

Winter Garden

by Kristin Hannah

About the Book

Can a woman ever really know herself if she doesn't know her mother?

From the author of the smash-hit bestseller Firefly Lane and True Colors comes a powerful, heartbreaking novel that illuminates the intricate mother-daughter bond and explores the enduring links between the present and the past

Meredith and Nina Whitson are as different as sisters can be. One stayed at home to raise her children and manage the family apple orchard; the other followed a dream and traveled the world to become a famous photojournalist. But when their beloved father falls ill, Meredith and Nina find themselves together again, standing alongside their cold, disapproving mother, Anya, who even now, offers no comfort to her daughters. As children, the only connection between them was the Russian fairy tale Anya sometimes told the girls at night. On his deathbed, their father extracts a promise from the women in his life: the fairy tale will be told one last time—and all the way to the end. Thus begins an unexpected journey into the truth of Anya's life in war-torn Leningrad, more than five decades ago. Alternating between the past and present, Meredith and Nina will finally hear the singular, harrowing story of their mother's life, and what they learn is a secret so terrible and terrifying that it will shake the very foundation of their family and change who they believe they are.

Courtesy of Macmillan

Praise for the Book

"It's a tearjerker, but the journey is as lovely—and haunting—as a snow filled winter's night."

—*People* magazine, on *Winter Garden*

"Readers will find it hard not to laugh a little and cry a little more as mother and daughters reach out to each other just in the nick of time."

— *Publishers Weekly* on *Winter Garden*

Courtesy of the author's website:

http://www.kristinhannah.com/content/books_winter_garden.php?id=Praise

About the Author

Biography Resource Center

Title: Kristin Hannah

American Novelist (1960 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born September 25, 1960, in Garden Grove, CA; daughter of Laurence and Sharon John; married Benjamin Hannah (a film buyer), May 17, 1986; children: one son. Education: University of Washington, B.A., 1982; University of Puget Sound, J.D., 1986.

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CAREER:

Northwest Diversified Entertainment, Seattle, WA, lawyer, 1986-93; writer, 1993--.

AWARDS:

Maggie Award and RITA/Golden Heart Award, Romance Writers of America, 1990, both for *A Handful of Heaven*; National Readers' Choice Award, *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 1996, *Booklist* Best Book of 1996, all for *Home Again*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *A Handful of Heaven*, Fawcett (New York, NY), 1991.
- *The Enchantment*, Fawcett (New York, NY), 1992.
- *Once in Every Life*, Fawcett (New York, NY), 1993.
- *When Lightning Strikes*, Gold Medal (New York, NY), 1994.
- *If You Believe*, Fawcett (New York, NY), 1994.
- *Waiting for the Moon*, Gold Medal (New York, NY), 1995.

- *Home Again*, Fawcett Books (New York, NY), 1996.
- *On Mystic Lake*, Crown (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Angel Falls*, Crown (New York, NY), 2000.
- *Summer Island*, Crown (New York, NY), 2001.
- *Distant Shores*, Ballantine (New York, NY), 2002.
- (With Jennifer Blake and Linda Lael Miller) *With Love* (omnibus volume), Berkley Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *Between Sisters*, Ballantine (New York, NY), 2003.
- *The Things We Do for Love*, Ballantine (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Comfort and Joy*, Ballantine Books (New York, NY), 2005.
- *Magic Hour*, Ballantine Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- *Firefly Lane*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2008.
- *True Colors*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2009.
- *Winter Garden*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2010.
- *Night Road*, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 2011.

OTHER

- *Harvest Hearts* (anthology), Berkley Publishing (New York, NY), 1993.

Sidelights

Kristin Hannah gained success as a writer after first practicing as a lawyer. Her first novel, a historical novel set in Scotland, was written while she was in law school. She worked on it with her mother, who was ill with cancer at the time. Although that novel has never been published, it nevertheless was a milestone in Hannah's path as an author. She completed law school and began practicing, but when her first pregnancy forced her to take complete bed rest, she turned to writing for something to pass away the hours. She sold a novel when her son was just two years old, and has published at a rate of about a book a year since then. Her novels are generally put in the category of romantic fiction, but many critics have lauded her work as being a cut above that usually found in the genre.

