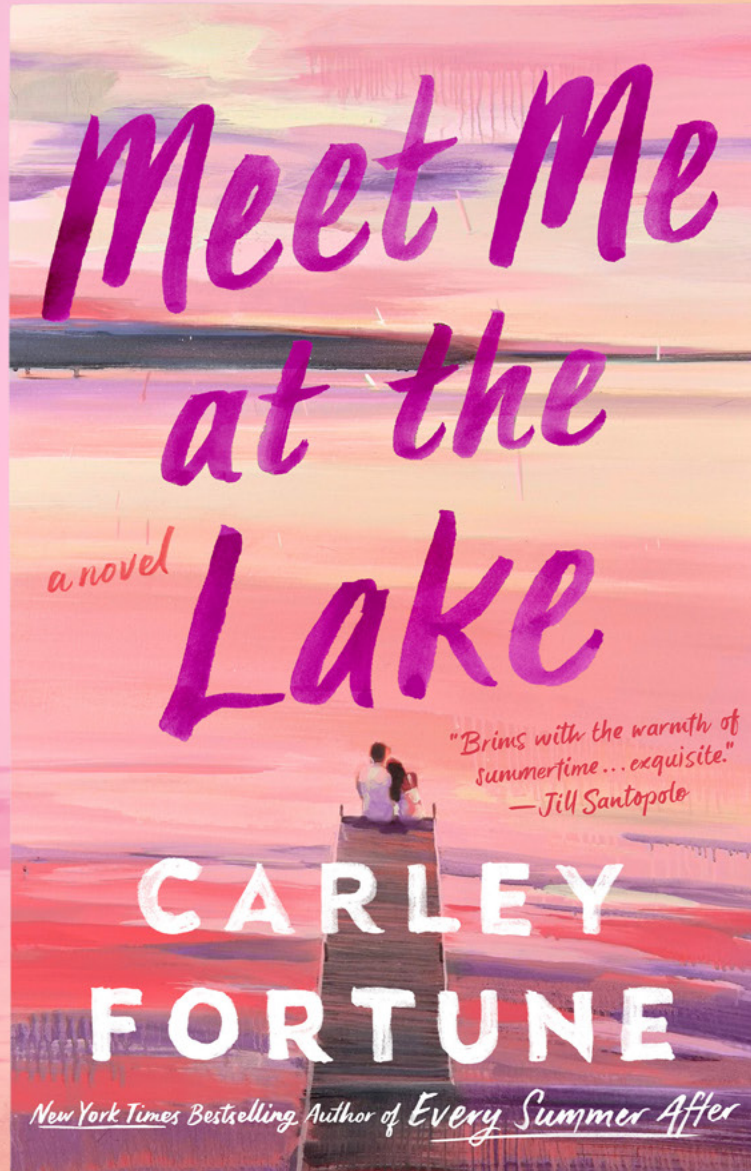


# Book Club Kit



BERKLEY

# Dear Readers,

*Thank you so much for reading *Meet Me at the Lake*. I hope you were transported to Brookbanks Resort and to the Toronto I so love. Most of all, I hope Fern and Will's story leaves you with a full heart. Parts of this book are deeply personal to me—they are the subject of this "Behind the Book" essay. I want you to know that I'm going to talk about some tough stuff. If you're not in a place where you want to read about reproductive rights, anxiety, and disturbing, intrusive thoughts, then I encourage you to save it for another time.*

**The earliest inklings of *Meet Me at the Lake* came to me like far too many of my ideas do: in the middle of the night.** It was several weeks following the birth of my second child, and I couldn't sleep. Sleeping has never been a skill of mine, but I developed chronic insomnia during my pregnancy, and it continued after Finn was born. As I lay awake, I found myself wondering what I was going to do about my next book. Writing my debut novel, *Every Summer After*, in 2020 was a joyful experience, and I was brimming with ideas for future stories. But in the spring of 2021, I was empty. I was also in the midst of my second bout of postpartum anxiety.

I find writing similar to reading in that I get to travel to wherever my characters exist. That night, I asked myself where I wanted to be. I shut my eyes, and I saw it: a classic lakeside resort in Muskoka, with a hilltop lodge and cabins overlooking the water. And I saw Fern, reluctantly running the place following the death of her mother. I thought of Maggie's diary, too—how it would recount her own romance but ultimately show a mother's love for her daughter. I wrote *Every Summer After* partially as an escape from life in 2020, but I created Brookbanks Resort to give myself a world to escape into. (Smoke Lake does exist, by the way, but it's slightly east of Muskoka and inside Ontario's famous Algonquin Park. There are no resorts on its shores.)

