

About Night Watch

Q&A with author Jayne Anne Phillips

Was there a particular event or idea that was the genesis of NIGHT WATCH?

My novels always seem to begin with the voice of a character involved in a specific yet mysterious scene. *Machine Dreams* began with Jean's "Reminiscence To A Daughter," which was inspired by my grandmother's letters begging her family to "let me visit home" after her elopement with a much older businessman; *Lark And Termite* began with Lark's first line in the novel, which appeared around page fifty of the finished manuscript. *Night Watch* began with ConaLee's first person voice (the only one in the novel): a twelve-year-old girl, the adult in her family for as long as she can remember, undertakes a journey with her mute mother and the man she's been told to call 'Papa.' And so our story begins! Given that trauma and memory are slippery, opposing mirrors, ConaLee may not be a completely reliable narrator, yet her decade alone with her mother and Dearbhla has taught her the strength, resourcefulness, and knowledge needed to help make a life in the mountain "frontier" of Western Virginia. She has been the much loved only child in a family of women who keep the past wholly secret and stay isolated in order to protect her. Finally, they can't keep the apocalyptic, post-war world at bay. The first image for me was ConaLee, rushing to assist her mother's journey in the buckboard, driving away with her, then gazing up at the asylum "castle," still not knowing how the journey will end. All of *Night Watch* is inside that first journey, but the revelations of both past and present are still to come. As a writer, I want that unscrolling mystery.

Can you talk about any research that informs the novel?

The State Hospital that began in 1858 as the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum was a twenty-minute drive from my hometown. Early on, I knew that my mother's father, the once wealthy, always "eccentric" owner of a thriving lumber mill, lost his fortune

during the Depression, became violent in the last stages of alcoholism, and died there after a stay of just a few weeks. By the mid-forties, the Asylum had become a warehouse, crowded and failing and surely hellish, but my mother and grandmother lived by renting out rooms in their large neglected house, and couldn't afford any other treatment. Post graduate school, I went to the (then) Weston State Asylum to ask for access to my grandfather's records, which I was not allowed to see. In 2007, the Asylum was sold to a private individual who saved the State the expense of tearing it down, opened it to the public, and restored the original name. I began visiting the asylum on trips home, wandering through the halls, taking photographs, thinking. Trying to penetrate the life experience of the Civil War was a separate endeavor that lasted years. The research fills bookshelves in my office – photographs, scholarship, battlefield accounts, diaries. I wanted to make the losses, the dislocations and separations, real, immediate, unforgettable.

Some of the chapters open with quotes from a Dr. Thomas Kirkbride and a book called *On the Construction, Organization and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane* written in 1854. Who was he and how does that work inform the novel?

I knew that the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, like nearly all of the huge State Asylums, was built to the specifications set out in Quaker physician Thomas Story Kirkbride's 1854 book, *On The Construction, Organization and General Arrangements of Hospitals for the Insane*. I learned that long ago, for a few decades after the Civil War, Kirkbride's revolutionary ideas about "moral treatment" (humane treatment for the insane) held sway. By 1874, when ConaLee and her mother set out in the buckboard, Kirkbride had emphasized the asylum as healing refuge; the facility should seem almost luxurious, suitable for every class of (white) citizen. Each patient had a private room, a window overlooking the grounds, and an open transom over the door; Kirkbride's plan called for housing a strict maximum of 250 patients in institutions so large that they might incorporate nine or ten miles of indoor space, and he

instituted “regimens” that were specific to each patient: games, lessons, walks of several miles a day in the open air, and what we would call today “talk therapy.” Nine years after the Civil War, the world was inverted: the asylum was safer than the world beyond it, certainly for ConaLee and her mother. I invented a Physician Superintendent who is kin to the real Kirkbride and read accounts of Kirkbride’s life that inspired events concerning the “Dr. Story” of *Night Watch*.

Your characters are so indelible and form this beautiful unexpected family among the ravages of slavery, the Civil War, and its aftermath. These are people trying to survive and escape violence but also to create a family in the midst of unprecedented chaos. Can you talk a little about how you came to envision ConaLee, Eliza, Dearbhla and ConaLee’s father, who remains nameless through much of the novel?

Namelessness is endemic in wartime. War ravages identity itself and cancels generations, creating refugees and physically maimed soldiers and civilians. *Night Watch* finally catches up to the name that ConaLee’s father invented for himself, though we come to understand that even from birth, he cannot fully know himself, and once the War envelops him, he is known by what he does: Sharpshooter. He’s so deeply longed for and mourned in the novel, by Dearbhla, by Eliza, even by ConaLee, who never knew him. They almost sense him, yet his absence leaves them all vulnerable to predations and departures, and seemingly fated years of separation. Still, the self moves toward what it needs and loves. “You’ll tell the story,” a remark addressed to ConaLee near the beginning of *Night Watch*, seems cruel, tossed-off. But the reader will see that phrase deepened. History has always told us the facts emphasized by those in power, but literature tells us the story. We understand the reality of other lives, other times -- even the reality of lives from which we are necessarily estranged -- in story.

Other work of yours has also touched on the legacy of war on families and the nation. How do you see *Night Watch* being in conversation with your earlier novels?

I have always seen *Night Watch* as the third in a trilogy of war novels, novels that penetrate the wars that most impact our modern lives: Vietnam (*Machine Dreams*), Korea –a civil war that ended in dangerous, prophetic stalemate (*Lark And Termite*), and finally the Civil War, fought on our own obliterated ground. I want my work, always, to connect with the reader in a sensual, associative way that is not limited by time and space. Words on the page can reach into the unconscious for both writer and reader, though they (probably) never meet. Literature forms an empathic history of sound and smell and being. The division and estrangement of the Civil War still casts its long, dangerous, unresolved shadow, and the shadow is darkening.