PRAISE FOR

Winter in Full Bloom

Winter in Full Bloom will grab your attention right away and it won’t let go until you finish each satisfying word. Anita Higman has written a beautiful story with well-rounded characters that reminds us what it means to be family.

Kristin Billerbeck, author of The Scent of Rain

At a poignant crossroads in her life, Lily Winter heads off to Australia to track down a family secret, armed only with a clue given by her mother, an eerily cold woman. In Melbourne, Lily finds who she was looking for, aided by a handsome stranger with a few skeletons in his own closet. But she ends up with more questions than answers and her faith is tested in ways she never expected. The results transform not only Lily but her entire family.

With a touch of humor, romance, and heartache, Anita Higman pens a beautifully written story of hope and healing drawn from the lives of wonderfully complex characters. Winter in Full Bloom will stay with you long after you read the last page.

Suzanne Woods Fisher, bestselling author of Stoney Ridge Seasons

Anita’s Australian-inspired novel is as warm as a koala, creative as a platypus, and filled with more twists and turns than a billabong. G’read, love!

James Watkins, award-winning author of thirty books including Writing with Banana Peels

Winter in Full Bloom had me from the first paragraph. Why is this woman who hates flying on a plane headed for Australia? Then throw in trying to redeem her truly dysfunctional family, and Anita Higman’s heroine will capture your heart.

Neta Jackson, bestselling author of The Yada Yada Prayer Group series and its sequels.
Winter in Full Bloom

Anita Higman

Moody Publishers
CHICAGO
Winter in Full Bloom

is lovingly dedicated to my son-in-law, Alex McMullen,
whose Irish ways not only beguiled my daughter, but enchanted us all.

The Irish touches in this book,
including the bagpipes, come from his merry influence.
(You play them delightfully, Alex.)
“If winter comes, can spring be far behind?”

Percy Bysshe Shelley
Part One

the adventure
I sat on a 747, trying to talk myself out of a panic attack.

The jet still sat on the tarmac, but already I could imagine—in electrifying detail—the fiery crash and then the watery pull into the briny depths of the Pacific Ocean. Lord, have mercy. What had I been thinking?

Fool that I was, I’d left the sanctuary of my own home, which was safe, and hygienically clean, I might add, to board this death trap. Too late now. I’d taken a leave of absence from work, stopped the mail, given all my indoor plants to my neighbor, and said a dozen goodbyes to my daughter, Julie. The trip was set in stone—the igneous kind that the geologists liked to talk about at work.

While I sat there sweating, my mind got out its magnifying glass to examine my inner motives. All in all, the journey had a grab bag full of miseries attached to it. For me, getting on the plane proved that my empty nest had driven me over the edge like the biblical herd of pigs. Since my Julie had left the house, was I trying to find a person to fill that void . . . that vacant place at the table . . . the perpetual silence of the house and the clocks, ticking away the rest of my tedious life? Probably. And yet finding my sister in Australia would be no less than wonderful, whether Julie was at home or not.

I looked out the small plane window at the heavens with my anxious puppy dog eyes and could almost hear the Almighty chuckling. Yes, I know, God. I must keep You entertained.
But back to the fear at hand. I rechecked my seat belt and pulled it so snugly I felt my pulse throbbing in my legs. My stomach busied itself doing the fandango. What had I eaten in the airport? A double bean burrito with a side of green chilies. Not a good travel choice. Did I already have motion sickness? The plane hadn’t even taken off yet. If I were to exit the plane right now, would they give me a refund? Probably not. I’d already used the restroom, crumpled the magazines, and troubled the flight attendant for a ginger ale. Lord, I need a friend. I need backup.

“You have to ask yourself: what am I most afraid of?” It was the voice of a child.

I turned toward the sound. “Excuse me?” Straight across the aisle sat a child no bigger than a thimble—a girl with moon-shaped eyes, a Pooh Bear T-shirt, and a wad of gum she was chomping as if it were a lump of tough meat. Surely this child isn’t backup, Lord. I think God enjoys showing off His sense of humor.

