

SEDUCED INTO CONSCIOUSNESS: THE ART OF JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS

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Novelist Jayne Anne Phillips recalls when she was growing up in Buckhannon, West Virginia, that she had a student teacher in her classroom who said of an essay she wrote, “People are going to try to bury you, but you mustn’t let them.” That student teacher, who later became her mentor and then her friend, was the future poet laureate of West Virginia, Irene McKinney. Phillips has spent much of her adult life living outside of the Appalachian region, but she has never lost her identification as an Appalachian writer or her awareness of the influence of people she knew there.

Jayne Anne Phillips went on to be arguably the Appalachian region’s most honored ambassador to the world of American letters in the last fifty years. She has taken on the literary establishment and won, garnering the kinds of honors and reviews that other authors only dream of. Her first book, a collection of short stories called *Black Tickets*, won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction, and her first novel, *Machine Dreams*, became a best seller and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award as well as chosen by the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the year’s best books. Her 1994 novel *Shelter* was awarded an Academy Award in Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and chosen one of the best books of the year by *Publishers Weekly*. She has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and a fellowship from the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College. Most recently, Phillips has taken on the project of starting a new Master of Fine Arts Writing Program at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, where she is both Professor of English and director of the writing program. Her career has been successful by any standard: a life of writing, teaching, raising a family, and now founding a new institution to support writers.

Phillips began as a poet and then a short story writer, but now her

poems and stories, she says, are in her novels. On a recent September afternoon, she sat down on her front porch with a fellow West Virginia writer and said, “All my novels start with a line—this sound, this voice.” She said she writes the kind of prose in which language itself is at the heart of how she approaches meaning. She writes, she says, “about family, of course, but also about consciousness, the consciousness of perception, the ways in which we think, remember, fantasize, dream, in words and images. Language is essential to me,” she says.

Much-honored, but not prolific, she tends to mull over and work on her books for long periods of time. Her upcoming novel *Lark and Termite* was twenty years in the gestating and follows her previous novel by nine years. She says she knows exactly how it began. She was visiting a friend back home and looked out the window onto a little alley between buildings where she saw a boy sitting on a lawn chair with his legs not seeming to work right, blowing a blue plastic bag that he held in front of his face, over and over again. This vision stayed with her and gradually, over years, grew into a tightly structured novel about the atrocities of war and the vulnerabilities and strengths of children and adolescents.

Looking at such a career and at such a deeply thoughtful and dedicated approach to literature, one admires an American literary artist, but might ask what is specifically Appalachian about Jayne Anne Phillips’ work. Is there anything that ties her to, embeds her in, the place she grew up? Something immediately apparent even to a casual reader is the frequent appearance of Appalachian landscapes in her work. All of her books include glimpses and sometimes long passages that bring to life the sensual impact of North Central West Virginia. Her work is rich in descriptions of the mountains and small towns, and even a novel like *MotherKind*, in which the present story is set in the Boston area, begins with a remembered trip home, flying into central West Virginia:

Kate’s landscape: no plateaus. Appalachian scrub hills wild with flower, the dense foothills and humped mountains, valleys, small skies, hay smell, cicada and locust, generations of farms and mining towns, the winding dirt roads and fields

in dense shade or brilliant sun, silos and barn boards, choke of sumac and bramble: all she sees in her mind's eye when she remembers what she fled.¹

That richly described West Virginia and the descriptions of other Appalachian landscapes, small towns, and typical characters form the ground of Phillips' fiction—and often the present scene of her stories as well. *Machine Dreams, Shelter, Lark and Termite* all have their present time in West Virginia. And even when the setting of her fiction is elsewhere, Phillips's home region is usually coequal through characters' memories and dreams, as in the passage above from *MotherKind*. Whatever literary heights she achieves, Phillips's work is shot through with the textures and odors of an Appalachian place.

