

A DUST NOVEL

UNSPOKEN

A NOVEL BY

JANN ALEXANDER



Black Rose Writing | Texas

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For Lorene

PRAISE FOR UNSPOKEN

“Jann Alexander’s blazingly alive novel asks how do we keep a family intact? Here, in a story told by both a mother and her daughter, two people struggle to both understand their world and each other.”

–Caroline Leavitt, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Pictures of You* and *Days of Wonder*

“The novel reminds me, in tone, of Texas classics like *The Time it Never Rained* and *Giant*. I loved it. Alexander is a great new talent in the genre of Texana.”

–W.F. Strong, author, *Stories From Texas*, and radio commentator for NPR Texas

“Fans of Kristin Hannah’s *Four Winds* will devour *Unspoken*, Jann Alexander’s tale of Ruby Lee’s gritty Texas Dust Bowl journey”

–Cam Torrens, award-winning author of the *Tyler Zahn* suspense series

“*Unspoken* is an evocative story best suited for readers who appreciate historical fiction steeped in grit and emotional intensity. Fans of novels like *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Nightingale* will likely feel at home here. I recommend it for anyone ready to weather an emotional storm in exchange for a beautifully written tale of survival and hope.”

– Thomas Anderson, Editor In Chief, *Literary Titan*

“A literary gem. Her story and character will be talked about and debated in book clubs everywhere.”

–Paul Jantzen, author of *Sour Apples*

“Alexander wastes no time snaring you with a double whammy of death in the first paragraph – a visceral description of all-too-common calamity during the Dust Bowl’s insipid encroachment that swallowed an entire region in the heart of the US. A sweeping story of many truths during a time little told. Don’t miss it.”

–Kay Smith-Blum, author of *Tangles*

“*Unspoken* explores themes of perseverance, love, and the resilience of women who redefine what home and family mean during times of great hardship.”

–K.C. Finn, Amazon and *USA Today* best-selling writer

"Unspoken shines in vibrant details—riding the rails, war brides waiting for their husbands, internal battles inside Ruby Lee and her mother. From the opening blackness of a blinding dust storm to the satisfaction of watching Ruby Lee reclaim her family farm, readers will experience the trials and triumphs of women."

—Joan Donaldson, winner of the 2010 Friends of American Writers Award for *On Viney's Mountain*

"Unspoken by Jann Alexander has a wonderful voice, is captivating, and is well-written. It's a heart-wrenching story of a family destroyed by the 1935 "black blizzard" dust storms in the Texas Panhandle."

—Connie Morgan, author of *More Than Luck Required*

"Jann Alexander brings us Ruby Lee, a feisty, determined gal, who you'll root for, page after page, in this gritty, heart-wrenching story steeped in history."

—Linda Rosen, author of the award-winning *The Emerald Necklace*

"One of the better written narratives I've read of late, ranking up with some of the greats, like Steinbeck. He'd have his hats off to the talented Alexander. Highly recommend."

—Paulette Mahurin, author of *Two Necklaces*

"A strong tale worthy of acclaim. I highly recommend it."

—P.L. Jonas, award-winning author of *Hall of Deception* and *Sea of Doubt*

"For an unusual Texas tale told with impressive detail and fine writing, I highly recommend *Unspoken*."

—Nancy Stancill, Author of *Saving Texas, Winning Texas, Tall, and Deadly Secrets*

"It all comes down to dust. It all comes down to desperation. It all comes down to survival. This novel is a must-read. Deeply researched, deftly detailed, Jann Alexander's *Unspoken* immerses the reader fully in Ruby Lee's journey as she learns to speak her values, to claim her choices and, ultimately, to breathe."

—Shirley Miller Kamada, author of *No Quiet Water*

“Courage is more exhilarating than fear.”

–Eleanor Roosevelt

UNSPOKEN

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

The dark sedan barreled toward me, sucking up the runway.

