



Perennials: A Novel

By Mandy Berman

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At what point does childhood end and adulthood begin? Mandy Berman’s evocative debut novel captures, through the lens of summer camp both the thrill and pain of growing up.

Rachel Rivkin and Fiona Larkin used to treasure their summers together as campers at Camp Marigold. Now, reunited as counselors after their first year of college, their relationship is more complicated. Rebellious Rachel, a street-smart city kid raised by a single mother, has been losing patience with her best friend’s insecurities; Fiona, the middle child of a not-so-perfect suburban family, envies Rachel’s popularity with their campers and fellow counselors. For the first time, the two friends start keeping secrets from each other. Through them, as well as from the perspectives of their fellow counselors, their campers, and their mothers, we witness the tensions of the turbulent summer build to a tragic event, which forces Rachel and Fiona to confront their pasts—and the adults they’re becoming.

A seductive blast of nostalgia, a striking portrait of adolescent longing, and a tribute to female friendship, *Perennials* will speak to everyone who still remembers that bittersweet moment when innocence is lost forever.

Praise for *Perennials*

“Berman is at her most insightful when exploring the awkward unfurling of female adolescence. . . . *Perennials* is a sharp meditation on the changing female body, and the ways in which such changes are often involuntary and unwanted. . . . [She] skillfully captures the details and rituals of camp.”—**J. Courtney Sullivan, *The New York Times Book Review***

“Berman’s command of prose is astounding. The more you read, the more difficult it is to believe that this is a debut novel. . . . Charged with hope, longing, an unexpected sensuality, and a bruised tenderness, *Perennials* is a book you should most definitely put near the top of your reading list.”—***Pop Dust***

“*Perennials* is a sharp, crushingly observant, and empathetic debut, full of wit and tragedy, and good for all seasons.”—**Sam Lipsyte, author of *The Fun Parts and The Ask***

“Lucid, psychologically nuanced, and great fun to read.”—**Rufi Thorpe, author of *Dear Fang, With Love and The Girls from Corona del Mar***

“Snappy and irresistible, *Perennials* takes readers back to summer camp, where her characters’ first friendships and treasons play out in sharp dialogue and playful, generous prose.”—**Kristopher Jansma, author of *Why We Came to the City***

“*Perennials* manages to be warm and loving and still wallop you with moments of shock and pain. What an exciting debut.”—**Victor LaValle, author of *Big Machine and The Changeling***

“Berman’s debut, a winning, keenly observed, and clear-eyed novel set in a summer camp, captures the age when fierce attachments forged over years begin to unravel, passionate female friendships give way to sex, and identity seems to shift with the tides.”—**Elissa Schappell, author of *Blueprints for Building Better Girls***

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Editorial Review

Review

“Berman is at her most insightful when exploring the awkward unfurling of female adolescence. . . . *Perennials* is a sharp meditation on the changing female body, and the ways in which such changes are often involuntary and unwanted. . . . [She] skillfully captures the details and rituals of camp. It’s a place where freedom from the roles young people play at home lets them become who they are. And where, for those who return year after year, a girl can retrace her steps, see all the parts of herself past and present, with the occasional glimpse into the future.”—**J. Courtney Sullivan, *The New York Times Book Review***

“This highly anticipated coming-of-age novel from Mandy Berman delivers the perfect sunny trifecta: summer camp drama, growing pains, and the enduring power of female friendships.”—***Redbook***

“[Mandy] Berman entices readers with this coming-of-age-tale of two girls. . . . This story of facing life’s difficulties is most memorable because of Berman’s excellently crafted, multifaceted characters.”—***Publishers Weekly***

“Stormy emotional weather and unforeseen events rock a summer camp in the Berkshires. . . . Berman’s debut recalls the beloved teen and adult novels of Judy Blume, both in topic and prose style: simple, powerful, unafraid to confront serious issues.”—***Kirkus Reviews***

“[Mandy] Berman’s command of prose is astounding. The more you read, the more difficult it is to believe that this is a debut novel. . . . Clearly borne of real-world camp experience . . . Charged with hope, longing, an unexpected sensuality, and a bruised tenderness, *Perennials* is a book you should most definitely put near the top of your reading list.”—***Pop Dust***

“*Perennials* centers on two girls who met as campers but are reunited as camp counselors once they’re in college. As the summer progresses, they begin to grow apart—keeping secrets from one another, avoiding conversations about things they need to talk about—all culminating in one fateful event that makes them put everything on the table.”—***PopSugar***

“If coming-of-age tales always get you, you won’t be able to put this one down—it involves a female friendship between two campers who become counselors at Camp Marigold who must confront their past to move forward as adults.”—***The Knot***

“Mandy Berman has remade the American summer camp narrative, ditching the usual clichés and getting in close with her characters and their various states of emotional and economic precariousness. *Perennials* is a sharp, crushingly observant, and empathetic debut, full of wit and tragedy, and good for all seasons.”—**Sam Lipsyte, author of *The Fun Parts* and *The Ask***

