

Transcript of Book Club Girl Podcast, Season 2

Episode 2: Peng Shepherd on *The Cartographers*

Bianca:

Hi, everyone. Welcome to the Book Club Girl podcast, where we chat about great books with awesome authors and you, our listeners get to ask the questions. I'm Bianca Flores and the book we're discussing today, the glorious novel, *The Cartographers* by Peng Shepherd is set largely in the New York Public Library, which had me thinking about Matt Haigs' *The Midnight Library*, which is basically this incredibly inspirational novel that takes the idea of a library to a whole new level.

Tavia:

Oh my gosh. That is totally on my TBR list. I am Tavia Kowalchuk, co-host of this podcast. And I actually have three books set in libraries I want to talk about, but the first one is actually a short story. It's called "Late Returns" and it's by Joe Hill. It's about a magical book mobile that when people bring back books have expired their return date, they enter into the world of when the book was first taken out. So like, let's say this book is like 30 years overdue. Like you found it going through your parents' house after they died, you bring it back to the bookmobile and you'll be 30 years in the past.

Bianca:

Wow.

Tavia:

It's such a wonderful story. And you know, long-time listeners will know this podcast is a big fan of Joe Hill. And then there's another book that came out last summer called *The Reading List*. And that's by Sarah Nisha Adams. And it's set in the UK and it's about this unlikely group of friends who come to get to know each other through this reading list, this mysterious reading list that they find in their local public library. And, and then they get inspired to save the local public library, because it's about to be shuttered. So it's like such a feel-good story. And... I know, it's so good. And then coming in July is *The Littlest Library* by Poppy Alexander. And I don't know what this book is about, but I know I have to read it because the cover is like one of those red London phone booths with the books in it. Like that's the library so already I'm like, no, no, I have to read this book. I have to.

Bianca:

Oh my gosh. Yes. Okay. So on today's show, we'll be discussing *The Cartographers*, a thrilling and adventurous story about a young woman who discovers a deadly family secret. And later in the show we'll be joined by Peng Shepherd, critically acclaimed author of science fiction and fantasy fiction novels.

Tavia:

Before we jump into today's episode, let's hear from one of our male listeners. Yes, we have them. And he says, "Yes, I am a guy, but I love to read. This is one of my favorite podcasts. I love the fact that you pick such a wide variety of different books and it's fun to hear the authors speak to us about them. I'm very glad to be one of the book club 'girls.'" I love the air quotes around girls cause we are in fact women. Patrick, thank you so much for taking time to leave us a review. We are so glad that we have male listeners. We think we have universal appeal. Um, and if any of you enjoy this show, please rate and review us so that we can reach more male and female listeners.

Bianca:

Yes. Men out there don't be shy. You can be one of the book club girls too, with Patrick

Tavia:

<laugh> And now we present to you. *The Cartographers* abridged

Bianca:

Nell Young and her father, Dr. Daniel Young don't have what you would call a close father daughter relationship, but they do share the same career in cartography science and practice of drawing maps. Nell has always been in awe of her father who heads the cartography department in the New York Public Library, but they haven't been in contact in a long time. And for a good reason: Nell's father fired her and ruined her reputation after they had an argument about a gas station highway map. But when her father is mysteriously found dead in his office, that old highway map resurfaces causing Nell to ask, why would he have held onto such a cheap old map in the first place? She soon finds out that the map is extremely rare and valuable and she believes that it may be the only copy left in existence. Her investigation leads to the discovery that someone out there is destroying all of the other copies that have once existed. With the help of her ex-boyfriend Felix and old family friends, Nell goes on a quest to find out why and discovers a dark family secret the way that leads to answers about her career and her father's death. So Tavia, what did you think of a book?

Tavia:

I enjoyed this book so deeply. I loved the world of this venerable library, which you know, is... As a New Yorker, I feel very sentimentally attached to the New York Public Library. And I loved all the talk about the old beautiful maps and this touch of magic is just so satisfying. It really tickled my imagination. There's just something about maps and, and maybe it's because we're all like use our Google maps, GPS app now, and we never consult a map, but there really is this sense of anything could happen with a paper map in your hand, like you could, you could go to your destination or you could go somewhere else because you know the way.

