

**Jayne Anne  
Phillips:  
*In Their Own Country*  
transcript**

**1 Kate:** I know that many young writers feel that in your homeplace, there are so many voices that say, “Don’t talk about that” or “Do talk about this.”

**Jayne Anne:** Well, I was definitely always the one who talked about things she shouldn’t talk about. I think it’s really a prerequisite for a writer. (laughs)

**Kate:** That’s the voice of Jayne Anne Phillips, who grew up in Buckhannon, West Virginia and became an internationally known writer. I’m Kate Long, and this is *In Their Own Country*, a radio series that brings you the work and thoughts of some of the best fiction writers and poets coming out of West Virginia today. This time, it’s Jayne Anne Phillips.

**2 Jayne Anne:** I think language has to take chances. Language has to talk about what we might not speak about, but we do think about.

**Kate:** That’s Jayne Anne Phillip’s territory! What we don’t talk about, but do think about.

She burst onto the national literary map in 1979 with *Black Tickets*, a wildly sensual book of short, intense pieces that got five-star critical reviews. She was only 26 then. In the years since then, her work has been translated into at least 12 languages.

**Jayne Anne:** I’ve always thought of the writer as the conscience of a culture. Not in the sense of “This is wrong, this is not wrong,” but in terms of searching for meaning, and in maintaining that there IS meaning. I think writing is an act against randomness, against the idea that things simply happen, that there’s no reason, there’s no eye in the sky. There’s nothing but us, sort of fumbling around. And I think that’s not true. And I think the writer - or really any kind of artist - is presenting us with evidence that that’s not true.

**3 Kate:** I interviewed her in West Virginia and in Boston, where she lives, and then West Virginia musician Bob Webb created music for the program. As I read back through all her books, I was struck by the variety of her characters: nursing mothers, haunted veterans, street kids, middle-class teenagers, a man with Alzheimer’s. As the *New York Times* said, “She writes beautifully, creating elusive moods and scenes.” To create those scenes, she often starts with a few real details and lets the story bloom from there.

So let’s see how she does this. We’ll use several short readings from her books as examples. And the first reading comes from *Machine Dreams*, her first novel.









**Jayne Anne:** I just sit there like a piece of stone. I often write by hand, in a notebook, writing lines. The computer makes revision much easier, but my process doesn't seem to have been sped up much by it. I really require a lot of time to just sit and think. And I write very slowly.

music

**14 Kate:** There are many people in West Virginia and elsewhere who struggle to write and struggle to get past all the inhibitions. How do you find the courage to write as honestly as you do?

**Jayne Anne:** Well, I don't think it has to do with courage. I think every writer writes because they must. It's a means of survival. And I think so-called courage is simply a measure of how badly the writer needs to speak. And I think if there's anything writers owe writing, it is the promise to go as far as you can, to go as deeply as you can, to do as much as you're able to do, with the help of the language.

**Kate:** Have there been times in your life when you were hungrier to do that than others?

**Jayne Anne:** Oh no. I have a, I would say, an unquenchable hunger to do that. Although life doesn't always cooperate in allowing me the time and space.

**Kate:** And she literally means she HAS always been hungry to do that, to write, even when she was growing up in Buckhannon.

**15 Jayne Anne:** I remember when I was in Girl Scouts writing a kind of serial novel to entertain my friends. We met in various churches around town. And I remember, at the Baptist Church, they had these beautiful mahogany cubicles like restaurant booths almost. But they were all enclosed by red velvet curtains.

They'd put various groups in these cubicles, and we'd draw the curtains, and I'd bring out my so-called novel, which I began with everyone in it. Myself and all my friends were in the novel. And then the heroine moves to New York City and falls in love with a gang member. And there are wars going on in the subway tunnels and all. But the interesting thing was that they kept wanting to hear it, even after they'd been written out. And that was my first sense of writing something that people were interested in. And that they could be represented by things other than themselves.

**Kate:** Before the serial novel, she read and read and read.

**16 Jayne Anne:** My friends used to complain because they'd come out to see me or to play with me, you know when I was a kid under twelve, and I would be sitting on my bed reading. And I remember my girlfriends getting mad at me because they couldn't get me to put the book down, even though they were standing there. So I was a kind of book junkie. I wasn't always

























*Our telepathy always frightens me. Telepathy and beyond. Before her hysterectomy, our periods often came on the same day. "If he hadn't had that nervous breakdown," she says softly, "do you suppose –"*

*"No, I don't suppose."*

*"I wasn't surprised it happened. When his brother was killed, that was hard," she says. "But Jason was so self-centered. You're lucky the two of you split up. He thought everyone was out to get him. Still, poor thing." Silence. Then she refers in low tones to the few months Jason and I lived together before he was hospitalized. "You shouldn't have done what you did when you went off to college. He lost respect for you."*

*"It wasn't respect for me he lost," I tell her. "He lost his mind if you remember!" I realize that I am shouting and shaking. What is happening to me?*

*My mother stares. "We'll not discuss it," she says. She gets up. I hear her in the bathroom, water running into the tub. Hydrotherapy. I close my eyes and listen. Soon, this weekend. I'll get a ride to the University and look up an old lover. I'm lucky. They always want to sleep with me for old time's sake.*

*I turn down the sound of the television and watch its silent pictures.*

...