“Mandy Berman explores an old trope: the magic of summer camp, a place separate from the rest of your life where you can become a slightly different version of yourself, a place where friendships run impossibly deep and romance and sex are innocent. But what happens when that divide begins to crumble, and real life, in all its moral ambiguity, finds its way to the heart of a halcyon summer? Lucid, psychologically nuanced, and great fun to read, *Perennials* has taken an old subject and made it new.”—**Rufi Thorpe, author of *Dear Fang, With Love* and *The Girls from Corona del Mar***

“Snappy and irresistible, Mandy Berman’s debut novel, *Perennials*, takes readers back to summer camp, where her characters’ first friendships and treasons play out in sharp dialogue and playful, generous prose. Berman fearlessly renders youth and adulthood alike, in sentences you’ll want to savor.”—**Kristopher Jansma, author of *Why We Came to the City***

“Do you remember that youthful summer when ‘everything changed’? Mandy Berman sure does and her wonderful novel is a snapshot of that time and the group of young women who are irrevocably changed by it. *Perennials* manages to be warm and loving and still wallop you with moments of shock and pain. At the right time she can also be funny as hell. What an exciting debut.”—**Victor LaValle, author of *Big Machine* and *The Changeling***

“Berman is a daring and fearless explorer of the complicated lives of young women. Her debut, a winning, keenly observed, and clear-eyed novel set in a summer camp, captures the age when fierce attachments forged over years begin to unravel, passionate female friendships give way to sex, and identity seems to shift with the tides. Most poignantly, Berman reminds us of the excitement, trepidation, and grief that comes with the growing awareness that we are starting to become who we will be for the rest of our lives.”—**Elissa Schappell, author of *Blueprints for Building Better Girls***

“In *Perennials*, Mandy Berman explores the inner worlds of girls attending a summer camp together—a place where the rules don’t always apply. Weathering love affairs, escaping crumbling friendships, and even surviving the loss of one of their own, this cohort of girls grows into women in the span of one short summer—and you’ll be glad for the chance to eavesdrop every step of the way.”—**Miranda Beverly-Whittemore, *New York Times* bestselling author of *June* and *Bittersweet***

About the Author

Mandy Berman is a writer from Nyack, New York. *Perennials* is her debut novel. She holds an MFA in fiction from Columbia University. She lives and writes in Brooklyn.

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1

Denise was supposed to drive Rachel to camp that morning, but she was hungover. Rachel had heard her come in late the night before, her heels clacking in the entryway of their apartment before she exhaled loudly and trod barefoot into the kitchen. Then came the slamming of cupboard doors and rustling through boxes; the crackling of plastic; the cereal tinkling into the bowl; the repetitive crunching. She’d had a date with a tax lawyer who took her for French food in the Village. Most of Denise’s dates didn’t leave the Upper West Side on the weekends, and neither did she.

Rachel imagined the night went something like this: They split a bottle of expensive wine. Denise tried not to drink it too fast, but they were done with it before finishing their entrées, and she was relieved when he suggested another. She went home with him but didn’t sleep there; she sobered up enough to remember she needed to take Rachel to Connecticut early the next morning.

When Rachel went out into the living room at seven, Denise’s mouth was wide open like a cartoon fish’s. Dark purple eye shadow was smeared over her closed eyelids. She hadn’t bothered to pull out the couch. People always said Rachel and Denise looked alike; often it was a pickup line from a guy—that they looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. But aside from the same dark, wavy hair, Rachel never saw the resemblance.

“Mom,” she whispered.

Denise swallowed, then sighed, like she was in the middle of a nice dream.

“Mom,” Rachel said again, stroking the top of her mother’s head. Denise groaned and put the pillow over her face.

On the ride there, with her Dunkin’ Donuts iced coffee, Denise started to wake up. They sang Pat Benatar; Denise had one hand on the steering wheel, and the other dangled out the window, holding a cigarette. They didn’t need directions. This was Rachel’s fourth summer at camp, and they knew the route by heart now—a straight shot up the Taconic, a winding parkway that could be so unpredictable Rachel sometimes worried her mom wouldn’t make a turn in time and they’d end up smashed against a cement boulder on the side of the road.

Rachel always got the feeling when they pulled into camp that time hadn’t moved since the previous summer. Everything was exactly the same: the wooden Camp Marigold sign with the fading painted orange flowers; the smells of the horse manure from the barn and cut grass from the athletic fields. In the months leading up to camp opening, she would think maybe the grass wouldn’t be as green. Maybe some building would be painted a different color. Maybe they’d fixed that one broken rail on the fence around the horse arena.

But none of that ever happened. Time didn’t touch Camp Marigold, and that was what was so perfect about it.

They pulled into the circle of platform tents in the girls’ Hemlock section, where the thirteen-year-olds stayed, and lugged Rachel’s trunk from the back of the rental car. Counselors were greeting parents, helping them carry trunks and shopping bags filled with magazines and snacks, and girls Rachel knew well, girls with whom she’d compared nipples in their tents and stolen ice cream from the dining hall in the middle of the night, were hugging each other, holding hands, and gleefully yelling her name.

Denise put her arm around Rachel. “Happy, baby?”

