

The Berry Pickers

By Amanda Peters

Discussion questions

What's your favorite berry? Have you ever gone berry picking?

The Berry Pickers is a story told from two perspectives and from both past and present time frames. What did you think about this format? Was it easy to move between Norma and Joe's narratives and from the memories of the past and present day? Did you prefer one voice over the other? Were there other characters you wished could give their point of view?

The family faced two major episodes of racism: when the local sheriff in Maine wouldn't help search for Ruthie, and when they returned home, the local Indian Agent tried to take away the remaining children. Discuss the effects of this racism on the family. How do you think you would have reacted to these situations?

In her isolation, Norma turned to books for company and they became "more than paper between hard cardboard, more than the alphabet organized into words and printed on a page." Have you ever turned to books during a difficult time in your life?

Norma felt responsible for her mother's headaches, even when Alice told her "it's time to start thinking for yourself...You don't cause them; she does." Why do you think it was so difficult for Norma to let go of that guilt and the corresponding need to tiptoe around her mother's emotions to avoid upsetting her?

Joe was the last person to see Ruthie before she disappeared and was there when the bullies attacked Charlie. How do you think that Joe's guilt over these incidents affected his life or changed who he could have become? To what extent do you think he used the past as an excuse for bad behavior?

Norma had memories of the place from which she was taken---even smells of the potatoes cooking. Do you have a special place that you visited as a child that evokes strong memories?

Norma reflects on secrets: "Even people who exude light and happiness have dark secrets. Sometimes, the lie becomes so entrenched it becomes the truth, hidden away in the deep recesses of the mind...Secrets and lies can take on a life of their own, they can be twisted and manipulated, or they can burst into the world from the mouth of someone just as they are starting to lose their mind. Is she right? Have you ever discovered a family secret you are willing to share? How did it change your relationship with the people around you?

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? Why do you think Norma's mother did the very drastic thing she did? If the truth had come out before her death, do you think she should have been charged in the kidnapping? (Maine has no statute of limitations for kidnapping a child.)

Amanda Peters said that the opening line "The day Ruthie went missing, the blackflies seemed to be especially hungry" came to her, and the rest of the book followed. How did this line set the scene? What expectations did it give you for the story, and were those fulfilled?

What parallels might there be between this story and the lives of migrant farm workers in Florida? Do you know much about those lives?

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?

The characters express a variety of observations about life. Do any of these (or others you recall) particularly resonate with you?:

"As the ones we love get older, we just start to separate from them, like oil from water, a line separating the living from the dying." But when her father died, "there was no time to get used to a world without him."

"Anger and sadness are just too different sides of the same coin. Every time I started to feel angry, the coin flipped, and I cried."

Frankie "told me decades ago that I needed to enjoy my youth, because once you become a man, time speeds up."

"I sent money, and I hoped it would help with the grieving, although I've found that money rarely helps with the things that are the most important."

"Words are powerful things, both said and unsaid."

What questions do you have for Amanda Peters?

