

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

George Brosi

Jayne Anne Phillips was raised in Buckhannon, West Virginia, the home of West Virginia Wesleyan College and the seat of Upshur County. It lies at the center of a large timber producing area dotted with coal mines, including the mine at Sago. Martha Jane Thornhill Phillips, Jayne Anne's mother, taught first grade for many years, became a remedial reading specialist, and was head of the Title I program in Upshur County. Her father, Russell Phillips, worked as a contractor. Both hailed from well-respected local families whose ancestors first settled in Western Virginia in the 1700s. Their own family consisted of two boys and a girl, Jayne Anne, born on July 19, 1952. She dabbled in creative writing at the tender age of nine and was into poetry at the age of fourteen. At West Virginia University, she continued to develop her writing skills, graduating *magna cum laude* with an English degree in 1974.

Right after commencement, Jayne Anne Phillips took off for California. She worked as a waitress and at other temporary jobs there and in Colorado. In 1976, Truck Press of St. Paul published 400 copies of a 24-page chapbook of one-page fictions: *Sweethearts*. It won the Fels Award from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines. The 1977 edition of *Pushcart Prize Stories* carried several of these innovative one-page pieces. Phillips received her first National Endowment for the Arts grant at 25 and was accepted into the prestigious University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. The year she received her MFA from Iowa, 1978, a second edition of *Sweethearts* (600 copies) was released, and Vehicle Editions of New York released *Counting*, another chapbook limited to 500 copies. It won the St. Lawrence Award, and a reprint edition of 2,500 copies was printed. A teaching assistant at Iowa, Phillips landed her first teaching job as an instructor at Humboldt State University in California for the '78-'79 school year.

In 1979, her strong relationship with editor Sam Lawrence, whom she met at the St. Lawrence Writers Conference, resulted in her first trade book, a collection of stories entitled *Black Tickets* published

simultaneously in hardback by Delacorte and in paperback by Dell. It received the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction offered by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Raymond Carver praised it in *Newsweek*, and Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer pronounced her to be “the best short story writer since Eudora Welty.” The following year, Phillips, offered a writing fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, moved back East. The 1980 edition of *O Henry Prize Stories* included her story, “Snow,” and she became a Bunting Fellow at Radcliffe College. In 1981 Bookslinger Press of St. Paul published her chapbook, *How Mickey Made It*. In 1982, Jayne Anne Phillips became an Assistant Professor at Boston University, and a third edition of *Sweethearts* was released. A chapbook, *The Secret Country*, was published by Palaemon Press of Winston-Salem.

Her first novel, *Machine Dreams*, was published in 1984. It became a *New York Times* best seller and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. *The New York Times Book Review* named it one of the twelve best books of the year. She received her second NEA grant that same year. The following year, on May 26, 1985, she married Mark Brian Stockman, a Harvard-educated cardiologist with two young sons from a previous marriage. The couple had two sons, and the four boys now range in age from 32 to 20. Phillips’ next story collection, *Fast Lanes*, was published in 1987 by E. P. Dutton. Harvard University lured her back into teaching in 1990 and again in the ’93-’94 school year. In 1994, Houghton Mifflin published her second novel, *Shelter*, and *Publishers Weekly* named it a Best Book of the Year. *Shelter* was dedicated to her editor, Sam Lawrence, “the angel of my writing life,” who died that year. By then, both her parents had died of cancer as well.

In 1996, Phillips was appointed “Writer in Residence” at Brandeis University, and the following year the American Academy and Institute for Arts and Letters awarded her its Academy Award in Literature. Alfred A. Knopf published her third novel, *MotherKind*, in 2000. She credits writers’ colonies, like Yaddo and McDowell, for enabling her to write during the years of active teaching and child rearing.

In 2007, she left Brandeis for Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, to design and direct a new MFA program in Creative Writing

(see www.mfa.newark.rutgers.edu). She has expressed her excitement about coming to the New York Metropolitan Area, being a part of the vibrant, diverse city of Newark, and experimenting in closely connecting a university-based writing program with the community through such outreach efforts as the Writers at Newark Reading Series. *The Secret Country: Decoding Jayne Anne Phillips' Cryptic Fiction*, the first critical work in book form about the author's body of work, was published in 2007 by Sarah Robertson. As this magazine goes to press, Jayne Anne Phillips awaits the January 2009 release of her fourth novel, *Lark and Termite*, by Knopf. It has already earned a starred *Publishers Weekly* review and back cover comments from Alice Munro ("This novel is cut like a diamond, with such sharp authenticity and bursts of light"), Junot Diaz (...not simply classic Jayne Anne Phillips [but] something far more extraordinary ... an outstanding feat of the imagination. It is the best novel I've read this year"), and Tim O'Brien ("What a beautiful, beautiful novel ... so rich and intricate in its drama, so elegantly written, so tender, so convincing, so incredibly moving. I can declare without hesitation or qualification that *Lark and Termite* is by far the best new novel I've read in the last five years or so").

Today, all of Jayne Anne Phillips' books are in print in Vintage paperback editions in this country and have been translated and published in twelve languages. Her stories appear in literally scores of the most prestigious anthologies and in highly respected literary magazines. She is universally regarded as one of America's most influential creative writers and writing program administrators.