# S2E1 - Writing the Writer-Mother: Lessons from Biography and Life in Julie Phillips's Work

**Kaitlin Solimine:** [00:00:00] She said, I don't think a hero can be a mother. I don't think a mother can be a hero. And I felt this terrible irritation and frustration that made me realize I want mothers to be heroes. I want them to be heroes, not in the slaying-the-dragon sense, but I just want them to be the heroes of their own stories.

**Pre-recorded intro:** I'm your host, Kaitlin Solimine and this is the Postpartum Production Podcast here. We hold conversations about the intersection of caregiving, creative practice, and capitalist production, as well as what it means to be producing art while also being a parent in modern society. Find out more@www.postpartumproduction.com where you can also sign up for our newsletter.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Today we're talking with Julie Phillip. An American biographer and book critic and the author of *The* [00:01:00] *Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Mothering and the Mind- Baby Problem* out from Norton in 2022, which feels like the perfect topic to launch our second season. Julie's previous book, *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, received several honors including the National Book Critics Circle Award, The Hugo and Locus Awards, and the Washington State Book Award. She's currently working on a biography of Ursula K. Le Guin. Julie's written for *The New Yorker*, *Ms.*, *The Village Voice*, and many other publications.

She reviews books for *4columns dot org* and writes about English literature for the Dutch Daily newspaper *Trouw*. I hope I'm saying that right. She's the fortunate recipient of a Whiting Creative Nonfiction grant and residencies at Hedge Brook and Willapa Bay AiR. She currently lives in Amsterdam with her partner and their two children.

Julie spoke to me from her home in Amsterdam about her new book, about what it means to her to be sitting at the intersection now of mothering older children and writing biographies of mother [00:02:00] writers. And I expect you'll enjoy this conversation as much as I did.

I've been reading your book and rereading your book and re-rereading your book many times in the last few months. And I love that it's been coming to me in different formats and through different friendships or networks and things like that as well. So it's really exciting to see the different ways and the different communities that are really excited about the work that you've done here.

And I think very clearly it's speaking to something, and I'd love to hear from you what you think it's speaking to that is drawing so much attention. And also I think there's a particular moment right now where it feels like the work that you're doing here in this book is feeling particularly relevant and powerful to a lot of people.

**Julie Phillips:** I [00:03:00] started writing this book as a biography and picked the theme almost randomly to bring together a bunch of women I was interested in, and I thought, oh, the common thread. I'll figure that out as I go along. And that really confronted me with how do you write about motherhood? How do you talk about motherhood?

How do you turn it into a biographical narrative? And at the same time, I really wanted there to be a narrative that wasn't just about the first year or just about the first months or just about pregnancy. As much as I love books like that, as much as I love the Argonauts or Rachel's writing on the first year of her motherhood, in a lot of ways, I'm doing this really nutty thing, which is trying to find out the experience of motherhood by looking at other people's experience when it would be much more logical to dig into my [00:04:00] own experience.

But I felt a little bit confined by my own perspective, by each single person's perspective. I felt I could wanted to see what was out there from multiple perspectives. And over time, and it ended up being kind of a big bag of stuff. I feel , but it was also somehow or other, it was the book that I wanted to read.

It was the book that I needed to read about motherhood. And I kept thinking, oh, I'm doing this wrong. It's a big bag of stuff. I should be writing more about myself. I should be making it more of a narrative. I should be putting all the pieces together. And eventually I just thought, you know, I'm writing this kind of monster of a book that doesn't fit any of the [00:05:00] categories.

I might as well just make it my monster and stick more legs and fingers, and bits and ears on it. And so then I would just put in another quote,

**Kaitlin Solimine:** I mean, I think though that's, that is what for me really worked and what was so enticing about it from the beginning was that there were a number of voices, and you do include your own narrative. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. , and I actually have to say that, that I found really grounding and also really relatable. I mean, I hate to make it about relatability, but there was a sense of, okay, hearing those pieces of this authorial intrusion, if you will, interjections or mm-hmm.

pauses or however you wanna define it. And I think it does serve different purposes at different points in the book as well. But I was curious about that choice for you as a [00:06:00] writer and how that felt. Because I think it's something that is done more now, but it isn't historically something that is allowed in literature.

**Julie Phillips:** I mean, I do think the book is all about me in the sense that it was all the things that interested me and all the things that puzzled me, and there are subjects that were less interesting to me that are kind of left out of the book. I don't think I talked very much about maternal guilt, for instance, that feeling of, I feel so bad for leaving my kids to write because I was writing about women who didn't have as much trouble with it. You know, I chose women who were at the top of their field. Mm-hmm. . I chose women who were really driven by their vocation. So that's a, I think a group of people who have a little bit less doubt about what they're doing than, for instance, I do.[00:07:00]

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Interesting. I can see that. , and I'd have to look at different specifics in the book, but I do feel like if it's not guilt, there's tension for sure. Mm-hmm. And depending upon, I guess, how you define guilt. I do think that inevitably there's that tension. And I think you did say though, early on in the book, you said one thing I really liked of your own framing, you said what mothering and creativity looks like that you're building (mm-hmm) a story of what mother and creativity looks like, not just in the first few years, but as part of a life story. And I think that that was what worked so well in the book of, of, in not just examining, like you said, an early moment or that particular intersection, but also how that particular intersection can just blossom across a lifespan, but across a career, but across a trajectory of one's own creative work.

