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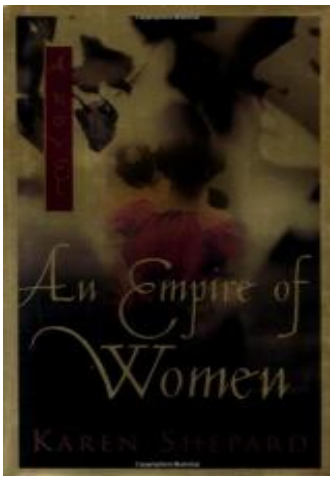
An Empire of Women

by Karen Shepard



About the Book

Karen Shepard's captivating debut novel captures the reunion of photographer Celine Arneaux, a French-Chinese émigré, her disaffected Asian-American daughter, Sumin, and granddaughter, Cameron, at a family cabin in Virginia. The cabin is where, a decade earlier, Celine had photographed Cameron for a famous series of child portraits. Joining them for a week in the country on the occasion of Celine's 75th birthday are two outsiders: Sumin's lover Grady, a journalist who is writing a profile of Celine; and Alice, an appealing and poised six-year-old Chinese girl temporarily entrusted to Cameron.

Alice, whose real mother has been forced to return to China, provides ample opportunity for the adults to show their better side. But the need to decide Alice's future also unleashes a ruthlessness that has marked the family's history since the Cultural Revolution, and forces the exposure of a long-buried secret. In a stark setting, where they are faced with no one but themselves-their biggest obstacle and best hope for making peace with one another-mothers and daughters achieve a kind of understanding and a new respect for one another.

With wonderful emotional acuity, artistry and suspense, Shepard weaves a compelling tale of custody, collaboration and the ferocity with which we sometimes sacrifice loved ones to gain our own ends.

Discussion Guide

1. Were you more sympathetic toward certain characters based solely on the prologue? Did your opinion of those characters change by novel's end?

2. Squeezed between a mother who is a world-famous photographer, a daughter who is a gifted painter, and a lover who is a writer, Sumin is the only adult at the cabin who lacks discernible creative talent. What role does this "shortcoming" play in the story?

3. The verbal exchanges between Cameron and her mother, as between Sumin and *her* mother, are brusque verging on rude. Were you shocked? In what ways does the novel make a comment on mothers and daughters?

4. In view of the circumstances surrounding Alice's guardianship, and what we learn about Cameron's childhood, which of the three women would be the most suitable surrogate parent?

5. Apart from Grady, male characters are largely absent from the book. Did you find the female characters overly skeptical of men? Are their views borne out or reinforced by what happens in the novel?

6. What impact does Grady's presence at the cabin have on our understanding of Celine's life and other events alluded to in the book?

7. All three women display a propensity for faultfinding. How is this trait expressed, in words or actions? Does the novel suggest a source for this attitude? What other attributes do the women share?

8. The cabin almost becomes an additional character in the novel. What significance does being at the cabin hold for each of the women, as well as for the outsiders, Grady and Alice? How does the bucolic setting affect their behavior?

9. What is the significance of the descriptions of the photos that are interspersed throughout the novel? What recurring themes or symbolic items are present in Celine's photographs and what insight do they provide?

10. The events in the novel take place during a single week but are influenced a great deal by things that have occurred in the past. What role does history and the passage of time play in the novel?

11. What is Alice's role in the story? Do you find her as persuasive as other characters?

Author Bio

Karen Shepard is a Chinese American born in New York City. Her fiction has appeared in Southwest Review and Mississippi Review, and received honorable mention in Best American Short Stories 1995. She lives in Massachusetts with her husband, the novelist Jim Shepard, and their two sons.

Critical Praise

"Plainspoken and direct, yet rich in complexities. "

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