

In Her Own Words: Karen Shepard on An Empire of Women

"The initial inspiration for this novel was Sally Mann's 1992 collection of photographs, *Immediate Family*. I was drawn to these beautiful and often disturbing photos of Mann's three children on and around the family home in Virginia, and was curious about the public response to the photos. People were offended; people found them pornographic.

I found them complicated and arresting. The youngest child was about three or four in most of the photos, and I began to think about what the relationship of that child and Mann must have been like during the shoots. What would it be like to grow up with your mother behind a camera, a camera that was directed at you?

I started a short story with that youngest child as the protagonist, but I propelled her into the future, and tried to imagine her as a thirty-year-old. What would the effects of those summers of photographs have been on her? What would her adult relationship with her mother be like? As I wrote, I soon realized that my interest was larger than a short story. The photographer became an older woman, her career long behind her. Her subject became a granddaughter rather than a daughter. A mother, squeezed from both sides, appeared. All three women became, as I am, mixed bag of American, Asian and European. I kept the setting, both because I wanted to stay connected to the original inspiration for the novel, and because my mother had owned a farm in Virginia for a while, and I had a fair knowledge of the place.

I began to read —and read, and read. (The reading never stopped: thanks to a comment from my editor, I was reading up on life in occupied Paris as late as the week before delivering the final manuscript.) I knew something about China —my grandmother is the writer Han Suyin; my mother was born there; I have visited my family there four times and done lots of reading about its history —but I knew almost nothing about photography. I was especially interested in women photographers and the particular ways they may, or may not have, balanced art and family, public and private. I read technical articles and books and photographers' journals, trying to learn about their voices. I looked at image after image, especially of family photographs. And I read more about China, especially first person accounts from the Cultural Revolution and accounts of mixed marriages.

And, gradually, decisions began to be made. I realized the novel would take place in a very short span of time, a single week in a single place, almost like a chamber piece. I wanted the hardened dynamics between the three women to come under

that kind of pressure; that kind of constriction. I wanted a sealed world, but I didn't want their world to be absent of possibility. So I came up with Alice, a six-year-old girl left behind in America by her Chinese mother, who I imagined would serve as a kind of lightning rod for the three women. She would allow the surfacing of their familiar dynamics, but she would also supply them with another chance, a chance to be better people than they'd been in the past. The addition of Alice also meant that I got to immortalize many of my seven-year-old stepson's most memorable lines.

As I traveled through that process of research, note-taking, writing, I began to realize I was learning as much about myself and my relationships with my own mother, my own children, my own ethnic identity as I was about Chinese history or photography. And, perhaps more importantly, I was making discoveries about my mother's relationship with her mother, and my grandmother's relationship with her parents, and so on, back into my complicated web of ancestors. My mother, for example, has always wanted to be a writer. My grandmother is a writer, and now I was one, too. What must it feel like for my mother, to be squeezed from both sides like that?

Of course, imagining yourself in someone else's shoes isn't the same as discovering the truth about those others. But it is discovering a kind of truth about them —what Tim O'Brien has called "story truth." I didn't, for example, research the details of my own family's background. But I did find myself imagining their lives in ways I hadn't before. As many writers before me have pointed out, there is probably nothing more profound than imagining other people's lives, and nothing less profound. The favor of doing that might be the best we can do for each other."