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HIEROGLYPHICS



JILL McCORKLE

New York Times bestselling author of *Life After Life*

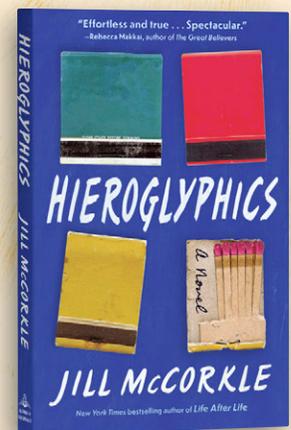
HIEROGLYPHICS *a Novel* JILL McCORKLE

Questions for Discussion

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HOST JILL McCORKLE AT YOUR BOOK CLUB?

Jill is offering free virtual author visits for groups of eight or more. To arrange a session with your book club, bookstore, or library, please visit the Contact page at JillMcCorkle.com for details.

1. The character Lil says that we are all haunted by something. What do you think haunts each of the main characters and how do they each deal with it?
2. The catastrophic events referenced—the train wreck and the Coconut Grove fire—really happened. Why do you think McCorkle used actual events? In what ways does that affect how you read the novel?
3. Harvey's sections, told from a child's point of view, are markedly different from Lil's, Frank's, and Shelley's sections. How does his point of view color our reading of the other sections?
4. There are many references throughout the novel to childhood games and toys and keepsakes. How do they function for each character?
5. Language—what is communicated as well as what remains unspoken—is a central theme in this novel, from Lil's notes and diary entries to Shelley's transcriptions to Frank's study of ancient cultures. How does this relate to the title of the novel?
6. At the end of the novel, Shelley is literally left standing in a threshold. How would you describe that threshold? What do you think lies ahead for her?
7. The present storyline focuses on a day in Frank's life. How would you chart his journey?
8. The characters all have interests woven into the storyline: Lil has her work as a dance instructor; Frank has his studies of ancient burial rituals; Harvey is obsessed with horror tales (real and imagined), his made-up superhero, and animal droppings; Shelley entertains a wholly imagined narrative (the book she would write) while also doing her job. How do these interests help us understand the characters' perspectives?
9. Frank, Shelley, and Harvey all have brothers who are key figures in their lives. Discuss what you know about each brother and how these relationships affect the central characters' lives.
10. Lil spends a lot of time thinking about her marriage to Frank, with particular emphasis on one period of time. How does she resolve her feelings about his affair? How do you feel about her decision?
11. Grief is central in the lives of all four of the main characters. How has it affected the way they live?
12. In the aftermath of both the train wreck and the fire, people were identified by tags or scars or the contents of pockets. Discuss the relevance of these lists.
13. The four central characters' lives are all significantly influenced by their relationships with their parents. Which character's situation were you most drawn to? Even after we've lost parents, how do they live on for us and inform our lives?
14. Were you surprised by the ending? If so, why? If not, why did you expect it?
15. What kinds of things have you saved over the years, and why these specific things? Do you have any talismans? Would the meaning of these keepsakes be evident to anyone else, and if not, why not?

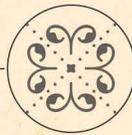




Writing Hieroglyphics

AN ESSAY BY

JILL McCORKLE



When I was growing up, there was a train that passed daily not far from our house. I loved the sound of it and the whole neighborhood loved playing on the tracks. Even though we were told not to go there—admonished and threatened with the terrible things that could happen—we returned to put pennies on the tracks and watch them get flattened, waving to the conductor and the occasional man standing at the rail of the caboose. There was always someone saying how destroying a penny was against the law and we could get arrested, but that fear usually dissipated with the flat copper treasure in our pockets and the view of the many miles we could travel, crosstie by crosstie.