Hannah's first several novels were published in paperback. *On Mystic Lake* was her breakthrough to the more prestigious hardcover market. According to a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, in *On Mystic Lake* Hannah "shows what it takes for an author to make that defining leap. Never one to gush, she is more than ever disciplined in her writing, and the result is a clean, deep thrust into the reader's heart." The story concerns Annie Colwater, who faces loneliness when her seventeen-year-old daughter Natalie departs for a summer in London. Annie soon learns that her husband wants a divorce so he can pursue his relationship with a younger woman. Annie retreats to her hometown and the gruff affection of her father, who raised her after her mother's untimely death. She meets up with her high school sweetheart, who is also struggling in the wake of his wife's

suicide. Patty Engelmann, in *Booklist*, called this "an extremely satisfying, insightful, and emotional tale."

In Hannah's next hardcover novel, *Angel Falls*, Dr. Liam Campbell is forced to cope with a shattered life when his wife Mikaela ends up in a coma after a horseback riding accident. While she is unconscious, Liam learns that she was once married to a world-famous movie star, Julian True. Liam realizes that Julian's name is the only one that evokes a response from Mikaela. Devastated and struggling with jealousy, Liam nevertheless contacts Julian, and the actor's presence helps to revive Mikaela. She has partial amnesia, however, and Liam feels he must let her choose once again between Julian and himself. Margaret Ann Hanes, a reviewer for the *Library Journal*, remarked that despite a melodramatic plot, "Hannah does manage to instill a sense of pathos and sentimentality that pulls the reader along." A *Booklist* reviewer added that "Hannah ably uses her insights into small-town and family life ... in a story sure to please fans of dramatic, romantic love stories."

The problems sometimes faced by married couples after their children are grown form the core of *Distant Shores*, another of Hannah's novels. Elizabeth and Jack Shore are struggling to chart their marital future. A former professional football player who now has a mostly unsuccessful career as a sports commentator, Jack has been a difficult husband--unfaithful and self-centered. When he contemplates a move to New York from Washington State in order to pursue his broadcasting career, Elizabeth must ask herself if she still loves him enough to follow. Noting that the subject matter has the potential to be "depressing," Angela A. Bauer in the *Florida Times Union* found that in "Hannah's skillful writing makes it an uplifting tale in which the reader gains the notion that the Shores will be all right. ... It might inspire some readers to question what is lacking in their own lives and fill the void before they reach Elizabeth's breaking point." *Booklist* reviewer Engelmann also praised *Distant Shores*, declaring: "This insightful look into the dynamics of marriage will resonate with readers, and mark Hannah as a strong voice in women's fiction."

Between Sisters is the story of Meghann Dontess and Claire Cavanaugh, two sisters with very different lives and a great deal of baggage standing between them. Meghann is a thirty-something, successful divorce attorney who lives in Seattle, and her career is her entire life. Her younger sister Claire, on the other hand, is a single mother with a five-year-old daughter, living in a small town in the Pacific Northwest where she helps her father run the family resort, a small business that sits on the lake. Meghann and Claire are actually half sisters, sharing a mother who had stars in her eyes and finally ended years of neglect by taking off for Hollywood to star in a science fiction series, abandoning the girls at the ages of sixteen and nine, respectively. Meghann, always more mother to Claire than their own mother, located her sister's father when their mother left, and suddenly finding herself on her own, focused solely on school and eventually her work. Now many years down the line, Claire is preparing to marry a country singer who has three divorces under his belt, a match that has Meghann terrified for her sister's heart. When Claire is suddenly diagnosed with a brain tumor, however, everything comes grinding to a halt, including a potential reunion with their mother, who was offering to

help Claire's fiancé get a record deal. Meghann, however, with her networking skills and wide range of acquaintances, ends up stepping in as the true hero of the tale. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* found the story to be melodramatic, noting that "some devoted fans will enjoy the sisterly bonding, but the broad-strokes characters will disappoint more demanding readers of women's fiction."