And I thought that that [00:08:00] really allowed each story in each biography to sit independently, but also then to speak to each other, right, just as lives would. I'm also curious, as you're saying, I didn't know, for example, that you chose these particular biographies because to you, they lacked potentially that guilt.

**Julie Phillips:** Well, that wasn't the reason, but I did choose women who were prominent writers just because that's the nature of biography. You write about women who are well known. You write about women who have reached the top of their field, and so I think that's a group that has— they all approached it really differently. And they all had their own hesitations and they all had their own limitations and they all had their own anxieties about, am I doing this right? But at the same time, they were all really driven. [00:09:00] Mm-hmm.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. What is that drive? Because that's something I think a lot about as a writer now and as a mother, what is capable of sustaining something that has so little support?

I mean, and that can be both the writing and the caregiving, right? If you were to look at them, what lessons did you learn as a writer and as a mother and as a biographer through these stories?

**Julie Phillips:** I interviewed a friend of Ursula K. Le Guin's, once. I asked her, how do you think she got through those 10 years when she was writing, but she wasn't getting published when she wasn't having any outward success.

And she, this other woman said, the talent has its own drive. The talent carries you through. And I think they all, in one way or another, had a vocation and a talent that [00:10:00] wouldn't be denied that really deeply needed to be expressed. And Alice Walker says, she talks about all the black women whose talents have been denied and who never had an opportunity to express them.

And she says, what happens? You go crazy. Mm-hmm. . And I think women in the 20th century were incredibly lucky to start being able to realize that and start being able to follow their vocation and not just stay at home and lose their mind.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** You could speak better to this, obviously, in terms of their own life chronologies and where they were situated within the 20th century and 21st century. But was that intentional or were you thinking of a particular moment of [00:11:00] history, which obviously can apply to the history of American literature or Western literature and also feminism within all of that?

**Julie Phillips:** Mm-hmm. . . Yeah. I picked women who were born between nineteen hundred and nineteen forty five. Mm-hmm. . Because they were old enough that I could get their whole life story. And they were young enough that it gave it a kind of coherence that they were all roughly the same age. They were young enough not to have been written about a whole lot

I thought, you know, I'm not gonna do another book about Rebecca West and her incredibly fraught motherhood. I'm not gonna do, I'm not gonna write about Vanessa Bell. I want to write about women whose stories I haven't heard about so much before. Hmm hmm. And it also gave me a narrative thread in the sense that so much changed in the [00:12:00] 20th century.

So much more became possible in the 20th century, and so I felt like there was an optimistic narrative that was running through the book.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. Yeah, I can make you look a little skeptical. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. It did. I was just thinking about my feeling. No, it definitely did. It also though, you know, as someone who was born in 1980, I feel like having been born at that moment obviously feels different than having been born between 1,919 40.

And so then sitting with these stories, Yes, there is optimism. I think there's also, there's just that much more hardship at that particular moment for those particular women than hopefully we have now. Right. I mean, we hope that we are progressing. Mm-hmm. as a whole, and especially for caregivers and for mothers.

Mm-hmm. . And I think there's optimism in what they were able to accomplish despite all those constraints. [00:13:00] I mean, you could speak to this too. I mean, I think there were some that felt less optimistic than others.

**Julie Phillips:** That's true. And I'm also thinking about, you know, things that we're losing in the 21st century. Mm-hmm. , like abortion rights. Mm-hmm. , which are so vital to creative motherhood. The ability to choose when to have your children. Mm-hmm. and. Under what circumstances. Reproductive justice, having healthcare. Mm-hmm. having a living wage are incredibly important and you know, in some cases we're losing it. I mean, where I live in the Netherlands, when my kids were little, daycare was heavily subsidized, and one of the things that made it possible for me to go on writing and keep my sanity was having access to four days a week of daycare without having [00:14:00] to work nonstop at a paying job just to pay for those hours.

Wow. So it gave me a sense that I as a mother had a right to time. Mm-hmm. . Had a right to time to use the way I wanted for creative stuff that wasn't making money or to earn money or to, you know, maybe spend time with my partner. All these things that are not at all taken for granted in the US in particular, but also some of those subsidies have been taken away.