My dad told another train story, his childhood memory that then became laced with my own. He recalled the train crash that happened in our native county when he was an adolescent, a catastrophic event that made all the national papers, and left the survivors hospitalized and stranded far from home. He had gone, as many people had, to see the aftermath of it all, a memory that clearly haunted him. Though I knew it had happened fifteen miles away, I pictured it there just beyond our neighbor's backyard and the pine trees where I played. The details were impossible to forget: a freak snowfall, a stalled train crossing the track, a broken warning light, World War II soldiers heading home for Christmas. There were presents strewn, a bridal veil in the limbs of a tree, survivors filling every hospital bed in much of the state. I was an adolescent myself when I heard the story for the first time, sitting on our back steps with my dad and looking over the dark yard. He was grilling steaks, our dog was waiting for a bone, and so my memory is of his story but also my own story of that time with him. I imagined the crash and



ALGONQUIN PAPERBACKS



I imagined my dad as a boy witnessing the site, and I committed to memory the night I sat and listened to him, glowing coals, pipe smoke, the sadness in his voice as he described the loss. I was also haunted by the details and unfathomable grief, loved ones in other places waiting for news that would proclaim someone alive or dead: a clothing tag, a scar, a particular brand and size shoe—words and numbers and objects with the power to represent a life, convey a whole story. The dry-cleaning tag that looks like nothing but a dry-cleaning tag becomes an intimate object, as do the watch, the lucky coin, the button that person might have fastened in place before getting on the train.

DURING THE MANY YEARS I lived in the Boston area, I often heard references to the Coconut Grove fire with the same level of shock and reverence that all catastrophic events render. Lives end; time freezes. We look for clues and meaning and can't help but imagine the *what-ifs* and *if-onlys*. And then all those bits and pieces of life we often take for granted take on new weight and meaning. Just a couple of years ago I saw an obituary that made reference to the fire—someone who was supposed to be at the club that night in 1942 and then had a change in plans. The fire took place a year earlier than the train wreck, and quite a few of those who died in the crash were heading home to the Boston area. It was cold. It was dark. It was sudden. Loved ones were left waiting and searching through those personal items—a ring or necklace, monogram, card—that would lend information.

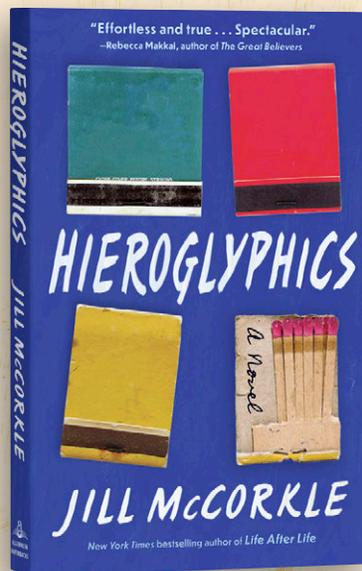
IN THE NOVEL, two of my characters—Lil and Frank—are dealing with parents who died in these tragic events. His father was on the train going home; her mother went to the club without telling Lil and her father that was where she was going. These losses led them to each other in the beginning, and now they have a long marriage behind them. Still, there is so much they don't know about their parents, and likewise so much their own children don't know about them and their life together. And there is Shelley, a young mother trying to raise her sons and working as a stenographer in the courts, her shorthand and recordings of local crimes helping her blot out much of her own troubled past.

Everyone has a secret. Everyone has a memory that haunts or lingers. Everyone has the door they want to close but for whatever reason, time



continues to blow it ajar. Frank has not wanted to look, and until now he has avoided going there. Lil flings hers wide open and goes in with a flashlight, determined to see and know all that she can. Shelley has locked hers multiple times, but the wind keeps rattling all that she cannot escape, while her son, Harvey, is just beginning to find his way, doing what all children do, imagining his future and along the way finding and collecting and hiding little things: matchbook covers and flattened pennies.

In the early days of writing this novel, I read that when sites of orphanages or schools are excavated, there are almost always little caches of toys tucked away and hidden, children wanting to claim and protect what belongs to them. There are also the many versions of *Kilroy was here*—graffiti, handprints, notes in bottles—the stroke of immortality and desire to be remembered. I was thinking of each of these characters in terms of the mark they leave on the world they inhabit, from the most visible and easily discerned knowledge to the tiniest keepsake or scrap of paper to what is consigned only to memory and perhaps never revealed. It is an endless excavation, each discovered item carrying its own story. My hope is that the readers of *Hieroglyphics* will be entertained by these characters and their lives, but I also hope it will lead them to think of various fragments and images from their own lives and to experience the oldest and purest form of time travel—memory.





