



“The Forest of Vanishing Stars” by author Kristin Harmel, who will speak Jan. 4 in the Nick Linn Lecture Series, sponsored by the Friends of the Library of Collier County. COURTESY

# Courage, resilience inspire author of World War II novels

**Vicky Bowles**

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Kristin Harmel is drawn to stories of ordinary people doing extraordinary things. The proof is in her latest novels, set in World War II and featuring young women who bravely rescue Jews marked for death by the Nazis.

The best-selling author will kick off the 2022 Nick Linn Lecture Series on Tuesday, Jan. 4, with a return to its luncheon-and-lecture format at The Ritz-Carlton Golf Resort in North Naples. She'll be followed by Susan Wiggs on Feb. 7, Brad Taylor on Feb. 28 and Scott Turow on March 21.

The in-person events are sold out, but tickets for online virtual access are available again, because that format was so popular during the pandemic restrictions in 2021. (See the information box for ticket details.)

The Nick Linn Lecture Series is a major fundraising event for the nonprofit Friends of the Library of Collier County. This year the Friends gave the Collier County Public Library system \$100,000 to buy e-books, which have been so much in demand during the pandemic.

Harmel grew up in St. Petersburg, writing sports and feature stories for the local newspaper and for national magazines, including *People*. But fiction was her dream, and now she's published more than a dozen novels. Her latest, “The Forest of Vanishing Stars,” was released in July.

For the ever-optimistic Harmel, one

way to cope with the pandemic's isolation was to help establish an online community called Friends & Fiction that has a Facebook Live show, a podcast and a weekly column on Parade.com.

Friends & Fiction is hosted by Harmel and fellow authors Mary Kay Andrews, Patti Callahan Henry and Kristy Woodson Harvey. Every Wednesday at 7 p.m. EST, the four hosts welcome other authors, discuss the stories behind favorite books and support independent booksellers.

Harmel, who now lives in Orlando, talked ahead of her appearance for the Friends of the Library of Collier County.

**Naples Daily News:** You've worked as a journalist, generally covering lighter topics like sports and entertainment. Your novels are intense stories of survival and courage set in World War II. What led to such a serious turn, and to a focus on such a narrow time frame as WWII?

**Kristin Harmel:** I think it was always where I was going. Even while writing for *People* magazine, I gravitated toward the weightier “Heroes Among Us” stories, which were the stories of everyday people doing incredible things. And in the cases where I was writing about sports and entertainment, I was always digging deeper; for instance, I remember talking to NFL quarterback Brian Griese for hours about the loss of his mother when he was 12 and how it changed him, and to *Outkast's* André Benjamin [André 3000] about the

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struggles and joys of being a parent and a partner and a citizen in a complicated world. So I think it's less a matter of having taken a serious turn, and more a matter of finally finding the path I was supposed to be walking all along. My first six novels — four of them contemporary rom-coms, two contemporary YA — felt like what I was supposed to be writing at the time, because I was in my 20s. It was as I got a bit older and more mature that I realized I had the right to ask myself, "Who are you, really? And who do you want to be?" World War II had always been a deep interest of mine; in fact, the first short story I ever submitted to a contest, all the way back in the seventh grade, was about a girl in a concentration camp! But I thought I didn't have the depth of life experience to walk that sort of path when I was younger. I wish I'd believed in my abilities as a storyteller (and a human being) earlier, but having said that, I'm also proud of that earlier body of work, which is very reflective of a time in my life during which I was still finding my way.

**NDN:** You're very familiar with France, having lived there for a while, but you ventured into another part of Europe for "The Forest of Vanishing Stars." Did you travel to Poland and Belarus? And how did you accumulate so much knowledge about survival and the flora and fauna of that region?

**KH:** It was fully my plan to travel to the Naliboki Forest — but I sold this book in early 2020, and of course in March 2020, the world shut down, and it became impossible to go there. I was enormously lucky to stumble upon a man named Vadim Sidorovich, a doctor of biology, who had not only written a book about the flora and fauna of the forest, but who in fact lives on the edge of the forest and leads wilderness treks



Author Kristin Harmel

into the forest all the time. He became my research right arm; he answered every single minute question I lobbed at him, oftentimes trekking into the forest himself to send back pictures accompanying his replies. He was a godsend, and I think he was essential in helping me to bring the forest alive. I also spoke at length with a fascinating man named Aron Bell (formerly Aron Bielski), now 94, who was a refugee in the forest during the war; he was a great help, too.

**NDN:** You've been asked about the possibility of writing a sequel to "The Book of Lost Names," maybe following up on the fates of the children who were "renamed" and rescued. Where are you on that idea?

**KH:** In the current book I'm writing, which is scheduled for release in March

2023, I currently have one of my characters spending time during the war near Aurignon, where "The Book of Lost Names" takes place, and engaging briefly with a few characters from that book. That said, I really do think of each of my books as a separate universe, so I don't have much of an intention to tell a fully realized story of any character that appears in a previous novel.

**NDN:** What are some of your experiences with the unpredictable movie business?

**KH:** My very first novel was optioned all the way back in 2006 with a big-name producer and big-name actress attached — and then it all went away. It broke my heart, because I had no idea then that projects like that could simply go up in a puff of smoke for no reason. But it taught me a very valuable lesson: I

have very little control over whether a film project proceeds to the next stage or not, once I sign over the option to the book. Now, because I have no expectations, I simply enjoy the process. I love talking to producers, writers and actors who are interested in a book of mine about where the book could go and how we could get it there. The collaboration, brainstorming and occasional Hollywood lunches are so fun and interesting! I've also taken some screenwriting classes and have tried my hand at adapting two of my novels (as well as writing some original screenplays) so that I can be a more educated voice in the room. I enjoy working in that realm, and I think the stars will align at some point (we're close on a couple of projects right now), but in the meantime, I'm enjoying the journey.