Mm-hmm. in the Netherlands now. So I think it's harder now to be a mother and a writer, or a mother and an artist than it was here, than it was when my kids were little.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Interesting. And the lack of social structures, right? I mean, there's so many layers of lacks of support beyond the governmental or institutional that we lack so much.[00:15:00]

Even culturally, I think there's a lack of support in terms of just the way in which we view children and elderly in capitalist societies. I feel like there's a lot of get out of the way and you're not serving any purpose, so—

**Julie Phillips:** Absolutely. You know, we don't want any of our tax money to go to other people's children. We don't really want you to spend your time raising children because that's not productive of Productive of what money, I guess this resentment of the time that care is put into caring for kids.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah. I think that when you speak of the idea, because this is not an American one at this moment of having four days a week of childcare that I'm not paying for like the, the mental calculus of that for me.

Mm-hmm. is sort of mind blowing because every moment that I am spending away from my children, even the idea of spending mm-hmm. , there's very few ways for me to do that. Yeah. You're paying for it [00:16:00] in a way that's paying for it, and so when I am then choosing also to do something that. Often unpaid.

It's like this double burden of unpaid labor. It's like, well, my creative pursuits tend not to be, again, not valued in a way that can support my family. It's a lot harder to do that as opposed to a lot of other careers, and so weirdly, the subsidies for childcare in a way, in my own head anyways, would somehow value my childcare as well. Like it would give value to my time.

**Julie Phillips:** And to the choices that you make about your time.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Right? Yeah. Because it's allowing me to make those choices versus to not be able to because of the cost, which is also skyrocketing. So there's that.

You pose this question and also I think all of the work that you're examining does as well about how we think about motherhood and intellectualism together, and also how we think about motherhood as an intellectual concept. [00:17:00] And I was curious how that came about in your work and also how you've wrestled with that personally.

**Julie Phillips:** It's there right from the beginning in anything that you say about motherhood and intellectual life, that there's a perceived split between them- that is an idea they cannot exist together. That the kind of emotional and physical labor of care and the labor of thinking, the labor of intellectual work, they just can't go together.

Not only in terms of time, but in terms of thinking about them conceiving the combination of those two and what it might look like. And of course there's a lot of moral judgment [00:18:00] that comes into that because there's this old idea that thinking too much is going to be bad for the baby. It's going to draw you away from that labor of care.

It's going to make you emotionally inaccessible to this family that is making demands on you. There's a fear that women will neglect their care work, I think. I mean, the whole society is built on women's care work. I understand why it's policed so much. Mm-hmm. , I understand why the motherhood police is always telling you that you're doing it wrong.

It's always asking you when you're going to have another child, or why didn't you have another child? Or is always voicing an opinion about how many days your kid should be in daycare and what you should, whether ,you know, you should be leaving it to cry or not leaving it to cry. I mean, it is the basis of civilization.

It is not really so [00:19:00] strange that people want to control it, but you do have to turn your back on that at some point. Hmm. You have to say, okay, I am going to define it for myself, but it is hard and there is this sense of mother and thinker as a negative space.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** This came up actually in an interview I just did last week with a writer who wrote this book called *Linea Nigra*. Her name is Jazmina Barrera.

**Julie Phillips:** Oh, that's a wonderful book. Yeah.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** And she was talking about, oh, now here my brain goes. Speaking of postpartum . What was she talking about? . Oh my God. The interruptions. Okay, let's let it go. It'll come back. It always comes back. Yeah.

But speaking of your book and the way in which, like you said, the [00:20:00] quotes, the personal interludes, you wrote the book that you needed to read. I needed to read this book too. So clearly it's not, you know, it is you and it's not, and I really appreciated that.

**Julie Phillips:** It's interesting though, isn't it, that it isn't a lot of sustained thought about motherhood. I kept finding a single quote that I thought expressed something really well. A single bit of insight. You know, there are some really great attempts to tackle the problem of motherhood on the theoretical level of maternal subjectivity. Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. And I think *Maternal Encounters* by Lisa Baraitser is the best one where she's the one that talks about interruption as the state of motherhood, the, the sort of fundamental state of motherhood and having to learn to live with that. Yeah. I appreciate by the way, after I read your book, I bought her book and I was just trying to look for it cause it was just on my desk and [00:21:00] it's since moved. But yeah, it's wonderful. And Chelsea Conaboy's book *Mother Brain,* which I'm sure you've read is also fantastic about talking about the science of what is actually happening to you in that first postpartum year. Mm-hmm. and why it feels like your life is being turned upside down. Mm-hmm. And why your emotions are so intense.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Speaking of those interruptions and the pauses, it's interesting, right, because you are suddenly holding a lot more than you are previously. I mean, you are literally carrying and caring for others.

Mm-hmm. in a biological way that requires this sort of restratifying. Right. So that when I'm talking to you and I'm losing my train of thought, maybe I'm losing my train of thought with you because somehow my executive form functioning or whatever is, is telling me like I need to be thinking in this [00:22:00] or, or not.

But it's just, it's so convoluted. And so before we started recording, you had mentioned that just yesterday you helped your daughter with a move. And in thinking about those interruptions and the holding and the space and how that works, either with or against the work that we do as creatives as a whole, that it doesn't end that, like you said, it's not an only early postpartum.

