

BOOK CLUB KIT

Dear Reader,

It's been a while. It's been nine years since my last novel, which feels both like yesterday and a long time ago.

The beginnings of *The Phoebe Variations* took form in 2014, when I saw the Globe's all-male production of *Twelfth Night*, featuring Mark Rylance and Stephen Fry. The world they created was so warm and joyful that I wished I could have it as wallpaper. I saw it three times! When the run ended and the Brits went home, I finally had to leave the theater.

In an effort to remain in something of that world, I started to write a novel about a girl who runs away and experiences transformation hiding out in the basement of a house with fourteen children.

Meanwhile, I taught, worked on our family orchard, rode my bicycle in the Pyrenees, dealt with health crises, and our apple barn burned to the ground. The usual and the not usual. During the pandemic, my husband and I bought a historic building in our small town to create a community space. We are not real estate people! But the forces came together—and now the space is a thriving, peaceful café where people of all walks and opinions come to live it up. It's been an illuminating, rewarding experience.

Through it all, I kept returning to Phoebe. I loved writing the book, each failure leading somewhere new. I loved being in the world of 1970s suburban Chicago. (I grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, where I knew some impossibly large families, mothers raising 8, 9, 10-plus children during the feminist revolution.) This book is about many things—girlhood friendships, the lives of mothers, and the spirituality of music. I was drawn back to that time in my life, just as Phoebe is.

I am a little sorry to have finished my work on this book, which holds a special place in my heart, but also happy it will be in the outer world. Thank you for choosing *The Phoebe Variations*!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Hill", located in the bottom right corner of the page.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your impression of Phoebe's reaction to meeting her biological family? Do you think Greta prepared her well enough for that encounter?
2. When Phoebe runs away and hides out in the O'Connors' basement, do you think part of her was hoping Greta would find her and bring her home? Even though she tells Greta not to (as does Luna), did Greta's decision to honor that request affect Phoebe emotionally or psychologically?
3. How do the novel's humorous and theatrical moments—like Phoebe's dramatic haircut, her escape into Patrick's chaotic household, and her time as Wanda at the hardware store—enhance our understanding of her identity crisis and emotional journey? Do these larger-than-life scenes reflect real emotional truths, or do they serve as a kind of performance for Phoebe herself?
4. The book centers on a classic allegorical journey: A girl undergoes a physical transformation that sparks both sexual and self-awakening. In what ways does Phoebe's dramatic haircut help her break free from the expectations placed on her—and from her own insecurities? With that in mind, would you consider this a modern feminist allegory? Did you notice any other nods to fantasy or fairy tales throughout the book?
5. How did your impression of Phoebe and Luna's friendship change over the course of the book? Did you find yourself questioning the depth of Luna's love, as Phoebe still does many decades later? Or did you come to see Luna as emotionally manipulative from the start, as Chummy suggests when he reflects on the Barker women, saying: "They'd play with us...until they got tired"?
6. In the context of Women's Rights in 1974—and Phoebe's own experience as an adoptee—how did you respond to her decision to have the baby? How do you think her encounters with the various mother figures in her life—Bea, Greta, Mrs. Barker, and Bridge O'Connor—influenced that choice and shaped the kind of mother she ultimately becomes?
7. The novel is narrated by Phoebe many years after the formative events of her youth took place. What does this suggest about how the past continues to shape the present? Why do you think Phoebe still struggles to let go of her past?
8. The novel weaves in many literary and musical references, including Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, and Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. What are some of your favorite books, music, or films from your own formative years, and how have they stayed with you over time?

Q&A WITH JANE HAMILTON



1. What first sparked the idea for *The Phoebe Variations*, and how did the story evolve during the writing process?

It was 2014. The all-male Shakespeare's Globe production of *Twelfth Night* came to New York. I went to see it. Being in that theatre, with that cast, was a magical, transforming experience. We, the audience, were held captive in a world of joy and love. I wanted to return to it, I wanted to have it as my wallpaper, wanted that to be possible. When I got home, I began a novel in which a girl feels the need to escape her mother; she runs away, she hides out in a house with 14 children, adventures ensue. I wrote many different iterations of the book, always with the same beginning: Phoebe needing to flee her mother, getting tossed up in the storm of her teenage life, and landing in her friend Patrick's enormous house. For a reason that still eludes me, I struggled to make the story work: I didn't have the friendship of Phoebe and Luna in focus; there were wildly divergent plots; there was failure after failure. At a certain point, though, the friendship finally came into focus, the subject of the mothers also became clear, and the house as a character assumed its rightful, primary place.