“You’re scared to fly. Right? I was too, but I got over it.” The girl blew a bubble and let the purple gum pop all over her face. She gathered up the gum and put it back in her mouth for another round.

“How can you tell that I’m afraid to fly?”

“All that sweat. Dead giveaway. And you look like you’ve just swallowed a Boogie Board.” She exploded into giggles.

I had no idea what a Boogie Board was. And in spite of the silliness the kid talked as if she were thirty, although she couldn’t be more than nine or ten. I had to know her secret—how she managed to rise above her fears. And something about her little turned-up nose and soft brown eyes reminded me of Julie when she was little. “And so how did you get over it . . . the fear of flying?”

The girl looked at me, her big eyes gobbling me up. She lost all the playfulness when she said, “I watched my grandma die of cancer. Her body stopped working, but she was still in there. It was a bad way to die. When I get old I don’t want to go to heaven that way.
Maybe dying on a plane isn’t so bad. I mean, I know God doesn’t ask us, but we might as well give Him a list of our pref—choices.”

I wasn’t sure if her reasoning reassured me or alarmed me, but I leaned toward her and said, “I’m sorry about your grandmother.”

“Yeah, me too. She always played dolls and Mario Kart with me. Every kid needs a grandma like mine.”

“So true.” If only my Julie would have had a grandma like that. When the girl said no more I turned my attention back to the plane, which now taxied toward the runway. My body wanted to flee. Each time I took in air it didn’t seem to be enough, so I breathed in more.

Did I smell fuel? My head went so buzzy I’d only heard half of the flight attendant’s speech. What was that about oxygen masks and exit doors and life vests? Oh, my. I fanned my face.

I clutched at my heart, which was now beating itself to death. Would I pass out? Throw up? Go crazy? All the above? The cabin felt like a cauldron. Maybe the air conditioner was malfunctioning. Maybe deep within the belly of the plane other more important electrical devices were failing. Things that kept the plane aloft—things that kept us from plummeting to the earth in a fiery heap. I mashed my damp bangs away from my face.

“Just so ya know . . .” The little girl crossed her legs. “I also found out that you can’t die of a panic attack.”

Her tone came off so pragmatic I looked at her again just to make sure the words were coming out of her petite mouth. “How do you know I was having a panic attack?”

She cocked her little Freudian head at me. “Classic symptoms.”

Who was this kid? And where were her parents? I unbuckled my seat belt. “I don’t think I can do this.” I jumped up and bumped my head on the overhead storage.

“We’re about to take off,” the girl said with maddening calmness.

I collapsed back onto the seat and rubbed my throbbing head. The contents of my stomach threatened mutiny. “I’m going to be sick.”
“Here.” The girl handed me a little folded bag. “It’s a fresh one. Never been used.”

I was in a tin can with wings, and there was no way out. The plane took off then. I gripped the armrest as the jet tilted upward at a steep angle. I was now officially airborne. My body felt a little weightless, but it might have been because I was sitting on the buckle of my seat belt, which made my posterior go numb.

“Know what? You remind me of Eeyore.”

It was that kid again. How could anyone make chitchat at a time like this?

I said nothing to her, since I was busy concentrating on my terror, the vibration of my seat, and the roar of the jet. After she glared at me for a full minute, I asked, “Why do you say I remind you of Eeyore?”

“You’re wearing Eeyore clothes, and it’s almost spring where we’re going,” she singsonged as if she couldn’t imagine anyone so ill-informed.

I’d forgotten. If it’s nearing autumn in America it’s almost springtime in Australia. I’d barely thought of it. Perhaps the girl was right about my connection to Eeyore. Wait a minute. Did Eeyore even wear clothes?

“Just so ya know . . . taking off and landing are the two most treach—”

“Do you mean treacherous?”

“Yeah. That’s it. Those are the two most treach-er-ous parts of the flight.” The girl wiggled her eyebrows while continuing to thrash on the wad of gum. “If we were going to die, it would have been back there. Of course, we could also crash on landing.”

