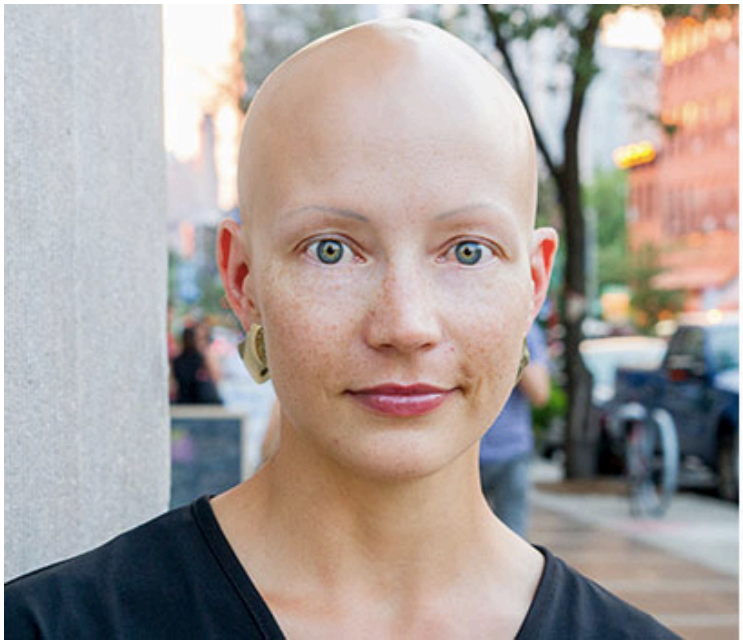
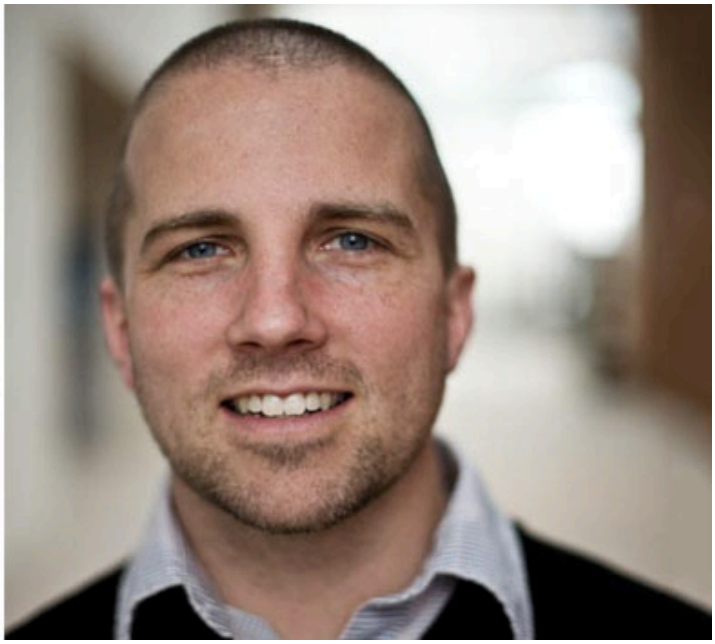
LITERARY HUB





THE ART OF THE SHORT STORY: HELEN PHILLIPS AND MATTHEW VOLLMER

ON PLOT TWISTS, "WHAT IFS," AND LETTING ONESELF GET WEIRD

July 5, 2016 By Literary Hub

Writer Charles D'Ambrosio said of one of Matthew Vollmer's story collections: "Virtuosic in its variations yet held together by a ballast of obsession, *Future Missionaries of America* has more range than most novels while doing brilliantly what stories do best: it deepens the mystery of others by making that mystery familiar." As much as that statement describes *Future Missionaries of America* and also Vollmer's newest collection, *Gateway to Paradise,* we equally found it an apt description of Helen Phillips' collection, out last month, *Some Possible Solutions*.

The fiction of Helen Phillips and Matthew Vollmer deepens life's mysteries as it explores them. Whether realistic or surrealistic, each of their stories places you in a world that feels lived in—where the mystery is familiar, where the strangeness seems ordinary. Given that commonality, we figured it made sense to have them together in conversation.

