

Book Review: The Berry Pickers
By Amanda Peters

Some books impact us more than others.

That's because they hit home. They strike an emotional chord within us that's deeply personal; that touches us intimately.

For me, "The Berry Pickers" by Amanda Peters is such a book. I will do my diligence and provide as honest a review as I can. But this one's personal, so there just might be a bit of bias here.

In the summer of 1962, following in the tradition of Indigenous workers from Nova Scotia, a Mi'kmaq family (father, mother and five children) makes their annual summer trek to Maine to pick blueberries. Several weeks into their stay, 4-year-old Ruthie, youngest of the five children, disappears. Her 6-year-old brother, Joe, the last to see Ruthie as she sat on her favorite rock, is distraught. The guilt he self-inflicts consumes him for decades, giving rise to drinking, anger, and destroying his marriage.

But Ruthie didn't just disappear. She was taken – coaxed off the rock and into a car – by Lenore, a woman whose numerous miscarriages left her emotionally compromised and desperate for a child. She and her husband Frank re-name the child Norma, and go about raising her as their own.

Norma's new life, however, doesn't wipe out the memories – people, places and smells that feel real to her, but her 'parents' dismiss as dreams. She even recalls the name Ruthie, and embraces this person as her imaginary friend.

The kidnapping (let's call it what it was) has an adverse effect on Lenore as well. She hovers over Norma, keeping the window shades drawn and limiting her time outside the home, paranoid that someone will recognize her and take her away. And when

sensitive subjects arise, such as Norma, at age nine, asking, “Why am I so brown and you guys are white?” Lenore flees to her bedroom with a splitting headache. Her guilt suffocates her.

Peters does a great job of character development, particularly with Norma and Joe, alternating chapters to trace their lives following Ruthie’s disappearance. Lives that are filled with unanswered questions, each of them seemingly reaching out for something just beyond their grasp.

At age nine, Norma buries her baby doll in the back yard. After years of being told her memories are just dreams, is this an attempt to bury her past? Bury the dreams?

Later in life, however, when Lenore begins a cognitive decline and unknowingly speaks of events long since suppressed in the recesses of her mind, Norma realizes those long-ago dreams were actually memories. With the help of her Aunt June – Lenore’s sister – she sets out to learn about her former life.

Perhaps a bit too much time is spent tracking Joe as he wanders across Canada in an attempt to outrun his past, but that’s a small blemish on an otherwise intoxicating novel.

My rating for “The Berry Pickers” is 4.5 out of 5 stars. It’s Peters’ debut novel, and I look forward to reading more of her work.