Hannah's *Comfort and Joy* is a holiday romance that starts on a depressing note. Joy Faith Candellaro, a high school librarian in Bakersfield, California, is just getting off duty on the last day prior to the holiday break, but her mood is still low over the end of her marriage, sparked by her discovery of her husband Thom in bed with her sister Stacey. The divorce is final, however, and Joy is making an attempt to move forward with her own life. Unfortunately, her old life keeps creeping up to distract her, as evidenced by the fact that, returning home, she discovers Stacey standing in her driveway with the announcement that she and Thom are marrying, and that Stacey is going to have a baby. Devastated, Joy simply gets in her car and drives. Before she knows what she's doing, she makes her way to the airport and buys a ticket to Hope, Canada. She has no real plans as to what she will do once she arrives, but she decides that is not the point. Anywhere must be better than home. Once she arrives, Joy meets a father and his son and discovers through them that there are plenty of people in the world with problems far more serious than her own. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* remarked that, while the author's fans might enjoy the book, it is otherwise "a bit too much for the more skeptical to swallow."

Magic Hour tells the story of Dr. Julia Cates, a child psychiatrist who, though acquitted in court of incompetence in a case, is nevertheless skewered by the press to the point where she loses all of her clients. Then she gets a call from her estranged sister Ellie, inviting her to head home to Rain Valley, Washington. Ellie is the police chief there and has an interesting case that calls out for a child psychiatrist's involvement. A young girl has been discovered recently in the local forest, accompanied by a wolf. The child has adopted animal behaviors and refuses to speak. Julia returns home, and together with Ellie attempts to determine where the child truly belongs, and to protect her from the dangers that seem to crop up everywhere. Engelmann, writing for *Booklist*, dubbed the book "one of this perennially best-selling writer's most compelling and riveting novels to date."

Firefly Lane tells the story of the friendship between Tully Hart and Kate Mularkey. Despite their differences, the girls become friends as teenagers when fourteen-year-old Tully breaks down at a party and spills her secrets to Kate. Tully's mother, a hippie, has run off and abandoned her. Kate, despite her own secure and loving family, sympathizes with Tully, and the two form a bond that lasts them through adulthood. As they grow up, Tully is determined to make a better life for herself. With the goal of becoming a television news anchor, she eventually gets a job at a small TV station following college, securing a spot for Kate as well. However, while Tully works hard in an effort to advance, Kate falls for their boss at the station and ends up a wife and mother. Their lives diverge at this point, but their friendship continues until years later when certain events conspire to break the bond between them. Kristine Huntley, writing for *Booklist*, found the book to be "a moving and realistic portrait of a complex and enduring friendship."

Jane Ritter, writing for *School Library Journal*, wrote that Hannah's offering "will keep readers turning the pages."

Hannah's next novel, *True Colors*, portrays the Grey sisters, Winona and Vivi Ann. The story is set in a small town in Washington state. The Grey sisters' mother died when they were teenagers, but the plot mainly focuses on the men in the sisters' lives. Winona has a crush on Luke, but he falls for Vivi Ann instead. Vivi Ann, however, cheats on Luke with Dallas. Vivi Ann marries Dallas and has his son, but Dallas is arrested and charged with murder. Winona, who has since become a lawyer, refuses to take the case because she is still upset about their betrayal of her beloved Luke. Dallas is convicted, effectively leaving Vivi Ann a single mother. The sisters' redemption is established through Vivi Ann's son, who brings Winona and Vivi Ann back together.

Critics applauded *True Colors* as a poignant, well-written, and riveting novel. Indeed, a *Publishers Weekly* writer commented that "though Hannah boldly embraces over-the-top drama, she really knows what women--her characters and her audience--want." A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor was also impressed, finding that the book is "above-average formula fiction, making full display of the author's strong suits: sense of place, compassion for characters and understanding of family dynamics." Engelmann, again writing in *Booklist*, offered additional praise, noting that the author "creates a beautiful and captivating story of love and rivalry, family and community, that readers will happily devour." A somewhat more ambivalent assessment was offered by an *America's Intelligence Wire* reviewer. They commented that "*True Colors* is as rewarding and riveting as one would expect from a Hannah novel. That is, if the reader isn't turned off by borderline corny writing; indeed, at the novel's conclusion, Hannah writes the 'Grey' sisters find their 'true colors,' as the title suggests.

