

La Libération: Journal de l'écrivain
samedi le 21 mars – vendredi le 27 mars, 2009
Par Arthur Phillips

Biography

Arthur Phillips (b. 1969) is the author of four novels, including *l'Egyptologue* and *Angelica* (Editions Cherche-Midi). His work is published in 25 languages. His most recent novel, *The Song Is You*, led one critic to call him “the best American novelist to have emerged during the present decade.” A former actor, musician, speechwriter, and *Jeopardy!* champion, he has lived in Budapest and Paris, and now lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Samedi, le 21 mars

Strange days. It is the first day of spring but snow fell all day yesterday. New York City is chilly in other ways, too. There is hardly a conversation with friends that doesn't turn to job concerns, evaporated savings accounts, global crisis, Obama hopes and doubts. Everyone makes nervous jokes and then shrugs, even those who, like me, try never to think about politics, economics, or meteorology. I'm reminded of those weeks in late 2001 when one involuntarily looked up whenever an airplane passed overhead, just to be certain that it was flying appropriately.

And in this atmosphere of frosty fear, I am two weeks away from publishing my next novel in the US. It seems a frivolous hope that anyone (ideally everyone) should buy my latest fairy tale. After all, I offer no economic advice, no political engagement, only fantasies. On the other hand, I am reminded that Shakespeare wrote “Venus and Adonis”—his best-selling work—during an outbreak of the plague. The theaters were closed, and one really must keep busy.

Dimanche, le 22 mars

Today, my younger boy turns six. He is, of course, delighted with everything, issuing orders for cakes of certain nauseating varieties, video games of obscure origin, baseball souvenirs, and books long since out-of-print. He is blissfully unaware that the world is lemming-leaping into global depression and panic. And so, as a long-lasting gift, I have decided today is the day to set him straight. A good father, I will help him become, as his grandparents are, keenly aware of shortage and danger for the rest of his life, so that he will forever more be constantly counting his pennies; the virtues of thrift and planning will be indelibly inscribed into his soul. Since I am a child of plenty, gleefully entitled, full of unquenchable desires, now is the time to make clear to him that his generation won't be nearly as lucky as mine. Happy birthday, my boy!

Today I will give him an apple, slightly soft. I will, with great ceremony, present him, in lieu of a cake, two single-serving sugar packets, stolen from a local café. Perhaps a slightly used woolen cap. A new marble. I will take photographs of him and his little chums at a special party: we are going to visit the local zoo, but only to see those animals that are visible through the exterior fences.

Lundi, le 23 mars

Brooklyn, where I live in New York, was once called the “Borough of Churches.” It’s New York’s largest borough, and a quick visit on Google Earth will show you the spires that won the area its name. I live in one of those churches, converted into condominiums, a rather over-wrought symbol from back in the pre-crash economy.

Brooklyn is now increasingly called the “Borough of Writers,” as 99.86% of all American authors now live within a few miles of each other. French national icon Paul Auster is probably the best-known, and perhaps the trend-setter that placed Brooklyn ahead of Manhattan for literary residence, but he is now one of thousands, if not millions of us. We pass each other on the streets and in the cafes, like weary factory workers, borrow each other’s plot devices, marketing plans, ideas for new careers.

Dinner with friends tonight. Three hours of wine and food and laughter while all the children are dispatched upstairs, drugged by the Wii. And at the end of the meal, as we are putting on coats and hugging goodbye, someone says with a note of wonder and pride: “Say, we didn’t mention the economy even once tonight.” Silence falls.

Mardi, le 24 mars

I lived in Paris for two very happy years, which I associate with the flickering last moments of my official youth: my first son was tiny and still portable; I spent my days in cafés composing my second novel with my dog at my feet; my wife taught; we spent all the money I’d earned on my first novel; my second son was born, a moment of great joy (although we later learned the obstetrician was subsequently indicted for rape).

Last year, America’s most beloved Frenchman was Philippe Petit, a title he has probably merited every year since 1974, when he walked on a tightrope between the two towers of the World Trade Center. I lately have a recurring fantasy of meeting him, and I now watch the sky for signs of him, lurking in trees, crossing above busy roads. He seems like Superman, untroubled by the fears that chew on most humans, and I dream he will descend from the sky, teach me something about being calm and enjoying the scenery.

Mercredi, le 25 mars

Until Petit descends, I have other teachers of calm: furry Zen gurus who daily advise me on how to live without fear. Thanks to my beagles, Agnes and Hamish, I spend part of every day in New York’s best dog park. (Visit us! Type “hillside park, brooklyn” into Google Earth.) They force me to sit under a tree and watch dogs play. Canine regression psychotherapy has proven successful at reducing thoughts of economic collapse.

My previous beagle was warmly welcomed in Paris, and he enjoyed his years there nearly as much as I. His only complaint (and mine) was the city’s lack of a dedicated dog park. Some rebels tried to colonize part of the Buttes Chaumont, but it was never

official, nor are the gravel strips of the Tuileries. So, during my brief tenure in Libération, I would like to address Mayor Delanoë:

“Please, sir, establish a working committee at once, and give to Paris the only facility it lacks. Also, please name it the ‘Edgar Phillips Memorial Dog Park.’ A marble bust (**Edgar, 1995-2006**) is optional. (Note that I do not, at this middle stage of my literary career, ask you for rue Arthur Phillips, or even a blue plaque on the apartment building where I lived and wrote. That will come in its own time. First, the dog park.)”

Jedi, le 26 mars

So now the President of the EU tells me that American policy is the “way to hell.” This undoes all the canine therapy I’ve been practicing. There’s something about European disapproval that makes Americans like me crazy. Either we believe you like worried children (“Oh, no, why are the Czechs so mad at us?”), or we ignore you but with suspicious irritability (“Please! What does that Czech guy know about anything?”).

Vendredi, le 27 mars

Everybody finally, has to just get on with things. The economy, the Taliban: if my history degree taught me anything of value, it is this: the sky is *always* falling and always has been. One thing about sensitive (whiny) artists: they have more free time to worry, but finally they, too, must do something, even if the plague is raging through the city. Poems must be written, even unnecessary poems that teach no lessons or virtues. “Venus and Adonis” was very popular with University boys who viewed it as a seduction manual. I would be proud to produce such work during a plague.