



THE

*A Novel*

*All-American*

**SUSIE  
FINKBEINER**

THE  
*All  
American*  
*A novel*

**SUSIE  
FINKBEINER**



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Susie Finkbeiner, *The All-American*  
Revell Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2023. Used by permission.

© 2023 by Susan Finkbeiner

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
[www.revellbooks.com](http://www.revellbooks.com)

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Finkbeiner, Susie, author.

Title: The all-American / Susie Finkbeiner.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022050952 | ISBN 9780800739362 (paperback) | ISBN 9780800741532 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493436293 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Historical fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3606.I552 A795 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20221028

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022050952>

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my dearest niece Gwen.  
When I wrote the part about the daisies,  
I thought of you.

# *Part One*



The first thaw always tricked us into thinking we'd come  
to the end of winter. We never should have believed it.

From *This Working-Day World*  
by William S. Harding

# *one*

## **BERTHA**

### **EARLY MARCH, 1952**

According to Mrs. Higginbottom—home economics teacher at Bonaventure Park High School—there were certain skills that the average girl needed to master in order to secure for herself a good husband, live in a nice home, raise clean-cut children, and serve her country. Those skills included, in no particular order:

1. Keeping a spick-and-span house.
2. The wherewithal to put supper on the table at the exact time her husband wanted it.
3. The coordination to wear pumps while chasing toddlers and the grace to maintain her perfectly set hair while scrubbing the tub.

*Et cetera, et cetera.*

To make an exhaustive list would have only, well, exhausted me. Suffice to say, she believed that the All-American girl was at her best when living a life of married domesticity.

Also according to Mrs. Higginbottom, I, Bertha R. Harding, was doomed to spinsterhood.

Not that she'd ever said as much. She didn't have to. I saw it in her eyes every time I left streaks on the floor I was meant to be

mopping, or when a sock I'd darned ended up more hideous than Frankenstein's monster.

It was all right by me, not being at the top of that class. As for my mother, well, she was a little less enthused.

Mam worried that my lack of domestic talents would reflect poorly on her. But the fault wasn't hers. It was completely mine. No matter how much effort I put into that doggone class, I couldn't manage to do much of anything right.

At the start of class that day, Mrs. Higginbottom told all of us girls that making a crust was as easy as pie—to which half of the girls laughed as if they'd never heard anything funnier in their lives.

I, however, had been dubious, remembering my many past failures with all things doughy.

I knew I'd been right to doubt when Mrs. Higginbottom said, "Young house makers, study the recipe on the board. Commit it to memory."

And then, only minutes later, erased all the instructions.

I had not, it turned out, committed it to memory, as was evidenced by the glob of goo that oozed at the edges on the counter in front of me.

All around me the other girls worked happily at rolling their crusts and dusting flour and being utterly and completely girlish.

Then there was me, sweating like a hog and unable to wipe my brow because every inch of my hands was covered in tacky, lumpy, unappetizing pie dough.

I was a mess, the crust was a bust, and I had no idea how to fix any of it.

"Ladies," Mrs. Higginbottom called, clapping her hands twice to get our attention.

Mrs. Higginbottom—sometimes referred to as Old Wigglebottom, but only when she wasn't around to hear it—looked like she was fresh out of a Norman Rockwell painting. Soft and round and in possession of the sweetest smile.

Mrs. Higginbottom really was a nice person. A nice person who—if school gossip could be believed—had a bit of a drinking problem.

"I have business to attend to," Mrs. Higginbottom said.

A few girls in the class exchanged knowing glances.

"Keep working," Mrs. Higginbottom went on. "I expect to see beautiful crusts from each of you when I return."

And with that, she slung her purse over her shoulder and stepped out of the classroom, the door thudding closed behind her.

Glancing up at the clock, I saw that I had just enough time left in class to give it another go. That was, as long as I suddenly remembered the recipe. And if I got started right away. I scooped up what I could of the first crust and dumped it in the trash can. It made the most horrible splatting sound when it hit the bottom.