It's painful to look through the drafts (boxes and boxes of them), to see that amid the failures there are some interesting sections, plus characters that are long gone, characters I still feel affection for. But those versions were unwieldy.

My goal in my writing now is to aim for concision, to distill experience rather than to create sprawl. And my hope all along was to make a joyful world, not to mimic the plot of *Twelfth Night*, but to spark even half of that Globe production joy for my readers.

**"MY GOAL IN MY WRITING
NOW IS TO AIM FOR
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2. You live and work on an apple farm in Wisconsin, which you run with your family. Where do you typically write, and what does a regular writing day look like for you in that environment?

These days, my orchard work is behind the scenes, supporting the crew with meals, for instance, and going to some of the markets with the family. I have the privilege of working in a room that looks out over the orchard, toiling in my own way—while staying warm and dry and free of mosquitoes. Also, there's the great privilege of walking out to the orchard to pick a perfectly ripe apple for lunch.

I love best to write in the mornings, followed by the daily tasks of garden, house, orchard imperatives, community work, exercise, etc. Grace Paley, when asked how she managed the various obligations in her life, said, "There is no balance." It is for sure a daily struggle to tuck into the hours everything that is important and vital to family life, as well as keeping the writing thread going.

3. All of your novels are set in the Midwest—several in Illinois, near your hometown of Oak Park. Did you draw directly from your own childhood for this novel? For instance, was the chaotic O'Connor household inspired by a real place or experience?

I continue to marvel at the mothers in my Oak Park neighborhood when I was a girl. There were many families with 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 plus children. How did the mothers cope? How did they manage their army of children, the feeding, the clothing, not to mention the disputes, not to mention the worry? As much time as I have spent thinking about those mothers from my neighborhood—and I've written about them in other novels—I remain in awe. There were several large, child-filled houses that I experienced as a girl, the Asylum a composite of some of the more chaotic houses I spent time in as a teenager.

4. In your novels you return to teenage characters navigating identity, family conflict, and coming-of-age struggles. What continues to draw you to that stage of life and to domestic drama as a literary focus? And what makes Phoebe's story from 1974 feel resonant today?

Introduce a teenage character into a narrative and it is bound to be interesting. For starters, a teenager inevitably has to confront adult hypocrisy; she has to figure out who she is, what her place is, and she often has to fight for her place. She is in conflict with herself: feeling at times all-powerful, but knowing she is vulnerable and often powerless. All of those tensions in one hormonal powder keg! Although the world has changed in significant ways since the '70s, the teenager is eternal, whether she is having her coming-of-age in 1974 or now. And, I think the issues of motherhood that bubble up in the book are also eternal.

"WE CONSIDERED OURSELVES ARTISTIC, AND DEEP (WHICH TEENAGERS NATURALLY ARE), INTELLECTUAL, AND IN LOVE WITH BEAUTY."

5. Music plays a significant role in *The Phoebe Variations*. How has music influenced your life and writing? Do you play an instrument yourself? What is your process for writing authentically about music and performance?

There was always music in our house growing up. My sister played the piano and the cello, my brother played the clarinet and the recorder, and when that terrific homegrown music wasn't playing, the radio was on. I played the recorder, and my sister, brother, and I played trios. I imagine this made our parents deeply happy, although we weren't considering their feelings at all. We loved playing together. I always think about giving music to any character I'm writing; I would not want to deny a character music. Also, I love the opportunity, the excuse to listen to music and to read about it. I read John Eliot Gardiner's magnificent book, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, when I was writing the Phoebe book, and I listened endlessly to *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

6. Motherhood—with all its emotional and psychological complexity—is a recurring theme in your work. In this novel, you explore multiple maternal archetypes and how they shape Phoebe. What keeps you returning to motherhood as a central theme?

I don't think I set out to write a book about mothers when I started on Phoebe,

but lo and behold, there were at once different styles of mothering, different approaches in each of the mothers, and I realized, oh, this book concerns mothers.

I think with every mother—or the hope is, anyway—that every mother in my novels is herself, she is unique, and the book explores the mystery of her personality. It's hard to beat motherhood as a theme, from Demeter, to Mrs. Bennett, to Lorelai Gilmore....

7. The title, *The Phoebe Variations*, clearly nods to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, but also seems to suggest layers of identity and transformation. How did you settle on the title, and what meanings does it hold for you?