Helen Phillips: One thing that I really loved about these stories was that they were really well plotted. Plot isn't always my primary interest in fiction—I was also reading them for the mood and the imagery and all of that—but to talk about the plot, you do some masterly things. A lot of these stories, if not all of them, have some really interesting twist at some point. Obviously, "Scoring"—obviously, "The Visiting Writer." So you really set us up so that we're expecting one thing, but then we get something else entirely. It gives me such a charge as a reader. I'm curious about how you came to those moments—did they surprise you, too, or did you know them all along?

Matthew Vollmer: That's an interesting question. For "Scoring," that's a story about a guy who is an AP essay scorer in Florida, and he goes to the mall to get shoes, because all his friends are running on the beach every morning, and he has no shoes. So he goes to the mall to get shoes, runs into this flirty kiosk girl, and they have this interchange. And when she hands him his receipt for a manicure, which she convinces him to buy for his wife, she leaves her number on it, and it says, "Call me." So he ends up calling her.

When I started writing that story, what was interesting to me was the idea of the mall as hell. At first the story was actually titled "Gehenna," which is another word for hell—or, I guess, a kind of hell. As usual, I wanted to put my characters in a place where they'd be in trouble, a place where they'd get into trouble, a setting that would exert really interesting pressures on them, give them something to struggle with. I didn't know that at the end, this girl was going to lead the narrator into a dressing room where she seduces him. The turn is that she's actually a Christian, and has set him up, and she and another guy who is in on it want to use this as a conversion opportunity. I can't remember how I got to that point, but it wasn't there at the beginning.

HP: That's what is so amazing to me, because so much of that was there at the beginning. When you look back at what's happened, you realize "Oh, of course this was all leading to this, how could I not have realized!" But it's so shocking the first time you read it.

MV: In the same way that you see these twists in my stories, one thing that I love about your stories is that there's always a surreal moment. Weird things are always happening. It seems like often in your stories—and I don't want this to seem reductive—but you can always seem to find a "what if." What if people just started disappearing inexplicably? What if you went outside and you didn't see anyone's skin, you just saw through to their flesh, their organs, and their bones? What if I have a bunch of dopplegangers? What if I could know the precise moment of my death? Is that how these stories come to you, as a "what if" thought experiment and then you follow that?

HP: I'm not at all offended by the idea of calling a story a thought experiment. I think that people write short stories for many different reasons, it might be an interesting character or a great plot idea. For me, it's often going to begin with some "what if"—and a "what if" that might manifest as some concrete thing, like: What if you could see through everyone's skin to their organs? But that "what if" is asking a deeper question about what it means to have a physical body connected to a brain. I think that I use stories often as a way to explore some pressing or anxiety-inducing question about existence.

MV: I hope it comes across that what I'm about to say is paying you a high compliment, but reading a Helen Phillips story is not unlike watching an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Partly because they both come from such human places. They're often very familiar, but something weird is happening, something unsettling. I guess

the unsettling part of it is that I'm okay with it. Even if it's troubling for the characters, being in that world is often a joyful thing. I get a feeling of warmth. It's almost like you're with a friend who is saying, "Let's pretend together!" There's something playful about it.

HP: I love that description. I think that what I turn to books for is comfort, and sometimes that comfort takes the form of recognizing that someone else is as anxious and paranoid and scared as I am. Kafka always makes me feel that way. "Oh, god, I know that feeling. You've made it into a metaphor of being an insect in your bed, but I know exactly what you mean." And that's comforting. I think it was Samuel Johnson, who had a quote like, "The only end of writing is to enable readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it." I like that idea, that we go to writing to help us enjoy life and help us endure it. My hope is that these stories are the reality that you know, but it's just a little off. So the comfort and the familiarity is there, and then within that comfort there is some jumping off point into the terrifying.

Something that I wanted to talk to you about with regards to your collection—though this would apply to my collection too—is that most of the stories are written from a male point of view, but a couple of them are written from a female point of view. "Dog Lover" and "Gateway to Paradise" both were aligned with the female character. Was that always an obvious thing for you? Was that something that you set out to do or did it take you by surprise what point of view it would be?

MV: The main character in "Gateway to Paradise," who is an ex-high school basketball star, is very similar to a female character in a novel I was working on that I abandoned. I guess in that story I always knew that Riley would be the main character. I can't even remember where that story originated. It must have been the

situation. Somebody wins the lottery, and then is robbed of their winnings. I'd never written a crime story, so it was a challenge to myself, like, "Hey, can you write a crime story?"

