



Flight of the Wild Swan

A Novel by Melissa Pritchard

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“*Flight of the Wild Swan* is the best of Melissa Pritchard. It combines her exquisite ear for tone and detail in story, her gift of mystic perception, and her sense of the historic layering of human lives and the events that make our lives absolutely distinct. In this novel, you will come to know Florence Nightingale close up, not as a faraway, distant figure.”

—**Joy Harjo**, author of *Poet Warrior: A Memoir* and *Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light*

“*Flight of the Wild Swan* offers a fascinating immersion in the 19th-century world of drawing rooms and battlefields, crinolines and leeches. Just as vividly, Pritchard’s tour de force evokes nursing and medicine today, when Florence Nightingale’s pioneering contributions are still felt and in which women still struggle for equality. An enchanting, inspiring, and utterly relevant novel.”

—**Suzanne Koven, MD**, author of *Letter to a Young Female Physician*

“Marvelous and moving.” —***Publishers Weekly* (starred review)**

“A fresh imagining of an icon.” —***Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)**

“[Young adults] will [also] enjoy this perceptive, engaging portrait of a pioneer in her field and will relate to Florence’s determination in the face of family and societal disapproval.”

—***Booklist***

INTRODUCTION

Sweeping yet intimate, *Flight of the Wild Swan* tells the story of Florence Nightingale, a brilliant, trailblazing woman. Overcoming Victorian hierarchies, familial expectations, patriarchal resistance, and her own illness, she used her hard-won acclaim as a battlefield nurse to bring the profession out of its shadowy, disreputable status and elevate nursing to a skilled practice and compassionate art. In lush, lyrical detail, Melissa Pritchard reveals Nightingale as a rebel who wouldn’t relent—one whose extraordinary life offers a grand lesson in inspired will.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I find the creative alchemy of combining researched fact with imagination one of the most satisfying parts of writing fiction. To enter other worlds than the one I presently live in, to imagine and “become” other people in past times and places, is an enriching form of adventure, a way of understanding the specificities of history and the universality of human nature.

There are numerous variations and attributions to the saying, “When an old person dies, a library burns to the ground.” When I write historical fiction, perhaps I am attempting to rebuild a life, a library, fact by fact, image by image, daydream by daydream.

Who was Florence Nightingale, the precocious child, the girl called by God, the despairing young woman, the desperately ill but determined nurse come home from the horrors—the utter waste—of war to what she believed was undeserved, distracting celebrity? This is what I have tried to sleuth out, and reveal to readers, in *Flight of the Wild Swan*.





CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Growing up, Nightingale was surrounded by the political and social aristocracy of her day. In what ways did she subvert her class upbringing, and in what way did the privileges of her unusual home education and prestigious social network make her accomplishments possible?
2. Lord Sidney Herbert, Secretary at War during the Crimean War, was Nightingale's friend and advocate. Their friendship was charged, at times contentious, yet grounded in a shared belief in political reform. How does their relationship evolve throughout the novel, and how did it influence the politics and policies of a nation?
3. Wartime journalists, particularly William Howard Russell, ignited "Florence-mania" by frequent reportage on Nightingale's activities. What did she think of the overwhelming media attention, and how did she handle it?
4. After the Crimean War, once Nightingale was a national celebrity, her family supported her vocation. Her sister, particularly, kept Florence's famous "lamp" polished and burning. What were their reasons for obstructing her ambitions when she was younger? What caused them to reverse their opinion?
5. Many of Nightingale's theories of medicine were prescient. For her, health care was, above all, an inalienable human right. How do you think she might approach today's global health care crisis, and how might she envision caregiving in the future?
6. What do you believe it meant to Nightingale to be "called by God" as she firmly believed she was? Do you think she ever doubted or regretted her life's chosen path?
7. Early portrayals of Nightingale emphasize the Victorian ideal of gentle, pious womanhood. Eventually, she becomes more accurately portrayed as a determined activist for reform. How would you describe her? Has this novel in any way altered your original perception of her?
8. Much of Nightingale's enormous body of work has been reduced to a romanticized story of the compassionate "lady with the lamp." Why are we drawn to such a simplified story? Is the less sentimental truth of one woman working determinedly, even aggressively, to effect social change of less interest to us?
9. Nightingale biographer Mark Bostridge has said of the controversies still surrounding her, "We are very uncomfortable still with an intellectually powerful woman whose primary aim has nothing to do with men or family. I think misogyny has a lot to do with it." Do you agree with Bostridge? As a society, are we still uncomfortable with women like Nightingale?
10. History is not static; each generation reinterprets and revises old "facts" as it uncovers new ones. How might a novel come closer to the emotional truth of a historical figure than a biography? What are the risks inherent in historical fiction compared to a biography?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Pritchard is the award-winning author of twelve books, including the novels *Flight of the Wild Swan* and *Palmerino*, the short story collection *The Odditorium*, and the essay collection *A Solemn Pleasure: To Imagine, Witness, and Write*. Emeritus Professor of English and Women's Studies at Arizona State University, she lives in Columbus, Georgia. Visit her website at www.melissapritchard.com.

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