I had several titles while I was working on this book. *The Noble Boys of Romance!* Eeek. Titles are, of course, so important. They have to hold the book and offer a promise. My agent came up with *The Phoebe Variations*. Thank you, EF! (She also had ideas for the cover. I am grateful to her.) The variation theme works in many ways, as the question suggests, with Phoebe trying on her different selves, as a teenager must, and the nod to Bach. When EF said *The Phoebe Variations*, I said, THAT'S IT.

8. What do you hope readers take away from this novel—emotionally, thematically, or even musically?

One of the privileges of writing a novel and having it be in the world, is, with luck, having readers—and readers who share their feelings. I've had the good fortune of meeting readers through the decades, and often their comments are illuminating and interesting, and I learn new things about my own books. So, I would just say, I'm very much looking forward to that experience again.

9. Are you currently working on a new project? If so, can you share anything about what you're writing next?

I've been working on a novel that is about a chef and her benefactor. Two women, one older, one young, who share a love of food and cooking and come up against intractable differences. It's a novel that, for me, speaks to our divisions—how we talk to each other, how we can't talk to each other, and how we tell the story about those divisions.

"I ALWAYS THINK ABOUT GIVING MUSIC TO ANY CHARACTER I'M WRITING; I WOULD NOT WANT TO DENY A CHARACTER MUSIC."

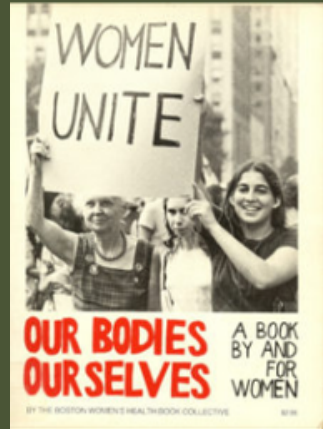
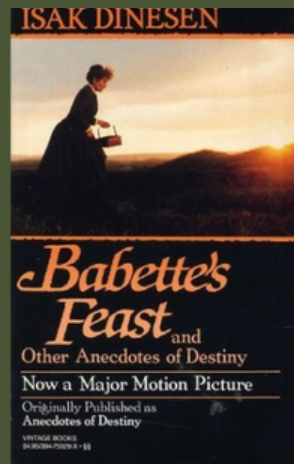
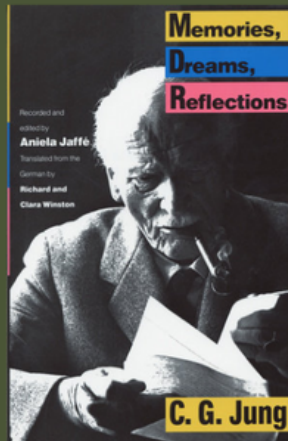
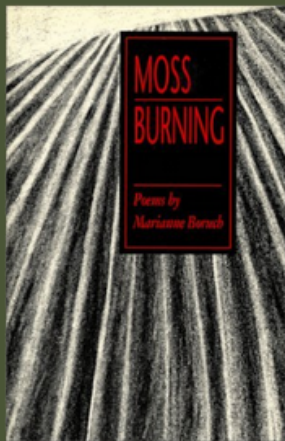
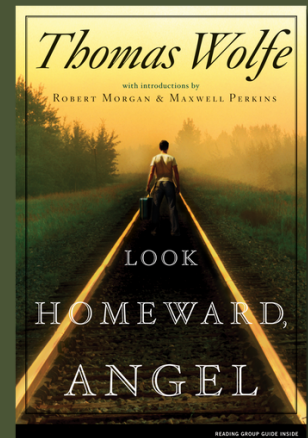
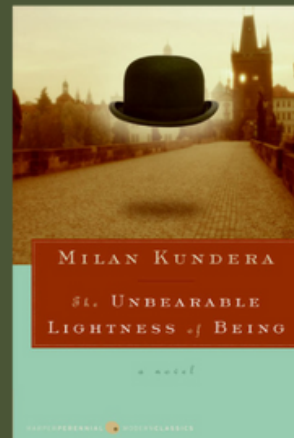
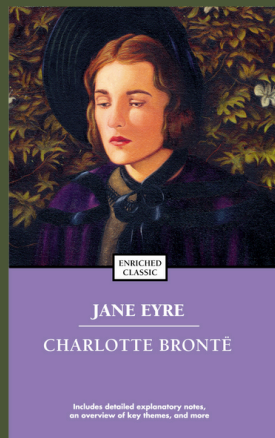
THE PHOEBE VARIATIONS