I think there's a heightened obvious reason why there's more of that potentially early on, but that doesn't change that once you are a mother, once you are a parent, once you are a caregiver, it is forever.

**Julie Phillips:** And apparently, as I've recently experienced, once you start caring for the older generation or caring for anybody else, you go straight back into that care mind. Mm-hmm. , that very intense, very emotionally overwhelmed [00:23:00] state that I think I would've, it would've happened to me anyway, but I recognized that I knew it because I'd been there before.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. I think even this is the first time I think, for me anyway, that I've, just the way that you're talking about the care mind in that way. Mm-hmm. It's intellectualizing it. I mean, and I'm not saying that in a pejorative way. I mean, it really is. It's holding space for something that we haven't, I think culturally at least been able to. Examine and hold space for, and then thus honor, I do think that like, right, because the intellectual allows it to be honored.

Oh, I remember. I remember what I was gonna say earlier. Okay. So yes, Mina was saying that it feels like there's a lot more energy and attention on motherhood right now in the cultural sense at least. And maybe that's, uh, an echo chamber. I don't know.

**Julie Phillips:** No, no, no. I think that's very true. Yeah, it does feel like that.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah. Like there's more that's being published and she was saying like, [00:24:00] but I hope it's not just a motherhood moment. It feels like it could almost be stolen from us in a sense of like, if it's just, oh, well, okay, see we're, we're gonna have this little motherhood moment where we seem to care and seem to publish, or will that end? Or is it just that? Okay, now we just, almost in some ways of naming the literature, obviously, or having the moment having there be attention to the fact that there is, it does sort of steal the power because it should just be a part of, like, we have so many narratives about grief and death and loss. Mm-hmm. , and yet so little about birth.

**Julie Phillips:** And love stories. I mean, there's plenty of room in love stories to feel and think about your feeling at the same time. Hmm. And so I don't see why you couldn't write motherhood the same way. Why you can't have all those feelings and you know, have your thinking mind be operating as well as long as you have time. Mm-hmm. [00:25:00] To go back to the idea of having, is motherhood a moment or is it something that's going to last. I think it might be something like feminism where you start thinking about it in a new way and then it ebbs again, and then something exciting happens and then it comes back. And you make a new step forward and then it ebbs away again.

And maybe there are some losses, you know, like the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Mm-hmm. is clearly a loss for motherhood and for feminism. Mm-hmm. . And then maybe there's something that happens politically. Mm-hmm. . That put Smothers in a better place. Maybe. Maybe we'll get more subsidies for daycare someday ever . And then, you know, a new book is gonna come out. If that is gonna make us think about motherhood in an even [00:26:00] more enlightening way, and we'll keep moving. Mm-hmm. , I hope. Mm-hmm. I'm really looking forward to when that book comes out. ,

**Kaitlin Solimine:** I think it's right here.

I did wanna address and, and get a deeper sense for the time of this book. And I also kind of wanted to push you a little bit. You said this book took too much time. Mm-hmm. , you said, I started thinking about it when my children were in elementary school, and as I finished, they're both in college. If I could keep reading, I love this paragraph.

Living in and out of the house as their plans change or are changed by the long, slow pandemic time, they don't outgrow their clothes anymore, though their body's temporal progress still shows in a vertical clock of pencil marks on our kitchen wall. As a parent of young children, I just, that just really got under my skin in a really emotional and beautiful way, and I appreciated it.

But I, I needed to ask, you said it took too much time and of course [00:27:00] I feel a judgment there. It took time. Right. So it, the, the idea that you're saying it took too much time. I was curious if you could sit with that a little bit.

**Julie Phillips:** Well, aside from it going way over the deadline and I spent a lot of time to, at some point, you know, having said, well, you know, obviously it needs to be a diverse group of writers. At some point I realized, oh, I don't know very much about black women mothering. I mm-hmm. . I had a lot of Dunning Kruger effect. The less you know, the more you think you know. Hmm. And the more you know, the more you realize that there is to know. Mm-hmm. and the more humbled you are by your own lack of knowledge.

Mm-hmm. , and that was a learning curve for me and I felt like I had to, I really needed to do that work. I couldn't just say, oh, [00:28:00] well, it's not that important. I'll just write a faster book and leave those thoughts out. That didn't seem fair. That seemed like cheating. Mm-hmm. the easy way out. But then there were whole periods of time when I just didn't know what the book was about and where it was going and, and when I just kinda set it aside and thought every day that I should be working on it and didn't work on it and, you know, found ways to procrastinate and at some point I read a passage by Ursula Le Guin, where she talks about heroism and she says she's frustrated with heroism.

She feels like it is just the old fantasy of men with swords slaying the dragon and rescuing the maid and that she wants a new way of [00:29:00] telling stories, but so she said, I don't think a hero can be a mother. I don't think a mother can be a hero. And I felt this terrible irritation and frustration that made me realize I want mothers to be heroes.