“Good to know. Thanks.” I continued to grip the armrests since I was somehow convinced that my gesture helped the pilots keep the plane in the air.

“Just so ya know, I’m Jenny.” The girl held out her hand. “What’s your name?”
“Mrs. Winter.” I let go of one of the armrests to shake her hand. “You may call me Lily.”

“So, why was it so important for you to get on this flight?” The dainty psychiatrist turned her big, round eyes at me again. “Talking about it might help.”

“Oh it’s a very long tale of woe. I’d hate to bore you.”

“Hey, what else have we got to do? It’s better than thinking about our plane catching fire and bashing into the sea.” Her finger made a little nosedive into her palm.

Cute. “True.” But I feared the telling of my story would be my undoing. Where could I begin, anyway? Maybe with the visit I’d had with my mother. “Are you sure you want to hear this?”

She nodded her head with wild abandon.

“Well, okay. My dark story starts with a recent visit I made to my mother’s house. It’d been ten years since the last time I’d seen my mother.”

Jenny pursed her lips. “Nobody does that. Everybody has to see their mom, right?”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t my choice. But when I got to my mother’s house, the visit turned out to be as shocking as sticking my finger into a light socket.” I frowned. “Don’t ever do that, by the way.”

“I know.” Jenny rolled her eyes. “I’m not a child.”

“Right. Okay. Well, in my story I also meet a woman named Dragan.”

She giggled. “Sounds like dragon.”

“True. Dragan was my mother’s housekeeper, and believe me, her name fit her well.”

Jenny sat up poised, resting her cheek on her index finger. “I wanna know more.” She smacked her gum, waiting for me to go on.

“All right.” Lord, be with me. I rested my head back on the seat, inviting the memory of that infamous day into my life.
First a jumbled mess of sensations trickled in, making me shudder. Then mist burned my eyes, thinking of Mother’s notorious secret and a lifetime of deception. The smarmy residue from being in her house stole over me like a dark slithering fog. Soon that day—the one that changed my life—began to unfold in my mind, so intensely that the remembering and the telling of my story became one and the same. . . .
Standing at my mother’s front door, the seconds ticked by like a hundred frenzied clocks. I glanced around the old place, trying to ignore the negative self-talk in my head and Houston’s sweltering August heat, but it was no use. I’d already surrendered to both.

The old plantation-style house still looked the same—its pillars like guards and its darkened windows like eyes that always stared at me without really seeing. Hmm. Suddenly, empty nest with my Julie off in college felt lonelier than ever.

More seconds passed. Mother didn’t seem to be at home. Guess my thirty-minute drive across the city was in vain. But maybe that was best. It had been ten years, after all, and ten years was enough time for a goodbye to harden into something permanent. After hearing my pastor’s stirring message on reconciliation I had vowed to reach out to my mother—even though she didn’t want it—not just for my sake, but for Julie’s sake. For now, though, I’d have to let go of my promise.

As I turned to leave, a deadbolt unlocked behind me. Oh, no. The front door moaned its way open as if wailing over my arrival. I hugged myself.

A stranger stood in the doorway, looking as lost as I felt. “May I help you?”

“Does Iris Gray still live here?” My voice made a flutter. “I’m her daughter.”
The woman adjusted her red-rimmed glasses and blinked like the slow shutter speed on a camera. “But Mrs. Gray doesn’t have any children.”

“I’m afraid she does.” I smoothed my dark pantsuit. “I’m Lily Winter . . . her only child.”

“I’m Mrs. Dragan Humphreys.”

What an odd name. Sounded Hungarian or something. The woman wore a faded Hawaiian muumuu, and her hair looked like a tossed salad, which gave her a bedraggled air. As my gaze wandered downward, I saw that she wore tattered red flip-flops too. Well, at least they matched her red-rimmed glasses.

“Your mother never mentioned you.” The woman sort of impaled me with her words.


“I know. Hard to imagine. Even with our estrangement, it is shocking that my mother never mentioned anything about me.”

The girl took my hand and squeezed. “You poor thing.”