Bianca:

I totally agree with you. I found this book to be so highly inventive and fantastical. I just really wanted this book to be real. I, I read a thrillers on my downtime and look, I don't want a killer on the loose. And I read a lot of big literary novels that have, as we know, big social issues and nope, I don't want those social issues to be real, but this book Tavia, I wanted it to be real. And I gotta say, I love how it opened up in a library. It's such a great way to open a book in terms of, you know, the first setting that the reader is entered into. Libraries are just such a nice point of warmth and intrigue. And I really can't imagine a better way to start a novel

Tavia:

Walking into a library is an invitation to discover something. But absolutely this book is a love letter to libraries. And I really liked the way that you said that you so wanted this book to be real because it reminded me of when I was a little girl, how I so wanted the Wizard of Oz to be real. And I wanted to go over the rainbow and, and I love that idea of like this map being like the way to get over the rainbow, right? This magical map.

Bianca:

Oh I love that idea.

Tavia:

It's set in a library. It's about maps. These characters are all massive nerds and I loved every second of their nerddom. They are passionate scholars, totally obsessed with their discipline. Their biggest dream is to pursue it until they die. And it's, it's just, I just can totally relate to that level of intensity. And there's, you know, there's this one scene at the library where there's this award ceremony and it's, it's just such a glamorous glitzy event. And I just, that the nerds like had their moment to come out and like shine with like champagne flutes and high heels. I loved it.

Bianca:

Oh my God. I'm so glad you brought that up. This book is definitely so nerdy, but it's so passionate about being nerdy <laugh> I, it made me feel so seen. And of course I'm not nerdy about maps. I am nerdy about books, but I still felt just so seen. I think that we need more people Tavia to be openly nerdy about the things that they're passionate about and vice versa. Even if they aren't conventional things like maps. So actually speaking about maps, Tavia, I have a funny story to tell you. So back in college I studied abroad and I, you know, traveled all around Europe and I even went to Morocco and I didn't have a smartphone. I was using, you know, maps from gift shops. And I can't to this day, I cannot believe that I traveled around all these different countries in Europe and again, even to Morocco, without using my smartphone, without using Google maps. Now, like I live in San Francisco and I, since I'm still new to the city, I need Google maps all the time to just travel around different neighborhoods here in the city. And I look back and I'm like, how did I go around right Europe and Africa. And I, I use gift shop maps. Like I, I just need my Google maps now. It's just, it's wild.

Tavia:

Yeah. So I am toasting to our use of paper maps. Cheers!

Bianca:

Cheers.

Tavia:

We love hearing from our listeners. You can rate and review the podcast on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you're listening to this episode. And you can also participate in conversations about great books in the lively comments section of our Instagram feed @bookclubgirl.

Bianca:

Today we're joined by Peng Shepherd, whose book *The Cartographers* is out now

Tavia:

Welcome Peng to the Book Club Girl podcast. We are totally psyched to have you on with us today.

Peng Shepherd:

I thank you so much for having me.

Tavia:

So we're going to jump right into it. We are both huge fans of this book. We were just gushing on and on about all the things we loved about it, but we do have questions and we actually have some questions from our listeners. So to get things started, I want to ask this question from Janessa. She is from our Book Club Girl community. And she says, "I love the idea for a book that revolves around maps. Did you have an interest in this topic organically from your youth?" Of course you're still in your youth or <laugh> did the idea just come to you?

Peng Shepherd:

Um, it's I mean, who, who doesn't love maps? I don't think I've ever seen anyone be able to resist looking at one as they pass by, you know, no matter if it's a, you know, a familiar place or it's even the floor plan to the building you work in. I just, you can't resist looking at them. So yeah, I think I was and have been fascinated with maps, uh, probably my whole life, like a lot of us. But I did always want to write a book about maps, but it wasn't until I came across this, it was just by chance, but it's a very, just incredible, unbelievable truth to story about a strange thing that happened with a very unassuming map. And as soon as I read that story, that was the inspiration of this book. The, the book is based on this incredible, true story about these two small time map makers in the early 1900s, they were working in New York City. And back then at the time map making was even more time consuming and painstaking than it is now because they had to do all of the measurements by hand. They would, you know, drive the entire