Library Journal writer Elizabeth Mellett called the book "an engrossing, fast-paced story that will appeal to ... fans of women's fiction. Furthermore, in a lengthy review on the *Book Binge* Web site, a critic commended the book as being "emotional," going on to explain that "the reunion at the end of the book was extremely emotional. ... I think that seeing Vivi grow up from a twenty-four year old carefree girl to a thirty-nine year old heartbroken woman was the hardest thing to read. If anyone deserved a happy ending, it was her."

Discussing her writing process in an interview on the author's Home Page, Hannah noted: "In a perfect world, I begin writing at around nine o'clock in the morning. How long I spend at it is largely dependent on where I am in the book. In the first draft--which I write long hand--I can only spend four or five hours at a time working. After that, as the novel begins to take shape, my ability to concentrate increases. By the end of the process, I am often working ten to twelve hour days. ... Honestly, I never believe I'm done, but sooner or later, my deadline arrives and I'm forced to say 'enough.'"

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *America's Intelligence Wire*, March 27, 2009, review of *True Colors*.
- *Booklist*, November 15, 1998, Patty Engelmann, review of *On Mystic Lake*, p. 547; February 1, 2000, Catherine Sias, review of *Angel Falls*, p. 996; January 1, 2001, Patty Engelmann, review of *Summer Island*, p. 870; July, 2001, Joyce Saricks, review of *Summer Island*, p. 2029; May 1, 2002, Patty Engelmann, review of *Distant Shores*, p. 1444; March 15, 2003, Patty Engelmann, review of *Between Sisters*, p. 1253; April 15, 2004, Patty Engelmann, review of *The Things We Do for Love*, p. 1404; December 15, 2005, Patty Engelmann, review of *Magic Hour*, p. 5; December 15, 2007, Kristine Huntley, review of *Firefly Lane*, p. 24; November 1, 2008, Patty Engelmann, review of *True Colors*, p. 5.
- *Florida Times Union*, August 4, 2002, Angela A. Bauer, review of *Distant Shores*, p. D4.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, April 1, 2003, review of *Between Sisters*, p. 496; May 15, 2004, review of *The Things We Do for Love*, p. 460; October 15, 2008, review of *True Colors*.
- *Library Journal*, August, 1994, Kristin Ramsdell, review of *When Lightning Strikes*, p. 66; November 15, 1995, Kristin Ramsdell, review of *Waiting for the Moon*, p. 64; November 15, 1996, Kristin Ramsdell, review of *Home Again*, p. 52; December, 1998, Carol J. Bissett, review of *On Mystic Lake*, p. 154; November 1, 1999, Jodi L. Israel, review of *On Mystic Lake*, p. 143; March 15, 2000, Margaret Ann Hanes, review of *Angel Falls*, p. 126; February 15, 2001, Margaret Hanes, review of *Summer Island*, p. 200; December, 2001, Jodi L. Israel, review of *Summer Island*, p. 198; April 15, 2003, Margaret Hanes, review of *Between Sisters*, p. 122; June 1, 2004, Margaret Hanes, review of *The Things We Do for Love*, p. 120; November 1, 2008, Elizabeth Mellett, review of *True Colors*, p. 57.
- *Publishers Weekly*, June 22, 1992, review of *The Enchantment*, p. 56; January 11, 1993, review of *Once in Every Life*, p. 57; December 13, 1993, review of *If You Believe*, p. 66; September 26, 1994, review of *When Lightning Strikes*, p. 61; September 18, 1995, review of *Waiting for the Moon*, p. 125; October 28, 1996, review of *Home Again*, p. 76; January 18, 1999, review of *On Mystic Lake*, p. 327; October 4, 1999, "Hannah's Mystical Appeal," p. 21; March 20, 2000, review of *Angel Falls*, p. 72; January 22, 2001, review of *Summer Island*, p. 300; May 27, 2002, review of *Distant Shores*, p. 33; April 14, 2003, review of *Between Sisters*, p. 49; June 21, 2004, review of *The Things We Do for Love*, p. 45; September 26, 2005, review of *Comfort and Joy*, p. 63; September 29, 2008, review of *True Colors*, p. 57.
- *School Library Journal*, April 1, 2008, Jane Ritter, review of *Firefly Lane*, p. 173.
- *Seattle Times*, March 22, 1999, Melinda Bargreen, review of *On Mystic Lake*, p. E3; March 19, 2001, Melinda Bargreen, "Mother Knows Best," p. E1; July 28, 2002, Melinda Bargreen, review of *Distant Shores*, p. K9.