I was pummeling hail pocks from the Cub—far easier than healing the pits in my heart. My stomach did a barrel roll and I climbed down the stepladder to meet the olive drab Plymouth staff car that stopped short with a screech.

A stranger in uniform emerged as the passenger door swung wide and Wade walked to me. The soldier handed me a telegram.

My head spun with my worst fears. Will, killed in combat on Okinawa. Earl, died in captivity on Kyushu. Clay, killed by mortar fire. Red, succumbed to sepsis. Who would it be, which one, I shook with dread; the telegram fluttered to the earth. Woozy, I bent for it, crumpling.

Wade's arms were around me, propping me up.

The soldier handed it back to me. They watched me read the unbearable words.

"This is about my brother." I felt the blood drain from my face and longed to be piloting the Cub, the engine's full-throated roar eliminating any thought.

Wade tightened his grip, speaking insistently, voice low, his breath warm on my neck.

"I knew you'd need a strong shoulder to lean on. Remember meeting at the café? I wanted to make it up to you, what I did, right then. The promise

you didn't want to hear . . . " He pulled me into the curve of his body. "I'll never let you down again. I'll be the man you can count on, no matter what."

My knees buckled, and he caught me. "I got you, Ruby, now and always. I promise."

"Those are fine words." I separated myself to stand on my own two feet. I read the telegram again, hoping for a different conclusion.

The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that Pvt. Earl Everett Becker, Radar Repairman, Airborne Equipment, is reported missing in action after a surprise attack on the 1094 Th. Signal C. O. Service group in Burauen, Leyte, Philippine Islands, on December 6, 1944. Presumed dead. Remains not recovered. To prevent possible aid to our enemies this notice has not been timely delivered. Letter follows. —The Adjutant General

"MacArthur declared the liberation of the Philippine Islands in 1945, in July—" I protested, recalling the much-ballyhooed news.

Wade conferred with the soldier, who described a battle over an airstrip, where fanatical Japs infiltrated the American lines. After the Allies' victory over Japan was celebrated, reports reached high command of belated guerrilla action, minor and isolated . . .

"Minor." I wobbled. Again, Wade steadied me.

I read the telegram—*has not been timely delivered*—a third time. Missing and presumed dead since 1944.

Not Earl! Not after I shirked him.



Ida Rose stayed close in the dark months that followed—when I refused to believe we'd lost my brother, and the crops, and feared I'd built a house for an empty dream and a dented plane. She allowed me privacy for the crying jags I couldn't predict, whenever shame and secrets bubbled up. She filled my house with laughter and love, perversely, hosting baby showers for war brides she'd roomed with, their bellies now expectant with life. She took in new mothers whose husbands were still overseas, allowing them modest

rents which covered our cash shortfall. In return Ida relieved them from the many sleepless hours they spent with their newborns. She rose to the most mind-numbing repetitive tasks that came with new motherhood, while she atoned for losing her own. The scents of baby powder and pabulum and Ivory suffused the house.

I was allowed to wallow in my guilt for only so long as she deemed cathartic. She walked the fence line with me, the one that divided my nervous distress and panicky regret from full-out emotional collapse.

"We've already faced the worst of it," Ida reminded me again and again. "We've got some cash on hand, we'll replant, we'll pay off the loans. We'll be in the black again." She'd hold me as the prickling began and shivers took me.

"Will's safe, still on active duty, stationed at Nagoya Air Base; he'll be back," she said. "He's fine." But she couldn't shake my certainty about Earl, who I'd shunned for shining light on the unspoken, who'd simply tried to pry loose my shame.

"The telegram said, '*Presumed dead. Remains not recovered.*' Earl's coming home," I insisted.



Later, Ida said, while I clung to false hopes, cultivating a breakdown, she'd kept me from cutting and my nervous distress at bay. The one thing she couldn't keep me from was Wade.

Wade Banks made good on his promise, always there if I needed a hand with the crops, double-checking my accounts payable, collecting my receivables. He cheered me with stories of his sales prowess at the new Chrysler dealer where New Yorkers and Town & Country Woodies were jumping off the lot. He brought his never-ending party of recently discharged GIs over for drinks, arriving with card games, magic tricks, a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black, a new record to whip up his gang.