A Conversation between Jill McCorkle & Editor Kathy Pories



KATHY PORIES: Working on *Hieroglyphics* was so moving, so much so that I often had to remember that I was supposed to be your editor in addition to a devoted reader. I think that's because you're so adept at taking us into the lives of these characters who try to connect to and understand each other, and it felt like what we all struggle to do with our parents, our siblings, our children. And I found myself underlining sentences that spoke to me. And yet, the book is also so funny. Did you feel as though you were writing a different kind of novel when you wrote this?

JILL McCORKLE: Yes, it's so interesting the way that I now look back over my body of work and recognize those places where I feel my writing went in a new direction. This novel is definitely one of those times, and yet, I also feel that *Life After Life* and the many voices within that novel along with a couple of recent short stories paved the way for it to happen. As a younger writer I often shied away from where I really wanted to go; I was intimidated or felt I couldn't do justice to the kind of psychological and emotional portrait that most interests me. Humor comes easily and I'm always on the lookout for the one-liner or quick turn to left field, but what I have always wanted to do is to go into those more serious interior places and *also* reach for the humor. I always tell my students that I think it's like a pendulum, and however far you can swing in one direction should allow motion and distance to the other. In earlier works I often lingered in the humor stretch, and I felt with this novel I fully indulged the other direction while hoping to balance the two. It was scary and yet it is also some of the most satisfying work I have ever done. When I was a kid and writing a lot of really bad poetry, my whole motivation was to make myself (and eventually those lassoed family members) either laugh or cry. As my editor, you

really helped me see and locate the necessary balance for such a swing to work. And hopefully I'm a bit more subtle these days!

KP: *Hieroglyphics* is told in kaleidoscopic pieces that echo one of the primary ideas of the novel: how we always try to make sense of what fragments we are left with, and how that is as difficult sometimes as mastering a new language. And so the reader pieces this all together as they read. When you set out to write this book, did you know that it would take this kind of shape? Or did you decide along the way that it needed to be told in this manner?

“What I have always wanted to do is to go into those more serious interior places and *also* reach for the humor.”

JM: I think I always knew that it would not be in chronological order; it's a novel about memory and our memory functions in a much more organic way. Lil and Frank have both been shaped by the early loss of a parent, and so it seemed natural to me that they would continue over the years reaching back to pick up or discover or reexamine some of the pieces. Because they are in the final stretch of life, their memories are multilayered—as children, as mates, and

as parents—and so the various memories are woven together with that in mind. I've always been fascinated by memory housed within memory—those little things we took for granted in the moment. Shelley is someone attempting to block a lot of her memories, so I knew what is revealed about her would be slight or cryptic in the opening. Shelley and Harvey are more of the present as opposed to the past, and in many ways, their lives provide even more substance to the plotline.

KP: One of the many moving things about *Hieroglyphics* is the way it reminds us how all our little private keepsakes hold so much history and meaning, and how that meaning might not convey to anyone else. Which is why it's important for Lil

to explain all that she'll leave behind. There is a sense in which the person can live on in all these things they've touched or saved, whether they're matchbooks or pennies or receipts. I'm thinking of her memory of the Foundling Hospital, where people have left behind small tokens, "all there to say, 'I love you. I'll be back. Please don't forget me.'" I was so moved by how this is a way that Lil, with so much unfinished in her life, strains to have immortality. Is this how you see it?

JM: Oh yes, absolutely. I visited the Foundling Hospital, and it was one of my most moving experiences and seemed right that I would give that memory to Lil. Each of the many small tokens left behind with all those abandoned babies has a story to tell, and it seems by way of the object being there that it is not the happy resolution the person had hoped for. Objects in the aftermath of the Cocoon Grove fire and the North Carolina train wreck were used to identify people, but they also remain as clues to the lives lost. Such objects surround us all through life, but with time and/or in the aftermath of sudden loss, they have more meaning. And often what they meant to the person remains a mystery. I think all the characters are dealing with such mysteries and coming to terms with those parts of life we might never know or understand.

KP: Frank nearly destroyed his and Lil's marriage, yet they made it through this crisis. When you were writing those scenes, how did you feel about him? Did you ever think of the action unfolding in a different direction? (Trying not to give spoilers!)

