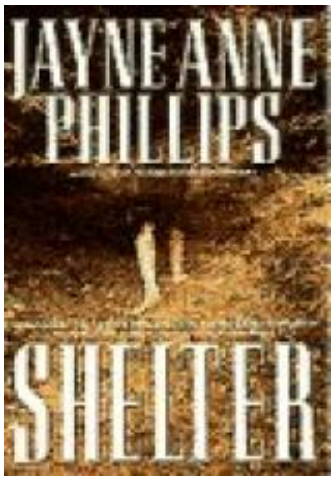
Shelter

by Jayne Anne Phillips



About the Book

In a West Virginia girls' camp in July 1963, a group of children experience an unexpected rite of passage. *Shelter* is an astonishing portrayal of an American loss of innocence as witnessed by a drifter named Parson, two young sisters, Lenny and Alma, and a feral boy. Like Buddy, the wide-eyed boy so at home in the natural bower of the forest, Lenny and Alma are forever transformed by violence, by family secrets, by surprising turns of love.

What they choose to remember, what they meet within and around the boundaries of the camp, will determine the rest of their lives. In a leafy wilderness undiminished by societal rules and dilemmas, Lenny and Alma confront a terrible darkness and find in themselves a knowledge never lent to them by the adult world.

Discussion Guide

1.In what ways does the imagery and mood of the opening paragraph set the tone for the novel? How does it serve as the essence of the novel?

2.Jayne Anne Phillips once said in an interview, "I'm drawn to that angelic aspect, and to the fact that children are the ultimate outsiders; they peer in at things and see things differently." Discuss the significance of children's perspectives in the novel. In what way do they create a more objective portrait?

3. The four central characters--Lenny, Cap, Alma and Delia--are linked by tenuous relationships between their parents. How do these adult circumstances affect the relationships and power structures among the children?

4. The action takes place in a single twenty-four hour period at a girls' camp in rural West Virginia in 1963. How does the time and setting create a timelessness and a dreamlike quality to the novel? In what ways is memory used to create depth in the time progression of the novel, a depth that serves to support the characters developments within this one

day?

5. Sexuality is seen as an integral part of almost every relationship in the novel. How does this view of sexuality aid or disturb the reader's understanding of the characters, and how does it extend the reader's view of the primal landscape? What does the audience begin to understand through this sensual connection to the physical world?

6. Parson is a frightening character, all the more so because he proceeds within his own logic, according to a complex system of apprehended images and beliefs. Is Parson a kind savior, a twisted angel, or a madman?

7. There are disturbing scenes in *Shelter* between Buddy and Carmody, his stepfather. Discuss the relationship between them, and the ways in which Buddy's inner strengths and intuitive resourcefulness influence the novel. Why might Buddy be seen as the moral fulcrum of the novel?

8. Carmody could be viewed as a monster created by a distorted world. Yet Parson has been a victim of the same distorted world. They went to the same reform school and were together in prison. Why does Parson, at least in his own perception, become a force for good while Carmody simply grows more dangerous?

9. Despite *Shelter's* rich language, a prose almost Faulknerian in its intensity, particularly in Parson's section, there is real suspense. The suspense arises from the reader's sense that the children are imminently threatened. Parson seems to be part of that threat but also struggles with the violence within himself. In what ways is he part of the adult world, a world already tainted, and in what ways is he still a victim, a child?

10. The town of Bellington, West Virginia, the setting of *Machine Dreams*, is mentioned as not being so far from Gaither, the fictional town near Camp Shelter. How does the isolated setting in Shelter work to intensify the characters and the world in which they live?

11. The author has described this novel as "a passion play in which children bear witness" and "a journey of souls" in which the characters undertake a quest in the mythic sense, descending into an underworld and emerging, having taken into themselves the power they confronted. They redeem a darkness, and so free themselves, but they must also accept the burden of what they know." How is the theme of redemption played out in *Shelter*?

12. It has been said of Phillips, "At her best, no one writing fiction in the U.S. today comes near her for linguistic beauty and an atavistic, almost reluctant wisdom." (*New Statesman & Society*) Discuss.

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.

Critical Praise

"A beautiful, intricate, abundantly mature new novel...mysterious, full of dark dreams, menace and the blind tug of sex. "

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