When his parties kicked into gear, the former canteen girl who'd yearned for an acting career (but had settled for the dance floor at New York's real Stage Door) nested herself in her bedroom with a good book. She

snubbed the swinging swaying sounds of Sammy Kaye that cascaded from the Bakelite radio-phonograph.

The bebop rhythm of those eighth-note triplets was irresistible, and I'd haul a protesting Ida from her room to show me the swing steps. No sooner had I mastered a swing hammerlock, or a swing barrel roll, she'd slip back to her book.

On my darker days Wade arrived with a slim little volume he'd consult, *The Stork Club Bar Book*, to separate an egg white into a highball and mix me a restorative Morning Glory Fizz. At lunch, he poured a foamy White Daisy into an etched claret glass. Evenings, he'd whirl a Snow White in the new Waring mixer he acquired, or serve a concoction he called the Ruby Julep, which involved much muddling of mint, shaving of ice, a generous jigger of bourbon, and a floater of cognac. Later, he propped me up, walking me to my bedroom.

In my bed he nuzzled my neck and kissed me breathless as he undressed me, patient with my refusal to remove my long-sleeved blouse—until the night he whispered we need not fear one another, my secrets were his, there was no truth he would not accept. I peeled off my blouse without hesitating. I offered my scarred arms with defiance, and he cradled my wrists and traced the cuts with his lips, tenderly, showing me a grace I'd denied myself.

The nightmares returned. I'd lowered my guard and nearly allowed an examination of the unspoken things. Sleeping, Momma's screams terrified me; I heard them clear as the night I lost Nell, Alma, then her. I pressed my hands over my ears but couldn't block out her keening wail.

"You're howling, Ruby, shush, it's okay." Wade pulled me into his chest, muffling my screams. "Tell me what's the matter, baby, we'll fix it."

There are things, I wanted to tell him, *unspoken things that can never be fixed.*

But I said nuthin.



Before his honorable discharge—he'd made more payola in auto sales than in the air force—Wade had secured the Piper Cub, per our deal, and had it

delivered to my runway, complete with two bottles of fine champagne. One he broke across the nose to christen my mustard-yellow tail-dragger, the other he poured into two Waterford coupes which fizzed up and bubbled over onto the runway amidst my tears, our laughter, and his toasts.

I wasn't the only pilot who wanted to fly for a living—those returning air force boys had the same idea, and surplus two-wing two-seaters were going for a song. While everyone welcomed the fliers home with victory parades and joyous celebrations, I got a head start on my crop-dusting business. I installed a tank, fixed a spray boom beneath the wing, added a small pressure pump. With my Cub rigged and loaded with insecticide, I practiced my drops, flying low on a field with wheels skimming the crops, pulling up sharp at field's end. I trained my eyes for obstacles that loomed up sudden and could take me down—fenceposts, standpipes, windmills. Wade stood his ground below as my flagman, keeping me on course, flagging me to the next section I'd spray. Once my wheels grazed him close enough for a buzz cut, and he dove like a duck. Circling back after my abrupt pull-up, I saw his head thrown back in laughter, his body shaking, the thrill of the close call as intoxicating to him as me.

That was how flying became my drug of choice, as my crops flourished, my dusting business took off, and for a few good seasons, nobody talked about next year when it rains.

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**Let's Discuss! We'll chat at the
Zoom Launch for UNSPOKEN
July 3, 2 - 3pm CT**

RSVP

JannAlexander.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jann Alexander is a 20-year resident of central Texas and creator of the Vanishing Austin photography series. Her lifelong storytelling habit and her more recent passion for Texas history merged to become the historical novel *Unspoken*, her first book in the Dust Series. She holds a B.S. from the University of Maryland. When Jann is not reading, writing, or creating, she bikes, hikes, skis, and kayaks. Jann always brakes for historical markers.

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