



## The Writers Who Inspire Me

---

Rebecca Goss

I WAS WEANED ON THE American short story by my Dad. I spent my teens reading Raymond Carver, John Updike, Richard Ford, Andre Dubus, John O'Hara. I loved how they all held a magnifying glass to the drama of a domestic landscape. But it was a female writer who made the biggest impact and what I read of her work then, continues to influence me to this day. At university, where I studied English and American literature, I was not a vocal soul. Shy and not confident, I was happy to let the loud and the erudite dominate during seminars. But one day, in my final year, I happened to let slip in class that I had always admired the writing of Jayne Anne Phillips, particularly her short stories. My lecturer's eyes flashed with recognition at the mention of Phillips' name and she asked me to come to her office later that day. Once there, I watched my lecturer forage at the back of a filing cabinet to pull out a copy of Jayne Anne Phillips' *Sweethearts*. I had already devoured Phillips' *Machine Dreams* and *Black Tickets*, knowing of *Sweethearts*' rare existence. I couldn't quite believe I now had its buff, velvety cover in my hands.

Born in West Virginia in 1952, Jayne Anne Phillips is a novelist and short-story writer. Her slim collection *Sweethearts* was published when she was in her early twenties. Phillips does not refer to its contents as either stories or poems; she calls the writing 'pieces'. Each piece is a page, each page a snapshot of small-town American life. The familial household threads the pieces together, as relatives try to make sense of each other. In kitchens, personal stories unravel as oven doors open and 'heat falls into the room like a pealing of bells.' A stripper grooms her protégé cousin saying she's 'white an dewy an tickin' like a time bomb an now's the time



to learn.’ Teenagers descend cinema steps, mouths ‘swollen and ripe’ from their squirms in the Friday night dark. Once outside, the girls ‘tossed their heads and shivered like ponies’. Phillips takes us deep into young female psyches. She exposes their parochial trappings and we watch as they emerge to swerve or soar.

I was nineteen when I first read *Sweethearts*, susceptible to the yearning in its pages certainly. Now, almost thirty years later, it still electrifies me with its crackle of tension and desire. Phillips’ work validated my longing to write about women, sex, the family and the body. *Sweethearts* gave me permission to explore those complicated subjects, and after a long search, the internet bore me a copy of my own. It remains my most precious book, and still commands the biggest influence on my own writing. Unlike my generous lecturer, I’m not sure I would loan it to someone I barely knew. I keep it like an heirloom, a piece of treasure on my bookshelves, so I’m telling you about it instead. Seek it out.