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PRESENTATION

**Elaine Westbrooks**

Hi, I'm Elaine Westbrooks, Vice Provost for University Libraries and University Librarian at Carolina. I'd like to thank you for tuning in for “Well Read”, which is the University Libraries series that we set up to bring amazing authors with Carolina ties to our library friends, book lovers far and wide, to have engaging conversations. So tonight, I'd like to welcome our guest, Jill McCorkle, Class of 1980. Jill is a short story writer and according to The New York Times, she's a born novelist. Just out of college, Jill simultaneously released two novels, and since then she has published seven novels and four collections of short stories. Five of her books have been on The New York Times Notable Books list, and in 2013, her novel *Life After Life* was a New York Times bestseller. Jill will be joining us today to talk about her new book *Hieroglyphics*, which is a mesmerizing novel about the burden of secrets and how they're carried across generations.

In addition, I'm pleased that we will be joined with Daniel Wallace, who's Class of 2008. Daniel Wallace is the J. Ross MacDonald Distinguished Professor and Director of Creative Writing at Carolina. He's the author of six novels, including *Big Fish*, which has been adapted to a film and Broadway musical. He's published children's books, dozens of short stories and essays, and he's also a writer – I'm sorry. He's also an illustrator, whose drawings have appeared in books, newspapers, and magazines all over the world. So I'd just like to thank Jill and Daniel for being here. We're really looking forward to a great conversation tonight.

For those of you in the audience, there'll be an opportunity at the end for you to ask questions, but use the box in the bottom to submit your questions and comments. Thank you. I'll turn it over to Daniel.

**Daniel Wallace**

Thank you so much, Elaine, and University Libraries staff. I am so thrilled to be here to talk to Jill about this awesome book. I think, Jill, this is the first time we've ever done an event together.

**Jill McCorkle**

It is.

**Daniel Wallace**

It is, and we've known each other for quite a while.

**Jill McCorkle**

We have. We've been on the stage before. You’re everybody's favorite emcee.

**Daniel Wallace**

Oh, yes. I mean, nobody even has to ask me. I'll just jump up and do it, but I want obviously to talk about this book and talk about all the complexities and the aspects of it, and I want to start though with the voice. In all of your books, voice is so important, and I think yours is so distinguishable. I would know it anywhere. I want everybody to hear it. So would you start off with maybe a little introduction to the book and read of a section?

**Jill McCorkle**

Sure. There are four main point of view characters. Lil and Frank, an elderly couple who have recently retired in North Carolina after their long marriage in New England, and then Shelley who's a single mom, raising her six-year-old-son, Harvey. What all four have in common is loss and early loss, and loss, and early in their lives. Harvey's dad has recently left, Shelley is basically running from many early losses in her life, and then Frank and Lil both lost a parent in childhood. Her mother went to the Coconut Grove nightclub in Boston without saying where she was going, only to die in the huge nightclub fire in 1942, and then, Frank's dad was on a train, heading back to the northeast from the south in 1943 that wrecked in my native county, Robertson County, and both catastrophic national news events, many lives lost. So that would be what the four characters have in common, but I'm going to read a little bit of Lil, who, upon retiring in North Carolina, has started going through all of her boxes and things she's kept and saved, more or less editing her life and deciding what she does and does not want her children to know.

“We all are haunted by something—something we did or didn’t do—and the passing years either add to the weight or diminish it. We all are haunted by something we did or didn't do, and the passing years either add to the way or diminish it. Mine have diminished, perhaps because I’ve spent time thinking about it all. It might sound silly, but I see these bits and pieces as my contribution to evolution, the unearthing and dusting of the prints and markers that led me here. Some seem to bulldoze right through life and up to their headstones, but I want to take my time. I want to find the right words.

I imagine my recipient to be you two, or perhaps your children, and I hope this is so, rather than some stranger who comes in and hoists old boxes into a dumpster, or rakes away the remainders of my life, like the sad debris in the aftermath of a flood or fire. I will never get over the sight of what we left behind at our home of over fifty years to move down here, a mountain of cast-off things—old towels and linens, papers and books and shoes and pots, side tables and lamps, hoses and hoes, packets of seeds I meant to plant, and a rubber squeak toy that had been safely hidden away in the back of my closet by one of the dogs long dead. And so much more: things not needed, things long forgotten, cans of cream-of-whatever soup and V8 juice (why?) and peas that had sat there forgotten for years, and things that never should have been there in the first place, like Tuna Helper, or those things in my closet like that geometric-print minidress I bought in the ’60s, hoping to look like Petula Clark or Judy Carne—a perky-pixie kind of dress that I never had the nerve to wear and instead looked at it there at the back of the closet for years, along with a wiglet and a long frosted fall and some jackets with shoulders resembling a football player or Victorian monarch. We divided it all into Goodwill, consignment, recycle, or landfill. But there were also the things I couldn’t let go of—letters, reminders, souvenirs—and I am taking my time, relieved when I find something that might have gotten lost in that mountain of debris, like one of your drawings from first grade or the stub from a movie I’d forgotten I even saw, or a note from my father.

When the moving van pulled away that afternoon and we got in the car and turned southward, the space within the car seemed so empty, vacant, our suitcases and silver chest in the trunk, an overnight bag and thermos of coffee on the back seat, and I had that terrible feeling that I had forgotten something. Because I was thinking of all the times the car was filled with you two, your belongings, your music and voices, the dogs, while going to school or on vacation, or just to the grocery store where I bought all of those things that I then put on the shelf there in our dimly lit pantry—on the red gingham contact paper I spent one snowy afternoon forty years ago cutting and sticking in place—all those things I put there and then forgot about.

