



WINTER GARDEN

by Kristin Hannah

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 ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

A
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A Conversation with Kristin Hannah

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

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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.

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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 heart-breaking.

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,

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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.



Researching Winter Garden

An Original Essay by the Author

Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, I wrote historical fiction. For years, I immersed myself in other time periods and rooted my stories in distant places. And then, somewhere along the way of this career, I came home in a way. I turned my attention to contemporary matters and began to write about women's lives. More often than not, I set these stories in places I knew well.

I didn't really make a conscious decision to change that pattern. In fact, I tried very hard to continue it. I enjoyed writing about the Pacific Northwest. *True Colors* and *Firefly Lane* literally took place in my own backyard and I loved it. The problem was that an oddball idea came to me. Now, believe me, I have a lot of strange ideas and I usually just ignore them until they go away. But this idea was Velcro. It started with a friend's offhand comment about women during the Siege of Leningrad. I knew very little about modern-day St. Petersburg, next to nothing about Leningrad, and absolutely nothing about how the city fared during World War II.

So I did what I usually do when an idea is insistent: I started researching the topic.

That's where the game ended...or began, depending on your point of view. Once I read my first account of the siege, I was hooked. Big time. The survivors' stories literally clawed their way into my heart and there they remain. I hope you've finished *Winter Garden* before reading this essay, and if so, you have a pretty good picture of the suffering endured by Leningraders. What I was less able to incorporate into the novel was the beauty of the city. Leningrad was built to be famous, an eternal, gorgeous city that would welcome artists and celebrities and the wealthy. Picture elaborately designed buildings, topped in gold and painted gaily...picture arching bridges over sweeping rivers...picture scrollwork and marble statues and intricately landscaped public parks...now picture the northern lights sparkling above. All of this was Peter's Window to the West, the city that would give Venice a run for its money.

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Of course, Stalin didn't share Peter's vision of the future and his rule became the anvil that beat down the citizenry. To write *Winter Garden*, I had to research not only the effect of the war on Leningrad, I had to become completely familiar with the people who lived there before the war. I read dozens of books about Stalin's regime, the Great Reign of Terror, and the disappearances that terrified everyone. It was really important for me to understand the Communist mentality because it informs the choices that people made. After years of terror, the citizens had learned not to question their government. Thus, when Stalin ordered the evacuation of the children of Leningrad, it was done. It's true that mothers put their children on trains, with their names pinned to their coats, with no real idea where those trains were going and when they would see their children again, if ever. It's true that several of those trains were sent directly into German troops and bombed. It's also true that Leningrad became a city of women during the siege—men, except for the very young and the very old—were off to fight the Germans.

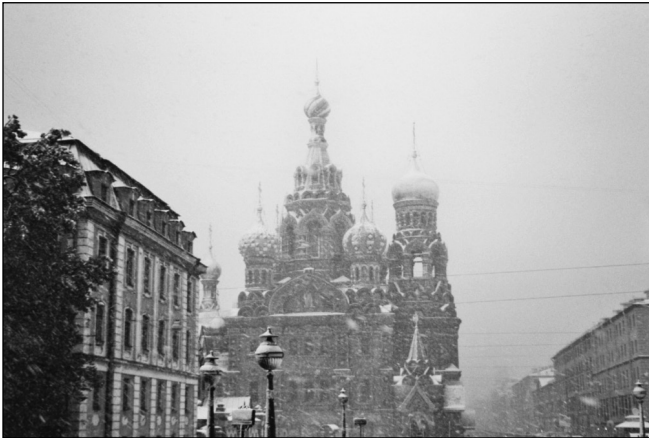
The most difficult facet of the research was definitely reading the firsthand accounts of the survivors. Diaries, letters, interviews. Unfortunately, the records of this time are not as extensive as they should be. It is yet another example of Stalin's repression. Only recently has the real truth begun to be told.

In writing *Winter Garden*, it was my goal to take this epic, tragic event and personalize it as much as possible. I wanted to give you all this story of survival and loss, horror and heartache in a way that would allow you to experience it with some measure of emotion. I am not a historian, nor a nonfiction writer. My hope is that you leave this novel informed, but not merely with the facts and figures; rather, I want you to be able to actually imagine it, to ask yourself how you would have fared in such terrible times.

If you want more information on the Siege of Leningrad, I recommend: *Writing the Siege of Leningrad* by Cynthia



Simmons and Nina Perlina; *Poems of Akhmatova* by Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward; *Leningrad Under Siege* by Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin; *Siege and Survival* by Elena Skrabina M.A. Ph.D.; and *The 900 Days* by Harrison E. Salisbury.



