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An intricately structured tale of absence and struggle


JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS (ELENA SEIBERT)

By Perrin Ireland
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LARK AND TERMITE
By Jayne Anne Phillips
Knopf, 254 pp., illustrated, $24

Secrets, and their rate of revelation, are among an author's most treasured tools, and while "Lark and Termite" contains enough mysteries to satisfy discriminating readers (Who is Lark's father? Is Nonie a murderer? Will Bobby survive a massacre in Korea?), Jayne Anne Phillips unspools them leisurely, allowing for full immersion in the evocative prose that marks her work: "She drops her forehead onto his palm and a pulse in her temple beats like a minnow holding still."

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The novel focuses on the years between 1950 and 1959 (S&H green stamps, "My Funny Valentine," communism) primarily in West Virginia and the Korean peninsula, in shifting, overlapping points of view and time frames. Five people (Lark, Termite, Lola, Bobby, and Nonie) narrate the story, and if this character-rich tale were to unfold conventionally, in chronological order, we would first meet sisters Noreen (Nonie) and Lola, in the small town of Winship, W.Va. (with Polish Town and Country Club Road). Older sister Nonie flees to Atlanta when her boyfriend refuses to marry her, and Lola follows, but not before burning down the family home.

Lola, who becomes a nightclub singer, gives birth to a daughter, Lark, and asks Nonie to raise her, after Nonie returns to the shrinking West Virginia town. Lola's second child, Termite (more lovable than his nickname implies) - the offspring of Corporal Bobby Leavitt, whom Lola marries before he's shipped off to Korea - is also returned to West Virginia to be raised by Nonie.

"Lark and Termite" might as easily have been titled "Lola," who, even in absence, dominates much of the book; indeed, lost mothers occur often enough to constitute a theme. Lola and Nonie's own mother was emotionally absent, "quiet, all her edges turned down the way Dad liked them."

In 1959, when she's not in secretarial school on the second floor of Murphy's Five and Ten, 17-year-old Lark takes loving care of 9-year-old Termite while Nonie works at a restaurant. (Nonie called him Termite because his fingers were always in motion, feeling the air, as if that's how he took in the world.) Termite is the sort of child now referred to as "special needs"; he can't sit up straight without assistance, walk, or talk, except to repeat phrases spoken to him. If his point-of-view chapters are to be believed, however, he perceives his environment with extraordinary sensory clarity, and his sections frequently offer Phillips the best stage for her striking skill in rendering place and physical detail. "The cold sits on the floor and breathes, one low shadow that folds and settles and stirs like smoke when Lark turns and walks." As for Termite himself, Lark believes people are drawn to him once they "know he's not the emergency he might appear to be."

The book periodically shifts to Bobby's 1950 point of view in Korea, where "green and brown hills . . . come together like a landscape of loins and thighs," and Phillips's talent for suspense is on full display. Bobby and the Korean civilians he was helping evacuate are trapped in a railroad tunnel by American gunners unaware that they're not the enemy. "Americans traverse dirt trails they've broadened, rutted, bled into with trucks and bodies" in a war "that sleeps dormant for years or months, then erupts and lifts its flaming head to find regimes changed, topography altered, weaponry recast."

Phillips has created intriguing, subtle parallels in the Korean and West Virginian vignettes - tunnels figure in both, as do young, disabled boys cared for by sisters - and characters occasionally "see" or know things that are happening on the other continent that would be impossible for them to know. Thus, Bobby feels Lola give birth to Termite even as he presses against the bodies of others in the tunnel under the searing white lights of American arms preparing to mow them down (inspired by a 1950 incident at No Gun Ri), and we're left feeling that Termite is born "damaged" because of this assault. Wounded, Bobby contemplates the possibility of death: "If death is this brilliant slide, this high, fine music felt as pure vibration, this plunging float in wind and silence, it's not so bad."

The atmosphere throughout much of the book is one of threat - will Termite be harmed by neighborhood bullies or the pack of wild dogs? Will Lark, who notices men looking at her as if she's food on a plate, escape violent attention? ("Nick Tucci puts his big hands flat on the table, but the darkness inside him follows Lark.") When the ultimate natural disaster materializes in the form of a catastrophic flood, no one in Winship survives unscathed. Lola gets the last word and, fortunately, dilutes a somewhat movie-ready ending with her own truth.

Not the perfect choice for devotees of fast-paced thrillers, "Lark and Termite" offers substantial rewards for readers who value passages of gorgeous, intelligent writing with intricate literary architecture. Phillips is the award-winning author of two books of stories and three other novels, and it's heartening to hear again from this major artist. "A song moves a story fast or slow like the river moves the water," Lark tells Termite. "Fast makes it funny and slow makes it sad." And, in this case, river deep.

Perrin Ireland is the author of the novels "Ana Imagined" and, most recently, "Chatter."