**31** *"Sweetheart," my mother calls from the bathroom. "Could you bring me a towel?" Her voice is quavering slightly. She is sorry. But I never know what part of it she is sorry about.*

*I get a towel from the linen closet and open the door of the steamy bathroom. My mother stands in the tub, dripping, shivering a little. She's so small and thin. She's smaller than I. She has two long scars on her belly, operations of the womb, and one breast is misshapen, sunken, indented near the nipple. I put the towel around her shoulders and my eyes smart. She looks at her breast. "Not too pretty, is it?" she says. "He took out too much when he removed that lump."*

*"Mom, it doesn't look so bad." I dry her back, her beautiful back which is firm and unblemished. Beautiful, her skin. Again, I feel the pain in my eyes. "But you should have sued that bastard," I tell her. "He didn't give a shit about your body."*

*We have an awkward moment with the towel when I realize I can't touch her any longer. The towel slips down, and she catches it as one end dips into the water. "Sweetheart," she says. "I know your beliefs are different than mine. But have patience with me. You'll just be here a few more months. And I'll always stand behind you. We'll get along."*

*She has clutched the towel to her chest. She's so fragile, standing there, naked, with her small shoulders. Suddenly I am horribly frightened. "Sure," I say. "I know we will." I let myself out of the room.*





**Kate:** Though it might not seem so at first glance, Jayne Anne is still breaking new literary ground with this material.

**36 Jayne Anne:** The idea of women's vaginas not being just sexual objects, but the vehicles of birth, the blood and the pain and the tearing and all the stuff that really is part of birth, is very explicitly described here. I may have won myself a lot of readers by writing very explicitly about sex, but I think I lost a certain number of male readers by writing so explicitly about birth, about nursing, about babies and about just the minutia of women's lives, the details that make up that period of time, those first two years between a mother and a baby.

**Kate:** Once again, you're writing about subjects that a certain percent of the population would just assume people didn't talk about.

**Jayne Anne:** (laughing) That's why they're so important. That's why there has to be language that talks about them, studied language. Language that is meant not only as information, but as art.

**Kate:** A lot of mothers would like to ask you: How do you write and be a mother too?

**Jayne Anne:** Well, you just don't write that much. (laughs) You know, you don't write that much. So what you do write better count. (laughs)

**Kate:** We've been visiting with Jayne Anne Phillips, who grew up in Buckhannon, West Virginia, and became an internationally praised writer whose work has been translated into at least a dozen languages. As art. I'm Kate Long. Thanks for listening.

*In Their Own Country is produced and edited by Kate Long. Music is performed by Bob Webb, who also recorded the music and supplied production assistants. Francis Fisher provided technical mentoring and production assistants.*

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she was those yellow eyes. There is that Buddhist sense of all sentient beings - which includes anything with any level of awareness - that we're deeply connected to all of those beings. And I think this is a kind of investigation of that idea.

music

**Jayne Anne:** There's a chilling parallel to some of these kids who have shot up their schools - They often say, "I didn't realize what I was doing" or "It didn't seem real." And it's almost as though - unless we make that leap of empathy into the creature that's been hurt - something's wrong.

**CONDENSE THIS SEVERELY> Kate:** When Jayne Anne was fresh out of college, she and two friends were sitting on her mother's back porch one day. One was Irene McKinney - now West Virginia's poet laureate. The other was poet Maggie Anderson - now director of Kent State University's creative writing program. Maggie recorded their conversation and published it in *Trellis*, a literary magazine she edited. Midstream, Jayne Anne's mother wandered out and started talking about cleaning out the basement. Maggie said Jayne Anne was going to be executor of her mother's basement. I read Jayne Anne that remark thirty years later. She liked it.

**Kate:** The threads that run between generations of women. It's one of Jayne Anne Phillips' strongest themes. She compared it to her mother's basement ... full of STUFF.

**Jayne Anne:** I remember, she and I going through-all kinds of stuff that she had down there and deciding where it was going to go, what we were going to do with it, long before she was sick. But it's an interesting metaphor for what women do and for what women do with their mothers' lives. Because I think we are not only in charge of the women's things, the objects. We're oftentimes also in charge of the stories. And we are all in charge of our parents' basements in the sense that we inherit their unresolved traumas, their dreams, the things they wanted to do, but didn't get to do... In a sense, all of that is a little bit hidden. It stands in a kind of shadow or underground. And that's what a basement is.