ONLINE

- *Book Binge*, [http:// thebookbinge.com/](http://thebookbinge.com/) (March 13, 2009), review of *True Colors*.
- *Kristin Hannah Home Page*, <http://www.kristinhannah.com> (September 23, 2009).*

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Author Interview

*A Conversation with
Kristin Hannah*

From Reading Group Gold Guide courtesy of Macmillan

Sometimes when you open the door to your mother's past, you find your own future. You've said this line inspired *Winter Garden*—how did the story develop from this one line?

I am powerfully drawn to stories about women's lives and relationships. I just can't help it. I'm fascinated by the way we women interact, and how we lean on each other in hard times. Personally, I draw a great deal of strength from the women who are important in my life. And like many writers, my fiction is drawn in large part from my own life. In *Firefly Lane*, I wrote about female friendship; in *True Colors*, I focused on sisterhood. When I finished those two books, I think it was almost inevitable that I would turn my attention to another important female relationship—the intricate bond between mothers and daughters. I'm still not entirely sure how the story evolved, but I do remember being out with friends one night when someone at the table mentioned Russia in World War II. Now, to be entirely truthful, I have never been much of a world-war buff, and although I was obsessed with Russian history in college, it was not something I had continued studying. Still, the comment stuck with me. That night I learned something new: that the women of Leningrad had faced incredible hardships during the war and somehow survived. It didn't blossom into a story overnight, but it stayed in my head, the way idea seedlings tend to do. Later, when I was trolling about a new story, I hit on one of those "what-if" moments that are a writer's bread and butter. *What if you discovered that your mother had a secret past...and how would uncovering that secret change your perception of yourself?*

So that was the start of *Winter Garden*. I imagined a woman who had lied about who she was and what her past held. But who was she? And that's when that idle dinner conversation came back to me. The women of Leningrad. So I began studying this period and this place, and I was more than intrigued. I was mesmerized. The power and durability of the women of that time and place is almost mythical. I still can't quite release the power of their stories.

Is your background Russian? What drew you to this setting and time period?

I am not Russian, although after researching this book, I can't wait to travel there. I want to walk the streets of St. Petersburg and spend time in the State Hermitage Museum and sit down to a meal of honest-to-goodness Chicken Kiev. The strange thing is that to me, after nearly a year's research, it's Leningrad and always will be, so I imagine it will be a little disorienting to walk through modern St. Petersburg and see the changes.

On his deathbed, Evan says he regrets letting Anya hide from her daughters. His love and compassion for his wife cost his daughters a close relationship with their mother yet he still holds out hope that they can come to know one another. Do you believe it's never too late to connect? What makes Anya finally tell the fairy tale all the way through?

I think Evan's deathbed request was about regret to a certain extent, but I think it was even more about hope. The way I saw that character, he was full of love and compassion and joy—he truly adored all three of the women in his life. And yet, for the whole of their family life, he carried the heavy burden of a secret. He alone knew how profoundly damaged his wife had been by her early life in Russia. Because of his deep compassion, he allowed Anya to remain broken and distant. For years, he imagined that their family and their love could heal her, but that healing didn't happen during his lifetime, and he knew that without him, the family could very easily have disintegrated. So he took one last risk on love. He asked Anya to tell the fairy tale to her daughters, and he asked Nina to listen. He hoped that if Anya could reveal her pain, and if her daughters could hear it, the three of them would have a chance at last to connect on a deeper level, and hopefully to start a new relationship, one based on truth.

I think life would be infinitely diminished if one believed that it was ever too late for anything, especially connection with loved ones. Call me an optimist—which I definitely am—but I absolutely believe that there's always a reason to reach out, no matter what the timing. One minute of love can really change the perception of an entire life.

I think Anya does as Evan asked for two reasons. First and foremost, because she loved Evan profoundly and was desperately grateful to him for saving her life. She couldn't deny him anything. Second, I think without Evan in her life, Anya began to feel adrift. More and more her mind turned to memories that she'd tried to forget and as painful as those memories were, they comforted her in her time of need. In a strange way, she liked going back to that time of her life that was both the best and the worst. And I think she'd secretly wanted to tell her daughters the truth for years. Evan gave her that chance.