I want them to be heroes not in the slaying-the-dragon sense, but I just want them to be the heroes of their own stories. To be able to be at the center and not pushed off to the side. And it made me realize that I hadn't conceived of them that way yet. Hmm. In their motherhood, their, I was writing about their motherhood as things happening to them.

Hmm. And not as things that they were doing that were changing them. Hmm. And that was, I think, the insight that made it possible for me to finish the book.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. At what part of the process did that happen?

**Julie Phillips:** Basically when all the chapters were done. [00:30:00] Mm-hmm. , except Audre Lorde. Audre Lorde was going to be a short chapter and Susan Sontag was going to be a long one.

And then I just found it too difficult to write about Susan Sontag's life, and I didn't like her motherhood very much. Hmm. Although in retrospect and talking later to somebody who knew her, I think that she might have been on the autism spectrum, which I kind of wish I'd discussed as a possibility because I think that that undiagnosed autism spectrum disorder would really complicate your motherhood. Mm-hmm. in ways that clearly were not her fault. Mm-hmm. , and it makes it possible for you to see that it's not her fault.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** I really enjoyed discussing the concept of maintenance work in relation to the political [00:31:00] activism of women and caregivers with Julie.

It was something I hadn't thought about and hadn't framed in the way that she had, and I found it really helpful to look at the work that we do both in the home and outside of the home through that lens. To that end, as I've previously mentioned, we're looking at ways to maintain this space on the podcast as a place we can offer a living wage to our production team to eventually build out caregiver stipends for our guests, and to build a residency program for listeners like you.

It's definitely a hustle, I'm not gonna lie, but I'm excited that sometimes there are glimmers of hope. And in this episode, we'd love to highlight a product and company that's working to build technologies to assist caregivers in early phases of postpartum and caregiving. ***The Bonoch Long Range Baby Monitor.*** I have to say that even as a co-sleeping family of five, there are many times I've left my children in bed or a bassinet and needed the security and safety of a monitor to know they're safe.[00:32:00]

*The Bonoch Long Range Baby Monitor* is perfect for larger houses and bigger families. So you can effortlessly hear your children when they wake and ensure they're cared for. At the same time, as you know in early postpartum and recovery from childbirth, having an extra set of eyes on a sleeping infant is that needed peace of mind to get better rest and care. To find out more about the impressive specifications of the Bonoch Long Range Baby Monitor and to receive a special 30% discount available only to our listeners, please check the links in our show notes and also the Bonoch website, which is https://invi.tt/P27J *(Probably easier to find it in the links.)* Now picking back up on our conversation with Julie about maintenance work.

**Julie Phillips:** I still sort of found ways to let maintenance work get in the way of writing. I noticed actually in the fall of [00:33:00] 2020, I did a ton of get out the vote work. Mm-hmm. , because I was so anxious about what might happen. Mm-hmm. , and I think of that as maintenance work in, you know, Miriam Muley is a sense mm-hmm. of the cooking and the cleaning, and the keeping the household running and keeping the country going along. Mm-hmm. without too much disaster is also just a kind of maintenance that I think is done a lot by middle-aged moms actually.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. . Mm-hmm. . And you're abroad?

**Julie Phillips:** Yeah. I live in the Netherlands. I live in Amsterdam.

I mean, I talk about that a little bit I was saying that I raised kids in really different circumstances, and I think much happier circumstances. It's a much more relaxed parenting culture here. People can afford to work [00:34:00] part-time. A lot of women, and particularly mothers, tend to work part-time, which is a very relaxed way to raise kids.

Ideally, you know, both the mothers and the fathers would work part-time. Mm-hmm. , but often it's the mother. So there's a debate about that. Why? Why is it women who, given the choice, choose that? Should they choose other things? I think there's pressure on women here to be less ambitious. Mm-hmm. in ways that maybe are not good.

While I also think that the pressure on women in the US to work really hard and earn and achieve and, you know, to support their kids and to pay for the daycare and so, and is not great either. Mm-hmm. , but you know, of course you look at the US and you know, you think this could, you know, it's still my country and it, it's scary that it happens and it has an effect worldwide.

I mean, people look at it [00:35:00] and say people in other countries are influenced by what happens in the US. Yeah. It's also a responsibility to my kids in a certain way, even though my kids think it's stupid.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** But getting out the, the, the work of—

**Julie Phillips:** the getting out the vocal stuff, they think it's a, they think it's kinda a stupid, weird hobby, but.....

**Kaitlin Solimine:** ...because they feel like it won't have an impact or because it's something that is taking you away from them or what? I mean, I'm just...

**Julie Phillips:** Oh, I just, I think that the impact feels very, abstract when you're a kid and you feel like your parents are taking care of the world and it's all going to be fine. Hmm. And kids are aware a lot of particularly climate change. Mm-hmm. . and I got involved in politics partly through helping my daughter organize a March for Our Lives event.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Oh, wow, wow.

