup and sour cream dip with potato chips? Let your creativity soar! Or maybe you'd rather bring something your mom made that you haven't had in years...

Enjoy!!!

And please note:

In recent years, I've been able to "talk" to book groups via speakerphone during their meetings. What a blast! For so long, I wrote books and never really met anyone who had read them. It is such a joy to talk to women

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from all over the country. We talk about anything and everything—my books, other books, best friends, kids, sisters. You name it, we'll discuss it. So if you belong to a book group and you've chosen *Fly Away* as your pick, please come on over to the website and set up a conversation with me. I can't promise to fulfill all the requests, but I will certainly do my best. And don't forget to join me on my blog and/or Facebook. I love talking to readers. The more the merrier!

Thanks!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristin Hannah". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.



Reading Group Questions

Reading
Group
Gold



In *Firefly Lane*, Kate is a big reader. Throughout the novel, she is often reading books instead of paying attention. I can tell you this comes straight from my own youth. I can't tell you how many times I was admonished by my parents to "get my nose out of that book and look at the scenery" on a family road trip. 😊 In case you'd like to recreate Kate's literary past, here are a few of the books she read along the way.

Go Ask Alice by Beatrice Sparks. This novel made a huge impact on me as a teenager.

Katherine by Anya Seton. This novel is still one of my favorites.

The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton. The classic teenage novel. If you haven't read it, you will love it. "Stay golden, Ponyboy."

Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkein. This book is woven throughout both *Firefly Lane* and *Fly Away*. It became a kind of short hand between Kate and Marah, a way to communicate when things grew rocky between them. A great novel can cross bridges and bring people together, and this is one of the best stories of all time.

Love Story by Erich Segal. Of course Kate read this when she was a teenager. She was always a romantic.

The Wolf and the Dove by Kathleen E. Woodiwiss. One of the classic seventies romance novels. Racy and politically incorrect. We couldn't put it down.

The Thorn Birds by Colleen McCullough. Another great romantic novel of the era.

It and The Stand by Stephen King. The *man*. These are two of my favorites.

And of course, Kate's favorite novel would probably be *Gone With The Wind* by Margaret Mitchell.

Keep On
Reading

1. First, a show of hands: Who among you has read *Firefly Lane*? For those who have not: Do you wish you had read it before this follow-up novel? Or does *Fly Away* stand on its own? Discuss your reasons. This might be a good time to fill the haven't-reads in on some plot points—no spoilers!—from *Firefly Lane* as well.
2. When we first see Tully in *Fly Away*, she is a wreck. Why do you think she's still so destroyed by her best friend's death? How did losing Kate contribute to Tully's loss of her own sense of self? And do you believe that one person can really be the glue that holds a whole life together?
3. In *Firefly Lane*, a dying Kate said these words to Tully: "You're afraid of love, but you've got so much of it to give." Is that true of the Tully we see in *Fly Away*? Is giving—or finding or receiving—love a choice that Tully can just make or break? Why can't Tully believe in love?
4. Kate was deeply loved by her family. How do Johnny, Marah, the twins, and Margie cope with her loss? How does each character find a way to heal? Do they help or hinder each other? Do their struggles feel *real* to you as a reader? You may choose to share your own personal experiences if doing so seems relevant or even helpful.
5. At Kate's funeral, Johnny had "pushed through the crowd [and] passed several people, all of whom murmured some variation of the same useless words—*sorry, suffering over, better place.*" What *is* the language of loss? How *do* we talk about death in everyday life? How do the characters do so in *Fly Away*?



6. *A better place.* Where *is* Kate in the world of this novel? How do her loved ones look for signs of her—and how does she find a way to reach them? Again, talk about what feels *real* to you as a reader. What narrative devices did the author use to bring the more mystical elements of life, death, and life-after-death to the novel? Did *Fly Away* succeed in making you...believe?
7. In *Fly Away*, the dark truth about Dorothy's past comes to light. "How could she explain to her daughter what she'd never been able to understand for herself? All her life she had tried to protect Tully from the truth...It was too late to undo all that damage now." Do you believe that's true? Is it ever too late to tell the people you love about your past? Do *you* forgive Dorothy for Tully's abandonment? Do you understand why it happened?
8. "I wanted to become a woman the whole world admired," says Tully. "Without (fame) who would I be? Just a girl with no family who was easy to leave behind and put aside." Even though Tully enjoyed great success as a celebrity journalist, she had to pay a price: Her downfall unfolded on a national stage. Take a moment to talk about Tully's public persona versus her private one. How did being famous help Tully during her times of need? How did it hurt her? Do you believe that being a celebrity and being loved by strangers can truly make you happy?

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9. Take the above question above to another level: Why *do* we invest so much interest in celebrity culture? What passes for entertainment in the age of reality television? How do you think Tully, and Tully's celebrity, fits into the world as you see it now? Did Tully's fame and fortune contribute to her fall?
10. *Fly Away* is a novel about love and loss, family and friendship, and everything in-between. It's also about the pursuit of the American Dream, offering glimpses into key events, trends, and cultural mores in our country's history. What did being—and becoming—American mean to Dorothy's Ukrainian parents? To Rafe Montoya? Talk about some of the cultural highlights (and low-lights) that are woven into *Fly Away*—from the freewheeling Sixties and the Vietnam War to the material-girl Eighties up to the present day. How does each character embrace or reject the so-called values of his or her era? What risks and benefits are involved?
11. Paxton and Marah. Rafe and Dorothy. Romeo and Juliet. "It seemed so romantic at first," Marah thinks. "All that 'us against them.'" What is it about love that's forbidden that is so attractive to the characters in *Fly Away*? Why is the theme of ill-fated love so well represented in literature in general? Why *do* we love stories about love's triumph over—everything?
12. If you could ask the author anything about *Fly Away*—clarification on a plot point, a detail about a particular character, scenes from the cutting-room floor—what would it be? (you may choose to contact Kristin Hannah, via Facebook, and ask her!)