

"Powerful, uplifting, and deeply personal. *Good Night, Irene* is a story of survival, camaraderie, and courage on the front line . . . A beautiful, heartfelt novel."
—Kristin Hannah, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale*

Good Night, Irene

A NOVEL

LUIS ALBERTO URREA

Author of the National Bestseller *The House of Broken Angels*

BOOK CLUB KIT

FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Book Club Readers,

Grab a cup of coffee and maybe a donut: have I got a story for you!

During World War II, my Mom was in a now-forgotten branch of the American Red Cross: the Clubmobile Corps. Known affectionally as “Donut Dollies,” these women drove 2 ½ ton Army trucks with a galley in the back that had coffee urns, donut cookers, and record players. Assigned to troops on the front lines in the European theater, they drove where they were told, bringing snacks and a touch of home to exhausted GIs happy to see an unexpected American girl with a bright smile.

How could I NOT write about this!? I am so excited to present my new novel to you, **Good Night, Irene**. I’ve been publishing books since 1993, but I can tell you this is the best work I’ve ever been able to put to paper. Because, when you are writing a novel based on your own mother’s forgotten heroism during WWII, you’d better bring your best.

My mom was part of a three-woman crew of a truck known as the Cheyenne. She and her crew served pilots and crewmembers at a B-17 base in England. Just after D-Day, they crossed the Channel, landed in Normandy on Utah Beach, and essentially followed Patton east. They took part in the liberation of Paris and they were trapped during the siege of Bastogne over Christmas of 1944. They were in the front line of the Battle of the Bulge and ended up helping liberate Buchenwald. Shortly afterward, my mother was severely wounded in a Jeep accident. She bore scars and nightmares that I knew my entire life.

Like many veterans, my mom didn’t talk much about her war experiences – certainly not that she was one of the forward-most women in battle during WWII. I only started researching her journey after she passed away, and it didn’t take long to realize what I should have known all along: my mother was a hero.

It is one of the miracles of my life that I discovered her truckmate, a woman I believed had been killed during the war. When I found her, Jill Pitts Knappenberger was 94 years old and lived less than two hours from my home. The stories she shared with me brought my mom to life in a way I had never known her. I needed to understand how this brilliant and vivacious young woman had been changed by WWII into my mom, a woman I now see was always wrestling with the trauma of living through a war zone.

My book is a novel based on the experiences of my mom, Miss Jill, and the dozens of other women who were part of the Clubmobile Corps. I used their letters and scrapbooks to imagine a different kind of war story, a different kind of hero. I hope my novel illuminates their experiences and puts these fantastic women back into the historical record.

I have been so gratified and honored by the early response to **Good Night, Irene**, and I hope you enjoy this novel. And a donut. And a cup of coffee!



Luis Urrea

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1 Irene and Dorothy have very different reasons for joining the Clubmobile Corps. What do you think each of them hopes to get by joining, and do they find what they're looking for?

2 The Rapid City's commandments are: "Roll on down the road. Nothing means a thing. Don't look back. Don't apologize. Don't concede. Don't let them see you cry. The Rapid City comes first. Never surrender." How does each of these come across in the women's daily experiences? Does upholding the commandments change how they see their role in the war?

3 Dorothy comments that everyone loves Irene. Why does Irene cultivate this image of herself? How does it differ from Dorothy's own self-created image when speaking to the GIs? Do the versions of themselves they portray to the soldiers differ from who they are to each other?

4 Irene and Dorothy have a turning point in their experience of the war over one night in a small French town. How does the night change each of their views of the war, soldiers, and officers?

5 How does going from the front lines to R&R in Cannes force the women to think about their time in the war so far? Would they have come to these realizations without the break? In what way does the break impact their return to the Rapid City and continued service?

6 Each meeting the women have with Zoot shows a different side of him, particularly in regard to how he views the deaths of combatants and non-combatants. What ways does he look at death, and how do his views shift throughout the war?