As a novelist you explore the disappointments and misunderstandings that separate families. The use of the fairy tale to let Anya tell her story was an inspired choice—in stories we can address the big issues of loss and love and tragedy and hope. Have readers told you that your stories provided the inspiration to heal rifts in their own lives? Have your stories changed your own relationships with friends and family?

I do explore the disappointments and misunderstandings that separate families, as well as the love and hope that heal them, and that's really the heart of what *Winter Garden* is about. The fairy tale was really the backbone of the story. In the first couple drafts of the novel, there was no fairy tale, there was just Anya telling her story. It was a much more standard parallel story structure, with a historical novel running alongside a contemporary family drama. And it just didn't work. To be honest, the Russian story was more powerful and more compelling, and it really overshadowed the contemporary story. At

the end of the day, I thought it read like two stories stitched together with the thinnest thread. Then I stumbled across the idea of the fairy tale. I loved the idea, but there were a lot of days I cursed myself for even trying it, I can tell you. Suddenly the book had a kind of mystery running through it; the daughters had to interpret and solve the fairy tale, and I had to twist all of my research just enough to make it feel fable-like. The upside was that I loved the voice I was able to create for Anya.

I have heard repeatedly that my books inspire women to mend some of the rifts in their relationships, and I can't even tell you how honored I am by that. To paraphrase a country song: We live in a crazy, busy, wonderful, terrible, beautiful world. We women are always running at mach speed, it seems, trying to make life better for our loved ones. So anything that can make us slow down and relax—and better yet—pick up the phone to call someone who is important to us, is worth the world.

Meredith and Nina both felt closest to their father rather than each other growing up. The sisters build very different adult lives, with Meredith putting her family first and Nina living for her photography. How would their lives have been different if their mother had been more present emotionally? How difficult is it for adult siblings to establish a new relationship?

I don't honestly know how Nina and Meredith would have been different if their mother had been more emotionally present. Meredith is a caretaker; Nina is an adventurer. I don't think those basics would have been changed by Anya's love, but the choices each woman made might have changed. In other words, Nina might have believed in marriage more if she'd grown up in a happier family; she might have wanted children more if she'd felt loved by her mother. Meredith might have had the strength to forge her own path a little earlier if she'd felt loved. But in the end, in the novel—as in real life—it's less about second-guessing than it is about acceptance. It's impossible to say how love would have changed them; what we can say is that the love they found throughout the novel definitely changed their future. That's what I think is important—that familiar idea that it's never too late to change your future.

Meredith is a character that many women can relate to—exhausted from juggling work, family, elder care, and now the loss of her beloved father. Her responsibilities and how she handles them take a huge toll on her marriage and put it in jeopardy. How can women who are already drained from emotional demands repair, recharge, and reconnect?

Ah, there's the \$64,000 question. It's true that so many of us are overworked and stretched to the emotional breaking point by family and work and community obligations. And yes, something devastating, like a beloved's illness, can push us over the edge if we're not really careful. In *Winter Garden*, Meredith tries to handle the "last straw" of her father's death as if it were another in a string of difficult problems. She does what she has always done—and what many of us do—she works harder, faster. The problem is that the death of her father is not something she can go around; sooner or later, grief has to be

experienced and worked through. The faster she runs away, the bigger the problem becomes. And then Nina arrives and throws it all in Meredith's face.

Nina forces Meredith to care about the very thing that scares her the most: their mother. And yes, I think there's a subtextual message to women woven throughout this story. Somewhere along the way, while we're doing everything for everyone else, we have to remember to care for ourselves, too. Honestly, I think women are so strong that it doesn't take a lot of pampering to keep us strong, but we do have to work at it. For me, this is where friends can make all the difference. The more we connect with each other, the more we share our burdens, the stronger we become individually. You definitely see this idea at work in *Winter Garden*. By coming together and being honest, Nina and Meredith and Anya become better women and create an honest family relationship—one that allows each of them to be happier.