country and record everything, uh, all by hand. And so these two smalltime mapmakers were concerned that really big companies like Rand McNally were stealing their data so that they could just produce things faster and cheaper. And they were desperate for way to prove that this was happening and, and protect their work. And so they came up with the idea to intentionally plant a really tiny error on their next edition, because that way, if their tiny error turned up on their competitor's work, they could prove that it had been stolen and that the competitor hadn't done the work themselves. So they invented and put in the, in this out of the way, little spot in upstate New York, they chose the middle of the countryside and they put a tiny town that doesn't exist there. And they named it with a combination of their own initials of their names. And, uh, then they waited and about a year later, everyone else's all their other competitors' maps came out and they saw this same tiny town on Rand McNally's map. And so they were like, aha, that's it like they they've been stealing from us. This is the proof we're going to take them to court. And so they sued and their lawyer said, you know, this proves it because there's this town on Rand McNally's map, right? In the same spot as it is on these two other mapmakers maps, and this place isn't real, it doesn't exist. And Rand McNally said, yes, it does exist. <laugh>. And so <laugh> yeah, so everybody, uh, you know, all the, the lawyers and all of the plaintiffs and defendants, they got in their cars and they drove out of the city out of Manhattan, a couple hours north to this empty field in the middle of upstate New York to, you know, look at what was not there and, uh, prove that Rand McNally had stolen. But when they got there instead of an empty field, just inexplicably, there was an entire small town with people living in it. And it was named exactly the same thing that they had made up and put on their map.

Tavia:

That is bonkers.

Peng Shepherd:

Yeah. I love it. Totally real story.

Tavia:

It just boggles my mind. Like, did they put the town there? Because they saw it on the map or what? What, what, what?!

Bianca:

I love it. Oh my gosh. Yes. I need more map drama. I need more of these types of stories in my life. <laugh>

Peng Shepherd:

Oh, I have a bunch. I mean, I've done it's uh, it is so fascinating. How, because normally you think of the world affecting a map because you, you build a map based on the world, but there are a ton of these stories where the map is actually the thing that changes the real world and it feels like as close to magic as we're going to get, you know?

Bianca:

Yes. I love that. <laugh> So without giving too much away, I loved to discuss how little Nell really knew about her father and mother. I just think it's really true of real life. We often forget that our parents had lives before us, at least. I know I always forget. I'm like, oh yeah, my mom had, you know, a life before me and so on and so forth. Yeah. Um, so I'd really like for you to just talk a little bit about it, this idea.

Peng Shepherd:

Yeah. That's definitely true of Nell that she really only sees one aspect of her parents. And I think also, especially her mother too, who died when she was just a little baby. But I think another thing that makes it really difficult for Nell, or to know about her parents' past, or about the other aspects of their lives is because all three of them, the mother, the father, and Nell are so dedicated to cartography and working in the industry that this passion for maps that they all have kind of stands in the way. I mean, it brings them together, but it also sort of stands in the way of them being able to relate to each other more intimately, you know? And so, and I think, especially for Nell, because she becomes

so convinced over the course of her life that she can just impress her father or be as accomplished as him, that'll be the thing that'll unlock their relationship rather than realizing that it's got to come from, you know, just being two human beings that communicate with each other. And so it's a thing that has the potential to bring 'em together, but is also kind of standing in her way and she can't see a way around it.

Bianca:

Oh my God. Yeah. This book made me want to talk to my parents more and have them tell me stories about, you know, adventures they went on in the past and all those fun tales that I haven't heard about.

Tavia:

It's like seeing a picture of your parents when they first got married. It's like, it was like that experience right. When she starts to learn this family secret.

Peng Shepherd:

Yeah. You see the photos and you're like, so wait, you, weren't always just 42.

Tavia:

Exactly.

Peng Shepherd:

You were just, you know, <laugh>

Tavia:

So, um, gosh, so one thing I love about your book is that it sort of pulls on this trope of friends setting off on an adventure together. And I think you do that in, in two different ways, right? There's two separate adventures in a way. And it, it made me think of like the movie, the Goonies, and of course Harry Potter, like I just think you're like in a good tradition of, of adventure... Friend adventure stories. And I'm just curious, like, I'm sure you did this on purpose, so why do you think it works so well? Because I think it works it well in your novel.

Peng Shepherd:

Well, thank you. <laugh> Um, I think, I think for me it's really exciting to write because as a person it's always really fun to go explore a new place and learn about it and discover. And so when I'm writing, I think my characters just naturally want to do that because I find it so interesting and you know, they end up finding the new place really. And so, um, I, there's a giant road trip in the *Book of M* too, a very different kind of road trip. But, um, yeah, I think my characters just like to get on the road and go somewhere new because I do too. And I think a lot of, a lot of readers do too.

Tavia:

That totally makes sense. For sure. Yeah. I love going along with them on the ride, I was like there for every step of the way. I was like, what are we doing next guys? Come on.

Bianca:

Yeah. Yes. This book made me want to go on board adventures with my friends. I need to like text them now and be like, you guys let's get on a plane. Let's go someplace exotic. Like let's do this.