Fiona ran over and embraced Rachel. “I saved you a bunk!” she said. She led Rachel into tent three. Their bunks were always at the top, head-to-head—best for late-night whispers after lights-out.

Fiona Larkin, Rachel’s best friend at camp, was a nosy but brutally loyal girl from a big family in Westchester. It was Fiona’s fifth summer at Marigold. She had already unpacked her own things and was now helping Rachel to unpack hers, taking items out of her trunk and organizing her cubby in a way Rachel would never be able to maintain.

Fiona stood with one hand on her hip, a box of Tampax raised in the other, and a questioning expression on her face.

“What?” Rachel asked. “Isn’t it obvious?” She stood back and let Fiona appraise her. The changes were small, but there: slightly wider hips, and breasts in a real, underwire bra, size 34B.

“You need to tell me these things!” Fiona said.

“Sweetie”—Denise, who was tucking Rachel’s mosquito net into the bunk, was shaking her head at Fiona—“it’s nothing to be jealous about.”

A few months earlier, Rachel had been home alone, lying on the couch watching a movie and eating Chips Ahoy cookies. At a commercial she had gone to the bathroom and been shocked to see brown in her underwear. For a minute, she thought it had something to do with the cookies, like she had somehow gotten the chocolate on herself. But then she realized. No one ever mentioned it could be brown.

The next morning, Denise kissed her on the forehead. "I'm glad we got you those pads."

"I used one of your tampons."

"Really?" She cocked her head to the side.

Rachel shrugged. "It wasn't that hard."

"You shouldn't be going into my things, Rachel."

"The pad was so bulky."

"Why didn't you call me?" her mom asked.

"You were on a date."

"You can interrupt for something like this."

Denise turned around to put on some coffee. As she was reaching for the ground coffee in the cabinet above her head, she paused with her hand there and turned to Rachel again.

"Are you having sex?"

"Mom. God."

"It's not impossible," she said.

"There's not even anyone I want to have sex with."

"Want to? I don't care if you want to or not. You're thirteen fucking years old."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I don't know how you figured out the tampon so easy."

"There's an instruction manual, Mom. I can read."

"Don't be smart."

"I'm not."

"You know you have to be careful about these things now."

"I know what getting your period means."

“Don’t be such a smartass, Rachel. I’m being serious.” She poured water into the coffeemaker. “And you might want to start watching what you eat. No more full boxes of Chips Ahoy in one sitting.”

Fiona and Rachel thought it was weird that some girls were new to sleepaway camp at this age, as if they had been afraid to be away from home before now. One of the new girls cried quietly at night as if no one could hear her. Another was a tomboy who just played sports all day. Their counselor was from Poland, and Rachel and Fiona made fun of her accent when she left for the staff lodge after lights-out.

Fiona was the one who had convinced Rachel to take horseback riding, and then Rachel had convinced her dad to pay the extra money for it. Her dad wasn’t around much anymore, but she knew she could still ask him for things. She knew at that age, though she didn’t have the words for it, that she was using him and that she was allowed to. That, because he was the one who wasn’t always there, she could ask for the things she wanted, and he would give them to her.

Riding was the first activity of the day, and Fiona and Rachel went down to the stables together after breakfast, walking arm in arm. Rachel got to ride only a few times throughout the year, when she was able to get her dad to take her out of the city, which wasn’t often, so while Fiona was going on about boys—“Matthew Dawson was staring at you today at flag raising, Rachel. Didn’t you see him?”—Rachel was thinking about Micah.

Most everyone else hated riding Micah. “His stubbornness is inconceivably annoying,” their riding teacher used to say, making it obvious that she wanted to trade him in for a younger, more obedient horse. It was all the better for Rachel. He and Rachel had a sort of understanding that she’d never thought she could have with an animal, and when she got back each summer, she swore he had missed her.

He was a dark brown dun with a gleaming coat. When she saw him again, she hugged his neck and trailed her fingers down his mane. He let out a neigh by blowing out his lips, and Rachel laughed.

She and Fiona saddled and mounted their horses. Rachel and Micah remembered each other’s rhythm as they cantered. She lifted off the saddle for one beat, stayed down for two. The air smelled like dry dirt and dandelions. She looked over at Fiona, whose face was clenched. She seemed nervous about what would happen next, her hands in tiny fists on the reins as if she would lose control of her horse if she let them slack even slightly.

Fiona rode a lot throughout the year; she lived just a short drive from a fancy stable. Rachel’s mom had taken Rachel on Metro-North the previous fall to sleep over at Fiona’s house in Larchmont, even though Rachel had insisted she could go alone. Fiona had a younger sister and an older brother, and they each had their own bedroom in their big house that looked the same as all the other big houses on the street. Inside there were freshly vacuumed carpets and a yellow Lab and parents who kissed each other on the cheek. There were brownies sitting warm and fresh on the counter like on those shows on Nick at Nite, and Fiona’s mom was wearing an apron and cutting up vegetables and boiling water in the open kitchen. She asked Denise if she wanted to stay for a cup of tea, but Denise said no, she really had to be going. With her eyeliner and her cigarette breath, she didn’t belong in that kitchen.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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