This was hopeless.

I moaned. It came out louder than I'd meant for it to, and Violet—the poor, long-suffering soul forced to share a workspace with me—cleared her throat.

"Do you mind?" she said, glaring at me.

"Sorry," I said, cringing.

No one—but *no one*—took pie making as seriously as Violet Lancaster. And she had the blue ribbons to prove it. Four years in a row she'd won first place for her apple pie at the county fair. I had no doubt that she could have made a pie in her sleep if she needed to. With one hand tied behind her back.

"You used too much Crisco," Violet said, working the edge of her crust into crimps using thumbs and pointer finger.

"I did?" I asked. "How do you do that?"

She paused and glanced up at me.

"You have to be able to get the recipe right first," she said.

"Right." I sighed, wiping my hands on my apron.

"It's two cups flour, one cup shortening, by the way."

I wrinkled my nose, trying to figure out how I could have messed that up.

"Isn't that what I did?" I asked.

"No. I watched you. You got them switched."

"Oops," I said. "What about the water? One cup, right?"

Violet closed her eyes and exhaled through her nose, pushing her lips closed tight.



“Half,” she said through clenched teeth. “Just half a cup.”

“Boy, did I ever get it wrong.” I chuckled. “You know, Vi, sometimes I wonder why they made you take this class at all.”

She looked up from her pie, giving me a look like I had a rat sitting on top of my head.

“Why’s that?” she asked.

“Well, it seems you know everything about being a wife already.” I put my hands in the pockets of my flannel skirt and turned back toward my side of the counter. “Keep up the good work, sister.”

“The water has to be cold, by the way,” she called after me. “Ice cold.”

I lifted my hand to give her a thumbs-up.

Violet was the kind of girl who planned to get married right after high school. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she dreamed of having a late June wedding. She was the type to know just what sort of dress she wanted to wear and who she’d ask to be her maid of honor.

All she needed was for a suitable boy to propose.

As far as I knew, she’d have her pick of the litter when the time came around.

She’d make the perfect wife.

Good for her.

I really meant that.

I let the tap water run, hoping that would get it icy cold like Violet said it should be.

While I waited, I looked at the posters that had been on the far wall for so long I was sure they were stuck there permanently. “Plant a Garden for Victory!” or “Missing Him Won’t Bring Him Home Sooner: Get a War Job!” or “Mend, Don’t Spend! Save the New for the Boys!”

One poster had a very blond woman—a very young and pretty woman—with a pie balancing on her hands.

“I know how to welcome him home,” she said via comic-book bubble suspended over her head. “A homemade apple pie for my own homegrown hero.”

I rolled my eyes at that very blond, very pretty girl and measured out a cup of water, hoping that was how much I needed.

Violet watched as I pried the top off the can of Crisco. She crossed her arms while I spooned globs of gunk into the measuring cup.

If I was ever going to get married, I'd need to find a man who didn't have much of a sweet tooth. Either that or a house that was close to a bakery.

# *two*

## **FLOSSIE**

I couldn't have known from personal experience—I'd never been sent to the office before—but rumor had it that Principal Braun kept a paddle that he used on very naughty children. I'd even heard that it had holes drilled into it so it would leave welts.

There was a story that one boy was so scared that he wet his pants right when Mr. Braun lifted the paddle. Then, from what I heard, he got another smack because he'd made a mess of the principal's slacks.

I wasn't sure if any of that was true. Still, I'd made a stop at the little girls' room just in case.

A girl couldn't be too careful.

I stood just outside the office, biting my lower lip so I'd remember not to let it tremble, and I told myself over and over in my head that I was *not* going to cry. Not even if I got the paddle. Not even if Mr. Braun said he would have to call my mother.

Holding my chin up, I walked into the office—well, wobbled might've been the better word for it. I still wasn't used to wearing high heels. I handed Mrs. DeYoung—the school secretary—the note from my teacher, Miss Lange.