HP: And you can.

MV: It was also like an alternate reality—I don't know if you've ever done that—where you take a character and…

Ha! I just realized the absurdity of asking you if you've ever written about alternate realities. But what I mean is having a character from one story, and lifting them out of that setting or situation, and placing them in a completely other world. That's basically what I did. I took a character that was in a novel I had been writing, and I put her in a crime story, and just let her go.

HP: That makes sense. You know her really well, and I think that comes through in the story, that having spent time with her in a different context. She was a very likeable character. She was probably one of my favorite characters in the whole book.

MV: You also spend more time with her than anyone else, because the story is like a novella. I spent a lot of time revising that story, so I'm glad it worked for you. I was wondering if you could take me through one of your stories. For instance, "The Beekeeper." The first line is "People and things are disappearing in the city." If you could talk about how you got the idea for the story, and how the telling of it unfolded.

HP: That is actually one of the older stories in the collection. I wrote that one a very long time ago. I wrote it because it was when bees were first starting to disappear in our actual world. There's been such a terrifying flight of bees. I read an article about it, and there was something so horrifying and dystopian about that. Bees make

honey, they pollinate flowers, they're so associated with fertility and nature, and I'm still really freaked out by what's going on with the bees. When they die, researchers open them up, and their insides are completely mush. It's all really creepy and science fiction-y. So that was my original idea, these bees disappearing. And it does happen at the climax of the story. From that, leaping to a vision of what would a world look like where all of the patterns of nature had been disrupted.

Unfortunately, this isn't really science fiction anymore at all. I wrote that story maybe ten years ago, and now it seems less science fiction-y than it seemed at the time. But it also comes back to that relationship, the surprising love that develops, at least on one side, between these two characters, and I can't really explain exactly how it happened, but I knew that my narrator would be this person of indeterminate gender. Like there is this caste system in this futuristic society, and this person with indeterminate gender is believed not to have sexual desire. And indeed in this situation, babysitting for this 18-year-old beautiful, rich girl at the family farm in the area outside the climate-controlled city, this person discovers sexuality or sexual desire. So I guess part of it is, if you're living in this dystopian world where you're disconnected from nature, what kind of natural instincts, such as the sexual instinct, can still flourish?

MV: Right. The great thing about that story is the narrator discovering all these simple pleasures, like dipping bread in the jars of preserves, and just being outside, seeing things he or she has never seen before. You said something earlier about plot not being one of your main concerns, but the way these stories are plotted, the way that they unfold, is so interesting to me, because oftentimes I can't figure out how you figured out what to give the reader at what point. For that story, we don't really

learn about the indeterminate gender part of that person's character until the story has already moved on. When you have all these things that you need to get across to tell your story, how do you decide when to tell what you need to tell?

HP: I think part of that question—and this idea about withholding information, or when you tell information—has to do with the fact that most of these stories are set in alternate realities. I think that the best way to make an alternate reality work is to draw no attention to the fact that it's an alternate reality. So everything is presented matter-of-factly. And so, this person of indeterminate gender wouldn't be thinking of themselves so much as a person of indeterminate gender, it would just be something about them that when it comes up it comes up, but it's not going to be front and center in their mind. So, whenever I'm writing in this alternate world, I'm just diving right in. As you would to a story that wasn't about an alternate reality. The details that are rich about the world should come in a natural way and not get over-emphasized. They should be a part of the water that the story is swimming in, rather than the center of the story.

MV: That makes sense. One thing that I noticed—I used the word "playful" earlier to describe your stories—there's a sense of, in some cases, that you're improvising as you're going along. For instance, in "The Wedding Stairs" you write, "Behind us, the bride and groom held each other weeping—hopefully for joy—in the starlight. Just kidding. There was no starlight." When you make a move like that, you're calling attention to yourself as a storyteller. Have you always been that kind of storyteller? Have you always given yourself the license to improvise or go off the rails or digress like that?