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St. Petersburg Church of the Savior on Blood

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Recipes

I have to say, writing this novel made me hungry. In a very real way, food—its abundance and its lack—was at the very heart of the story. Obviously, the historical section detailed the starvation faced by Leningraders, but food also had a starring role in the contemporary story line. Cooking was Anya's way of reaching out to her daughters. She was constantly feeding them and cooking for them and begging them to eat. In due time, of course, we discover the truth behind Anya's obsessions, and by the time we learn the truth, we feel a deep empathy for this woman for whom food was so important.

Before embarking on *Winter Garden*, I knew very little about Russian food. Oh, I'd had the occasional sip of vodka or taste of caviar, but beyond that, not much. As I wrote the scenes, however, I cooked the food for my family, and I have to say, what a treat it was. In case you'd like to add a little ambiance while you're reading the novel, I've included these classic Russian recipes. Enjoy!

POTATO PIEROGI

Makes 65 to 70 pierogi; 8 to 10 servings

This recipe...yields a large amount. You could halve the recipe, but instead I recommend making the full amount and freezing half. Frozen pierogi can be dropped directly into boiling water for cooking; there's no thawing required. You can also refrigerate the dough for a day or two, so you can make the pierogi in a couple batches.

PIEROGI WRAPPERS

- 1 large egg yolk
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups all-purpose flour



TOPPING AND FILLING

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 5 cups finely chopped onion
- 4 cups mashed potatoes (leftovers are fine)
- 4 ounces farmer's cheese
- 2 teaspoons salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

TO ASSEMBLE

- 2 large egg whites
- All-purpose flour, as needed
- Sour cream, for serving

1. To make the wrappers, in a small bowl, combine the egg yolk, milk, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water, and the vegetable oil. Whip with a fork for 1 minute. Place the flour in a large bowl. Make a well in the center and pour in the wet ingredients, about one third at a time, using your fingers or a fork to incorporate the wet ingredients between additions.
2. When you have added all the wet ingredients, use your hands to fold the dough together. If it seems too sticky, add a little more flour, about 1 teaspoon at a time to avoid making it too dry.
3. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured board and knead for 3 minutes. Again, add very small amounts of flour if the dough is too sticky to knead. When the dough is smooth and thoroughly amalgamated, form it into a ball, transfer it to a small bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for 20 minutes. Clean and dry your work surface.
4. While the dough is chilling, prepare the topping and filling. Melt the butter in a large sauté pan, then add the onions and sauté over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until browned, about 10 minutes.
5. In a large bowl, combine $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the cooked onions, the mashed potatoes, farmer's cheese, salt, and pepper. Set aside at room temperature. Reserve the remaining onions for the topping.

6. When you are ready to roll the dough, in a small bowl combine the 2 egg whites with 2 tablespoons water and set it to the side of your work surface. You will also need a pastry brush, a rolling pin, a teaspoon (the table kind, not a measuring spoon), a fork, and a round cookie cutter about $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches in diameter (a jar lid or juice glass will also work). Set aside a floured jelly-roll pan, platter, or cutting board for the finished pierogi as well.
7. Divide the dough into 3 sections. Place 1 section on the work surface, well floured, and roll out to $\frac{1}{16}$ inch. Cut circles of dough with the cookie cutter. Place a heaping teaspoon of the filling in the center of each circle, leaving an empty margin. Brush some of the egg white mixture on half of the outer edge of the circle, and then fold the dough over into a half-moon shape. Crimp the edges with your fingers or with a small fork.
8. As you finish, transfer each pierogi to the floured board or platter. Do not stack them. Repeat with remaining dough and filling.
9. Fill a large stockpot about three-quarters full with salted water and bring to a rolling boil. Using a slotted spoon or skimmer, lower the pierogi, three or four at a time, into the boiling water and cook for 4 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon, drain, and transfer to a serving platter. Repeat with the remaining pierogi, allowing the water to return to a full boil each time.
10. When you have cooked all the pierogi, serve them topped with the reserved sautéed onion and as much sour cream as you like.

Variation: For Fried Pierogi, cook them in boiling water as above but for 2 minutes rather than 4, then sauté them in butter until they are golden brown. When making Potato Pierogi for Christmas, leave out the farmer's cheese in the filling and add a little extra mashed potato.



BEEF STROGANOFF

Serves 6 to 8

Like Veal Goulash, this is a belly filling meal-in-a-bowl, perfect for cold weather. Serve it with egg noodles or rice. Also like Ola's Veal Goulash, this recipe includes some ketchup. Interestingly, our Eastern European cooks don't see ketchup as a condiment—for them it's interchangeable with tomato paste, probably because they didn't have it on their tables when they were growing up. You can substitute tomato paste for the ketchup without any loss of flavor....