**Julie Phillips:** Because I was thinking a lot about my own kids and if they should ever go to school [00:36:00] in the us mm-hmm. and what could happen. Mm-hmm. , you know, I mean, they're looking to me to, to fix all this, but in that case, somebody in my generation has to be doing that very basic work. That maintenance work.

Mm-hmm. . Yeah. That work that has to get repeated over and over and over and over just to keep things running on a basic level.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. Interesting. I hadn't thought of that political work in that way, but it makes a lot of sense. And like you said, it's likely a reason why the demographic fits the work as well.

And I don't know whether or not are we acc cultured to sit in that space? Or is there an expectation of this is the type of work that you do and therefore it fits that mold? I'm certainly not studied enough to understand that, but I'm just thinking about it as you're saying it.

**Julie Phillips:** Yeah. I mean, I don't know. I mean, I [00:37:00] get why women would show up for that work. I don't get why more men don't show up for that work.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** It is, it is not visible labor like your children are saying, right? Like you're not, that doesn't, you don't see the impact in a tangible sense. No. If that's true,

**Julie Phillips:** it's not very glamorous. Yeah, it's not very visible.

Right. It's much more exciting to talk about making change than it is to talk about maintaining .

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Interesting.

**Julie Phillips:** I've been thinking about this a lot, about the value of just maintaining. The value of keeping going as opposed to working for those moments of radical change. And yet, and yet my whole book was about admitting those moments of change into the narrative of motherhood.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** If you don't mind my asking, have you unpacked, like why you're sitting with that more right now? Moments of [00:38:00] maintaining?

**Julie Phillips:** Oh, I think, you know, cuz there was just another election cause of this work of care for an older person I've been doing, bringing me back to that very basic place of, you know, here is someone who needs to eat mm-hmm. and you need to come up with something that she can eat, that she will eat. You need to coax her to eat. Mm-hmm. , you need to make sure she's comfortable. You need to, you know, do a lot of cleaning work.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. The value in that. It's so interesting.

**Julie Phillips:** And the intimacy of it was really intense. Mm-hmm. for, especially for someone who you were not maybe intimate with. Mm-hmm. on that level before.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Right. But you had me thinking back to the quote that [00:39:00] you mentioned in terms of Ursula Le Guin, the hero, the heroism , because I feel like that applies to what you're saying in terms of the maintenance work. I mean, there isn't heroism in that, at least no. Right. And so therefore, as a culture, it's difficult then to ascertain the value when there isn't the hero.

**Julie Phillips:** And I think that's what Ursula was saying was, Hey, let's look at the value of maintenance work. Let's look at the value of gathering instead of hunting. Let's look at the value of caring instead of fighting, you know, let's make stories out of that.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. Hmm. How does your book wrestle with that then?

**Julie Phillips:** I think what I realized was that all of the women that I wrote about had moments when their lives fell apart or when they fell apart emotionally, when either in connection to their art or in connection to their motherhood when they [00:40:00] just, it was too much for them. Or they hit a wall or they hit a crisis or their work wasn't going, or they ran out of money. Mm-hmm. or they lost a child.

Mm-hmm. And they had to recollect themselves and put themselves back together emotionally and find a new house, find a new partner, start writing again after a long pause. Hmm. And I think that's heroic. Hmm. To collect the pieces and keep moving. Mm-hmm. . And to hopefully discover something about yourself in that process.

And I think that's really what biography is about. Achievements is that [00:41:00] the dissent into the underworld and in its very Joseph Campbell sort of terms and coming back with new knowledge about yourself in the world. And I think that happens in motherhood all the time. And you just have to look and you just have to recognize, Hmm.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Thank you. I feel like I shouldn't say anything else now. That was perfect. Like served it on a platter. Thank you. I have nothing else to say that was really lovely in terms of just tying together all the threads that are loosely jumbling around threads, marbles, whatever inside my brain when I read your work, so I appreciate. And actually answers a question that I was going to ask and I don't have to in terms of, I think you've answered it.

**Julie Phillips:** Well go ahead. I might have something else.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Ok. Okay, fine, fine, fine. I was gonna say in terms of your work as a biographer, because to be honest, I don't know that I've [00:42:00] know many biographers. I've spoken to many biographers, and so hearing you speak about biography in that way is really helpful. But I was curious in terms of your work as a biographer and a mother and that intersection. Mm-hmm. And I think you just, if there's more to say than what you just said.

**Julie Phillips:** Hmm. I mean, one thing about, you know, I'm working on the biography of Ursula K Le Guin, that's my next project. And people tend to look at that and say, well, not very much happened in her life, so how are you going to deal with that? And I think.

Okay, here is somebody who, she came from a certain place. She had a certain education, she got married, she had three kids, she raised kids, she worked. And on the surface, that's a very kind of ordinary story, and this is somebody with such an intense inner life. And so [00:43:00] many complex wrestlings with that inner life and with her situation and somebody who was constantly reinventing herself as a writer.