Tavia:

Who has the treasure map? <laugh>.

Tavia:

Coming up on the Book Club Girl podcast, we ask Peng about her affinity literary character, so stick around.

Lian Dolan:

This episode of the Book Club Girl podcast is brought to you by *Lost and Found in Paris* by me, Lian Dolan. I call this book an art history treasure hunt with romance, wit, intrigue, and Paris. *C'est magie!* *Lost and Found in Paris* is available now, wherever books are sold.

Tavia:

Welcome back to the show each week, we bring you a fascinating new conversation with an author. Who's written a book we think is a great choice for book clubs to read together today. Critically acclaimed author Peng Shepherd is here with us answering questions about her book, the highly imaginative thriller, *The Cartographers*.

Bianca:

This book had me thinking that if I'm ever on a big quest, I would absolutely need a Young on my side. The Young family is incredibly fierce and so full of determination. Peng I've got to ask what inspired you to craft the Youngs the way you did.

Peng Shepherd:

It's really fun to write characters that are, are really passionate about something. And so that's how it started out that they were all just really passionate about maps because maps are, they're so great. But what I think made them kind of more interesting, but also it's a little bit of their, um, you know, it's the danger with their personality is that they are all three of them are so passionate that they kind of become obsessed. And that it's a really delicate balance between being passionate about something and being obsessed with something. And I think that in, um, you know, it is their greatest asset, but it does end up becoming, um, I think without spoiling too much their downfall or at least the danger of their downfall for all of them. Because when you are that obsessed about something, you do know everything you can know about it, but you're sort of missing everything else on the outside. And that's a lot of times what's happening is they become so interested in figuring out what's right in front of them, that they're not seeing something that might be, you know, happening right in the periphery. Um, you know, somebody might be keeping a secret from you or they might be stealing from you or about to betray you. And you just, you can't see the forest for the trees. Is that the, the expression?

Bianca:

That's so true. I didn't even think about how passion can lead to obsession, which can lead to danger. I hadn't realized how that track can really be an engine for a plot.

Peng Shepherd:

That was what it was for me too, because I just wanted to, I was so excited to write a story about maps, but it, uh, the story, it, what ends up happening sort of developed because my characters got more obsessed than I realized they were going to. And that created a lot of the problems that happened in the story really organically without me realizing that was where it was going.

Tavia:

So, um, coming back to the maps, because clearly we all have at least a mild obsession. I don't know, maybe passion, how will we define it? But even our listeners were really gripped by this map part of the, of your book and two of our listeners, Mary and Barry, um, were wondering if you personally have a map collection.

Peng Shepherd:

Um, I, I have, I do have a few maps. They are, unfortunately, maps are just so expensive. Um, so I would love to have a bigger collection one day, but one thing that I started doing. Because I knew that true story about, you know, the town that was planted and then kind of became real somehow. Um, I've known that story for about eight years and was trying to figure out a way to write about it this whole time. But when I first heard that story, I just thought that that's so cool. I, I have to know more. So I, I went and found a copy of that map where the town appears like back from, I think it it's, uh, yeah, it's, it's from like 1920 something. And, uh, at the time it was like \$5 because these are little, you know, foldable gas station, you know, the highway driving maps that you get at a gas station. And so I found one on eBay or something for like \$5 and I opened it up and I saw the town and I just thought it was so neat. And then over the past eight years, I have, every time I come across one, bought it because I figure they're really old and they're probably going to, you know, all be gone someday. And now when you look for them, they're much harder to find and they're like \$50.

Tavia:

Wow. So you drove up the price, Peng! It's commodity trading, you're a commodity trader <laugh>.

Peng Shepherd:

I just, uh, yeah, I just couldn't, uh, I don't know, I was always worried that the one copy I had was going to get damaged or something. And so I just thought, well, every time I find one I'll buy one. So I've got, I've got a tiny collection of just this map. That's, um, really important to the book, but I'm really glad I did, because at this point it's really, it's really hard to find them now.

Tavia:

Oh my gosh.

Peng Shepherd:

Because they are so old, actually the, um, the, uh, the copy, the picture that's in the novel is one of the maps that I have. Because we got to the end of the editing process, and my editor Emily was like, okay, we obviously have to have this map in the book, but where are we going to find it? Because it's not an, it's an important map. And so you can't, um, you know, the library of Congress doesn't have one and even the New York Public Library, they don't have a scan of it. And so, yeah, amazingly, uh, they have records of it, but they don't have a scan. And so I had to, I took mine to, uh, um, like a UPS Store or a Kinkos. And yeah. So the map that is in the book is my map. Yeah.