PLAYLIST

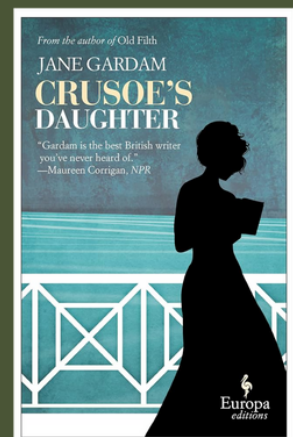
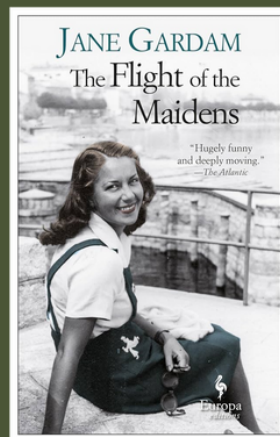
The Goldberg Variations – Johann Sebastian Bach
The Well-Tempered Clavier – Johann Sebastian Bach
The French Suites – Johann Sebastian Bach
The Inventions – Johann Sebastian Bach
Intermezzo (various) – Johannes Brahms
Symphony No. 5 – Ludwig van Beethoven
Piano Concerto No. 20 – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Requiem – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
String Quartet in F major – Maurice Ravel
Sonata in F Major – George Frideric Handel
Nocturnes – Frédéric Chopin
Thick as a Brick – Jethro Tull
Save the People – Hunter Parrish (Godspell)
People – Barbra Streisand (Funny Girl)
Old Paint – Stephen Wade
Banjo Serenade – Stephen Wade
Peachbottom Creek / John Henry – Stephen Wade
Don't Let Your Deal Go Down – Stephen Wade
Hand in Hand – Stephen Wade
Where Have All the Flowers Gone – Pete Seeger
The Cat Came Back – Harry S. Miller
Goodbye Old Paint – Arthur Russell

THE PHOEBE VARIATIONS READING LIST

MENTIONED
IN THE
NOVEL:



SOME
FAVORITE
COMING-OF-
AGE STORIES
FROM JANE:



A WRITING PROMPT FROM JANE

[illegible]This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on the right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

TO WATCH

FILMS, PLAYS, & MUSICALS MENTIONED IN THE NOVEL

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*

Man of La Mancha

Godspell

Funny Girl

Li'l Abner

Oklahoma!

Guys and Dolls

Dial M for Murder

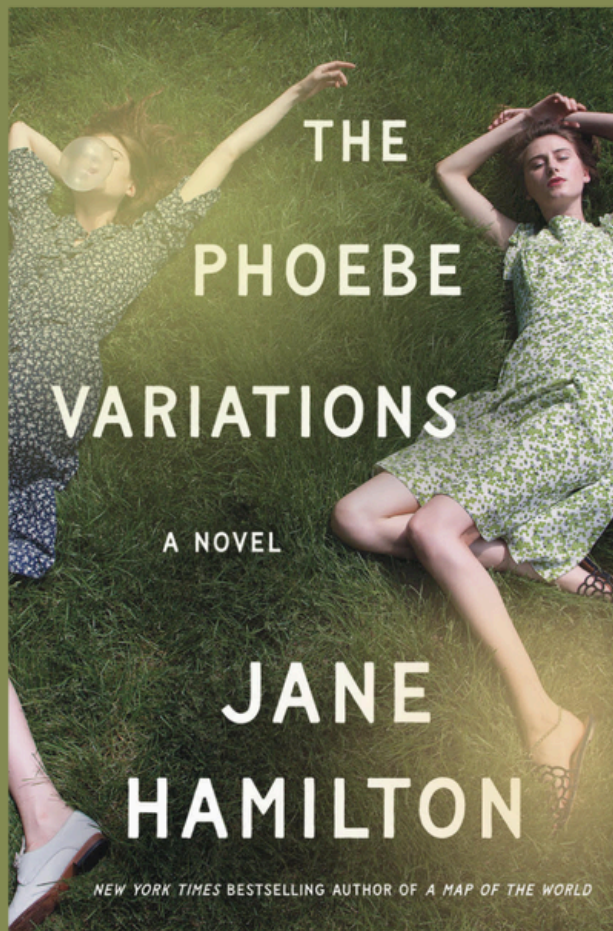
As You Like It

The Godfather (1972)

Blazing Saddles (1974)

Dirty Mary, Crazy Larry (1974)

Victor/Victoria (1982)



THANK YOU FOR READING!

If you selected *The Phoebe Variations* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please follow and tag us on social media: **@janehamiltonwriter and @zibbypublishing**

***The Phoebe Variations* is available in
hardcover, e-book, and audiobook
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