Miss Lange hated me.

"Florence," Mrs. DeYoung said, clutching her pearls and looking me up one way and down the other. "Oh my."

I grabbed the sides of my skirt and twisted the cotton between my fingers. I couldn't tell if "oh my" was said in awe or pity.

"I'm supposed to see Mr. Braun," I said with the smallest little bit of a shake in my voice. "Please."

"Okay." She got up from her chair and smoothed her skirt, the teacher's note still folded in her hand.

She hadn't even read it.

While she was gone in the principal's office, I looked down, noticing that the two rolled-up wads of toilet paper I'd stuffed in my undershirt had gone a little cockeyed. Making sure nobody was looking, I did my best to adjust them.

"Florence." Mrs. DeYoung glanced down at my blouse and cleared her throat.

"Yes," I said, dropping my hands.

"Principal Braun will see you," she said.

The lip I'd tried to remind to keep still started to tremble.

"Here, dear," Mrs. DeYoung whispered. Then she used her own hanky to wipe under my mouth. "Your lipstick is just a bit smudged."

"It's my sister's," I whispered back.

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's a very pretty color." She dabbed a spot near the corner of my lips. "I think it might've gotten away from you a little."

"Thank you," I said.

"You've never gotten in trouble at school before, have you?"

I shook my head.

"And you're scared?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Well."

That was all she said. Then she took me by the shoulders and turned me, pushing me into the principal's office.

Mr. Braun was at his desk reading what I guessed was the note my teacher had sent me with. He didn't look up when I stepped in.

"Miss Harding," he said. "Have a seat."

I did. And while I waited for him to read the note—honestly,

how much had Miss Lange written?—I searched the room for the paddle and decided he must have it hidden somewhere behind his desk because it wasn't in plain sight.

He took off his reading glasses before looking up at me.

"Oh," he said.

It was like I'd tossed confetti and yelled "Surprise!"

I guessed he'd never seen an eleven-year-old girl with a full face of makeup before. And a shirt full of wadded-up toilet paper. If only he could have seen the high heels on my feet—also full of wadded-up toilet paper. A girl had to make up for her lack somehow.

"Miss Harding . . ."

"Do you have a paddle?" I asked, the words out before I could even think about them.

"Excuse me?"

"Do you have a paddle?" I folded my hands together in my lap. "With holes drilled into it so it gives kids welts?"

"Well, that isn't why there are holes . . ."

"Because if you're going to paddle me with it, I have a right to know."

I pushed my lips into a thin line and squeezed my hands together all the harder.

"Miss Harding, in my twenty years as a principal, I have never paddled a little girl," he said. "Now, would you like to tell me why Miss Lange sent you to my office today?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I'd rather not."

"I must insist that you do." He cleared his throat. "How about we start with you telling me why you came to school dressed like that."

"I didn't come to school like this."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Well, of course my mother wouldn't have let me leave the house like this," I said. "I changed in the girls' room before the first bell."

"I see."

He scratched the top of his head, which made me think he definitely didn't understand. That was fine. He was a man so he didn't need to.

“Next you’ll want to know why I changed,” I said. “Is that correct?”

He nodded.

“I wanted to look older. A little more mature.” I crossed my ankles. “Being the smallest in my class is the pits, you know.”

“I’m sure it is.” He glanced at Miss Lange’s note. “Now, if you will, tell me about what happened with Iris Markowitz.”

I bit the inside of my cheek because I really didn’t want to tell him about that.

Iris Markowitz was the prettiest, best dressed, most well-liked girl in our class. She thought that she was the smartest, but she was wrong.

It was me. I was the smartest.

Bertha had warned me not to brag about it, though, saying that nobody liked a know-it-all teacher’s pet.

Well, I wasn’t there to make friends. At least that was what I told myself when I ate lunch all alone or heard girls talk about the slumber party I hadn’t been invited to.

“Miss Harding?” Mr. Braun said. “What happened between you and Iris?”