Bianca:

Oh my God.

Tavia:

So Peng I was saying to Bianca, when we were talking earlier, just the two of us, how much I loved the way that you like used the different voices throughout the book. And you gave each character a chance to really like introduce themselves and their backstory. But I would love if right now, if you would just tell us about the main character. Now, I feel like we've talked a little bit about her in the intro, but I would love for you to share more with, about her, with our listeners, because I think she's just such a strong hero. And I, I really, I just adored her.

Peng Shepherd:

Oh, thank you. She was a lot of fun to write because she's so complicated. You know, she's this, um, she's a young woman and she's in her mid-thirties and her whole life has been about cartography because her two parents are giants in the field. Her mother was a visionary who passed away when she was, um, young, but you know, her works continue to be cited even 30 years later. And she's considered just one of the most, you know, innovative cartographers in, in their industry. And then her father is one of the senior curators at the New York Public Library. And just, you know, everybody in academia knows his name and, and he's just so famous and so respected. And so her, her whole world is about maps and she loves it as much as her parents do. And she's desperate to, you know,

make the memory of her mother and her father, you know, as proud of her as they are of their own accomplishments, because she feels like if she can just do that, she can be there equal. And then she might be able to get closer to her father in a way that she never has, because there's been this thing, you know, the grief of over losing her mother and then his obsession with, with the passion that they share. It's always been standing in the way,

Tavia:

Her determination. I mean, you talked about this earlier beyond God. It is like, it just propels this book forward. And if she was not who she is, like, this would be a completely different book.

Bianca:

Uh, totally. I love her character. So Peng we have one final question for you. On every episode we ask our authors, if you could be any character from any novel, who would you be?

Peng Shepherd:

This is such a hard question. There's an author named Josiah Bancroft. And he wrote a series of four books called, uh, it's about the tower of Babel as if it's almost like a modern day theme park in a way it's like a, a real place that you can visit. Yeah. Oh, it's fascinating. It's a fantasy series and it's about a husband and wife that go to the Tower of Babel on their honeymoon or on vacation or something, but it's a real place that you can go and it's, you know, millions of levels high and every level is totally different and strange and magical. And, and they get separated. Of course. And so they're the last thing she says to him before they get separated is, So we're going to meet at the top. And so he's got to work his way all the way. It's so great. So I would definitely, I would be, um, that guy, his name is Senlin. I would be Senlin, I think, because I would just love to ascend the Tower.

Tavia:

That's amazing. I didn't even know those books existed.

Peng Shepherd:

I think this is the fourth one. Um, but that's his name? Josiah Bancroft. And the first one's called *Selin Ascends* because he's going up the tower.

Tavia:

Well Peng thank you so much for joining us today. We had so much fun talking.

Peng Shepherd:

Me too.

Tavia:

I just, this was really awesome having you on the show. I think everybody, you should definitely go get this book and read it. You will not regret it.

Peng Shepherd:

Awesome. Well, thank you so much. I had such a good time too.

Bianca:

Thank you. That was Peng Shepherd, whose book *The Cartographers* is out now. To find out more about *The Cartographers* and Peng's other books, head to bookclubgirl.com/podcast, where you can also find links to everything mentioned in this episode,

Tavia:

Like what you heard? Subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, wherever you get your podcast. And while you're there, give us a rating and leave a review. Another way to help spread the word about the Book Club Girl podcast: Tell a friend, it really helps others to find us.

Bianca:

You'll hear from us again in one week where we'll be speaking with Sally Thorne, author of the TikTok hit *The Hating Game*, now on demand as a feature film. If you want to read the book before its podcast drops, head over to hc.com and use promo code BOOKCLUBGIRL for 25% off and free shipping for any book discussed on this podcast.

Tavia:

We love hearing from our listeners, email us at the girls at book club girl dot com or post the comments on our Instagram feed @bookclubgirl, you can also leave us a voicemail. Our number is 2 0 2 0 7 7 3 3 6. Your voicemail or email could very well end up being read on the show

Bianca:

Before we go. We'd like to thank Caroline Kwash of The Hangar Studios who produced today's episode and Roscelia Ryan, who's the excellent engineer at Hangar Studios

Tavia:

Until next time I'm Tavia.

Bianca:

And I am Bianca.

Tavia:

Happy reading.