

The Berry Pickers

Amanda Peters

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While working as migrants, a Mi'kmaq family is rent by their daughter's disappearance in Amanda Peters's decades-spanning, heartrending novel *The Berry Pickers*.

Even before Ruthie disappeared from the Maine field where her parents and siblings were gathering blueberries, six-year-old Joe had hints that the world was against his Indigenous family: people wanted to remove him and his siblings from their parents' care to Christianize them; he and his family were treated with suspicion and disregard. The policeman asked to investigate Ruthie's disappearance only confirmed this, refusing to even take a report. Ruthie would show up, the family was told. But weeks passed, and Ruthie stayed gone. Her family was forced to return to Canada; they could not be made to forget.

With her most solid memories beginning days after Ruthie's disappearance, Norma grows up in outward comfort, though in a home shadowed by secrets. There are no photographs of her as a baby. She has dreams of another house and another mother. She does not know why her skin browns in the sun. She knows only that her mother is sad: following a string of miscarriages, Norma is the only child that stuck. A hole remains in Norma's life into her adulthood, with no one willing to answer the questions that plague her.

Heartbreaking as it details two families' open wounds—which, untreated or untreatable, continue to fester across the years—this is a novel about prejudice, unaddressed trauma, and the incalculable costs of concealing the truth. Its late developments are a balm, but not a cure; they speak to the endurance of family bonds—and to the significance of forgiveness.

Kept company by shadows and half memories, a hidden girl grows toward the family she lost in *The Berry Pickers*, a novel about the power of personal identity.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2023)

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