HP: Yeah. I often ask my students, "Do you feel like you're a first draft writer? Do you feel like you get a lot of charge out of the first draft? Or do you feel like you're a revision writer? All of your joy comes in the revision process?" I find that people generally do break down into one or the other. I would say that for most of my writing life, I'm a first draft writer. I just love that. When I'm writing my first draft, I just let myself do crazy stuff like mention starlight and then contradict myself. But I've definitely started over time, especially when writing *And Yet They Were Happy*, to cherish revision more and feel like revision can be just as wild and creative and crazy as the first draft. So now I feel like I like both equally.

But little moments like that often come organically. In that story, a woman is at a wedding, and then at the end of the wedding, the maître d' leads her up the staircase, which as it turns out has all the food and trash of the wedding—the detritus of the wedding—spread up the staircase. And so in that moment of transition, there's this magical starlight of "Oh, we're getting married" wonder, and they're transitioning into the reality of, "Oh, it's not starlight, it's fluorescent light." So hopefully that moment does feel organic, I'm just messing around. But it does actually fit in thematically with the idea of, "We're passing out of the magic, illusion, and into the trash." It's also a fun moment where it feels like a wink at the reader, and I enjoy that.

Speaking of lines that really stood out, there was this passage from your story "Downtime" that stood out to me when I first read the story, and I've come back to it because it's so interesting: "Ted slipped his hand under his shirt. The flesh of his stomach felt slick. He was afraid to look. Using his fingertips, he traced the fluid-trail to his navel. It didn't seem possible. The little fleshy bulb—his outie!—was nowhere to be found. In its place, a dime-sized opening. He was leaking. He had no

desire to probe the hole, but his finger had a mind of its own. In it went. There, he felt something else, no bigger than a nodule, slimy and hard. It had length, Ted discovered: a tiny, jointed bone-thing, a finger-shaped-thing connected to other finger-shaped-things, which formed a tiny, bony hand-thing, a fleshless baby hand, which now gripped one of Ted's own fingers."

So we're reading along in this story, which has surreal moments certainly, because his dead wife is interfering on his weekend getaway with his assistant. But then the surreality of the story reaches a new climax, and a new horrifying/sublime climax, the emergence of this alien baby creature from within. It definitely has a nightmarish alien quality to it, but at the same time, you almost feel like it's what he's been seeking all the time—that there's some relief of having this bony finger-y thing, and, a man is pregnant in a way. The man gets to be the creative, generative force in creating a being. I'm curious why you wanted to have a man pregnant with a creepy alien child?

MV: I mean, why not? Doesn't everybody?

HP: Why not? I'm with you there.

MV: That story took probably ten years to write. At first it took place in Cancun, Mexico, where he had gone back—he went on a honeymoon with his wife and she dies. Years later, he goes back with his girlfriend and he's haunted by his wife. I don't know why but it wasn't working. So I said, "Well, why not have the wife appear somewhere really weird?" I just let myself eventually get weirder. I handed it over to the story. I felt like I was trying to control it too much, and there was this weird

force in the story of this dead wife, who not only seduces him successfully, but then climbs into him. Climbs inside him. And I think it was just inexplicable. I don't know how I came up with it, I don't know where it came from, I just followed it.

HP: I felt like in many of these stories—I'm thinking of "Probation" as well—in many of them we have fathers and offspring, and that for me was the most surreally dramatic moment of it. But I'm interested in that theme of children and offspring in your work, and where that comes from.

MV: The theme of family and children is something that I find myself writing about more and more as I get older. I'm married, I have a son. He's thirteen. So much of the drama of my own life, so much of the things that I've struggled with, daily troubles, they come from interactions with my family—things I worry about, things I obsess over, things I want to ignore, things I want to get away from, things I want to get into. All of that is a part of my family and creeps out in various ways.

The story you mentioned, "Probation," where a guy shoots a toy laser at an FBI helicopter during a manhunt for a fugitive, and then gets put on probation for it, that actually happened in the town where I'm from. I don't know if you remember Eric Rudolf, the Olympic Park bomber in 1996. He bombs a bunch of locations around Atlanta, lesbian nightclub, abortion clinics, and then the Olympic Park when the Olympics were going on. No one knew who this bomber was, and then when they found him, he went into hiding. Then the FBI shows up in our tiny town of 600 people, and people were not happy about it. Local, really private mountain people are suddenly having FBI agents walk through their lawns and knock on their doors looking for this guy. One night, some guy got drunk and fired a round from his rifle into the FBI warehouse, and it grazed the head of an FBI agent, and so they sent out

their helicopters out to find this guy. So that's where the story starts, because he hears a helicopter hovering outside his house, and he hovers a flashlight over it, and he sees five little laser dots hovering over his t-shirt over his heart.