***Winter Garden* is written as two parallel stories that make up one seamless and captivating novel. How did you balance the events unfolding in World War II Leningrad with the equally compelling narrative in contemporary Washington state?**

As I said above, this was really the challenge of the novel. The Russian half of the story came to me like a gift. After about five months of research, I felt that I knew about Leningrad and writing that half of the story—as difficult as it was—absolutely captivated me. You can picture me sitting around, with about thirty research books scattered around me, pulling that single narrative together. The last fifty pages were absolutely devastating to write, though. By then, I “was” Anya, and telling her story was heartbreaking.

The bigger problem was the contemporary story. That side of it took repeated drafts to get right. What I wanted was a story in the “now” that fed off the past, that was ultimately changed by it. Each story had to be bolstered and illuminated by the other. I wanted the girls to have to continually reassess their own pasts as the fairy tale revealed the truth about their mother. And of course, I wanted the contemporary story to be as powerful and compelling as the historical story. Quite a challenge. I hope I pulled it off.

In Leningrad, Vera asks her mother if she would choose to fall in love with her papa again and her mother says no—not if she had known how it would feel to live with a broken heart. Your characters take the risk and you show that in the end it's worth it, that there can be no joy without risk of loss. Ultimately you write stories of survivors, and that's what resonates so deeply with readers. What do you think makes certain characters survivors?

Honestly, I was never quite sure, even as many times as I reworked this novel, if Vera's mother was being honest in that scene. I know she was trying to impart information to her daughter that she felt was crucial. You have to consider what Leningrad was like in those times, under Stalin's brutal regime. The people lived in constant fear. The reign of terror that Nina and Meredith research is absolutely true. People simply disappeared for saying

the wrong thing, or thinking the wrong thing, and Vera's mother is afraid that her daughter is making a terrible mistake by falling in love with a boy who believes in words. When the end comes for Vera's mother, however, we learn that she is unafraid, that she is going to be with her beloved Petyr. This doesn't sound like a woman who would choose not to fall in love.

I hadn't really thought about it that way, but you're right. I do write stories about women who survive sometimes insurmountable odds and triumph. More often than not, my characters triumph not by solving a mystery or becoming a millionaire; they triumph by choosing love. I write about women that rise above victimhood rather than those who succumb to it. I believe in the strength of the human spirit and the amazing resilience of women. If that resonates with readers, I think it's because they believe it, too. We all believe on some level that survival and triumph is about never quitting. Not on our family members, not on our friends, and not on ourselves.

Anya and Evan's relationship is lifesaving and yet even Evan's immense love couldn't heal Anya's broken spirit. It's only by talking through the tragedy and sharing with her daughters that Anya can become whole. That lesson, that avoiding the pain is ultimately isolating and counterproductive to moving on, is one ripe for discussion among reading groups. Can you add your thoughts?

There are some wounds, of course, that can never be truly healed. The heartrending story of Vera's life is not the kind of tragedy that can ever be forgotten. But I do believe that if Anya had allowed Evan's love to truly heal her, it could have created a greater sense of wholeness in her. She could have taken his love and wrapped herself in it and dared to love her children. The problem was not in some lack in Evan's love; rather, the problem lay in Anya's sense of self. Her past had left her so damaged that she viewed herself as a terrible mother. She looked back on her choices in Russia and saw them not as a remarkable story of love and survival, but rather as proof that she was unfit as a mother. This was what kept her separated from her daughters, her innate fear that she would somehow damage them if she showed her love.

If she had been strong enough to forgive herself, she would have had a chance, but she couldn't do it. Without forgiveness, it's difficult to really embrace love. We all have to forgive and be forgiven if love is to grow and flourish. Another interesting book club discussion question is how much does our childhood perception of our parents define who we become? How much will Nina and Meredith change now that they understand their mother better?

Did you ever consider an alternative ending to *Winter Garden*?

I did, actually. For the entire year that I was writing *Winter Garden* I imagined the end to be a scene in New York, at some swanky art gallery, where Nina was unveiling her "Women Warriors" exhibition. The centerpiece of the exhibit would have been the photograph she took of her mother after the telling of the fairy tale. I even toyed with Nina seeing Danny there...with his new wife and child. But in the final draft, I realized

that I wanted Nina and Danny to get their version of “happy ever after.” The women in this story deserved that.

The epilogue was wonderful—seeing the emotional bond develop between Anya and her daughters was immensely satisfying. What a gift to be at peace at the close of such a tumultuous life. You’ve said that this novel haunts you as no other novel you’ve written has done. Can you tell us about that?