7 Irene, alone at Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge, begins to lose track of herself, time, and reality without her truckmates. How do the truckmates anchor her? How has her identity become tied to the truck and her companions?

8 Throughout the book, the Rapid City receives letters from soldiers they've encountered. What is the purpose of those letters? How do they impact the women?

A CONVERSATION WITH LUIS ALBERTO URREA

What inspired you to write *Good Night, Irene*?

My mother and her time in the Red Cross Clubmobile Corps.

If you could get lunch with one author (living or dead), who would it be?

Mark Twain. He was the first author I connected with because my mother used to read me *Tom Sawyer* to put me to sleep. He has always been a presence in my writing life, sometimes subliminal, sometimes overt. Plus, he would always have a good story. Me, too.

What are you listening to?

I am always listening to music, especially when I'm writing. Some of it is pretty esoteric, some of it is LOUD rock and roll. Lots of it in Spanish. I am proud to confess that, every night, I fall asleep listening to podcasts about Sasquatch. I only hear about the first 10 minutes and then fall asleep. So one episode lasts me an entire week.

What other book genre would you love to write?

Wish I was enough of a plot-master to write mysteries.

What book do you like more than the movie?

Given my line of work, the book is ALWAYS better than the movie. That being said, I still feel a touch of awe about the film version of *Under the Volcano*. And I will never change the channel when *No Country for Old Men* or *The Godfather* is on the schedule. We were all mesmerized by the Elena Ferrante novels on HBO, and when we made our daughter watch the Olivier version of *Wuthering Heights*, she changed before our very eyes.

What "darling" did you "kill," and why?

I'm working on a piece for *National Geographic* and they told me it had to be cut by 300 words. I was devastated to realize my favorite scene had to go. It just didn't fit, and I was wrecked. But after a bit, I realized that scene would actually work perfectly in my new book (still very much in the beginning stages), so I rescued it from an earlier draft and determined it will live forever!

If you could take a trip with a fictional character, who would it be and why?

I think I might like to spend a couple of days in the company of Gus McCrae and Woodrow Call. Lord knows I have spent enough weeks and years hanging out with them anyway.

THE DONUTS

INGREDIENTS

- 5 cups of flour
- 5 tsp. of baking soda
- 2 cups of sugar
- 1/4 tsp. of salt
- 2 eggs
- 1 tub lard
- 1 3/4 cups of milk

1. Combine all ingredients (except for lard) to make dough.
2. Thoroughly knead dough, roll smooth and cut into rings less than a quarter-inch thick.
3. Heat the lard, drop rings into hot lard, turning occasionally
4. When browned, removed doughnuts and allow excess fat to drip off.
5. Dash with powdered sugar, let cool and enjoy.

Yield: 4 dozen donuts.

This was the original recipe used by the "Doughnut Lassies" of WWI, who inspired the creation of the WWII Red Cross Clubmobile Corps. Due to rationing and changes in contemporary taste, these donuts are much less sweet than the donuts we eat today. To modify for current times:

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup white sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 quart for frying

1. Heat oil in a deep-fryer to 375F.
2. Sift together flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt in a large bowl. Mix in butter until crumbly. Stir in milk and egg until smooth.
3. Knead lightly, then turn out onto a lightly floured surface. Roll to 1/4-inch thickness. Cut with a doughnut cutter.
4. Lay doughnuts in hot oil, a few at a time. Do not overcrowd or oil may overflow. Fry, turning once, until golden, about 3 minutes. Drain.

OPTIONAL: Add cinnamon and nutmeg or pumpkin pie spice in step 1.

Dust with powdered sugar, roll in cinnamon and sugar, or glaze after step 4.

Yield: 1 dozen donuts.

THE INSPIRATION



Phyllis



Jill (l) and Phyllis (r)



Phyllis



The crew of the Cheyenne



Phyllis and Jake



The cottage at Glatton



Service in the Cheyenne



The Cheyenne



Helen, Jill, and Phyllis (l to r)