There are pieces of me scattered throughout *Meet Me at the Lake*. My parents owned a restaurant and inn when I was growing up. I gave Fern my insomnia as well as my fondness for both the city and the lake. Maggie received my dedication to my career as well as my worries about not being very good at anything outside of work. And to Will Baxter I bequeathed the quiet, invisible terror of postpartum anxiety.



*Meet Me at the Lake* evolved over the course of the writing process, but from the earliest conversations with my editor, it was always about how life doesn't always turn out the way we expect. But I didn't set out to explore the ways parenthood shapes us—perhaps that's what happens when you begin writing a book about a mother and daughter a few months after having your second baby.

During the late stages of editing *Meet Me at the Lake*, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and I began to worry that the two unplanned pregnancies in the book (and the fact that both Maggie and Annabel choose to become mothers) would be perceived as an endorsement of that ruling. That is not my intention. I firmly believe the choices to continue a pregnancy and to become a parent are exactly that: choices every person with a uterus should be able to make. Reproductive rights, including access to contraceptives and safe abortions, are fundamental to individual well-being and to society at large. I've always considered myself pro-choice—becoming a parent only strengthened my stance.

There was a moment when I was in labor with my first son, when my hospital room was suddenly swarmed with doctors and nurses, their faces tense, that I thought I might die. It wasn't my life at risk, it turned out; it was the baby's. Long story short: He needed to get out of my body as quickly as possible and was born via a brutal forceps-assisted delivery. It took fifteen minutes of active labor for Max to come into this world, and an hour and a half for the doctors to stitch me back together.

From that day to the first weeks and months of the baby's life, it felt like I was fighting for survival—my own and the baby's. There were many intense challenges in those early days, and coping with them was made more difficult because my mind had become a very scary place. As a journalist, I've written about some of the struggles I faced as a new parent, but I've never publicly spoken about my postpartum OCD.

There's a good chance you've heard of baby blues and postpartum depression but not about postpartum OCD—I know I hadn't. (During both my pregnancies, no medical practitioner mentioned it to me.) It's a serious but treatable anxiety disorder with symptoms so horrifying, few of us are comfortable talking about them—it's often misdiagnosed and unreported. Despite its name, it can affect not only birth parents but adoptive parents and anyone in a parenting role—people such as Will.

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I didn't experience compulsions, but like Will, I was bombarded by recurring intrusive thoughts and images. I made a conscious decision not to describe Will's thoughts—I didn't think he'd be ready to share them with Fern, and to be honest, I was worried you'd judge him. It took me months to tell my husband what was happening in my head. Years to tell my mother. The thought of putting it out into the world makes my chest tight. I don't want to burden you with what plagued me, with what made me afraid to be alone with the baby every day, with what made me certain I'd be institutionalized if I told anyone. But the reason I'm writing about it (and as vaguely as possible) is in case you find yourself in a similar position. If you find yourself terrorized by thoughts of harming your baby, if the same horrible images keep flashing through your mind, if kitchen knives or stairs or subway tracks fill you with terror, you are not alone. The thoughts are just that—only thoughts—even though you dread the possibility of losing control. You won't. In fact, I've been told people who experience these kinds of thoughts tend to be highly conscientious. You will be okay—your baby will be too—but you need to tell someone. In fact, telling someone is the first step to being okay. We go through our darkest moments alone, but we emerge from them with help.

My postpartum anxiety was different the second time around. I had a few episodes with intrusive thoughts and images, but I was better prepared to acknowledge them, see them as a nuisance, and send them on their way. My anxiety, however, was almost debilitating. I've experienced anxious thoughts before, but nothing compared to the

***We go through our darkest moments alone, but we emerge from them with help.***

spring of 2021. It was like every problem I could possibly face for my entire life needed solving. Getting out of bed each morning took immense effort. Tearful conversations with my mom (about how I sucked as a mom) and my husband (about how terrified I was about the future) helped. Walking helped. Therapy helped. Will and Fern helped.