Where did Jenny come from anyway? So much sensitivity in such a little package.

“Is that why you’re going to Australia? You’re running away from home?”

“No, adults don’t run away from home.” Although maybe she had a point.

“It’s a pretty good story so far. Does it have a happy ending?”

“I don’t know.” I sighed. “I’m still living the story.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jenny leaned toward me and drummed her fingers on the arm of the seat. “I’m not sleepy yet, so maybe you better tell me some more.”

“All right.
“My mother’s housekeeper, Dragan, pulled her glasses down to the tip of her nose. ‘I guess I can see the resemblance,’ she said to me. ‘You have the same gray eyes as your mother and that sad Mona Lisa smile.’

“I could suddenly see the woman’s eyes more clearly now. You’ll like this part, Jenny. Dragan’s eyes were like pale marbles. But one orb appeared slightly different from the other.”

Jenny leaned into the aisle. “Oww, that’s pretty creepy. Keep going.”

“Yeah, well, it made me uneasy trying to figure out the colors and which eye to look at. Finally, I just asked the woman, ‘Is my mother at home?’”

“She’s in the study.” Dragan paused and then opened the door wider.

I stepped inside. “So, are you my mother’s housekeeper?”

“Yes and no.” Dragan closed the door behind us. “Your mother and I have a special arrangement.” She placed her palms together, prayer-like. “I know how unorthodox this might sound, but Mrs. Gray pays me to be her friend.”

Normally I would have laughed at such a bizarre comment, but being in my mother’s house kept my bursts of emotion in check. “Oh? I see.” Most normal people wouldn’t be able to imagine hiring a stranger to be one’s friend—and yet in my mother’s case it was plausible. She’d always needed a friend more than a daughter.

Dragan seemed to study me for a reaction.

I smiled convincingly and trudged behind her toward the study. A trace of alcohol swirled in her wake, and when she glanced back at me, I saw the tapering of her eyelids.

Our footsteps clacked and flopped across the marble floor, making strange echoing rhythms through the entry. Even though I’d grown up in the house, I’d only visited the study occasionally. It had been my mother’s sanctuary, a place off-limits to animals and chil-
children. A place she retreated to when she could no longer tolerate the world. Or me. But perhaps my mother had softened over the years and the tendrils of compassion had attached themselves to her heart.

Dragan opened the door to the study and then, with the cadence of crisp snaps, she flip-flopped away down the hall. I tiptoed through the doorway, and all my good intentions threatened to scamper away like scared little mice.

I paused to get my bearings. The study looked the same—paneled walls accented with wainscoting, shelves of books, and an eclectic array of French Provincial furnishings. The afternoon light made phantoms on the walls, and like an enchantment, a grim and lonely feel still shadowed the place. Musty odors completed the overall anti-festive ambiance. I swallowed a chuckle and then hesitated mid-stride like characters do in cartoons, knowing that my mother’s disposition was as stagnant as her surroundings.

“I could hear your whispers through the vents . . . you and Mrs. Humphreys,” my mother said from behind one of the high-back chairs.

Her face was hidden from view, but the voice belonged to my mother. It was raspier than I’d remembered, but the brusque tenor sounded the same as a decade before. Suddenly my bones felt incapable of holding me up. I sensed it then—our meeting would be a farce, but without the comedy.

“What are you doing back there? Come here. I want to have a look at you,” came the voice.

I walked over to the chair opposite from my mother and sat down. I looked at my hands; they’d taken on a life of their own, strangling each other until they throbbed. “Hi, Mother. It’s been a long time.”

“Let’s see you. Your complexion has improved, and your long hair isn’t so straggly. But you’re still thin and pale. But of course, all that dark clothing you’re wearing makes the pallor more pronounced. In fact, you look ill. My doctors say I have a weakened immune system, so if you think—”
"I’m not sick." I looked up at her. Mother’s eyes had faded some, but they were still as intense as ever. Streaks of iron gray ran through her dark hair, so many, in fact, that it was hard to know which color was more dominant, but the whole bundle was drawn up into a painful-looking bun. Her nose appeared more angled, and with her piercing stare, the whole effect was one of a fearsome eagle studying its prey.