Phillips, however, asserts that her very involvement with language is itself specifically Appalachian. She further says that she believes all Appalachians, wherever they live, share certain themes and ways of framing their experience. "My work," she says, "is deeply rooted in small towns outside the cultural mainstream, and connected to the land. There's an independence and emotional depth to Appalachia that you don't necessarily find in the more urban Northeast, or in a flat landscape like the Midwest." Her attachment and awareness of the land and the landscape is clear, but less obvious, and perhaps more intriguing, is her contention that Appalachians share a certain world view, what she calls an "outlier sensibility," which is to say an awareness of being outside the mainstream culture. She goes further with this, even suggesting that Appalachians often see the world through the lens of the outlaw.

Phillips's fiction has always been considered edgy, and some of her popularity with the literary establishment has been based on how she combines experimentation with language and an emphasis on interior landscapes with a regional, recognizable place and an unflinching look at the dark side of life. Her early short stories in particular include sexual experimentation and lives on the edge of society, and she has always, she says, been attracted to writers who don't follow rules and who challenge social norms—William Faulkner and William Burroughs, for example. Her fiction may describe stunningly beautiful Appalachian landscapes and center on Appalachian families, but it is

also self-consciously in the modern literary tradition. The writers she admires, and with whom she considers herself to be in a continuum, include Faulkner and Burroughs, but also James Agee and James Joyce in *Dubliners* as well as Bruno Schulz in *The Street of Crocodiles*, and Katherine Anne Porter in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*. These are extremely different writers who approach literature and society—and challenge the rules of both—in many different ways.

One of Phillips's primary literary strategies is to explore the lines of tension. She examines the tensions between the individual and society and between language and story. She writes of psychological tensions within families, and the tensions between past and present, between men and women, between Appalachia and the Northeast, between consciousness and action. Such explorations are precisely, in Phillips's opinion, what makes art. Living with tension, she asserts, also characterizes Appalachian attitudes. She speaks of the common Appalachian interest in the stories of other people's lives in the form of gossip simultaneous with the Appalachian need for privacy and even secrecy. You know all about your neighbors' business in the small towns of Appalachia, she says, but you try hard to hide your own business from the world. This interest in narratives with underlying secrets makes for gripping stories.

She is especially drawn to children as characters with their secret lives and secret knowledge. She says, "Children are the ultimate outlaws because they perceive the world free of any context." This freshness of vision in Phillip's work—of things being experienced as if for the first time—is something I have written about elsewhere.² It is my opinion that Phillips's building block of fiction is vividly re-created moments of being—passages of heightened sense observation that create breakthroughs to the reality underlying the everyday. She uses her characters' (especially children's) vivid sense impressions in the present to rip through the ordinary in repeated epiphanies. She explores heightened states of mind that are profoundly in the present, but that also break through to the past. Especially in later works, the epiphanies are also about connecting to other people as well as to past events.

Shelter is set in a girls' camp in the forest of North-Central West Virginia, and most of its main characters are children. Her new novel, *Lark and Termite*, has as one of its main consciousnesses a boy whose

developmental difficulties are accompanied by extreme sensitivity to odor, colors, and sounds—and by the ability to experience the past as if it were happening around him now. This collapsing and exploding of time into a concrete and sensual present moment of consciousness is both Phillips’s subject matter and a strategy that frees her storytelling from conventional chronological narrative.

The thing that keeps this intense exploration of consciousness accessible and engaging to the reader is that it always comes to us through human beings and human voices. Even though she typically writes in the third person, it is a third person that works its way deep into the character and captures the sound of the character thinking. This use of voice is perhaps, in the end, the most Appalachian of elements of Phillips’s work. She has a great talent for capturing—almost channeling—voices. Like a true daughter of the mountains, she listens to the voices she hears around her and to the voices she carries within. Some of the most powerful sections of her first novel *Machine Dreams* are written in the voices of the generation that came to its adulthood during the Second World War—before Phillips was born. For example, the father in the novel has a scene during the war in which he is running a bulldozer on a South Pacific island:

Nothing to do but go ahead, hot metal seat of the dozer against his hips, vibration of motor thrumming, and that kid still crying, some island kid, get a detail over there to keep those kids away, got to get pits dug and doze this mess. The smell blew against and over him; he felt the whole awkward dozer tilt, rolling on the ocean of the smell as on the slanted deck of a transport. Bad seas, it was a bad, bad sea....³

She is particularly adept at capturing the essence of men, in *Machine Dreams*, but also in *Lark and Termite*, where one of the main point of view characters is a soldier during the Korean War. In *Motherkind*, the main character’s father is also a veteran, and watching him sets off the following observation and musing in Kate’s mind:

Men she knew [outside of Appalachia] weren’t like him. It was as though his kind comprised a vanished world, a time

when sexuality was mute stored power and isolation. Men like Waylon lived by touch, and wordlessness, and custom so ingrained it seemed instinctual. Language blurred instinct, made it harder to find, allowed for variation, illumination. Men entered language and became more obviously complex and expressive, like women, though with a different edge.⁴

When asked the inevitable question about whether these men are *her* father, is her writing in any way autobiographical, Phillips replies, “There may be elements of autobiography, but even those change when they are recast into fiction. If, as they say, ‘everything is everything,’ we can deeply understand even what seems very different or even threatening to us. In that sense, all my characters are like me, or I am like them. A writer has to be like smoke, entering the characters so deeply that the reader is seduced into that consciousness. The language becomes a seduction, especially in the paragraph form. Unlike the formal lines of poetry, prose seems, visually, the same ordinary language in which we read instruction manuals and newspapers. Reading prose, the reader perceives in something ordinary, extraordinary knowledge that makes another’s world deeply knowable—you get both the child’s consciousness and the way others think about him. My books teach me how to write them, just as I hope they teach my reader how to read them.”

I love this idea that her prose is a seduction to bring us close to voices and minds and experiences that we think are foreign to us. This is precisely what Phillips is seeking, then, not merely to create something called literature, and not merely to teach us how to take the same journey in reading that she has taken in writing, but to bring us deeper into experience, into other people’s consciousness. There is an effort involved in reading Jayne Anne Phillips’s work, but the effort pays off with great emotional impact. Her stories have no lack of event—threats to children, the horror of war—but it is not the description of action that attracts her but rather the emotional state of extreme experience.

In a novel like *MotherKind*, in some ways the quietest of her works, everyday events are given the same quality of intensity and extremity

as massacres and child abuse in other books. *MotherKind* chronicles the relationship of a woman and her dying mother, and includes life's most common—yet most unique and extraordinary—events: dying, birth, nursing babies, establishing a family, raising children. In the end, this novel is about love, in particular about love that persists beyond death, as is her new book, *Lark and Termite*. *Lark and Termite* is on the surface more concerned with wonders and horrors: there are shocking scenes of a military massacre, vivid descriptions of a flood, and an extremely well-done touch of the supernatural. There are family secrets and heightened perceptions at moments of life's passages. And yet, this novel too is richly detailed with the quotidian complexities of first love, family, and sex.

Jayne Anne Phillips says that “human lives mean something; we are connected, even in dimensions not obvious to us.” When asked if she is religious, she replies, “The Dalai Lama says that there are many paths to the light. Literature is my religion. I look to literature for guidance, depth, spirituality, a way to straddle the boundaries between us and understand the world.”

Phillips causes us to witness what is terrible and also what is beautiful in our universe. And what is most beautiful is the concrete and spiritual love expressed in mutually caring sex, in a sister's care for her brother, of a mother for infants, of husbands and wives, of the caretaker for the dying elder. To read Phillips's work is to be drawn into a heightened consciousness of our own being and the being of others.

1. Jayne Anne Phillips, *MotherKind* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 5.
2. Meredith Sue Willis, “Witness in the Nightmare Country: Jayne Anne Phillips,” *Appalachian Journal*, 24:1, (Fall 1996).
3. Jayne Anne Phillips, *Machine Dreams* (New York: E. P. Dutton/Seymour Lawrence, 1984), 59-60.
4. Phillips, *MotherKind*, 194.