I’d love to be a fly on the wall as book clubs discuss the ending to this book. That last scene is unusual and unexpected—even I didn’t expect it. But the truth is, that by the end of *Winter Garden*, I simply couldn’t bear for Anya to lose anyone else. I wanted her to find her daughter (I wanted her to find Sasha, too, but that’s another story), and I wanted her to come to the end of her life as a happy woman, one who had survived the impossible and still managed to let love and joy into her broken heart.

It is Anya who haunts me. She is a fictional character, obviously, but she is drawn from research. The women who survived the Siege of Leningrad were lionesses, warriors. It’s deeply inspiring to me. And even though it happened a long time ago, I find the story of their courage relevant in today’s world. I like to think that if the situation arose, I could be that courageous.

Courtesy of Macmillan

Discussion Questions

From Reading Group Gold Guide courtesy of Macmillan

1. This novel explores a complicated and strained relationship between two sisters. Do you think Meredith is justified in being so angry with Nina? In what ways are the sisters different and in what ways are they alike?
2. Meredith and Nina are both reluctant to let the men in their lives help them through a difficult time, yet both are suffering from the grief caused by the death of their father. Do you think this is something they've inherited from their mother? In what other ways are they similar to their mother? Is it impossible to avoid becoming like the people who raised you?
3. Anya Whitson is color-blind and cannot see the colors in her winter garden. Why do you think the author gave the character this particular trait? In what ways is it a metaphor for what Anya has gone through in her life? Do you believe it is a physiological blindness or a psychological one?
4. One of the themes in this book is female solidarity and strength during hard times. Nina witnesses women in Namibia, Africa, holding hands and laughing, even though their country has been ravaged by famine and warfare. Their bond impenetrable. Why do you think she's so interested in this theme? How else does this theme play out throughout the novel? How does understanding her mother's life inform Nina's view of her work?
5. Memory is an important theme in *Winter Garden*. Meredith often regrets—when looking at old family photos taken without her—that she was often off organizing or obsessing over details, while everyone else was living in the moment, creating memories. How common is this for women and mothers? What memories keep your family together?
6. As a child in Leningrad, Anya learned that it was dangerous to express emotions. That in doing so she would be putting what was left of her family at risk with the secret police. But now, with Meredith and Nina, her inability to express emotion is driving them apart, destroying the family she has now. How has Anya passed down this legacy to her daughters? How has it harmed their own relationships?
7. Food is an important element in this novel. Obviously, Anya loves to cook. Why doesn't she teach this to her daughters?
8. Jeff tells Meredith that “words matter.” What are some examples of this throughout the story? How have words saved and harmed each of these characters' lives? How has silence saved and harmed each of these characters' lives? How do words—the telling of the fairy tale—change their individual and collective perceptions of who they are?

9. When Anya, Meredith, and Nina watch the man carving the totem pole in Alaska in memory of his deceased son, Meredith realizes that Anya's fairy tale has served the same function as this man's sculpture. It is a symbol of loss, a way to sublimate the pain of grief, to heal. In what other ways did Anya heal by telling her daughters the fairy tale?
10. In what ways did Meredith and Anya heal? Keep on Reading
11. Anya is an unsympathetic character throughout much of the book. How did your perception of her change as the fairy tale unfolded? Did you end up sympathizing with her, or even liking her? Or do you feel that her treatment of her daughters was inexcusable, regardless of the hardships she had faced in her life? How would you have fared in Leningrad under the siege? Was Anya heroic in Leningrad, or a failure?
12. It isn't until Nina and Meredith discover who their mother is that they are able to discover who they are. What do they find out about themselves? How do you think their perception of their own childhoods will change now that they know the truth behind their mother's story?
13. Winter Garden teaches us that it is never too late to say "I love you." Meredith and Nina waited all of their lives to hear it from their mother. Sasha waited until his death for Anya to return. What has this novel taught us about the bonds of family and the strength of love?
14. How did you feel about the ending? Why do you think the author chose the surprising meeting in Sitka? Did you see it coming? Do you think this ending is too "easy" or did Anya deserve this unexpected reunion?

Courtesy of Macmillan