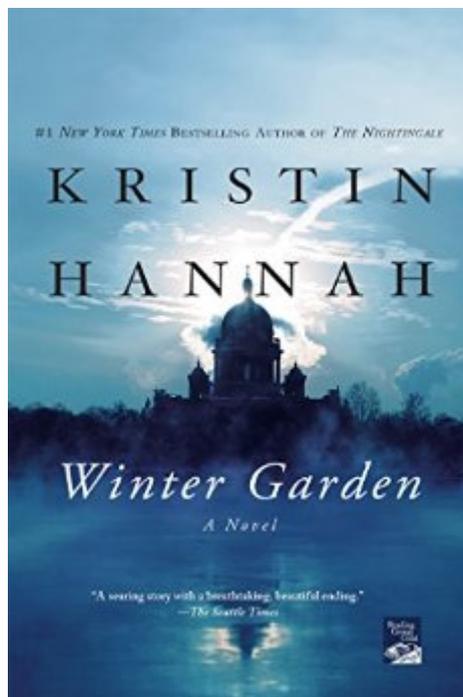


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Winter Garden



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

"Winter Garden," by Kristin Hannah, is a surprising book. I say this as someone who has been deeply impressed by Ms. Hannah's writing before -- her "When Lightning Strikes" is on my short list of favorite novels to re-read often, and whenever I pick that book up, I always find something new to appreciate. So I was well aware of how vividly Ms. Hannah envisions history ("When Lightning Strikes" is a paranormal set, for the most part, in 1896), and of how fine her use of language, culture, mores, tone, and description. All of those are again on display in "Winter Garden," a more traditional straight-up family history and memoir, along with the themes of sacrifice, sisterhood, families, and secrets. At the start of "Winter Garden," we meet two pre-teen sisters, Meredith and Nina Whitson. We see them briefly act in a play, a story their mother has told them that seems to be of a worthy, yet poor, young woman, her sister, and the prince who rescues her. But the play angers and upsets their mother, Anya, who cannot tell them why; this makes them vow never to try to please their mother again. Then we see them as full-fledged adults -- Meredith, the nurturer, someone who takes on difficult jobs around the house and at her job without praise or fanfare and is running herself into the ground, and Nina, the prize-winning and world-renowned photojournalist, who takes on difficult jobs in various countries photographing people (mostly in war zones) and is running herself into the ground in a wholly different way. Meredith is married, with two children in college, but her marriage is in trouble because she can't communicate; Nina is in a long-term relationship but can't admit she loves her boyfriend because she isn't able to communicate.

...but don't give up on it. I'm glad I listened to that advice from another reviewer as I might have put it down myself. The first half lays the groundwork of the familial relationships between the main characters. Sometimes the reader will get impatient with the flawed characters, as it seems drawn out at times, therefore 4-1/2 stars from me. It is not a happy or feel good type of read. It is sad, heartbreaking, and captivating. There have been many novels lately that flip back and forth between the past and the present, many revolving around wartime. Personally I like that, it is like reading two novels in one. We have seen this in Shanghai Girls, on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet, Whiskey Island, and countless others. This one gives us an intimate look at Leningrad survivors in the Russian/German war. It varies in the fact that the past is presented as a fairy tale by the Russian mother of two American born daughters. All three are strong-willed and feeling incomplete and do not relate well to each other. As adults, grief unites them and a death-bed promise forces them to face and come to know each other as well as themselves. It starts as the two young daughters Meredith and Nina fail time and again in seeking affection from their cold, distant mother. When they

were young their mother would tell them this fairy tale at night, practically the only communication they had between them at the time. It mesmerized them, leaving them wanting more, but the story telling stopped suddenly and does not continue until their adulthood when circumstances brings about the completion of the tale. In actuality the "fairy tale" is the story of their mother's young life in Russia.

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