My body shriveled like dried fruit in the hot sun. I felt desperate, almost reckless in my hopes for a chance to reconnect with my mother. I huddled down onto the chair, gripped the cushions, and waited for the judge’s decree.

“I’ve been expecting you.” My mother lifted a tiny glass of clear liquid—most likely schnapps—to her lips.

“You have?” I smiled, glad for any sign of goodwill.

Her eye twitched. “Well, let me see if I can guess why you’ve come. Your daughter has gone off to college, and you’re feeling useless. Empty nest is eating at you. And so you thought you’d visit your old mother. See if we couldn’t be pals.”

Mother either talked in riddles or cut to the chase. “Yes, some of that is true, but I hoped—”

“I heard about your husband’s death a year ago. My gout kept me from the funeral. But I’m sure I wasn’t missed.”

“Oh course you were missed.”

“Bah. If you’re going to lie, girl, learn to do it with style or not bother.” She took another sip from her glass.

Talking my mother out of one of her certainties was as easy as getting an amendment to the Constitution. So I let it go.

“Tell me again . . . your husband . . . what did he die of?”

“Richard died of a heart attack.”

Mother tucked the corners of her dress under her legs and then smoothed the fabric, which looked a lot like wall tapestry. “Hmm. You should have fed him a healthier diet. Less junk food . . . more prunes.”

A wall clock chimed, and I jumped.
“So, now that your daughter has gone away, and your spouse is dead, what are you going to do with your life? You’re thirty-nine years old, alone, with no promising future. You probably still live in that shabby little house your husband left you.” Mother shook her head. “You never did use your expensive education for a real career. You just wanted to marry and have a child.”

I sighed. “I don’t know what God has planned for me. Not yet anyway.”

“Bah. Leave God out of this. You’re old enough to make your own plans.” She set her glass down and pulled her afghan up over her knees.

I tried to batten down the hatches of my emotions, but I’d been born too flimsy to stand up to my mother’s hurricane-force blows. I could no longer look at my mother, so I stared out the window into the solarium. A wooden table sat in the center of the glassed-in room, covered with botany journals, microscopes, and sketches of flower parts. There would also be small instruments of torture, for dissecting. With all her multiple gardens, no flowers were ever displayed in the house for their beauty. “Have you made any new discoveries with your flowers?”

“You mean angiosperms. No, nothing new there, but I did recently purchase a night-blooming Cereus cactus. Amazing specimen. It blooms just once a year, you know, and if you miss your one chance . . . well, now that would be a real loss. Wouldn’t it?”
Irony had more weight than I could carry. My mother’s worship of flowers was never-ending, probably because they had no hearts. No sins to number. Or remember. I fingered my charm bracelet to remind me that life outside her walls was still good—that the sun still rose in the morning and my darling daughter, Julie, still loved me.

“I see you fidgeting with some trinket on your wrist. What is it?”

“Julie gave me this bracelet when she left for college recently. Each of the tiny silver charms represents our favorite things, like her rollerblading or my reading. And—”

“Yes, well, I’m sure.” My mother gave a one-finger pat, pat, pat on the chair, which was meant to silence me as if I were her trained poodle. I’d never forgotten that gesture. My heart constricted, no longer wanting to beat, but it kept on pounding just the same.

“Well, let’s have a look at it.” She motioned to my wrist. “The bauble.”

I removed the bracelet, handed it to my mother, and immediately started picking at my fingers, a habit I must have started in the cradle.

The hinges on the study door creaked, and I glanced back. The door was ajar, but perhaps I’d left it that way. Or was Dragan eavesdropping just outside the door? Hmm. I turned my attention back to my mother.

She put on her reading glasses and rolled the bracelet around in her hand. “So, little Julie’s all grown up.”

