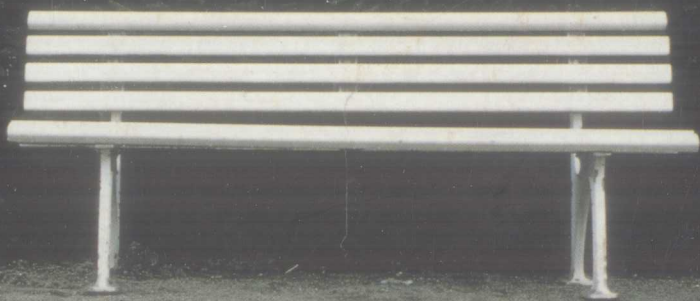


'Masterly.' Guardian

JOHN LANCHESTER



MR PHILLIPS

'To read this book is the greatest fun.'
Barbara Trapido, **Independent on Sunday**

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JOHN LANCHESTER

Mr Phillips



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Mr Phillips

John Lanchester was born in Hamburg in 1962. He was brought up in the Far East and educated in England. He is a columnist for the *Daily Telegraph* and is on the editorial board of the *London Review of Books*. *The Debt to Pleasure*, his first novel, was translated into twenty languages, won the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Betty Trask Prize (for 'a first novel of a romantic or traditional nature'), the Hawthornden Prize (for a work of 'imaginative literature') and a Julia Child Award (for 'literary food writing').

by the same author

THE DEBT TO PLEASURE

For Miranda

A man left alone in the universe would have no
rights whatsoever, but he would have obligations.

SIMONE WEIL, *The Need for Roots*

Mr Phillips

1.1

At night, Mr Phillips lies beside his wife and dreams about other women.

Not all of the dreams are about sex. Not all the women are real. There are dreams in which composite girls, no one he knows, look on while Mr Phillips goes about his dream-business of worrying about things, or looking for things, or feeling obscurely guilty about things. There is a dream he has been having since he was ten years old, in which he saves a whole group of strange women from certain disaster by diverting a runaway train or safely landing an aeroplane or encouraging them to hang on to the roof fittings on a tilting ship until just the right moment. He has even had a couple of dreams which involve him doing something vague but heroic in relation to the Channel Tunnel.

In the aftermath of these feats he is becomingly casual, almost dismissive. To camera crews and the world's press he explains that it is no big deal; but the women in the dream know that that isn't true.

Mr Phillips has anxious dreams about meeting the Queen and being awarded an honour, but not being able to remember what it is for. He has dreams about being told off by Mrs Thatcher. He has dreams about meeting his mother and not

being sure whether they are in Australia (where, in real life, she lives, with Mr Phillips's sister), or London (where, in real life, he lives), or somewhere else. He once had a dream about Indira Gandhi. None of these dreams was about sex. He never told his wife about them. What good could come of it?

As for the sex dreams, he never told her about them, either. What good etc., only more so.

Mr Phillips grades them from one to ten. A one out of ten is quite mild. For instance, he often dreams about Christine Wilson, his next door neighbour but two when he was growing up in Wandsworth. At the age of twelve she was half a notch posher than most of the children in the street; she had brown hair worn in plaits and a naughty streak well hidden from grown-ups. Christine would often instigate uproar, though she was never blamed for causing it. Mr Phillips had gone from hardly noticing her to being horribly, drowningly in love with her in the course of a single Saturday. They had spent that day crawling around in the foundations of a new office building that was going up on land that had lain empty since a stray V2 had cleared it thirteen years before. They played hide-and-seek among the concrete mixers, ducking and scrabbling through partially built walls. When an adult shouted at them they ran home. As he lay in bed that night Mr Phillips found that he was very much in love.

In the dream, he and Christine are at school together, which in real life they never were. Mr Phillips sits next to her on a scratched wooden double desk which is covered in archaeo-

logical layers of graffiti. They are solving, under test conditions, a series of simple algebraic equations: $a + b = x$, if $a = 2$ and $x = 5$, what is b ? He has an erection so strong that he is worried his flies are going to pop open. The end of the lesson is approaching and he is going to have to stand up and everyone is going to see his cock. The unfair thing is that he doesn't feel sexually aroused, he only has the erection because he's got caught up inside his underpants. In fact his penis is trapped outside the entrance to his knickers and is pinned vertically upwards. But no one will believe that. He wouldn't believe it in their shoes. In the dream he starts to blush, feeling the blood rush upwards and his face become lava-hot, electric-fire-hot. Then he wakes up. That is a one out of ten.

By three out of ten, the sex component is more definite. Mr Phillips is kissing his secretary Karen on the cheek while the telephone rings. He knows that he should pick up the receiver but Karen's eyes are closed and she looks so happy that he doesn't want to stop. He has such a good close-up view of the tiny hairs on the side of her neck that when he stops kissing her he says, 'You'll have to start shaving there soon.' She reaches down and puts a hand on his cock. Mr Monroe, the Aberdonian colleague with whom he shares an office and Karen's services, looks on approvingly. Then he wakes up.

A five out of ten sex dream might involve what used to be called 'heavy petting' or some form of explicit display. One of the most common of these dreams involves the television personality Clarissa Colingford. She has hair that is whitish

blonde and what would once have been called 'a lovely figure' and eyes that are the same colour as the middle of a Mars bar. Mr Phillips is hiding in her cupboard, terrified and excited, as he watches her masturbate, covered only by a single thin cotton sheet. That is actually one of the most exciting of his dreams, but it only scores five since Mr Phillips's system is to grade the dreams not on how stimulating they are but on the explicitness of their sex content.