In the epilogue to *Meet Me at the Lake*, we learn that Fern is pregnant with a baby girl. I don't believe I'm a more fulfilled person because I'm a mom. When someone tells me they don't want children, I get that. Sometimes I envy that. But for this story, I wanted to give Fern the opportunity to forge her own path as a mother—to decide what elements of her relationship with her mom she wanted to preserve and what she

would do differently. Perhaps most of all, I wanted to show that Will's anxiety had not stopped them from having children, that mental health struggles don't preclude you from being a wonderful parent. I like to think that when Fern and Will discussed having children, they did what my husband and I did before we had our second child: They talked about the possibility that Will's intrusive thoughts might resurface, and they came up with a plan to ensure he'd have support.

What I admire about both Will and Fern is that they love hard. It's not easy for either of them to open their hearts—to risk rejection, judgment, failure—and they stumble along the way. Near the end of the book, Fern gives Will a chance to explain his actions. She decides to reach out her hand. This, I think, is one of the bravest, hardest things to do in the early stages of any relationship. It's also what makes them stronger. **We all make mistakes. We experience trauma and loss and plain old bad days. We all fly, face first, onto loose gravel. But, with any luck, someone stands beside us, reaching out their hand.**

## **A few books I read (and loved) while writing** *Meet Me at the Lake*

***A Hundred Other Girls*** by Iman Hariri-Kia

***Book Lovers*** by Emily Henry

***The Heart Principle*** by Helen Hoang

***Twice Shy*** by Sarah Hogle

***Something Wilder*** by Christina Lauren

***Exes & O's*** by Amy Lea

***The Road Trip*** by Beth O'Leary

***The Dead Romantics*** by Ashley Poston

***The One That Got Away*** by Charlotte Rixon

***Seven Days in June*** by Tia Williams



# A conversation with Carley Fortune

## Tell us about *Meet Me at the Lake*.

My second novel is a heart-wrenching love story about Fern and Will, who meet at two pivotal moments in their lives. We see them first as strangers in their early twenties just as they've graduated from university. A chance encounter brings them together and they spend twenty-four hours in the city together, sharing their secrets and dreams for the future. They make a promise to meet in one year. Fern shows up; Will doesn't. A decade later, Fern is back at home, running her mother's lakeside resort, the last thing she ever wanted to do. The place is struggling, her ex-boyfriend is the manager, and then Will shows up with an offer to help. Fern hasn't seen Will since that day ten years ago—a day that changed both of their lives. And while Will is nothing like the artist Fern remembers, their connection is as strong as it was back then. But Will is clearly hiding something, and Fern's not sure she wants to find out what it is.



## What three adjectives would you choose to describe this story?

Emotional, cinematic, poignant.

**Similar to *Every Summer After*, *Meet Me at the Lake* is told through dual timelines, where we see Fern and Will develop their formative connection over the course of a life-changing twenty-four hours and when they are reunited ten years later. What inspired this idea?**

In *Every Summer After*, the main characters meet when they're thirteen and we see their relationship grow over the course of many years. In *Meet Me at the Lake*, I wanted to do the exact opposite—build an intense bond between two strangers in a tiny slice of time. What would make such a brief connection meaningful? What would it be like to reunite with that person, especially if they were different than you remembered? Would you trust them? Would you trust your memories of them? One of the greatest challenges was calibrating the emotional response to these complex questions.

**What is it about dual timelines that is so intriguing to you?**

I must be a deeply nostalgic person because I love when characters have a history and when the backstory is part of the actual story. There are moments and people from our past that stick with us—they are the ghost stories of our own lives. When we resurrect our characters' ghosts, there's so much opportunity for increasing tension and exploring the emotions that simmer under the surface—especially when the protagonists have a shared past but different perspectives on it. I'm also interested in how our self-perception and relationships evolve over time. We're not the same people in our thirties that we were in our early twenties or at thirteen—but our current selves are an amalgamation of all the versions that have come before. Dual timelines add depth to my characters, but they also help me amp up the pacing since both narratives raise and answer questions for the reader. You get two stories in one.

**In both your debut novel and *Meet Me at the Lake*, you do an amazing job of portraying layered romantic relationships. What makes complicated love stories so compelling to write about?**

My intention is that my books offer both escape (a gorgeous setting, page-turning plotting) and comfort (the heart-soothing hug of a happy ending). I also want the stories to feel authentic—like the reader is getting to look behind the curtain at a real couple. Romance is fundamentally an examination of human relationships, and human relationships are messy. I'm not interested in writing about flawless people—I want my characters to make mistakes and bad choices and live with regrets. We're all imperfect, and I want to show that we are worthy of love even when we screw up. I'm drawn to creating characters that allow me to write compelling, dramatic stories that might challenge your perception of what a romance looks like.



