

Q & A with Valley Author, Peng Shepherd

Written by Lauren A Grifol

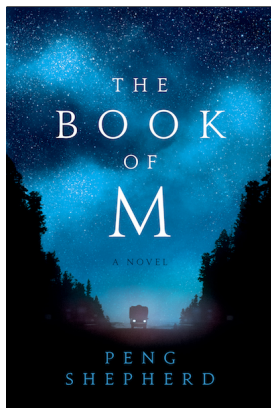
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Photo by Rachel Crittenden

Peng Shepherd, a Valley native, was inspired by nature and art from a young age. She trained in classical ballet and explored the outdoors on her trusty steed. Following her dream, shepherd continued her education and development at New York University, where she earned her master of fine arts in creative writing. Since then, Shepherd has lived in cities all over the world including Beijing, London, Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and Philadelphia and has been keeping her creative juices flowing by writing her first novel titled *the book of m*. *The Book of m* was a project that did not come naturally at first. She had the general theme she wanted to incorporate but was unable to conjure up a unique take on shadows... until she ran into the astronomical phenomenon, zero shadow day. Zero shadow day occurs when the earth's rotation causes a certain area of land to become perfectly aligned with the sun for a few minutes. This alignment causes objects placed vertically on the ground to not cast shadows.

After the earth has had a few minutes to continue its rotation, your shadow, of course, returns and everything is normal again...except in *the book of m*, it doesn't return, and that's where the story begins. In this exclusive interview, shepherd gives insight on her novel and how her life led up to writing her first novel.



AFM: What are a couple of your favorite places around the Valley?

PS: Warning, this answer is going to be very food-based! My favorite spot for Vietnamese pho soup is Pho Thanh on Camelback Road, and for great Mexican food with awesome ambience, Ladera on Central Avenue is unbeatable. I'm also a longtime fan of Café Lalibela in Tempe—the food is amazing, and my best friend and I used to go all the time as soon as we could drive. I have so many fond memories of eating there with her during high school.

AFM: What are some of your favorite things to do around the Valley?

PS: I really love our indie bookstores—Changing Hands and The Poisoned Pen, especially. I could wander for hours. I also really enjoy hiking Piastewa Peak. I try to go early in the morning when it's not so hot, and when the sky is just so beautiful.

AFM: Who has inspired you the most in your life?

PS: My mother [former 12 News anchor, Lin Sue Cooney] has always been a huge source of inspiration to me. It was wonderful to grow up with a journalist as a parent because she really understood and encouraged my love of reading and writing. And to watch her work so hard at her career was very important and motivating.

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AFM: What made you pick this genre?

PS: I don't know if I picked it so much as it picked me. Writing still feels like such a mysterious thing to me—every time I sit down to draft a chapter or a story that I think I have planned out, it always goes in a surprising direction. I originally thought *The Book of M* was going to be a very tight relationship drama with just two characters, and the final book ended up becoming a sprawling epic with multiple settings, an entire cast of characters, and its own style of magic.

AFM: What inspired the story?

PS: I had been wanting to write a novel that had something to do with shadows, because shadows are so eerie and mysterious, but it took me a long time to find a way into the story itself. I started researching art, folktales, and stories about shadows, and that's when I came across a real life phenomenon called Zero Shadow Day. Believe it or not, every year on a certain day in India, everyone's shadows actually *do disappear*—for just a few minutes. As soon as I read that, it was like lightning. I started writing immediately, with Zero Shadow Day as the event that sparks it all.

AFM: What is a piece of advice you have for authors who are working on their first novel?

PS: There's so much conflicting writing advice out there, and ultimately, it only matters what works for you personally, but I can say what works at least for me. I've found that it's best to get the first draft down as quickly as I can. It's really tempting to keep going back over what you've already written, editing and fine-tuning, but that can also sometimes be a trap. I've learned that for myself, it works better to just get to the end first, no matter how rough or cringe-worthy the draft might be. You can always fix the book later, but if you never get to the end because you're stuck endlessly revising the first chapter, there's no book to fix.

AFM: Can you give AZ Foothills readers a little taste of what to expect in your book?

PS: *The Book of M* is a sprawling epic that spans several countries and timelines, and is full of disappearing shadows, magical elephants, sinister cults, dangerous journeys, and a mysterious city rumored to be able to save the world...