



Book Club Set

The Berry Pickers

By Amanda Peters

About the Author



Amanda Peters is a writer of Mi'kmaq and settler ancestry. Her debut novel, *The Berry Pickers*, was a critically acclaimed bestseller in Canada. Her work has appeared in the *Antigonish Review*, *Grain*, the *Alaska Quarterly Review*, the *Dalhousie Review* and *Filling Station*. She is the winner of the 2021 Indigenous Voices Award for unpublished prose and a participant in the 2021 Writers' Trust Rising Stars Program. Peters has a certificate in creative writing from the University of Toronto, and she is a graduate of the master of fine arts program at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Amanda Peters lives and writes in the Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, with her fur babies, Holly and Pook.

(She) is a woman, a daughter, a sister, an Auntie, a cat mom, a dog mom, a friend, a descendent of a revolutionary war sailor, of accused witches and Mi'kmaq ancestors. A Canadian, a traveler, a wine drinker, an admirer of stained glass, a listener of jazz and old country, a reader of books, and a teller of stories.

Moreover, she is an associate Professor in the Department of English and Theatre at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia.

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<https://www.harpercollins.ca/9781443468183/the-berry-pickers/>

About the Book



A four-year-old girl goes missing from the blueberry fields of Maine, sparking a tragic mystery that remains unsolved for nearly fifty years

July 1962. A Mi'kmaq family from Nova Scotia arrives in Maine to pick blueberries for the summer. Weeks later, four-year-old Ruthie, the family's youngest child, is seen sitting on her favourite rock at the edge of a field before mysteriously vanishing. Her six-year-old brother, Joe, who was the last person to see Ruthie, is devastated by his sister's disappearance, and her loss ripples through his life for years to come.

In Maine, a young girl named Norma grows up as an only child in an affluent family. Her father is emotionally distant, while her mother is overprotective of Norma, who is often troubled by recurring dreams and visions that seem to be too real to be her imagination. As she grows older, Norma senses there is something her parents aren't telling her. Unwilling to abandon her intuition, she pursues her family's secret for decades.

A stunning debut novel, *The Berry Pickers* is a riveting story about the search for truth, the shadow of trauma, and the persistence of love across time.

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Discussion Questions



1. The Berry Pickers is a story told from two perspectives. Was it easy to move between Norma and Joe's narratives? Was it easy to travel between the memories of the past and present day?
2. After the devastating disappearance of Ruthie, what kept the family bound together? What struggles did they face in the aftermath of this loss?
3. Joe was the last person to see Ruthie before she disappeared, and this haunted him for the rest of his life. How do you think that Joe's guilt affected his life, or changed who he could have become?
4. Two families were forever changed on the day that Ruthie disappeared. As you read about Indigenous children being forcefully taken from their families, has this novel changed you in any way? Do you feel more reflective about your own childhood?
5. Do you have a special place that you visited as a child that evokes strong memories?
6. Joe was portrayed as an angry, violent, heavy drinker even though his parents were hard-working, family-first people. Do you think this was an accurate depiction of Joe, or are there factors to be considered in how you think of him?
7. The family faced two major episodes of racism: when the local sheriff in Maine won't help search for Ruthie, and when they return home, the local Indian Agent wants to take away the remaining children. Discuss the effects of this racism on the family. How do you feel you would have reacted to these situations?
8. Why do you think art-making becomes so important in the story? Are there other themes that jump out at you about making a meaningful life after loss?
9. In the end, why do you think Norma's mother did the very drastic thing she did?
10. You might say this story is ultimately about forgiveness. Are you able to find all the major characters redeemable in some way, or are there any you cannot forgive?
11. If you were going to write a novel based on stories of family history your parents told you, as Amanda Peters has here, where would it be set and what might it be about?

12. After Ruthie goes missing, what do you think keeps the remaining family members bound together? What do you think pulls them apart?
13. How does Ruthie's disappearance echo tragedies and atrocities in the broader history of Indigenous peoples? Have you learned more since reading the book?
14. How does Norma's feeling of being stuck between worlds come out in the story? In what ways might other characters feel a sense of duality or out of placeness?

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Author Interview



Where did the idea for *The Berry Pickers* come from and how long did you spend creating it and writing its story? Did you need to complete research in order to flesh it out the way you envisioned?