**A major theme in *Meet Me at the Lake* is grief. Tell us about your decision to explore this in a romance.**

There are certain experiences that are almost universal, yet we go through them in relative isolation. New parenthood is one of them, and losing a loved one is another. I find that dichotomy fascinating. On a personal level, my mother lost both her parents within weeks when she was quite young. She was pregnant with me at the time, and I have felt those losses keenly my entire life. Perhaps it's a form of intergenerational trauma, but I've lived in fear of my mom dying since I was little, and I consider myself lucky that both my parents are alive and healthy. A close friend lost her father during the pandemic, and my aunt, who was both a mother and a grandmother, died several years ago. Losses like that are so tremendous I can't quite get my head around them. I think that's why losing a parent is something I grappled with in both *Every Summer After* and *Meet Me at the Lake*.

**What compelled you to set this story in lake country again, this time in Muskoka?**

The idea for *Meet Me at the Lake* started with the setting. It was just a few weeks following the birth of my second child, and I couldn't sleep. I experienced insomnia throughout the pregnancy, and it continued after the baby was born. As a writer, I get to be transported to the setting of my novels just as the reader is. Lying in bed awake one night, completely exhausted, I asked myself where I wanted to be—what place would give me comfort and escape as I wrote. That's how I came up with Brookbanks Resort, with its classic lodge and cabins, a lakeside getaway from a bygone era. Muskoka is Canada's most famous cottage country region—celebrities like Cindy Crawford, Tom Hanks, and Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell have summer homes there. It made sense for the resort to be in Muskoka because it's such a popular tourist destination, although I set it in eastern Muskoka, close to Algonquin Park, and not on one of the posh lakes like Rosseau. Also, one of the characters in *Every Summer After* trash-talks Muskoka, so I felt like I owed the region one.

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**During their first encounter, Fern and Will each create one-year plans and Fern declares that she won't be working at Brookbanks Resort or living in Muskoka. Why is Fern so reluctant to return home to the resort?**

Fern went through a tough phase during high school—a teenage rebellion that left her with emotional scars, including the fact that everyone back home gossiped about her behavior. In the city, she's free of that baggage. In the past, Fern is twenty-two and living in Toronto and is just starting to recognize that there's more to the city outside of her university bubble. (I think this is a very common experience for students who come to Toronto for school—at least it was for me and many people I know.) At the same time, she's been following her mom's wishes to get a business degree and return home to work at the resort, but she hasn't given herself the chance to imagine a future beyond the one that's been laid out for her. Will helps her see that she's become a bystander in her own life.

**Fern's best friend, Whitney, disapproves of her taste in men, saying she has two types: the person who is perfectly fine, but not even close to perfect for Fern, and dickheads. Why do you think Fern constantly chooses the wrong guy? Is she holding out for Will? Or is it something deeper?**

I don't think Fern is holding out for Will. When we meet her at thirty-two, she's accepted the fact that he's not going to be part of her life. But I do think she's looking for the kind of connection she shared with Will when they were young. As an adult, Fern thinks relationships are a bad proposition—too much disappointment for too little payoff. It's a common frustration if you've been in and out of relationships for a good length of time: Why am I investing all this time and emotional labor in another person when it's not going to work out? It's less that Fern has chosen the wrong men and more that she hasn't met one who is worth the effort. But even the best relationships are hard and take work, and one of the greatest questions Fern must answer is whether she wants to make that effort for Will.

**What was one of the hardest scenes to write?**

There were a couple of scenes that take place after Fern and Will meet in the present that were challenging. One was the morning after Will arrives at the resort, where he and Fern discuss why he's there and why he didn't meet her nine years ago as they'd planned. There were many attempts at adjusting Fern's internal and external reactions to Will, as well as Will's response to Fern and the amount of information he shared

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with her at that point. Will and Fern dance around each other and their past for several chapters, and getting the choreography right was crucial.