And I think, how can you not be excited by that? Hmm? How can you not see that the narrative of biography is always the inner life. Mm-hmm. , no matter where the person is or who they're meeting, you know, it's always about how they are shaped by their circumstances and what they do with it. How that emerges in their work.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. Well, thank you because you've also answered my other question, which was in terms of your next book and your next work, where I think some additional color could be given is in terms of where your care work and your maintenance work are right now as a [00:44:00] biographer and as a writer, and where they're heading. If you could just tell us more about whether or not that looks different or how that feels different, how the constraints are or are not different?

**Julie Phillips:** Yeah. My kids are 24 and 21. My son, who's 24, is still living at home and going to college and my daughter's not living at home right now, but she's in the same city, so I have the good fortune to get, spend a fair amount of time with them. But I definitely identify with the writers who I talk about who found the empty nest painful, and who found the shift from full-time motherhood to part-time assistant parenting difficult.

I really enjoyed my motherhood. I really liked living in a family. Mm-hmm. , I really liked the [00:45:00] demands that it made on me and felt like I could, most of the time, more or less answer those demands as opposed to the demands of writing, which seemed to me much more mysterious and difficult. And some people, I think, are exactly the other way around.

There are so, so, so very many responses to both of those things.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. I was curious if you think whether or not it's something specific to you personally or specific to your circumstances that allowed you to enjoy the motherhood work that you have done.

**Julie Phillips:** I identify with Audre Lorde, who felt very unrecognized as a kid and who in being able to recognize her own children to use her psychological gifts to [00:46:00] see them and value them for who they were, was able also to repair some of the feelings that she had had as a kid. And I think that it was a process like that for me too. ]

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Hmm. Yeah. I, I feel that and I once you have that confidence in self and in them, like I think that for me at least, whether this is on or off the record, I don't know where it'll go with this, but I just feel like I, especially where I am now as a mother of three, is just liberating weirdly, it's like, it's not supposed to be liberating, but the more liberating it becomes, the more empowered I become as a mother and as a writer, interestingly.

**Julie Phillips:** Liberating in what way? From ideas about how it should be done, you mean?

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah, I think so, but also in terms of the more I am able to see my children as human beings, [00:47:00] honestly, in a way that I don't, that I was, or that culturally, generationally, that children were. Mm-hmm. . The more I empower my children, the more I empower myself, the more that they have a sense of self, the more mm-hmm. I do. It's so odd.

**Julie Phillips:** Yeah. It's a great gift to be able to give someone. And how often do you have that chance to give such a powerful gift?

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. , right? Not with the intimacy, as you said. I think there's few relationships that you have that kind of intimacy of relationship where there is that power. And I think that that's where personally, or I think also culturally, like there is so much power in the parent-child relationship and so to be able to empower children at the same time. For me, it's just sort of rights the balance and it also has allowed me to do my own, my own work that was needed to be done. But I am, it has impacted my own writing and my own creativity in [00:48:00] different ways that at sometimes I worry about in terms of whether or not it's impacting it negatively or not.

And I'm not talking about like the time or the the interruptions. I'm talking more about just the work that I wanna do as a writer and worrying that it's not gonna fit the scope and the the cannon. And that's something that Jazmina and I had spoke about as well, of what is sort of allowed to fit. And so when you start to write in a way that feels somehow outside of the traditional Western patriarchal

**Julie Phillips:** yeah, I mean maybe you can sort of carry some of that empathy practice into biography. Mm. . but, it's difficult because you do have to turn off some of the parts of yourself that you love the most. I think in order to terminate , not just, you know, turning away from your kids, but turning away from that side of yourself, that is for others, and that enjoys being for others [00:49:00] and, and into that kind of solitary place where you're confronted with yourself and you think, oh, haha, finally time to write, but it's not always as comfortable a place to be.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. , although you had me thinking about, again, like the pleasure of that and, and your, your book and in the biographies do wrestle with this as well. Right. The pleasure of motherhood, the pleasure of writing, and again, I think there's an, and not to make it too political, but to me it just feels like inevitably there's a kind of activism or resistance in that, and I know there's a lot culturally that's being spoken about now, like Ross Gay's work on *Inciting Joy* and there's a lot of mm-hmm. momentum around that right of joy as activism. But I think you're right because there's this sense of, well, if this is the book that I wanna write, I mean, look, at the end of the day, it's not gonna pay me very much anyway, so

**Julie Phillips:** yeah, just make your monster and stick on some extra things. [00:50:00]

**Kaitlin Solimine:** But I, I really appreciate hearing too what you drew from this work and that you needed to write this book in this way because in the end, that is what worked and it worked for me, so, and I know it's working for others. So thank you for sticking to that kernel of truth.

**Julie Phillips:** I mean, thinking about the way the book has been received, one of the things I've been considering lately is how it is— I mean, it's fantastic that it is affirming for people and that people can recognize themselves, but in a sense that seems to edge it out of the literary world that I thought it was in, in a funny way.