Was this the moment I’d waited for? I gave myself the luxury of hope. “Julie plays the guitar and the piano, and she sings like an angel in church. She’s grown up so beautiful and wise and funny too. She’s getting a music degree at Sam Houston State University, so she’s about an hour drive from Houston. I miss her, even though she’s not that far away. Mother, you would love her. Maybe I could have her come visit you. Julie has missed having a grandmother in her life. She needs you. We both need you and love you and—”
“I don’t think so.” My mother closed her hand around the jewelry.

“I would like for you to keep the bracelet as a gift.” I hadn’t planned on giving away my greatest earthly treasure, but I really did want my mother’s love—her understanding. Her “knowing” of me and my Julie. Life seemed to be an unfinished puzzle without it.

My mother clutched the bracelet to her heart as if she’d just found a misplaced heirloom, and then she set it on the coffee table between us. “Please take it back. We both know that the bracelet comes with strings. You want me to have a relationship with your daughter.”

“But she’s your granddaughter. Doesn’t it feel unnatural not to be a part of her life?” Not to be a part of my life? What would it take for her to see me, love me? How long could I survive such an onslaught of rejection? Guess that was one of the reasons I’d disappeared from her life for so long.

“What are you insinuating? That I’m heartless?” My mother raised an eyebrow. “So, is this the real reason you came today? To call me names?”

The anticipation of good things faded. “I meant well.” Some people loved the theater, but Mother didn’t. She hated displays of emotion, which were sentiments for the meek in spirit she’d say—fools who had no business inheriting the earth.

“I don’t appreciate your gift. You should have brought me some more schnapps instead. It has such purifying qualities.”

I retrieved the bracelet and ground my nails into my palms, trying not to cry. It was no use, though. Tears splashed onto my lashes anyway.

“Are you trying to manipulate me with your tears?” I didn’t answer her. What was the point? I instead walked over to the large window that overlooked my mother’s solarium. Then I placed my palm on the pane, letting the warmth from the glass seep into my skin. I left my hand there. I didn’t know why exactly. It was a windowpane
winter in full bloom

ritual I’d performed my whole life as if I’d wanted to connect with something but didn’t know what it was.

“Sit down.” Her tone became a hiss.

If I returned to my seat I was bound to dislike myself for a long time to come. Nevertheless, I surrendered to the force—my mother—and sat on my trembling hands.

“You, Lily, are just like your father . . . an unpredictable ocean. No matter how calm the water is on the surface, the waves come to shore full of bluster and drama. And to tell you the truth, I’ve never felt at peace near the ocean.”

“I see.” I caught her meaning, and I felt my insides curdle like sour milk. I was officially mutating into a child again. “I know I didn’t turn out to be the daughter you hoped for, but why do you hate me so much?”

“Hate? Why do you always have to pick the most potent spice in the rack when a little salt will do? That is so Lily. What do they call it these days? A drama queen.” Then she closed her eyes—something my mother always did to be rid of me. “And . . . you still look just like her,” she said in the barest whisper. “Just like her.”

“I look like whom, Mother?” Who could she mean? Whoever it was, the person seemed important.

And then I noticed something just below my right hand—a small decorative glass dome sitting on the table. Just under the clear glass were two seeds. Nothing more. So tiny. Were they mustard seeds? How peculiar. Would the mysteries never end? I touched the dome and then pulled back. My thumbprint remained on the surface of the glass. Is that all I would leave in this house? God help me.

If there wasn’t going to be any affection between us, maybe there could be a connection, no matter how small. I would try again, for Julie’s sake. “I look like whom, Mother?”

Mother’s eyes drifted open. “Her name is Camille Violet Daniels.”
“Is she the woman I look like? Who is she? Is she still alive?”
My mother slumped in her chair, the color draining from her face. “Yes, she’s still alive.”
“What’s the matter?” I leaned forward, thinking I might need to call 911.
“Maybe it’s time.” A bit of drool dribbled out of the corner of my mother’s mouth, and she daubed at it with her hand. She gazed off into the solarium still murmuring, “Maybe it is time.” She gripped the arm of her chair until her knuckles went ashen. “I’ll answer your question. Camille Violet Daniels is your identical twin. She is your sister.”