

Susan Elizabeth Phillips Interviewed by Karen Harper

Since you've lived in the Chicago area for years, I'm sure many of your Ohio readers don't realize you have past and present Ohio ties. Do you have some Buckeye blood still in your veins?

Oh, yes. My family settled near Wilmington in the 1800s, so my Ohio roots are deeply planted. I grew up in Lancaster, then moved to Columbus where I eventually taught, married, and gave birth to our first son. We hated leaving Ohio, and after more than twenty years in Illinois, I still consider myself a Buckeye.



Susan Elizabeth Phillips

Have you used Ohio in your novels? I recall a scene with a car being dumped in the Olentangy River in Columbus.

Even more impressive, one of my heroes played football for Woody Hayes!

What are some of your best Ohio memories? Are there any Ohio events that helped to shape your literary career?

So much of a writer's viewpoint is shaped during childhood, and my love of small towns grew out of my experience growing up in Lancaster. My favorite early childhood memories center around that town, my grandmother's farm along Todd's Fork in Clinton County, my aunt's rambling house in Cincinnati, and later, the Clintonville area of Columbus. I also loved my years in Athens attending Ohio University, Hocking River floods and all. My worst Ohio memories revolve around entering Columbus North High School as a new student during my sophomore year and being confronted with the school's underground, but deeply entrenched, sorority and fraternity system. I found refuge with wonderful teachers such as Meta Gregg, Donald Dupre, and Marjorie Blaire. That sense of being an awkward outsider has served me well in many of my

books.

You were a theater major at Ohio University in Athens. Although you didn't originally plan to be a novelist, was this training helpful for writing fiction?

I can't count how many times I've given thanks for my OU theater degree, especially as I've watched my friends with degrees in creative writing struggle to find their bearings in commercial popular fiction. My theater background gave me the tools to approach my characters internally, which has turned out to be one of my greatest strengths. Even more important, I was able to start writing without a long list of literary caveats firmly implanted in my brain. A real gift.

Your contemporary romance/women's fiction novels have hit the biggest national bestseller lists for years. What do reviewers and readers appreciate most about your work?

The humor. I can't tell you how often I've heard a reader say, "Don't ever stop making me laugh." Readers also get incredibly attached to my characters, maybe because they're as imperfect as the rest of us.

Would you share your general writing process? Plan ahead or grow-it-as-you-go?

Such an embarrassing question. Did you have to ask? Before I start writing, I'm lucky if I have a premise and a few vague ideas about the central characters. It's a messy, stress-inducing process, but it's mine, darn it, and I'm not apologizing.

In 1992, you wrote a seminal essay on "The Romance and the Empowerment of Women" for *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* (Pub. University of Pennsylvania Press.) Could you explain this theory?

The journey of the heroine in the classic romance novel is always a journey of a woman rising above her obstacles. Our bestsellers don't center around the neurotic, victimized women so frequently depicted in other forms of popular and literary fiction. Our heroines take charge. And they win. Of all forms of genre fiction, the romance novel tends to be the most subversive because it takes patriarchal notions of power and turns them upside down.

How have you seen the romance genre change in the years you've been published?

Romance has always been a fertile ground for creative experimentation. Because the romance genre historically has received so little attention from literary critics and academics, its authors have been able to fly beneath the radar and pretty much do whatever they wanted with no one watching. This freedom has led to an astonishing degree of innovation that makes it difficult to define exactly what a romance is these days. We see social issue books; suspense; paranormal, futuristic and fantasy romances; historical romances; chick lit; time travel; romantic comedy; and lots more I probably haven't yet heard about.

Why do you think the romance genre seems to be the most recession-proof of contemporary fiction categories?

My reader e-mail clearly tells me how difficult peoples' lives are, now more than ever. We provide inexpensive stress relief, but more important, we provide a sense of order. The lovers will find the happy ending that, for many, feels elusive right now. Beyond that, the great romance affirms our core values as a society – values we may believe are slipping away from us. We write about love and justice, trust and loyalty. About forming families and community. The lover's path will be treacherous – and almost certainly paved with delicious hot sex – but our hero and heroine will eventually find their way just as we hope we will find ours.

Susan Elizabeth Phillips was born in Cincinnati and grew up in Central Ohio. She graduated from Ohio University with a BFA in Theater and did post-graduate work at the University of Iowa. Phillips began writing in 1979 and since then has become a *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *USA TODAY* Top 50 best seller. She currently lives in the Chicago area with her husband and two grown sons who occasionally show up for food. Her website is www.susanephillips.com.