

A CONVERSATION WITH HELEN PHILLIPS:

Q: Do you have any particular story to tell concerning the writing of this book?

A: My husband Adam Thompson is an artist, and some years back he was feeling bogged down in the process of creating a painting; the original excitement would get lost in the execution. He gave himself the constraint that he would simply make pencil line drawings on 8 ½ x 11 paper. The idea and the creation became simultaneous. Around the same time, I found myself similarly bogged down in a novel. Adam suggested that I set some constraint for myself—say, writing a 340-word piece every day. And so began the project that would become *And Yet They Were Happy*. Incidentally, Adam’s drawing project also bred a book, #1359-#1458 (Regency Arts Press, 2010).

Q: So you consider this book a formal experiment?

A: The constraint merely served as a sort of scaffolding that enabled me to explore central themes and concerns from many different angles. While it was helpful to have one thing to cling to amid all the chaos of creation, ultimately it’s not so important. Its primary role was to set me free, to make me feel that, as long as I held to my little word limit, I could do absolutely anything, could draw any bizarre parallels, bringing together history and mythology and Snow White and Bob Dylan and my own experiences in one breath. I wrote this book while I was engaged and during my first year of marriage, which was an intense and transformational time for me. The idea of a book comprised entirely of 340-word stories sounds rather mathematical and formal, perhaps even gimmicky; but this book is flesh and blood and mess and life.

Q: How would you describe those “central themes and concerns” you mention above?

A: The sections of the book (The Fights, The Weddings, The Apocalypses, etc.) were created fairly late in the process, after I’d written all of the pieces. But because I’d found myself continually returning to explore repeated themes in different ways, it wasn’t too hard to name and craft the sections of the book. I think of the fables in each section as various manifestations of the same experience. Here’s the wedding ceremony where the bride and groom drive their guests away by laughing too much; here’s the wedding ceremony that’s performed by wooly mammoths. Ultimately these are a series of metaphors, many attempts to describe milestone experiences that evade description.

Q: What advice have you received concerning writing? What advice would you give to young writers?

A: Beckett: “Fail again. Fail better.”

Advice to young writers: Show up. Have fun. Embrace rejection. Be daring. If you’re feeling bored as you’re writing, introduce a lion attack or UFO into the scene.

Q: How did you find the publisher for this book?

A: My agent sent *And Yet They Were Happy* out to all the big New York publishers.

Unsurprisingly, none of them was willing to buy it, due to its somewhat experimental format. So I started to send the book out on my own to small presses. I cannot speak highly enough of Lisa Graziano, managing editor of Leapfrog Press. I'm extremely fortunate that my debut book is being shepherded by such insightful and generous hands.

Q: What books have changed your life?

A: The books that have helped me realize that certain conventions one tends to associate with fiction don't necessarily need to be upheld. Michael Cunningham once lent me *Maps to Anywhere* by Bernard Cooper and one of Lydia Davis' books. Reading those books made me brave. *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman, *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Amy Hempel—all of these writers have made me feel courageous; you can create your own rules.

Q: Do you laugh out loud when you read some of the funny passages you've written? Does the writing affect you the same way it does any other reader, once it's actually out there in book form, or do you remain the editor/self-critic whenever you read it (Or do you never read it again!)?

A: I've agonized so much over every single word (one of the benefits/burdens of having a strict word limit) that on any given page I could point out a word about which I've flip-flopped; as I read the pieces in book form, my reading is deeply affected by knowing the history of their development. I'm too distracted by all that to ever find myself laughing out loud! Maybe years from now, when I've forgotten the layers. Because my own experiences are woven in here alongside myths, fairytales, etc., I do feel somewhat vulnerable, my various anxieties and struggles on display in a pretty raw and honest way. That said, I hope the emotional urgency that powered this book will come through to the reader.