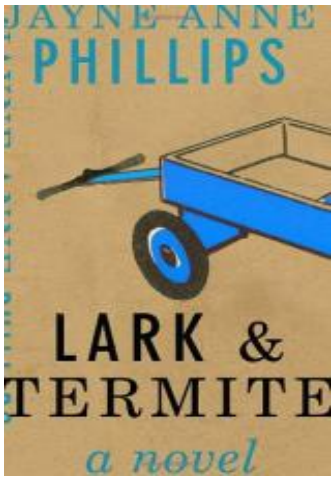
Lark and Termite

by Jayne Anne Phillips



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.

Discussion Guide

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?

SUGGESTED READING **The Sound and the Fury** by William Faulkner; **Charming Billy** by Alice McDermott; **The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter** by Carson McCullers; **In Country** by Bobbie Ann Mason; **Plainsong** by Kent Haruf; **The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War** by Charles J. Hanley, Sang-Hun Choe, and Martha Mendoza.

Author Bio

Jayne Anne Phillips is the author of BLACK TICKETS, MACHINE DREAMS, FAST LANES, SHELTER, MOTHERKIND, LARK AND TERMITE, QUIET DELL, NIGHT WATCH (which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2024), and SMALL TOWN GIRLS. Her work has been a finalist once for the National Book Award and twice for the National Book Critics Circle Award. The recipient of Guggenheim, National Endowment for the Arts, Howard, Bunting, and Rockefeller Foundation Fellowships, she is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She lives in Boston and New York.

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