JM: I always felt sympathy for Frank because I see him as someone who acts in life without really understanding why. He never got over his father's death. He was not old enough to see his dad as a human who makes mistakes, and so he has held his father up as an image he will never match. Likewise, as a younger man, he was just hoping to get past the age his father was when he died. Frank's life is completely compartmentalized, and though he is haunted by his dad's early death, he's been able to shelve it and not look. Frank was the hardest character to write for this reason. I needed to rely on his work. It's never easy to have a character who is more knowledgeable than you are. He is a shut-down, compartmentalized man, but I always liked him. Or, let's say, I was pulling for him.

KP: Shelley and Harvey are in a way the counterpoint to Lil and Frank's family, with Shelley unwilling to share her history. And her voice creates a great alternate register in the book. How did you know that she needed to be a part of this novel? Was she always part of your idea of how to tell this?

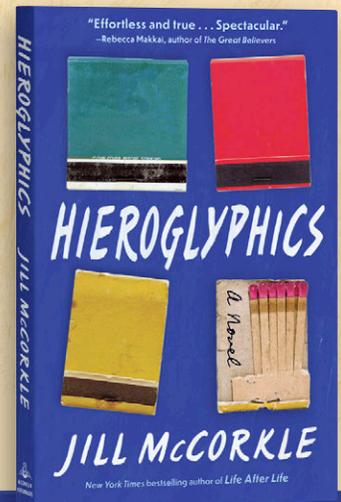
JM: I worried for a long time that maybe she *didn't* belong in the novel, and yet, I knew I needed some off-balance comic relief in there. Shelley's situation in life is *not* funny, but some of the details are. I love characters who have no filter—old, young, or frazzled like Shelley. It's fun to unplug and let them go. When I realized she was living in the house where Frank once lived, it all made sense. Shelley also represents that part of life when we are too busy or stressed to stop and take note and make sense of it all, as Lil (and even Frank) is doing.

KP: What is it about memory that attracts you as a writer?

JM: I think when all is said and done, that is who we are. Our lives are built on the various memories—positive and negative—that have shaped us, and then what's left are the memories others have of us, or repeated versions of our memories that we have given over to the

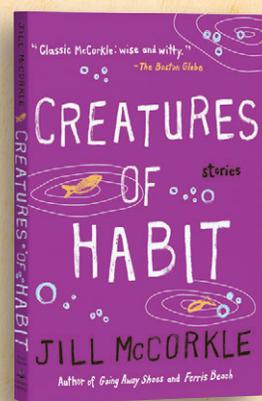
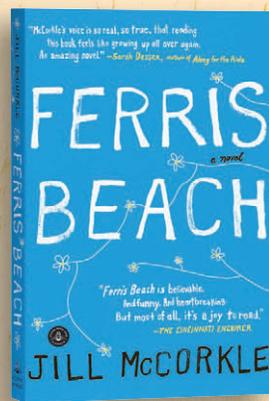
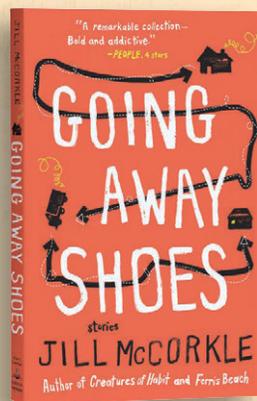
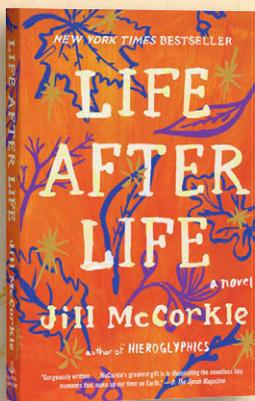
air or written on a page. Many get lost along the way, which is why I am endlessly fascinated by those details that render one life different from all others. I grew up spending a lot of time with older relatives, and their voices and stories have never left me. Many of the works that have inspired me as a writer are rooted in memory. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* is a play I return to often, as well as *The Glass Menagerie*, which Tennessee Williams described as a "memory play." I think we all could name various memories in life that, for better or worse, led to a present moment, and my challenge as a writer is to find the logical steps of a character's progression to some realization or resolution. I want to create believable lives. I lived with these characters for a long time, and I continue to think about them. I like to think that the reader will as well.

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ALSO BY

JILL McCORKLE



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