

## Jayne Anne Phillips Interview 1/27/09

**Faulkner:** I have to ask this, because I'm just blown away by it. I hadn't gone to your website. I didn't even know that you had one, and I feel like just two days ago I found "A Secret Country." That was a mind blower. Tell me about that. It was like – this is where it all comes from.

**Phillips:** It's not exactly where it all comes from, but it is a resource. There are certain photographs that I've used and certain things that I've looked at a long time, and of course, the work is not figuratively, literally real. Some of it was things I put together after the fact that connected in a logistic way, but I hope to expand that to include a whole thing on *Lark and Termite*. That's in the future. I haven't had a web master for a long time, and I didn't know how to do it. I just found someone, and we're going to do some stuff.

**Faulkner:** That's really amazing. When I found the birthday cakes...

**Phillips:** Oh, the pictures of the birthday cakes.

**Faulkner:** Yeah. They were from your childhood.

**Phillips:** I can't remember right now what novel the birthday cakes were in. Was it *Motherkind*?

**Faulkner:** Yes.

**Phillips:** There were a couple of those birthday cakes.

**Faulkner:** That's amazing and then seeing the family pictures – it was like picking up some sort of stone and then finding these magical things. I was so impressed by it. It

also made me think a little bit about the kind of eerie feelings that I would get reading Seibold. Do you know what I mean? Have you ever read any of his stories?

**Phillips:** Yeah, I like his work a lot and the fake photographs. I like the idea of using fake photographs. I've never used photographs before in a book, and this sort of happened by accident with *Lark and Termite*. When I was researching the book, I was writing to travel books writers, who had written books on Korea. I was trying to connect to someone on the internet, and this wonderful guy said that he was in Korea at the time. He said he would go to the tunnel and take photographs for me. So he took a series of color snapshots and mailed them to me. I'm sure he thought he'd never hear of me again. I gave Knopf a bunch of research materials – the little moon pitcher that Termite is so attached to is something that I have had for ages. The drawing was a drawing that a friend of mine, Mary Sherman, gave me many years ago. I had a series of photographs of the alley where in fact I did see a boy thirty years ago, who in my mind became the nexus to the story of *Lark and Termite*. I also gave them Robert Neilson's photographs. I wanted to use that drawing of Mary's at first as the cover, but Knopf said "no" to that, thankfully I think because I love the cover they came up with. It is going to be the UK cover of the book. I really just gave them the photographs to set the scene, but they turned them into black and white, and they cropped them tighter and tighter as the end of the book comes closer and closer. I like the way it works, so all of that will be part of "The Secret Country" of *Lark and Termite* eventually.

**Faulkner:** I'm still reeling from that. I don't know exactly why. I think on some level, it's really just the forthrightness of it and the honesty of it. It's as if you say, "Oh, reader. Did you think these things just sprung into my head out of nowhere?"

**Phillips:** Well, most things do, but if there's something that I have a literal representation of, like the birthday cake, that belongs in "The Secret Country." And it is a secret country because, as you say, not that many people know to look at it.

**Faulkner:** I feel lucky to have figured that out. So then just to finish on that, you're not really using those photographs as some sort of vague memoir or incitement to tradition. They usually come and confirm something.

**Phillips:** I only put those together for the website. I don't go looking up photographs of things in order to refresh my memory about them, because my memory of them is very contextualized and angular. That's the sense memory that I work with, but I went back afterward and found these pictures and put them on the website.

**Faulkner:** What have you been up to since the last time that you were here?

**Phillips:** I was last here about nine years ago when *Motherkind* came out. This book, *Lark and Termite* – I've actually been working on it for about fifteen years. I had written part of it, and I had written part of *Motherkind*. It was around 2000 or '99 that I finally signed a contract with another publisher after Sam Lawrence died in '94. It was for a two book contract; I had plans for both the novels. Knopf thought *Motherkind* seemed more marketable, and they asked me to finish that first. As it turned out it was best that I did, because I think every book prepares the ground for the next one in a particular sense. So I finished that book, and I went back to working on *Lark and Termite*. Four years ago, I took a major change of direction by accepting a job at Rutgers-Newark designing a new MFA program for them, which involved writing a proposal and getting it through several state agencies. After starting the program two years ago, we now have forty-four students. We have a great reading series called Writers of Newark that I curate and courses that are connected to the series called Writers of Newark: Contemporary American Lit. We're working with that reading series as the basis for a lot of community outreach; we're working with several high schools in Newark. It's a huge undertaking. Our students are probably the most diverse MFA group in the country. Almost half are students of color. Over half are non-traditional students that range in age from twenty-one to sixty. Many of them have had careers; they have ongoing careers now. We do all of our classes at 5:30 and later so that people can actually have jobs and families and be in the program. Our students this year are publishing in *McSweeney's*, *Granta Young*

*Voices*, and *Paris Review*, so it's very interesting. It's really too interesting, too compelling.

**Faulkner:** That pulls you away from writing?

**Phillips:** Yes, it does, but I had kind of settled into writing in the summers anyway even before I took that job. I think if I get either older or deeper into my own material, I really have to be shut off from outside cellulose and forced to go to writers' prison, where the meals are served and everyone's working. One feels very guilty if one isn't working. There's isolation, and there's community at night, which blunts the loneliness.

**Faulkner:** You talk around stuff like this in the journal section. I don't think I've seen a book that's been reviewed as extensively and consistently enthusiastically in literally years. It's quite the home run. Did you have a sense that you were touching all the bases, hitting all your marks, that this was something that was going to garner the connotation it has, or is it, as one of my friends says, the wheel turns and sometimes it lands on you? And at other times with something of equal significance, you might not be heard.

**Phillips:** I don't know. I always write in a very layered way, but I don't always resolve things as specifically as things are resolved in this book. It connects with the reader in a very specific way, maybe because of that. Intentionally, sometimes I leave things a bit more open, and while *Lark and Termite* suggests a future beyond the book, it connects in so many ways. Most of those connects were not necessarily planned from the beginning. I work very much inside the material and let the material dictate the form and follow the material into the form. That's very much what happens in this book. Initially I intended this to be a short little book composed of Lark's voice and Nonie's voice. Nonie's voice was going to be short fictions, one or two page fictions. My initial plan got more and more complex. From the time that I tried to embrace the idea of working with parallel worlds with the 1950s section and the '59s section, it got endlessly complicated. There were times when I despaired of ever sustaining those two worlds. Fortunately, I'm extremely persistent. The book had a very compelling hold on me. I felt as though I just

had to stay with it until I got there. The ending of the book was a surprise leap. I wanted to know who that boy was that I saw sitting in that chair thirty years ago looking at an empty alley holding this piece of blue dry cleaning bag in front of his face and blowing on it. I wanted to know what he was doing, and this book answers that question. It works with the dimensionality of past, present, and future in a way that I've always been fascinated with. It resolves in a very particular way, and it suggests certain things that I think have been surprising. You never know what reviewers are going to do, and I don't connect myself to that process. It's about the book, but the way I feel about it is that I'm glad Lark and Termite are on their way. They're in transit.

**Faulkner:** The whole thing about this piecing of yourself – basically I see your point and agree with you about how this work could only come out of your capacity to really learn how to face yourself and remain persistent across nine years of distractions and pulls in other directions. And to be able to not really fight them, but actually use the transitions and interruptions as design vehicles.

**Phillips:** Well, I wish that it worked that way. I think it wasn't so much that the gaps in time were a help. It was more that it necessitated going over and over the work. I'm very line orientated and many of the lines remained the same for years. But the layering and the way one thing connected to another, the cutting up of the sections and the way they moved into one another did change over time.

**Faulkner:** You've spoken in interviews more factually about how you came to incorporate the Korean material, and it wasn't part of the original design. It sort of discovered you. Could you talk a little more about how you found it valuable strategically? How you found it useful as part of the expansion of the story?

**Phillips:** Lark's section of the book was the beginning of the book. Her first section of the book defines a lot of things about the town, what she knows, what's kept a secret from her, what she thinks about Termite, and what she thinks about herself. She states in that first section that Termite's father was killed early in the Korean War, and that they

never got his body back. They had to hold the service around a flag that was folded up, which of course is an echo of what happened to Billy in *Machine Dreams*. The world that I invented for the children was very much West Virginia based, and of living behind it, across the tracks, near the train yard, the alley, and the river. Termite has a fascination with trains and particularly for this double railroad tunnel that is very similar to a lot of WTA constructed chiseled stone (almost monumental) structures in West Virginia. So there was this double railroad tunnel with these double tracks that went across the river. On September 30, 1999, the AP Martha Mendoza and her team of AP reporters wrote the story of No Gun Ri, which had been hidden for fifty years. There was a big color photograph on the cover of *The Times* with this stone tunnel that looked exactly like what I had been imagining in the world of these children. I knew that his father had been killed in the Korean War early on, and I looked at that tunnel and knew that was why they had never found him. Then I began doing a lot of research into that incident and the beginning of the Korean War in general. I patterned everything that happens to Leavitt after what happened. This did not factually happen, but it could have happened. Of course, the children that he's trying to help are counterparts of Lark and Termite or echoes of them. The idea that Leavitt enters into the boy's perception momentarily at the beginning and then more as his senses expand as he grows closer to the transition, or however you want to term that passage.

**Faulkner:** That's amazing, all these symmetries and transitions and impacts, powerful forces that go beyond the immediate. It gives it tremendous depth.