

Jayne Anne Phillips Seminar 1/27/09

Faulkner: Our guest is Jayne Anne Phillips, and I'm really delighted to have her back with us. She was with us a good while ago for her last novel *Motherkind* in the year 2000. She writes slowly and deliberately. *Lark and Termite*, her new book, is a product of those nine years of meditation. In the process, she also has been the starter and director of a MFA program at Rutgers-Newark. She has started it from scratch and now has a full blown forty-eight credit program, which indicates the level of seriousness of it. It requires that students do a lot of literature work, which I think is necessary for one to become a good writer. By reading much, one learns to write well. It's a marvelous program. It's extremely diverse. It's probably the most ethnically diverse MFA program in the country, in part, because Newark itself is so diverse. Jayne Anne's earlier books include the story collection *Black Tickets*, which is what I first stumbled upon and had my mind turned inside out by. It remains one of the most compelling collections of short stories in a generation. The novel that emerged that really fully established her long standing reputation as a major, serious writer was *Machine Dreams*, followed by *Shelter* and *Motherkind*. These are books that altogether give us a portrait of character, of language, of the powers of human emotion, and of a transcendence of immediate issues that can be gained by steady concentration of matters at hand both by the author and her characters. Jayne Anne Phillips is a West Virginian by birth and is somebody who comes to us as a natural born storyteller – I always like to think that. So join me in welcoming this marvelous writer of this marvelous new novel, *Lark and Termite*, which has gotten universally rated reviews. I have not seen a book so highly commended in recent times. Please welcome, Jayne Anne Phillips.

(Applause)

Phillips: Thank you, Don. It's nice to be here.

Faulkner: I thought that we would start off with a little bit of conversation and then enter other questions. We were talking earlier about the way in which *Lark and Termite*

emerged and the forms of it. It's a book that – I didn't ask you your opinion about this, but I guess I'll deem it apropos – it has been compared to William Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. I think in part this is because of its structure, which moves around from story frame to story frame and then equally a mix of those stories together. Is that a satisfying thing to have your work compared to that other Faulkner?

Phillips: Sure. *The Sound and the Fury* is one of my favorite books, along with James Agee's *A Death in the Family* and a number of other books in which children are primary characters. I guess I would see Termite though as someone at the opposite end of the spectrum from Benjy. Faulkner famously said that Benjy was an animal, that he wouldn't recognize Caddy if she stood in front of him. Termite really is – at least I think of him as – someone with more than average intelligence that is trapped inside a body that doesn't work very well. He has this combination of sensory deprivation and sensory overstimulation. I try to represent that by using a third person point of view, by using language and repetition, and rhythm very specifically. He's also a conduit in a sense. The reader, from the very beginning of the book, is taken into confidence in a very specific way by all the characters really, but specifically by Termite, because Termite sees things and knows things that he himself doesn't recognize. Because the reader has read the other sections of the book, the reader recognizes things and actually knows more than the other characters of the book know about the reality of their world.

Faulkner: I know that you've been talking this talk frequently since you're actually touring with the book. Tell us a little bit about – in terms of the broad strokes of structuring – how you came to settle on the various choices that you made, your composition practices, and development. I think of you as a writer who has a very meditative sense of composition, that you think things through or let them sit with you until they take some shape. As you said earlier, the form starts to dictate the content. You follow your own intuitions very strongly.

Phillips: I've always said, in my work anyway, that material dictates form, not the other way around. My husband once cut out something I'd said and put it on the refrigerator.

Somebody had printed it in something, and he thought it was so funny that he put it on the fridge to taunt me. It was some quote like: "Writing is not a career; it's a calling, like working in a leper colony or becoming a nun." But I do think that's very much true. I think that writers who are writing for the right reasons know that it's really a very lonely thing to do and should be a very scary thing to do, because we should be working with materials that we have a resistance to. We're so close to the mark we should have to overcome a certain amount of resistance every time we go back into our work. So when I talk about becoming a nun, that's not so far off the mark. I began working as a poet, and I'm a failed poet like Faulkner. I think that failed poets make very interesting fiction writers, because they have that sense of language, the sense of every phrase, and yet they're going to be writing novels that are composed of thousands and thousands of phrases. Language for me is always the entry point into a story or novel. The first line of this novel was Lark's line: "I move his chair into the yard under the tree and then Nonie carries him out." She laid out the whole book for me in a sense, because in that first section of hers, which is now the second section of the book, she talked about the town, she talked about what she knows, what's been kept secret from her, the fact that she doesn't know who her father is, and she's never been told much about her mother. She knows that Termite's father was killed early in the Korean War, but they never got his body back. They had the service around the flag, knowing that this is wrong and it can never be right. And that whole world of the river, Termite's fascinations with sound, and the way Termite repeats phrases or repeats the last three syllables of what was said to him, more tones than words, the fact that he's overcome with big sounds like storms, the sound of the train going overhead in this double railroad tunnel where the children go and play in both summer and winter. I wanted to set the book in '59, because I wanted to locate Termite and his family in the world in which he wouldn't have been labeled too specifically – what was wrong with him wouldn't have been labeled so specifically. The phrases that Nonie's been told about him are that he simply is cared for and people have different ideas about how much he knows and what he can do. I was very much into Lark's character and much of the Nonie sections of the book when the No Gun Ri massacre news broke in *The Times* in '99. The photograph that was on the cover of *The Times* was a photograph of a double railroad tunnel, exactly the shape that I had imagined

for the children. I looked at the picture and realized that that was what happened to Leavitt, Termite's father. This book has been full of kismet-timed coincidences.

Faulkner: Even the date of (?)

Phillips: Even the date. A lot of my research mainly consisted of reading a lot about the beginning of the Korean War and reading all the articles on the No Gun Ri incident. I tried to make a world for Leavitt that would be completely believable and yet what happens in the course is created but could easily have happened.

Faulkner: You've written about war. It's an important issue in your work and in your thinking. It doesn't seem like a subject that you would naturally pick up or find yourself drawn to, yet in reading your work it does seem that you're drawn to it.

Phillips: Why do you think I wouldn't be drawn to it, Don?

Faulkner: It's not something that anyone, except maybe crazy people like Hemmingway, would be willing to write about. What I was trying to draw you out of is your sense of purpose in selecting subjects that you do and that they have a multilayered impact. There's the immediacy of circumstance of characters caught in a poor situation, but then there's a larger overview about the nature of war.

Phillips: Well, I grew up with my dad, who was a WWII veteran. He never talked about it, but when I was in my late teens I found a scrapbook. In it there were these little tiny black and white pictures. There were a couple of small pictures that you almost couldn't see what they were. I asked him about them, and he said that they were the bodies on a beach that he had buried with a bulldozer. My dad, after the war, had a concrete company. He always worked selling heavy equipment, selling bulldozers and those kinds of machines. I think a writer is a person of permeable boundaries. You are yourself, you can easily imagine being somebody, and sometimes the sensation of being somebody else becomes who you really are. I could just feel the sensation of being inside his body as

he's on this machine. It's an inversion of what they really do, which is building things; they were burying things. That became a central image in *Machine Dreams*. And then of course Vietnam was the formative war for my generation, and I lost close friends there. That figured in some of the stories and *Machine Dreams*, and became a central thing of a lot of my work. I think the line that Leavitt speaks in this book is "War never ends. It's all one war." I think another character says, "When the soldier dies, it goes on for generations." Because each one of them leaves behind this kind of absence, a multiplication of death that you don't really think about. That's a question that the book asks, that it does all seem to be one war, but different reasons for them.

Faulkner: Let's open the questions up to the floor.

Audience: I read and very much enjoyed your book. I read that you had seen this boy thirty years before and that stayed in your mind and that's very much where you got the idea for *Termite*. Could you talk about how you worked that image into your writing and how from there you developed the character of Lark?

Phillips: You said you're a teacher?

Audience: No.

Phillips: I probably should have never told anyone this, but thirty years ago I saw a boy sitting in a 1950s suburban lawn chair. I was visiting a friend in my hometown, and she had an apartment in an attached garage behind the house. We were looking out of the window down onto this beautiful grass alley. There were several houses that affronted on the alley. The boy was just sitting right underneath her window facing this empty alley with his legs folded up under him holding this dry cleaner bag up in front of his face and blowing on it so that he was looking through it. I said to her, "Who is that? What is he doing?" She said, "I don't know. He sits that way for hours." That was just something that I never forgot seeing. Looking back on it, the novel answers questions for me: Who is that? What is he doing? That was simply a memory at the time or an image that I

carried around with me. I think several years after that, a friend of mine named Mary Sherman, a wonderful American artist – we were living in Cambridge and we were there for a birthday party, because birthdays figure into the book too. I was looking at her sketchbook and I admired this drawing. She just tore it out of the sketchbook and gave it to me. She wrote across the top Termite, something, something, something, in sort of illegible writing. The minute I saw it, I recognized that boy. It looked like him. He seems to be sort of turned to the side and holding something up. I don't know when I actually started working with Lark's voice, but clearly there had to be someone very connected to him who felt very protective of him to begin this story and bring the reader into it. In terms of meditation, I think writing for a writer is a kind of assimilation because you really are just sitting there, working, gaining access to a voice and following the voice itself into the book.

Faulkner: This drawing is the premise piece.

Phillips: The designers I think did a wonderful job with the novel, but that drawing which I first suggested as a cover of the book is actually not. They are using it as a premise piece. In the book, it is a drawing that Lark has made of Termite. She, like her mother, sketches.

Audience: When you are working with young writers, how do you encourage them to develop their characters in a novel?

Phillips: In the first place, I don't encourage them to keep developing a novel as a young writer. There are exceptions, but normally people learn to write stories. That's how you learn to write novels. You learn to sustain a story. Then you begin to take on longer and longer forms. Sometimes people can write novels in short forms and that can work, but I encourage writers in our program to basically work on stories. If they really want to work on novels, they can. Normally, I think you learn how to write a character by working on scenes. It's kind of like being an actor. An actor works on scenes before they do the whole play. I also encourage them to read widely and deeply. As I said to one

undergraduate class and I've been given very bad evaluations for saying this: "If you don't read good literature, you will certainly never write it." I think reading is really important because it's that emergence into voice. It happens on a conscious level, and it happens on an unconscious level, but only if you really make language your conduit.

Faulkner: There's not a canon for the program. Are the students moving through an expected range?

Phillips: We have three things happening. We have a number of literature courses that students can elect to take. Seven courses, they can really take anything. It's very interdisciplinary. They don't even necessarily need to be in the English department. They can be in journalism or history or any number of different departments. We also have the writers of Newark courses in which students are reading as textbooks books of the writers coming each year in the series. Each of our workshops assigns a reading list, so there's a kind of triple contingent to reading that students are experiencing.

Faulkner: Does it include Phillip Roth?

Phillips: It depends. Phillip does not come to our reading series.

Faulkner: I was just thinking of Newark.

Phillips: I think his work has been included in a workshop or two depending on what the writer wants to assign.

Kennedy: Faulkner has been associated with this particular novel. He has been such an influential force in the world of writing. How do you relate to him as a writer, or how do you see him in relation to your novel?

Phillips: It's an homage in a sense. I loved Faulkner growing up. I've always been attracted to writers who I see as outlaws. It's always as though they've gone to the other

side and come back and they are bearing witness to things that we don't see. I have been to Roanoke, and I have been to (?). It's actually a nice little house. There's a shotgun porch in the back of the house. It's in Oxford, Mississippi. Katherine Anne Porter was another writer in *The Jilting of Granny Weatherall* – you get the sense of having gone beyond the border of depth and come back. Other writers like William Burroughs, (?), Laura Ingalls, Nadine Gordimer – there are a lot of writers who seems very disparate, but to me they have this connection. With Faulkner, it was although he had no rules. He just made them up. He was so gifted as a writer that he could do that. Comments about this book have included that *The Sound and the Fury* is about the demise of the south, this falling moral center losing grips. In this book, it's almost as though the female characters triumph over certain scenarios. It's a novel that's moving in a very different direction. It's not about the dismantling of a history. It's more about the persistence of life itself, and the fact that death maybe is not the end of those energies.

Audience: When you started writing, did you start out in a certain style or form and then progress to the novel, or did that form just lengthen itself? Do you know what I mean?

Phillips: Yes. I started out writing poems – bad poems, though some of them were published. Then I started writing prose poems. A number of American poets were working in that form. Then I began writing short fiction. Some of the short one-page fictions in *Black Tickets* were some of my earliest successful work. I was very interested in compressing a story to one paragraph or two paragraphs and using a kind of elliptical form in which the plot stems out from the center. I think in a way I taught myself to write prose by writing these very compressed fictions. Then I began writing stories that were monologues or that were different characters speaking in a Rashōmon way and went from there to writing more traditional stories. I remember when I moved from writing poems in broken lines to writing paragraph forms, it felt incredibly liberating. I feel that paragraphs are a very subversive form, because when you're reading a poem, and it looks like a poem, we're always aware that we're reading a poem because of the shape of the words. But if we're reading a paragraph we don't arm ourselves against it because everything is written in paragraphs. Newspapers are in paragraphs, instruction manuals

are in paragraphs, everything we read is more or less in paragraph form. So we kind of take it into ourselves without stepping back from it. It's wonderful that the voice in fiction works that way. When you read "I crossed the street," that voice that's in your head is your voice in a sense. It's a main line image in language that I think is miraculous. I feel as though it's a huge advantage of a prose writer and fiction writer to make use of. I moved into longer and longer forms I think because that long arc of the novel gives me space to live my multitasking life and allows me to put together something that is compelling enough that I can reenter it as many times as I might need to.

Faulkner: I've never talked with you about whether you have any thought of yourself vis-à-vis the Southern writer. Maybe it would be easier to ask you to respond to one of your own lines: "In West Virginia, you are your people, your home place, your town, your county. People have one home, and home is where you come from. West Virginians are a less mobile population than almost any other in the country." You're not talking about the destruction or demise of the South; instead you're looking at the internal structure. In light of so much that's made the importance of place, or writers of the deeper South, it's clear that West Virginia has a huge impact on you, but I've never been able to get out where West Virginia itself actually stands.

Phillips: It stands alone.

Faulkner: There's something that's very powerful for you. It's not so much that you see yourself as part of another tradition or anything but something that's a very strong course, and it stems through your work.

Phillips: I think West Virginia is the crux and focus of Appalachia, because it is the only state that's entirely within Appalachia. The South does not claim West Virginia, and the North does not claim West Virginia. The North is afraid of West Virginia. The South is mad at West Virginia for ceding and not supporting the Civil War awareness in the South. It's interesting. I think on the one hand, the South and West Virginia seem very dense as

places, because the North, the East particularly, sees the South as the past, or it feels as though the past is more real there than it is here, where everything has been layered and layered and the populations are so much denser. Other parts of the country project all kinds of unconscious fears and desires on the South. There was an interesting documentary called *Will the Real West Virginia Please Stand Up?* It went back into some of the images that have been put out there about the South and about West Virginia particularly. It was really enlightening. I don't think place has been any more important to me than it has been to any number of writers, for instance Bill Kennedy. Place has been really important in all of your work, but that place seems to recognize the people in the audience, because for some of them it's their place too. I think any writer who works over time, works from a place, whatever that place is, a physical place that has part of it, a cultural world, and a particular history. All of that pours into the work in some way, whether we're distinctly referencing certain places or not.

Audience: I was just curious – I'm a parent of a child very much like Termites. This work was very satisfying to me because you were able to capture the subtleties of a child with a mental disability. I was wondering if you have personal reasons for writing about a character like this?

Phillips: Thank you for saying that. It's nice to hear that coming from you. Well, the answer is yes. I remember from the time I was very young, there used to be a house in Buckhannon that was right near Main Street. It was actually a house that was attached to the county jail. I'm sure the jail came after the house, and it was a very nice little jail. There was a house there and as you drove up the main boulevard onto Main Street, there was a window in this little house that looked out and there was always a man sitting there. He was someone with Down's syndrome who was at least in his sixties or seventies and had always lived at home with his parents no doubt. He was always looking out that window. I just remember being so aware of him. Two of the names in the dedication of the book were children I knew. One of them had a physical disability; the other had a number of disabilities. I was always aware that they had very strong sensations and perceptions, and as you say a kind of subtlety to what they communicated, but almost a

sense of aura that was very powerful, at least if you were receptive to it. That was certainly part of what I was trying to get at that we can't make assumptions about what other sentient beings are feeling, and in fact we might receive certain hints from them that expand the dimensions of what we ourselves might be aware of.

Audience: You said earlier that writers are very vulnerable and scared. How do you get past that fear and put meaning into your work?

Phillips: I'm sure what's inside the work – it's not really so much a personal discovery as gaining access to something that's bigger than one personality. It's really as though literature is a slow accumulation of meaning as it is in story and language. It's about meaning; it's about the idea that this isn't just a random universe. It's not a random occurrence that we live in a certain period of time. I think the writer is trying to connect one thing to another and it's not easy. You probably discover a meaning more than impose a meaning on a particular world, but then have some connective layering effect on the world we live in. I think people really did used to read for guidance, spiritual sustenance, and for hints on how to live. They would practice for life and practice for death, almost the way actors on the stage rehearse a play by reading books. I think that's one thing that's really missing for the last couple of generations. The idea of being involved in a media universe is the idea of images and sequences of words as opposed to narratives, but our lives really are narratives. That is we live in a particular arc. To be robbed of that sense of narrative about our lives and the lives we're connected with is a loss.

Audience: How do you know when to go back to certain sections and chop up certain parts so they work?

Phillips: I don't really know how to answer that. I guess I could only say that I looked at the entire manuscript except for the very end, and then the last three sections, and began to look at the associative narrative, the associative arc inside it. Then I cut sections up a

little differently so the associations moved from one world to the other in a way that carried the reader with them. I guess that would be my best answer to that question.

Audience: In regards to writing in the voice of a person with a disability, do you feel pressure on you that you have to get it right? Do you feel like that makes you a better writer or is it in some ways detrimental?

Phillips: To me?

Audience: Yes, the pressure that you feel to get it right and authentic.

Phillips: Well, I think you feel that pressure in any case. It's a little more difficult when you're trying to speak for someone who physically can't speak. I think I have always written from the points of view of people who are not particularly articulate or are not seen as being articulate. I initially didn't even plan to have Termite's point of view involved in the book. I wanted him to be the focal point around which the book would turn, and he would not ever be heard from. I was simply so compelled by that that I couldn't resist entering into his point of view, and once there the point of view itself seemed to just to pull me in with it. Again it's very much trying to move inside perception, which is what I really have always been doing. I have been much more concerned with perception itself, with how people think of how fantasy, thought, expectation, and dream – the way these things can exist outside time, outside the world in which our bodies exist. To represent that in language has always been what I have tried to do, so Termite's point of view was maybe what I've been working towards in a sense.

Faulkner: This opens up some of the technique discussion that you were talking about before. This is from an interview. A questioner asks: "Do you find short story writing much different from novel writing? An essential part of your answer is a simple statement. You say, "Well, I think I write stories in my novels." Do you stand by that? Is that some of the way that you get versatility into the line and structure or even also a possibility of moving things around without undercutting the momentum [end of tape].

Phillips: ...the work of silence, the work that happens between the lines, and the work that happens at the end of the line. I've always said that short fiction shouldn't just be clever little snippets of prose. They really should work as stories, and they should have endings that open up something for the reader, that sort of drop the reader off a cliff so to speak. This is going to continue beyond the page. I love the idea of making leaps inside of works of prose. I think the novel form allows me to do that. My novels are never exactly conventional in the way that they're put together. Each book seems to pull me in and teach me how to write it, in the same way that a good book teaches a reader how to read it. You enter that book and you begin to understand what that writer is doing, and then you go with it. That's certainly the kind of writing that I'm most interested in reading and writing. I want to do writing that is validatory to me in some way.

Audience: I noticed that many parts of the book were published as short stories. Why? Is this something you do to help develop your work?

Phillips: The novels I write do have sections, and some of those sections stand alone, so as time has gone on and people ask me for work, I sometimes fashion something from the book, or a piece just works as a short piece. I think the writer operates in a kind of vacuum. Seeing those pieces in print during the long process of writing the book just sort of convinces the writer of the book's reality in a way, and it's very encouraging. Writers have to read their work as strangers. We have to see the work completely outside ourselves and see that it stands. Seeing work published, seeing work in print is very different from reading it in your own printout off your own printer.

Audience: I'm curious about your MFA program and do you publish works through that program?

Phillips: It's too bad that all the money for small presses dried up, because they were very important to book arts and to writers. We actually have a course in our MFA that produces a chapbook. That you can take a printmaking course and do a fine arts binding

and cover for a digitized version of your own work – book of poems, a story, a certain novel. I think what people are doing now is doing zines. Zines are interesting, but they are very low production value. They can be put together with a stapler. The whole fine arts piece of it seems to no longer be a part of it, and that's a shame.

Audience: I enjoy writing. I'm not a writer. That would be reaching far beyond, but I know when I start writing I write this conceptual idea of what I want to get across. Is there a right way to do that or is that wrong to start off that way?

Phillips: No. I think writers have a relationship to their own writing that's very much like a relationship to a person. It has very much to do with the way you think, the way you see things, the way that your sentences work, and what you want from it. There are definitely writers who come at something – they are trying to do a particular thing and they have a certain idea, and they might do research on that idea before they begin, and it's all preparation for getting over the resistance of actually doing the writing. That's the ritual for that person. There are other people like myself where I don't want to go into it with an idea because that would seem to almost limit what could happen. Language for me has no limitation. It simply leads one deeper and deeper into what feels like an ocean that you could descend deeper and deeper into.

Audience: You were talking about trying to get outside of your own work to read. What are ways to do that and how do you become able to read your work as you're reading it for the first time?

Phillips: I think I just do it naturally at this point. I think part of what writing classes do is teaching the writer to step away from the work. When people read each other's work, they're commenting on each other's work, they're editing work, they're line editing, they begin to think like editors. I think once you hit a certain point, when you see your own work on a page, you do begin to read it as an editor. A really fine writer is the best editor he or she will have. I guess that's simply part of a second phase of what you're doing and

that's revision. I think it's just something you learn over time. It begins to come naturally.

Audience: After having written all the stories you have, do you still get writer's block or anything like that, and if so what do you do to get through it?

Phillips: I don't know what writer's block is, or else I live in writer's block. I'm really not sure which. I think writing is very hard and difficult. I can't say that it's fun. I love that story about Thomas Wolfe marching around the block at night and saying I wrote five thousand words today or whatever it was he was crowing. I don't find it pleasurable, but I find it so deeply satisfying to move through that process and get that page done or that paragraph done and to have finished creating a world within the parameters of a book. It's so deeply satisfying. I think that's why writers write. I've always said happiness is not important. Happiness is mandatory like sadness. It's meaning that's important. Thank you all for coming today.

Faulkner: Thank you Jayne Anne.

Jayne Anne Phillips Seminar

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