At seven out of ten the sex component is such that it becomes hard to meet the eye of the woman in the dream, the next time he meets her in real life. There is, for instance, something embarrassing or delirious about bumping into Janet – secretary to his boss Mr Mill, the incompetent head of the accountancy department – as she walks down the corridor with two plain digestive biscuits balanced on the saucer of a cup of tea, for all the world as if she had not, the night before, been eagerly responding to Mr Phillips's frightened but keen request to be sodomized with a nine-inch rubber penis.

It can't just be him, Mr Phillips feels. Office life is an erotic conspiracy. Everybody in offices thinks about sex all the time – that's exactly what they do. If the air at Wilkins and Co. were like one of those swimming pools which changes colour when someone pees in it, so that the air would be dyed blue whenever anyone looked on their colleagues with lust, or need, or at the very least sexual speculation, then the atmosphere would be as clogged and dense as a London pea-souper. Does he stalk rampant through the dreams of co-workers, a vivid prin-

ciple of priapism, so that the working day carries the lurid after-tinge of the night before? Perhaps Karen herself has beguiled an idle moment by speculating as to what it would be like with Mr Phillips. After all, she's only human. People fall in love with their secretaries all the time, and vice versa – not least because most men are at their most attractive when at work, their attention directed outside themselves, with chores to perform and decisions to make, all unlike the sulking, shifty tyrants of the domestic stage, wanting everything their own way and locked in a battle to the death to get it.

It goes without saying that people use offices for sex all the time, too. It's a rare photocopier that hasn't been used to take a picture of somebody's bum. It's a very unusual desk that has never had people fucking on it. In an important sense, all this is what offices are for. Mr Phillips has even done it on a desk himself once, when he was working at Grimshaw's, his first employer. His girlfriend Sharon Mitchell came to the office late to collect him on the way to a film, a Western with James Stewart in it. This was in the days before security guards and after-hours subcontracted office cleaners. They had done it on Mr Phillips's very own desk, indeed on his very own ink blotter. Sharon was the first girl Mr Phillips did it with who was on the pill; she chucked him for a musician. A sixties memory.

One thing that all the dreams have in common is that Mr Phillips never actually manages to have sex in them. Even in the ten out of ten dreams, Mr Phillips never gets it wet. He looks and sees and feels and kisses, he plots and schemes and

gets women to agree to have sex with him, and in some versions they even pursue him to ask for it ('begging for it', 'gagging for it') but he never, in the dreams, actually puts his penis inside another person, not even in the homosexual dreams which come along every now and then, with their own agenda, as if trying to make a point.

This morning, Mr Phillips has just woken from a seven out of ten dream in which he was trying to arrange to have sex with Miss Pettifer, his younger son Thomas's form teacher at St Francis Xavier's. She is in her early fifties and therefore around the same age as Mr Phillips. In real life, he hasn't been conscious of being even vaguely attracted to her – but when he wakes after the dream, he realizes that isn't the whole story. The fact that she is, say, twenty pounds overweight, he feels in part of himself as a liberation, as if, in throwing off one set of worries about being sensible and watching your weight, other worries might be thrown off too, so that her half-double chin and wildly blossoming hips, all the more visible because her clothes are a third of a size too small, hold a promise: with me, you can do *anything you want*.

This isn't the first time he has dreamt about Miss Pettifer. The last time it happened he made an effort to talk to her at the next PTA meeting, as a way of getting the dream out of his system. When they shook hands, in the tobacco-stained staff room which smelt of instant coffee, he had the feeling that there was something in her eyes beyond the usual struggle to remember who this particular parent was. Perhaps she was

aware that she had spent at least part of one night trying to clear a space among the desks or find a cupboard where he could fuck her standing up among brooms and brushes and ironing boards. (That is a detail from the dream that had to be wrong – why would the school have ironing boards in the cupboard?) But they were constantly interrupted: people came in and out, children playing cricket in the corridors kept bursting in to ask Mr Phillips if he would be their umpire, and once Martin, Mr Phillips's elder son, came knocking on the door of the cubicle in the bathroom just as Miss Pettifer had undone Mr Phillips's fly and extracted his penis.

1.2

As Mr Phillips begins to wake up, by instalments, reality gradually coalesces around him in the form of his bedroom, his house, his sheets, which are wedding presents still surviving nicely more than two decades after the event, the photographs of his sons in a silver frame on top of the dressing table, and his wife, behind whom he is curled, underneath whose buttocks his erection, harder than those he now usually comes up with, is squeezed. Over her back and shoulder Mr Phillips can see the bits and pieces on their shared bedside table:

- a lamp, an impulse purchase of Mrs Phillips's, slightly too low to cast a valuable reading light;
- a glass of water, undrunk, which by morning would always have undergone a change in taste and become oddly flat;
- an alarm clock in the shape of an owl, a present from Thomas, with luminous hands, and ears which have to be wound to make the clock go; Mr Phillips can never remember whether the left ear wound the clock and the right the alarm or vice versa;
- his reading glasses, black-framed and substantial, like the ones Michael Caine wore as secret agent Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File*;
- a cloth doily, fringed and trimmed with lace, given them by