**Which character do you think changed the most over the course of the book?**

It seems like the answer would be Will—Fern certainly sees him as having changed a great deal from the person she knew in her early twenties. There are surface-level differences and he's more guarded, but in so many ways he's the same steady guy he was at twenty-two. Fern is the one who changes the most to find her happy ending. She reevaluates so many of the things she's held tightly—her dreams for the future, her relationship with her mother, and her feelings about romantic relationships.

**Fern re-reads her mother's diary. What does she glean from visiting Maggie's early adult years?**

My intention for the diary entries was that through the tale of Maggie's own romance, we'd ultimately get a mother-daughter love story. Maggie devoted so much of her time and energy to running the resort, and Fern always felt like she came in a very distant second. Maggie's diary makes it clear how much she loved Fern. It was also important for Fern to have an appreciation for Maggie as a person outside of being her mother and insight into how parenthood changed her mom. People aren't static.

**Fern's mother, Maggie, and father figure, Peter, have a very beautiful and non-traditional relationship. Why is this an important concept for Fern to understand?**

I think it's a beautiful relationship, too. Maggie and Peter fight and have different ideas about what their relationship should look like, but they have a solid foundation of friendship that ties them together. They were always there for each other. Fern needs to see a love that withstood the kinds of challenges Maggie's and Peter's faced. I also wanted Fern to learn that there were sides to her mother that were unknowable to her.



She is devastated Maggie didn't tell her about her relationship with Peter or that the resort was struggling. Could she have done something so that they had a more honest relationship? Ultimately Fern must understand that her mom's choices weren't fully about her, just as Will's struggles aren't entirely about her, either. Fern doesn't get a second chance to strengthen her relationship with her mother, but she can have one with Will.

**Do you relate to any of the characters in the book? If so, who and why?**

Quite a few of them! I share Fern's love of both Toronto and the lake, and like her, my parents were in the hospitality business. They ran an inn and restaurant, where I worked as a teen. One of the hard parts was that my mom and dad worked long hours with little to no time off. My brother and I were on our own a lot. But one of the great things were the guests who came back year after year—customers who became good friends. The Roses are an amalgamation of several of them. Both Maggie and Will's mom are deeply devoted to their careers and struggle with both their commitments to work and to parenting. That's something I feel in my bones. And like Will, I was totally unprepared for how having a newborn at home would throw my life and my mind into complete chaos. I also experienced postpartum OCD following the birth of both my children. It's a quiet, terrifying experience—one we don't hear much about.

**What do you hope readers take away from reading *Meet Me at the Lake*?**

First and foremost, I want readers to feel like they've been transported to both the Toronto I love and to the shores of Smoke Lake at Brookbanks Resort. I loved spending time with Fern and Will—I missed them when I wasn't writing—and I hope readers feel a similar connection to these characters. *Meet Me at the Lake* is about how life doesn't turn out the way we expect, and about the people we want with us on that winding journey. I want readers to see how much we gain when we take the risk of opening our hearts and reaching out our hands. And I want to prove Fern wrong: relationships are worth the effort.

# Discussion Questions

1.

Fern and Will develop a close bond over just a day. Have you ever felt that kind of strong, fast connection with another person, whether platonic or romantic? If so, what do you attribute it to?

2.

How did Fern's and Will's life stages play into their friendship when they first met? Do you think they would have been as drawn to each other at another time in their lives?

3.

In Chapter Five, Fern thinks to herself that secrets are a key ingredient in close friendships. Do you agree? Do you think Fern still believes this by the end of the book?

4.

How did you see Whitney and Fern's friendship evolve? Have any of your long-lasting friendships had similar ups and downs?

5.

What do you make of Fern and Jamie's relationship, both in the past and the present? Do you think they would have stayed together if Fern had never met Will?



6.

Will learns that his sister is pregnant after the twenty-four hours he spends with Fern. Do you think their time together affected his decision to move back to Toronto and help his sister with the baby?

7.

In her thirties, Fern is on hiatus from relationships because she doesn't think they're worth the effort. But she decides to give her relationship with Will a chance despite his actions and the secrets he's kept. Would you have done the same?

8.

Fern carries around a lot of guilt when it comes to her mother. What do you think of Maggie and Fern's relationship? Do you think Fern's decision to stay on at the resort is driven by guilt or by something else?

9.

Do you think Maggie and Peter's love story is a sad or a happy one?

10.

The fact that life doesn't always work out as we plan is a theme of this book. Does your life look the way you pictured it when you were younger?