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PHILLIPS, CARYL

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A cursory glance at Caryl Phillips's biography suffices to understand why such notions as "home," belonging, and unbelonging are central to his writing. Phillips was born in St Kitts, in the eastern Caribbean, to parents with roots in Africa but also in Madeira and India. When he was only twelve weeks old, his family moved to Leeds, in northern England, and his childhood was spent in mostly white, working-class areas, where he and his three younger brothers were often the only black children. In 1979 Phillips graduated from Oxford – yet another facet to an already complex background – and almost immediately afterwards he started on a successful, peripatetic writing and academic career that has taken him all over the world, including a position as a professor of English at Yale University. Though based in New York City, he still frequently goes to St Kitts and to England – particularly London – two islands that remain essential pieces in his identity puzzle.

Phillips's work is, like his life, marked by complexity and plurality. If Phillips is now mainly known for his wide-ranging essays and above all for his award-winning novels, it is worth noting that his first published books were plays, *Strange Fruit* (1981), *Where There Is Darkness* (1982), and *The Shelter* (1984), which concentrate on issues of race, class, and gender, and, like all dramatic writing, give pride of place to individual experiences and voices. These indeed remain major preoccupations in Phillips's novels, though always set against a well-researched historical and social background that has been either neglected or misrepresented in traditional historiography. Whereas his first novel, *The Final Passage* (1985), focuses on individuals who were part of the Caribbean exodus to Britain in the 1950s, his second work of fiction, *A State of Independence* (1986), explores the plight of a returnee who decides to go back to his native West Indies after living in England for some twenty years.

Slavery is another major historical episode that Phillips revisits almost obsessively in his next three works of fiction because he regards "the peculiar institution" as a founding event of modern societies both in Europe and the New World, explaining at once their heterogeneous population but also their inherent racism and their exclusion of the other, whether black, female, or Jewish. This is perhaps best suggested in *Higher Ground* (1989),

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his third novel, which puts side by side the story of an eighteenth-century African interpreter who assists the slave traders in their gruesome transactions, the prison narrative of a young African American in the 1960s, and the sad tale of a young Jewish woman whose exile in postwar London leaves her mentally vulnerable. His fourth work of fiction, *Cambridge* (1991), mostly set in the nineteenth-century Caribbean, takes a closer look at the ironies of plantation societies from the contrasted yet intertwined points of view of a white female planter and a black male slave, while his next novel, *Crossing the River* (1993), explores the history of the African diaspora through the stories of three African children sold into slavery by their father in the eighteenth century. While dispersed in time and space, Nash, Martha, and Travis are nonetheless bound by the love of their guilty father, who eventually regards Travis's wife, a white Englishwoman, as one of his own diasporic children.

A similar gesture of inclusion can be found in *The Nature of Blood* (1997), a novel in which Phillips brings together the African and Jewish diasporas, juxtaposing the exclusion suffered by Jews in fifteenth-century Venice and during the Holocaust with the narratives of an Othello-like figure and a black Jew in contemporary Israel. Clearly, Phillips's repeated and formally daring exploration of an often forgotten past is not gratuitous. Not only is it meant to trigger reflection on human nature, on man's divisive instinct as well as on his need for company, but it also compellingly demonstrates the crucial role played by the past in shaping the present, which is likewise the message of A *Distant Shore* (2003), in spite of its contemporary setting. This subtle novel, which earned Phillips many awards, follows Dorothy, a newly retired English teacher, and Solomon, an African refugee, whose paths cross in an England refusing to come to terms with its changing humanscape. Phillips's novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005) focuses on an actual figure of the African diaspora, Caribbean-born Broadway entertainer Bert Williams, who lived at the turn of the twentieth century. Though not a slave himself, Bert is victim of "performative bondage." Like many other Phillipsian characters, he bears the burden of the slavery past.

Many of the issues tackled in Phillips's fiction are present in his nonfiction, which can be regarded as a political blueprint for his creative imagination. Phillips is the author of three book-length essays, often with an autobiographical slant: *The European Tribe* (1987), *The Atlantic Sound* (2000), and *A New World Order* (2001). While the first one views Europe through the eyes of the young writer who is both of and not of the Old Continent, the other two dwell, like his novels, on the suffering but also the human richness that goes into the making of the transatlantic identity.

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See also Literature of the English-Speaking Caribbean

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