“She made fun of me,” I answered.

The year before the kids in my class had made up a song about me, which wasn’t nice in the least. It was called “Little Baby Bumpkin.”

They’d made up scads of verses that had me living in a pumpkin and marrying a munchkin.

My big brother Chippy had told me not to let it get to me, that those kids were just trying to get my goat.

Most days I could ignore them, keeping my nose firmly planted in a book.

But that day Iris had gone too far.

She’d pointed out my toilet paper bosom and sang—under her breath but loud enough for most of the class to hear—a brand-new verse of the Baby Bumpkin song.

“Little Baby Bumpkin, sucking on her thumb-kin,” she’d sang. “Never adored cause she’s flat as a board.”

That was it. I couldn't take it another second.

"What happened then?" Principal Braun asked.

"I slapped her across her stupid face," I said.

He blinked a couple times real slowly, like he didn't quite believe what he'd just heard.

"That's all," I said. "Are you going to paddle me now?"

He squinted at me before shaking his head.

"No, Miss Harding, I am not," he said.

What a relief.

"But," he said, "I do believe I'll have to talk with your mother."

Oh no.

"You do not need to talk to my mother," I said.

"Florence—"

"You may call me Flossie," I interrupted.

"Flossie, I've heard that you're a good student." He pushed his lips together, hard, and it made the corners of his mouth turn down into a frown. "But . . ."

"I make good grades," I said, not pointing out that I had the best grades in my entire class. That would have been arrogant.

"School is about more than good grades."

What a thing for the principal of a school to say!

"Your teacher seems to think you haven't tried very hard to make friends." He held up the letter from Miss Lange, waving it in front of me. "Don't you have any friends at all?"

"Of course I do," I said.

It wasn't a fib. Not entirely.

I had plenty of friends if the characters from books counted. Besides, Chippy was my friend and sometimes Bertha too.

"How about friends in your class?" Mr. Braun asked.

"Oh no," I answered, shaking my head. "They don't like me at all."

"Why do you think that is?"

"I couldn't tell ya."

"Would it hurt to put forth a little effort?" he asked. "To make nice with them?"

The tip-tops of my ears felt like they were on fire, and that was the first sure sign that I was about to lose my temper.

I had tried, honest Abe I had. I'd done everything I could think of to make Iris and them be my friends.

Earlier in the year when all the girls in the class were wearing their hair in ponytails, I started having Mam put mine up in the morning. And when they all added ribbons to their hair, I found a pretty red one in Mam's sewing basket. Then when they all cut their bangs, I did too.

Never mind that Mam had the hardest time trying to get them even after the job I'd done with her sewing shears.

Also—I wasn't proud of it—but I'd even done Iris's homework a time or two.

It hadn't mattered at all in the end. She was mean to me anyway.

"I'll bet Iris wants to be your friend," Mr. Braun said. "She's a very nice girl, don't you think?"

"No, I do not," I answered. "She's horrible."

"Now, why would you say that?"

I reminded him, as respectfully as I could, of the Baby Bumpkin song.

"Just good-natured teasing," he said. "After all, 'sticks and stones may break my bones . . .'"

He lifted his hand like he wanted me to finish the silly little rhyme. But I wouldn't do it. I bit my lips between my front teeth and shook my head.

"Come now, Florence."

I made a "mmm-hmm" sound without opening my mouth.

"Surely you *want* to have friends," he said.

I did. More than anything else in the world.

So much that I couldn't help but burst out into loud, heaving, messy tears just thinking about it. I didn't have a single friend in all the world.

"Now, there, there," Mr. Braun said, pushing a box of tissues across the desk toward me.

I didn't want his pity or his stupid tissues.



*The All-American*

I looked him right in the eye and reached down my shirt, grabbing both wads of toilet paper, and used those instead.

His jaw tensed and he cleared his throat before telling me that I was dismissed.

I took off Mam's shoes and walked down the hallway in just my bobby socks.