The story is inspired by the stories my dad tells. When he was young, his family went to the fields in Maine each summer to pick berries. He tells some crazy stories about ghosts, fights, and good times. He laughs a lot. I think it was a very happy time for him when he was a kid. When he found out that I was taking writing courses, he said I should write about the Mi'kmaq berry pickers. I told him that I didn't write non-fiction, but he would not be deterred. So, in the summer of 2017, we hopped in my Prius and headed to Maine, on a father-daughter road trip. He showed me where they used to pick berries, the lake where they used to swim, and the supply store where they used to get supplies. I recorded his stories and I still have those recordings somewhere. While on the trip, a story began to form in my head and the rest is history. *The Berry Pickers* is fiction but inspired by those stories. I wrote the first chapter and agonized over it for two years before I moved on. I was lucky enough to attend the MFA program at the Institute of American Indian Arts and got to work with some remarkable mentors and classmates on most of the book. Their advice and careful attention to the manuscript made it the story I wanted to tell.

There was some research. I have never been to Boston for instance. I wanted to go and just walk around and get a feel for it, but the pandemic prevented that. So, I asked a friend, a fellow writer who lives and knows that area and she 'walked' me around Boston with Google Maps. I hope I did the city justice.

Altogether, it took about four years to write it. And there were so many people who had a hand in making it a better story and me a better writer. I am so grateful to them all.

Tell me about your writing space. Where do you spend your time writing and creating and do you need to create a certain atmosphere to get you in the headspace of writing? A certain tea perhaps or music on?

I like to write in the quiet. I live alone with my dog and cat, so it is generally quiet. I do find that I need extended periods of time to sit and write. I can't write for 15 minutes and then walk away and come back later. I need an extended time. I can sit, on a Saturday, from 8 am to 9 pm, stopping only to eat. I love those days. Not everything I write in these marathons is worth saving but I love the sense of getting something done, ready to be molded later. I like music, nothing with words or I will sing along. If I don't know the song, I find myself listening to the lyrics. There is an album on Apple Music called Classical Music for Meditation and Yoga and I find that is my go-to. Unless I'm having a tough time getting started and then it's Pink Floyd's The Division Bell. I don't know why, but that album stirs my creativity.

How did you select your character's names? Did they spark immediately in your mind or were they based on people?

Joe is my grandfather's name and Lewis is my great-grandfather's name. Ruthie is a name I always liked and thought that if I ever had a daughter, I might like to name her that. Leah and Cora are the names of two friends from high school. When I was writing those two characters, I had no intention of writing them as my friends but in my mind, they look a bit like them, so I gave them their names. I asked them and they were okay with it. The characters don't necessarily have the same personalities, but they looked like them.

What was the hardest scene to write and for what reason? Did it require the most research, or take the longest, or was the hardest to emotionally process?

The hardest scene. The book is full of difficult scenes so that's a hard question. I think maybe when Norma loses the baby. I felt so much for her. I wanted to crawl inside the

story and give her a hug. I have never experienced this, so once again, I hope that I did right by the experience and gave it the care it deserves.

Did you ever consider a third perspective, or did you always know that this story would be told by Joe and Norma?

I originally thought the story would be told only by Joe. But Norma snuck up on me and demanded to tell her own story. And I listened. I think it worked out well.

How did publishing your first book change your process of writing?

I'm not really sure. I think I would say that it gave me a little more confidence to just write. If someone liked this story, they might like the next so just keep writing.

To gain a little insight into your creative self, if you had to describe yourself as a writer in three words, what would they be?

Determined. Hardworking. Insecure.

What is your "must-read" book recommendation and what book has had the most impact and influence on your writing?

This is such an unfair question. There are so many books out there that have inspired me. When I'm stumped or when I can't seem to get into the groove, I will pick up *The Underpainter* by Jane Urquhart. I know that I've read this book at least three times. Sometimes, I just read the first couple pages and sigh with contentment. I love all her work, but this is the one I turn to. And I would have to say *Heave* by Christy Ann Conlin. This was the first book that I really recognized myself in. It takes place in the Valley and has characters like people I know. It made me think that if this person could write such an amazing story that takes place in the Annapolis Valley, then maybe I could too.

What advice would you give to aspiring authors who are trying to navigate the publishing world?

Ask for help, never be afraid to ask people for advice. Don't be discouraged, rejection is part of the process. If you believe in what you are writing, keep going.

Do you have another novel in the works or is there a new project that you're working on? When can readers anticipate it?

I have a short story collection *Waiting for the Long Night Moon*, but I'm not sure when it will be out. It will also be coming from HarperCollins. I am working on something new, but I am keeping that close to my heart. I want to make sure I can do the story justice before sending even a little bit of it out into the universe.

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Other Links and Resources

- Awards and recognitions: <https://amandapetersauthor.com/awards-and-recognitions>
- In The News: <https://amandapetersauthor.com/in-the-news>



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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...	Loved it!	

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: