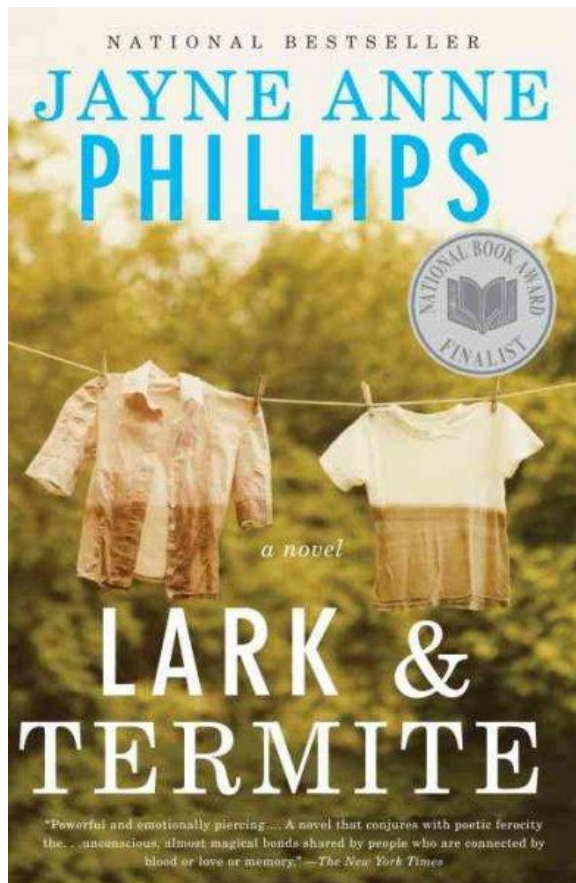


Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1392776>

About the Book



A glowing, wonderfully alive novel from one of our most admired and best-loved writers, her first book in nine years. *Lark and Termite* is set during the 1950s in West Virginia and Korea. It is a story of the power of loss and love, the echoing ramifications of war, family secrets, dreams and ghosts, and the unseen, almost magical bonds that unite and sustain us.

At its center, two children: Lark, on the verge of adulthood, and her brother, Termite, a child unable to walk and talk but filled with radiance. Around them, their mother, Lola, a haunting but absent presence; their aunt Nonie, a matronly, vibrant woman in her fifties, who raises them; and Termite's father, Corporal Robert Leavitt, who finds himself caught up in the chaotic early months of the Korean War.

Told with deep feeling, the novel invites us to enter into the hearts and thoughts of the leading characters, even into Termite's intricate, shuttered consciousness. We are with Leavitt, trapped by friendly fire alongside the Korean children he tries to rescue. We see Lark's dreams for Termite and her own future, and how, with the aid of a childhood love and a spectral social worker, she makes them happen. We learn of Lola's love for her soldier husband and her children, and unravel the mystery of her relationship with Nonie. We discover the lasting connections between past and future on the night the town experiences an overwhelming flood, and we follow Lark and Termite as their lives are changed forever.

About the Author



Jayne Anne Phillips was born in Buckhannon, West Virginia. She is the author of four novels, *Lark and Termite* (2008), *MotherKind* (2000), *Shelter* (1994) and *Machine Dreams* (1984), and two collections of widely anthologized stories, *Fast Lanes* (1987) and *Black Tickets* (1979). She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, and a Bunting Fellowship.

She has been awarded the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction (1980) and an Academy Award in Literature (1997) by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her work has been translated into twelve languages, and has appeared in *Granta*, *Harper's*, *DoubleTake*, and *The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*. She is currently Professor of English and Director of the MFA Program at Rutgers-Newark, the State University of New Jersey.

Awards

Lark & Termite was a finalist for the National Book Award (<http://www.nationalbook.org/>).

Reviews

Booklist

"Phillips, who made a big splash with *Black Tickets* (1979) and *Machine Dreams* (1986), has fallen somewhat off the literary radar but comes back full force with a new novel that certainly reminds us of her strength as a fiction writer. Set in her native West Virginia, the author places her multi-voiced narrative in the 1950s. Several characters, all related, tell their version, or let the narrator tell it, of family life, beginning with Robert Leavitt, an army corporal stationed in Korea during that dreadful conflict. Leavitt dies tragically overseas, leaving behind a young widow and infant son. In alternating sections, Leavitt's Korean experiences are chronicled, as are his survivors' attempts to put together a family that can decently function without husband and father. Phillips' understanding of each of her characters is typically immaculate. A sense of sluggishness in the novel's first pages gives way to an appreciation of how moving this in-depth definition of what

makes a family is. Expect demand from her fans; on the other hand, readers unfamiliar with her should be encouraged to make her acquaintance."

Library Journal

In her latest novel, Phillips (*Machine Dreams; Motherkind*) works with favorite themes in a tale of secrets, family bonds, and the power of love related through multiple perspectives and set during the 1950s. Central to the narrative are a remarkable pair of siblings orphaned by the Korean War. Born the day his soldier father perished in the notorious No Gun Ri massacre, the young boy called Termite possesses unusual perception unnoticed by most observers because of his severe disabilities. His prospects in tiny Winfield, WV, seem dismal, but teenage sister Lark, who adores her little brother, won't give up. She schemes to gain a happy mutual future even while she is pursued romantically by a much older man, threatened with Termite's removal by the state, and endangered by approaching floodwaters. These suspenseful plot elements (including more than a hint of the supernatural) are supported by sensitively rendered characters and finely drawn Appalachian and Asian locales that create a poignant story with broad reader appeal. Recommended for most fiction collections.

BookPage Reviews

Momentous return for beloved writer

It's been nine years since Jayne Anne Phillips' last book and almost 30 since the acclaimed author burst on the scene with her dazzling short-story collection *Black Tickets*. Like her previous work, *Lark and Termite* uses highly evocative, poetic language to explore the complexities of ordinary relationships—mothers, fathers, daughters, lovers—but this time, they're set against a wider backdrop of war and environmental destruction.

Lark and Termite tells two overlapping stories: the death of Robert Leavitt, a young soldier in Korea in 1950, and four days in the life of his severely handicapped son on the eve of a great flood nine years later. These two characters never meet, but their intuitive sense of one another fuels this intensely spiritual novel.

Termite and his half-sister Lark live with Nonie, their aunt and caregiver, in small-town West Virginia. Termite is unable to walk or talk, but the teenage Lark bears the burden of his care lightly, almost joyfully. Hovering over this family are the spirits of Termite's father and the children's mother, the unstable, enigmatic Lola, who could not take care of either child.

Using multiple narrators, *Lark and Termite* invites the reader to experience the perceptions, memories and desires of the characters. Phillips has a gift for narrative voice and shifting time, from the brisk no-nonsense tones of hardworking Nonie to Leavitt's erotically charged recollections of Lola. Even Termite, in a literary nod to the character of Benjy in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, expresses himself in intense monologues of sensory observations. Events and actions echo and repeat themselves like a carnival hall of mirrors, and Phillips doesn't shy away from bold symbolism or her notion that the bonds of love—familial, erotic, paternal—can conquer time and space. Only once does the book step from the spiritual to what reads as a plot contrivance, and this change in direction strikes an artificial note. Still, one misstep is a small price to pay for any reader who welcomes Phillips' return to fiction.

Kirkus Reviews

Phillips (English/Rutgers-Newark; *MotherKind*, 2000, etc.) divides her novel between July 1950, when a young soldier in the Korean War dreams about his unborn son, and July 1959, when that son, an orphaned hydrocephalic nine-year-old, is being raised by his older half-sister and their aunt in West Virginia. Basically blind, his language limited to the repetition of other people's sentence endings, Termite is severely mentally and physically disabled, but Phillips gives him an active, if unconvincing inner life based on his sensitive hearing. Termite's 17-year-old half-sister Lark devotes herself to his care, a devotion based not on a sense of duty but on pure love. Raised by her Aunt Nonie, Lark has no memory of her mother Lola and no idea that her father is Charlie, who runs the restaurant where Nonie works. Years ago Nonie and Charlie were lovers. Then Nonie left for Atlanta. Charlie brought Lola to live with Nonie after their mother's death and the three fell into a convoluted lovers' triangle. Charlie moved back home, Lola had Charlie's baby, Nonie moved home and, when Lark was three, Lola sent her to Nonie. Charlie and Nonie became lovers again but never married. Lola became a nightclub singer. She found unexpected happiness with a young clarinetist, Bobby Leavitt. They married and she was pregnant before he shipped overseas. Although Phillips returns repeatedly to the tunnel where Corporal Leavitt finds himself trapped trying to save a Korean girl and her brother from friendly fire, the novel's heart lies with Lark. Phillips is not afraid of symbolism. Lark often carries Termite into a nearby tunnel. A mysterious ghostly, perhaps Christ-like young man appears bearing gifts and then disappears. A flood roars through town causing destruction and revealing hidden truths. As usual Phillips writes up a storm (this time literally), but without a convincing story, readers may find themselves sinking into a marsh of sensory overload.

Publishers Weekly

From Phillips (*Motherkind; Shelter*) comes a long-awaited and wonderful coming-of-age tale of grief and survival. The story straddles a parallel six-day period in July, one in 1959—during which 17-year-old Lark; her brother, Termite, who can't talk; and their aunt and caretaker, Nonie, are struggling to balance hope and despair in small town West Virginia—and nine years earlier, when Termite's father, Robert Leavitt, serves a tour in Korea. Lark, living with her aunt without knowing who her father is or why her mother gave her up, was nine years old when baby Termite landed on their doorstep. Nonie works long hours at a local restaurant to support the hodgepodge family, leaving Lark to take over mothering duties, but as Lark finishes secretarial school and realizes how limited the options are for her and Termite, forces of nature and odd individuals shed light on mysteries of the past and lend a hand in steering the next course of action. Through Robert and Nonie's stories and by exposing the innermost thoughts of each character, Phillips creates a wrenching portrait of devotion while keeping the suspense at a palpating level.

Literary Criticism

Trapped

Jayne Anne Phillips' new novel, *Lark and Termite*, opens in Korea on July 26, 1950, as Corporal Robert (Bobby) Leavitt leads an evacuation of refugees through rice paddies, all the while daydreaming of the pregnant wife, Lola, he left behind. The rhythm of the prose is perfectly cadenced, marching us along with Bobby: "Diverted onto the railroad tracks, they keep a dull time, their sandals slap-thudding the muddy ties."

Chosen for a language-immersion course in Seoul, Bobby learned to speak Korean phonetically. He observes that his South Korean instructors "were angry and their country was defenseless; everyone would pay. Meaning didn't matter; the real content of the words was in sound itself."

Sound is crucial throughout the book. It's not surprising to learn that before the war, Bobby played trumpet in "ballrooms and swank clubs" in Louisville, Kentucky. This is where he met Lola, a jazz singer eight years his senior, a seductive, enigmatic woman with secrets she won't reveal even to Bobby. He knows she has a daughter she sent off to live with her sister in West Virginia, for instance, but "Lola wouldn't say her daughter's name, even to him. I gave her a bird's name. Maybe she'll grow up safe and fly away."

When Bobby thinks of Lola, the prose breaks from the relentless beat of marching into phrases more like jazz riffs:

Moving in near darkness like a slow, detached shape, she turned on the stairs as she paused to look down at him. Leavitt sees that shape now in his fragmented sleep or behind his eyes, glowing, asexual, like a flicker of light opening into himself. He can't shake the feeling that seeing her, wanting her, playing behind her in the club, making love to her days and nights in her rooms that became his rooms, were practice for staying alive.

Staying alive is Bobby's one task as he moves across the hostile landscape, forced at the end of the first chapter to hide under a railroad overpass when he and the refugees are caught in misguided strafing by American planes.

Another of the book's narrators is Lark, whose soft, Southern voice sets up a new musical pattern. Her story takes place nine years after Bobby's, though on the same day of the month; she is taking care of her younger half-brother, Termite, who is hydrocephalic. He can't speak except to echo what others have just said, and he must be lifted into his chair or into the wagon in which Lark pulls him through the streets of the small town of Winfield, West Kentucky--through its ruined lots and fallow meadows out to the river, where they can sit in a railroad tunnel and hear the trains. "I'm so used to be with Termite," she says, "he feels like alone to me. He's like a hum that always hums so the edge of where I am is blunt and softened."

The present action of the book is condensed into four days and culminates in a flood that traps Lark and Termite in their attic. The narration weaves from Bobby, shot, bleeding, and trapped in the tunnel; to Lark and her aunt Nonie, struggling to keep Social Services from taking Termite; to Termite himself, immersed so completely in the present that his perception consists of sounds and sights blending together into one pulsing experience. There's a stuttering quality to Termite's narration--not in the sense of stuttering speech but of light stuttering through blinds. Termite looks at the world through a three-foot strip of blue dry-cleaning plastic that he likes to hold up in the wind:

He sees through the blue and it goes away, he sees through the blue and it goes away again. He breathes, blowing just high. The blue moves but not too much, the blue moves and stays blue and moves.

This stuttering is echoed in the way that events told from Lark's point of view are told again through Termite's, or expanded upon from Nonie's adult perspective. There's a sense in the narrative of moving forward and then folding back, not unlike the way Lark folds food coloring into the icing of one of Termite's birthday cakes. A fierce sense of musicality makes Lark and Termite impossible to put down. Phillips is a one-woman band. For her, language is more than a tool for storytelling. Sounds and cadences collide, merge, or blend, so that reading her prose deepens until it becomes like listening to a symphony or a jazz quartet. I read almost the entire book in one fevered sitting, pushing on despite Sunday chores and family members coming in and out of the room. *Lark and Termite* thrilled me and will send me back to Phillips's earlier work.

Source: Crapo, Trish. "Trapped." *Women's Review of Books* 26.3 (May-June 2009): 20-21. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 296. Detroit: Gale, 2011. Literature Resource Center.

<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

Discussion Questions Source: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

1. Have you read any of Jayne Anne Phillips's other books? If so, in what ways is *Lark and Termite* similar to her earlier work, and how is it different?
2. Reread the quotations in the epigraph. Now that you've read the novel, what does each one mean to you?
3. On page 5, Leavitt thinks, "The war makes ghosts of them all." In what ways does this prove true? Which ghosts are literal, and which metaphorical?
4. Who is the strongest person in the novel? The weakest?
5. Mothers, and substitute mothers, play a substantial role in the novel. What do you think Jayne Anne Phillips is trying to say about motherhood?
6. Compare and contrast the sibling relationships in the novel: Lark and Termite, Nonie and Lola, and the nameless Korean pair.
7. Discuss the sense of sound as it relates to each of the main characters. In what ways does sound function differently for Termite than for Nonie or Lark? What about Leavitt and Lola? What does the sense of sound say about the

importance of language?

8. Two different tunnels are the settings for major developments in the novel. What do they signify?

9. On page 24, Lola says of Lark, “I gave her a bird’s name. Maybe she’ll grow up safe and fly away.” And on page 34 Lark discusses Termite’s nickname: “I think he’s in himself like a termite’s in a wall.” What other names in the novel carry metaphorical weight?

10. Why does Charlie take care of Lola? What about Onslow?

11. “Termite can only tell the truth,” Lark says on page 85. Who else tells the truth? Who lies? What are the ramifications?

12. What role does Solly play? What about his father, Nick?

13. Throughout the novel, we revisit events from different perspectives. How do the multiple takes change your understanding of what’s happening?

14. On page 144, Lark says, “It’s almost as though Stamble and Termite are related versions of something, but Stamble walks around in the world and Termite doesn’t.” Who is Robert Stamble? Why does Lark see him?

15. Where do you think Termite’s new wheelchair really came from?

16. Discuss the flood. How is each character’s life affected?

17. Reread and discuss the final Termite passages, on pages 249–250. What is revealed there?

18. Does the novel have a happy ending?

Multimedia

Jayne Anne Phillips' Fractured, Fictional Family (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100057708>

A discussion of the novel on NPR’s *Weekend Edition*.

Lingering Love and Loss in 'Lark & Termite' (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99045374>

A discussion of the novel on NPR's *Fresh Air*.

Further Reading

Machine Dreams by Jayne Anne Phillips

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1327557>

(Call number: Fiction Phillips)

In her highly acclaimed debut novel, the bestselling author of *Shelter* introduces the Hampsons, an ordinary, small-town American family profoundly affected by the extraordinary events of history. Here is a stunning chronicle that begins with the Depression and ends with the Vietnam War, revealed in the thoughts, dreams, and memories of each family member. Mitch struggles to earn a living as Jeans becomes the main breadwinner, working to complete college and raise the family. While the couple fight to keep their marriage intact, their daughter Danner and son Billy forge a sibling bond of uncommon strength. When Billy goes off to Vietnam, Danner becomes the sole bond linking her family, whose dissolution mirrors the fractured state of America in the 1960s.

Shelter by Jayne Anne Phillips

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1090587>

(Call number: Fiction Phillips)

In a West Virginia forest in 1963, a group of children at summer camp enter a foreboding Eden and experience an unexpected rite of passage. *Shelter* is an astonishing portrayal of an American loss of innocence as witnessed by a mysterious drifter named Parson, two young sisters, Lenny and Alma, and a feral boy called Buddy. Together they come to understand bravery and the importance of compassion.

Phillips unearths a dangerous beauty in this primeval terrain and in the hearts of her characters. Lies, secrets, erotic initiations, and the bonds of love between friends, families, and generations are transformed in a leafy wilderness undiminished by societal rules and dilemmas.

Author's official website

<http://www.jayneannephillips.com/>

Information and resources on the author.

Read-Alikes

Lucia, Lucia by Adriana Trigiani

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1209029>

(Call number: Fiction Trigiani)

Forced to choose between duty to her family and her own dreams, Lucia finds herself in the midst of a sizzling scandal in which secrets are revealed, her beloved career is jeopardized, and the Sartoris' honor is tested.

Unexpected Blessings by Barbara Taylor Bradford

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1232610>

(Call number: Fiction Bradford)

Evan Hughes, Emma's American great-granddaughter, is trying to integrate into the powerful Harte family. She is caught between her estranged parents, her new family, and new love. But a dangerous enemy hovers in the background. Tessa Longden, Evan's cousin, is battling her husband for custody of their daughter, Adele. When Adele suddenly goes missing, Tessa is forced to seek help from her half-sister Linnet--a woman who has been her rival all their lives.

Ya-Yas In Bloom by Rebecca Wells

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1237561>

(Call number: Fiction Wells)

An emotionally charged addition to Wells's award-winning bestseller "*Little Altars Everywhere*" and #1 "New York Times" bestseller "*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *Ya-Yas in Bloom*" reveals the roots of the Ya-Yas' friendship in the 1930s and roars with all the raw power of Vivi Abbott Walker's 1962 T-Bird through 60 years of marriage, child-raising, and hair-raising family secrets.

The Memory Keeper's Daughter by Kim Edwards

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1249396>

(Call number: Fiction Edwards)

To spare his wife the hardship of raising a baby with Down Syndrome, the doctor tried to kill the baby. But the presiding nurse took it and raised the baby as her own. The joy and pain experienced by the two families form a stark contrast in the story.

Summaries from AADL.org Catalog

Extra!

As a group, attempt to learn a few new words in Korean such as Bobby did in the novel. If there are any fluent Korean speakers in the group perhaps this person

would not mind teaching the rest of the group some key phrases. Otherwise, borrow something from the library's language learning collection:
<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/search/callnum/lang-learn-kor>