And I wonder if maybe, you know, audiences really want an artist or writer who's an art monster because that person is more completely devoted to them, to the audience as [00:51:00] well. I mean, you don't wanna have to share your, share your artist with with their kid. You don't wanna know that they wrote the book in between naps.

Mm-hmm. , you don't wanna think about it's almost like sibling rival. Hmm. Hey, I'm here too. Mm-hmm. I'm your reader. Mm-hmm. Hmm.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah. That intersubjectivity that happens through the process of art, but then parenting too. That's so inter— yeah. Gosh, I hadn't thought about that.

**Julie Phillips:** We're like greedy little kids saying, be there for me.

Create a world just for me. Hm. Don't share it.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** That's so funny. I personally, I actually really like work that does that, but I don't know, I haven't unpacked why I'm like that.

**Julie Phillips:** That that does what?

**Kaitlin Solimine:** I, I prefer work that is attempting to also understand itself. So I prefer work that doesn't [00:52:00] just sit in a box in a sort of like, isn't this packaged deal but rather that kinda wrestles with its own.

**Julie Phillips:** The kinda auto fiction that acknowledges the circumstances of its own creation. Mm-hmm. . Yeah. I mean that's kind of great too.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah. I mean, I love Annie or No, so , before she won the award, I was like, oh my gosh, I'm so happy that she won. And also like, yeah, yeah, . But again, it's a particular artistry I think. And so that's just for me that's a form that speaks to me more than others. And that's the beauty of obviously like, right? I mean, all of the different works that you encounter in this book and the diversity of motherhood as well. I think.

**Julie Phillips:** Yeah. If you can't identify with some of the writers, at least you can find, hopefully you can find something that doesn't make you feel excluded from the book because you're kind of mothering isn't in it.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. . Yeah. Interesting.

**Julie Phillips:** Your temperament or your [00:53:00] needs aren't in it.

I love belonging to the community that I feel like I've landed in of, creative mothers. It's an amazing place. Mm-hmm. seeing everybody's work. I think that community was always there. Hmm. , but it does really have a new energy and intensity that I think wasn't there when I was working.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Mm-hmm. . Yeah. I definitely feel like there's so many ways in which there are now so many different supportive communities, depending upon your own mm-hmm. identification and your own experiences. And so I think there's, I, I really appreciated seeing that a lot more that is speaking to the intersection of motherhood and creativity and caregiving and mm-hmm. and is doing amazing work, both being supportive and also being forward thinking and active and political and just, just sort of like [00:54:00] politicizing a lot of things that actually then give, like we were saying, like can give a lot more power to the maintenance work and just becoming more mainstream in a way than like you were saying, where the motherhood narrative isn't just seen as this moment or like a section of the right child, but rather.

**Julie Phillips:** The motherhood memoir section.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Right, that it's now, it's just the more here it is, then the more power it has in that sense. So I appreciate that, and I'm really grateful to have read and reread and I could we'll continue to reread your book and also the books that it pointed me to, which I also really appreciated to explore other things that I may not have been exposed to. I really appreciated that as well.

**Julie Phillips:** You know? Motherhood is such a huge topic. It's really tempting to want to go everywhere and read every book and acknowledge every experience and go down every sort of political and cultural and creative happening , [00:55:00] and I wish I could have done that, but that was another thing that took me a long time was just feeling like there's always more out there.

Yeah. And I hope that those books get written. I hope that the people who are working on those books are working on them right now.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** Yeah. I think in a weird way, actually, I, I've been obsessed. You've been obsessed with the maintenance. I've been obsessed with scarcity lately, and I think mm-hmm. , as you're saying that, it's making me feel like Right.

There's a sense as a writer, I think that like, oh my gosh, I'm, I, I'm, I'm not doing, I'm not pulling in enough. And I'm like you said, but it just. Let that there is someone else's moment to do that or someone else's interest and, and we can do what we can here. Mm-hmm. again, there's like a liberation in that and that pushes against the scarcity sense, right.

Like that Oh no, no one can do that. No one's gonna have unpacked that or, or mentioned that book or, right. Like, uh, dug into that narrative.

**Julie Phillips:** It's not all your work to do.

**Kaitlin Solimine:** [00:56:00] Mm-hmm. . Yeah, exactly. Well, thank you. Many, many lessons learned from me here today. So I have, like I, I, I have like, I tend to like put up little quotes and your book does a wonderful way of having these really wonderfully concise ways of saying things that I can't say clearly. So I think that this conversation also has done that for me. So I'm excited to extract wonderful pieces of wisdom from this and remind myself of it down the road. So thank you for that too.

I really enjoyed this conversation with Julie Phillips whose work *The Baby on the Fire Escape: Creativity, Mothering, and the Mind-baby Problem* can be found in our show notes and on our bookshop.org recommended reading list. I highly recommend you check it out. A reminder too, that as listeners, you'll receive a special 30% discount on The Bonoch Long Range Baby Monitor.

So please be sure to check out our links in the show notes for the [00:57:00] discount code and to learn more.

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