- 5 pounds pepper steak strips
 - 1 cup all-purpose flour
 - 2 tablespoons olive oil
 - 8 cups chicken stock
 - 4 tablespoons ketchup
 - 2 bay leaves
 - 4 whole allspice berries
 - 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter
 - 2 yellow onions, sliced (about 1½ cups)
 - 4 large portobello mushrooms, sliced
 - 8 ounces shiitake mushrooms, sliced
 - 8 ounces button mushrooms, sliced
 - 2 cups sour cream
 - 1 teaspoon cornstarch
 - Salt
 - Freshly ground black pepper
1. Rinse the meat and pat dry.
Dredge the meat in the flour.
 2. In a large cast-iron skillet, heat the olive oil and pan fry the meat until completely browned on all sides.
(Cook in batches if necessary.)
 3. Meanwhile, combine the chicken stock and ketchup in a large stockpot or Dutch oven and bring to a boil. Remove the cooked meat from the skillet with tongs or a slotted spoon (let any excess fat drip back into the skillet) and place the meat in the pot with the stock. (Pour off excess fat and set the skillet aside for

- step 5.) The stock should just cover the meat in the pot. If necessary, add a small amount of additional stock or some water.
4. Add the bay leaves and whole allspice berries to the pot. Simmer the beef until very tender, about 1 and $\frac{1}{2}$ hours, skimming occasionally.
 5. In the same cast-iron skillet you used to cook the meat, melt the butter. Add the onions and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the onions are a deep rich brown, about 11 minutes. Add the mushrooms and sauté until they are fully cooked, 10 to 15 additional minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.
 6. When the meat is cooked, remove about 2 cups of cooking liquid from the pot and transfer to a medium bowl. Stir the sour cream into the hot liquid. Add the cornstarch to the sour cream and whisk vigorously to remove any lumps. This mixture should be very creamy and somewhat thick. Return the sour cream mixture to the pot, stir to combine with the meat, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until thickened, about 10 minutes.
 7. Stir in the mushrooms and onions and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve hot.

Variation: To make Chicken Stroganoff , replace the pepper steak with boneless, skinless chicken breasts cut into strips and decrease the stock to $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups. In step 4, simmer the chicken for only 15 to 20 minutes, and in step 6, stir only 1 cup of cooking liquid into the sour cream. Omit the ketchup or reduce to 2 tablespoons.

Find this and many other delicious recipes in *The Veselka Cookbook: Recipes and Stories from the Landmark Restaurant in New York's East Village* by Tom Birchard with Natalie Danford. To learn more or to buy the book, visit <http://www.veselka.com/cookbook/>.



Ideas for Book Groups

To Enhance Your Book Club Meeting:

If you usually go out to dinner before your meeting—or eat during it—why not prepare one of the featured recipes? Or if life is too hectic for you to spend time in the kitchen, stop by your local store and pick up some frozen pierogies. What really matters is the company and the laughter...

A huge part of the book is the apple orchard; it was really the heart of the Whitson family. Your group might like to sample a few cups of hot spiced apple cider to get you in the mood. Or maybe it's all about the cocktails for your group. Instead of your regular white wine, try a *Winterized* beverage! There are lots of great White Russian recipes to be found on the Web. Just remember to stay safe if you have to drive home.

You may choose to share some of your own “fairy tales” while you’re chilling out as well. Bring photos of yourself or your family in the winter, building snowmen or sledding. Nothing makes us all laugh and smile like photos from long ago.

If someone has a computer at the meeting, check out some pictures of St. Petersburg (Leningrad) during the war. It will really bring home both the beauty of the city and the horror of the Siege.

To learn more about *Winter Garden*, visit KristinHannah.com.

Cheers!

Reading
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*Keep on
Reading*

In the past year, I've been able to "talk" to book groups via speakerphone during their meetings. What a blast! For so long, I wrote books and never really met anyone who had read them. It is such a joy to talk to women from all over the country. We talk about anything and everything—my books, other books, best friends, kids, sisters. You name it, and we'll discuss it. So if you belong to a book group and you've chosen *Winter Garden* as your pick, please come on over to the Web site and set up a conversation with me. I can't promise to fulfill all the requests, but I will certainly do my best. And don't forget to join me on my blog and/or Facebook. I love talking to readers. The more the merrier!

Thanks!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kristin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.



Reading Group Questions

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?



Keep on
Reading

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? In what ways did Meredith and Anya heal?



10. 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?
11. 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?
12. *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?
13. 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?

*Keep on
Reading*