All of that actually happened, but I started thinking about this guy being on probation, because I had talked to him. My dad's a dentist, and he was his neighbor. He lived right next to the dental office. And I talked with him about it. He talked about the probation officer who would come at any time in the day—he never knew when he was going to show up—and he would just start messing with his mind. I also knew that he was going through a divorce or something, so I started thinking about all the pressures he was going through. So then I started thinking, what if his daughter doesn't come home one night, and he's not supposed to leave his house but he needs to find his daughter. And if you've ever not—how do I put this?—for parents with children who have had children go missing, you know the panic, even if it's just for five minutes. I know one day, my kid didn't get off the bus and I was like, "Oh my god, where is he?" Turned out he was at school. But anyway, those moments of joy, of terror, of everything in between that come with living in a family, with loving family, you know, like almost any writer, those influence me and I draw inspiration from it.

So much of your collection, *Some Possible Solutions*, is also about families, about mothers and fathers, and you have a story called "Children," which really resonated with me, about the mother being convinced that her children are aliens. So why don't you talk about that story, where did that story come from?

HP: It's funny—this is really unusual for me—but it came from a found photograph of an artist. I was doing a collaboration with him at the Brooklyn Museum, and he was using it as his Gmail signature. It was this photograph that was going along

with all his emails. It was of these two children standing in a field with these blurred features, and it looked like they were standing there in high winds. It looked old. I was so fascinated with the photograph that I printed it out. I showed it to my students and had them write about it, just a random photograph, and the story actually grew from that, from just thinking about the photograph.

I also wrote that story not long after I became a mother. I have a 3-year-old daughter and a 1-year-old son, and this feeling that you don't own your children, that they come out in possession of themselves, that's what the story is about. They have their own nature, and it's amazing to witness that. You didn't do anything to make them that way. They are who they are. And so that's just a way of exploring the alienness of these creatures who supposedly come right from you, but they have their own thing going on.

MV: Absolutely. Near the end, the mother talking about her children says, "'Believe me,' I say, 'I've tried everything. I've tasted their saliva and licked their eyelids. I've swallowed bits of their hair and I've spread their snot on my forearms.' Bill and Lill laugh that same mysterious laugh they'd laughed at my belly button when they were little. They'd crawl over to me and pull up my shirt and put their lips at my belly button as though they were doing mouth-to-mouth. Another hint, of course—that fascination with and amusement at their humble human mother."

This is an example of what you do so well, I think, and what's so effective about these stories, is juxtaposing something really weird—like a mother who is sampling all the stuff that comes off her kids as a sort of test—with something that seems very ordinary almost, and every day, but is also idiosyncratic. And that I think is another

way of what makes these fantastic stories feel so real to me, is that they're laced with these strands of the ordinary and the everyday and the familiar. How would you talk about that?

HP: As you said, your family is the source of so much intensity and drama in your life. Our families are our day-to-day existence, but if you take just a tiny step back, or look at it askance, I feel like the deepest questions about the meaning of your life and existence are contained within the family unit and in this experience of parenthood. So I feel like the early days of having a child are also strangely so physical. Breastfeeding is weird. It's weird to have this intense physical relationship with this other being. It is weird that she spreads her snot on her and things like that, but also I'm at a stage where my kids are so little that I still feel—it's a little gross—but you're so involved with your children's bodily fluids and discharges for so long, and it's unlike anything else in life. Like sex is the only thing that approaches it, but it's not… sorry if that sounds strange. But you're just so physically involved with these other beings and it's a really weird and unique experience, even though it's an everyday experience. So I feel like the things we get used to being common and normal are just really strange, and if you move back a little it will overwhelm you with its oddity. It's funny because your story also had the belly button fixation, so we're obviously on the same wavelength.

Literary Hub

http://www.lithub.com

ON THE COMEDY OF HISTORY, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD JOKE

ON THE BATTLE TO DESEGREGATE THE NATION'S LIBRARIES