It's mysterious how fluid time has become for me; I wake and pour a glass and have no idea what I’ll find. In short, I am homesick and I am timesick. I would be lying not to say that it's possible to feel content and resolved and still be homesick. I miss all that no longer is, which is why I paste and piece all these scraps together. Sometimes I hold a ticket or photo or piece of paper while willing myself back to where I first held it. I know that might sound silly, but it's what I do. I want to hear your young voices, the dog scratching to come in. I want to call my father on the telephone, finger in that rotary dial one number at a time, TW33642. Let me take this playbill and arrive at the theater or this receipt and find myself there in the produce aisle of Star Market. Then after the show, after I check out, after I sit and let the car warm up, I drive those familiar streets home and find everything just as I left it, the kitchen door creaking behind me.”

I’ll stop there.

**Daniel Wallace**

Thank you [audio] unforgettable character, and what she's doing in all of her sections is describing, explaining her life in a way that her family will be able to understand her and understand what's happened. It's like walking into what they call a memory palace. Your writing is like that. One of the astounding things about it is that you see things, you see everything, and you write it down in details that bring this time to life. How do you know so much? How do you remember all these things?

**Jill McCorkle**

You know, some I remember and some I have to look up after the fact and fill in. Lately I have wished that I could, like, download my brain onto a hard drive, you know, and make room for something new because I do remember all the jingles from television, childhood television, and all kinds of things, but I think that the details that stick with an individual really do compose so much of that life, certainly in hindsight or whatever is left, those little things that we've chosen to save and protect. So with *Hieroglyphics*, I was obviously thinking of language and the words that we say and write, as well as what we don't say, or what gets broken and lost, but I was also thinking a lot about the objects in life that come to stand for a certain period of time, or the way we have shorthand with the people closest to us in life where you're somebody says, “Remember when?” and you say one word and everybody laughs and you can just move on because everybody knows the story, though we tend to want to hear it again.

So it was really important to me in getting to know these characters, to collect those objects that were… I have Lil's [skate] key, Frank's Captain Midnight badge.

**Daniel Wallace**

Oh, amazing. This book is about the biggest events that can happen to a person and the smallest, or would appear to be the smallest, and I think understanding people, you have to understand both of those things and the fact that I know all the words to the Petticoat Junction theme song, that it's really important to know—

**Jill McCorkle**

I knew, I knew you would know that sort of thing. We can sing it at the end. I can help you with that.

**Daniel Wallace**

If there's time, yes. So, if it's not completely clear, each chapter of the book is a different character, it's from a different character's point of view, or focusing into… deeply into their experience and their lives, but they don't always know each other. Their experiences parallel each other through loss and tragedy and actually place and home in various ways and through language itself, through words and hieroglyphics. So there is a question here. How did their stories evolve as you created this book? How did they become what they were? Because this is interesting, I think, as a reader, and as a writer, how that's done. What was your process in doing that?

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes. Oh, gosh, a novel in what felt like a million pieces for a very long time, and it was in many ways, like putting together a puzzle. I really started with the idea of those major catastrophes, the Coconut Grove fire and the train wreck, because I grew up here and my dad talked about the train wreck and then I moved to Boston and was there for 20 years and I realized people talked about the Coconut Grove fire in the same way. It was one of those events that marked time. There was a before, there was an after, there were lives forever changed by those events, and in both cases, when you read about them, you almost always come to these cataloged lists of how people were identified and how loved ones found their people, and often it was the most insignificant, a token in the pocket or a dry cleaning tag or a certain brand of shirt, things we don't always think about.

So I was thinking of those events and originally had thought, wow, they're exactly a year apart and maybe I would have this person was at that one, this other person there, and I just wasn't getting it to take off, but along the way it became more and more interesting to me that in both cases there was a child at home waiting for that person, and that's Lil and Frank. They were the children. So they're the next generation of someone affected by an event like that, and so immediately they’re a ghost on the page because they've spent their whole childhood into adulthood, and now late in life, still with so many questions and trying to fill in. And then I have no idea how Shelley and Harvey were going to connect. For a while, I even thought, whoa, do you guys need to live in another novel over here, but then Frank has taught archaeology his whole career and he keeps going back to this house he lived part of his boyhood in, because his mother was basically stuck in North Carolina after the accident that killed his father—she was injured and pregnant and ends up creating a life there—and so the house that Frank keeps visiting, trying to see again and get inside, is where Shelley is living and as soon as I figured out that Shelley could live in the same house, everything clicked into place because, I mean, Harvey, the kid, is basically growing up right on top of where Frank grew up and Harvey's even finding some of Frank's little childhood relics that he had stashed and hidden away, so that was the connection.

**Daniel Wallace**

So writing for you is a process of discovery, the same way that the reader comes to the page not knowing what's coming next. You don't really know what's coming next either until you get there.

**Jill McCorkle**

I don't. Do you?

**Daniel Wallace**

No. I don't think I would write it if I knew.

**Jill McCorkle**

I feel that way too. I mean, it's the excitement of the unknown, and I'm always telling my students, there's a natural logic in the world and as you start to put the pieces down, as you give characters histories and belongings, and you know what they love and you know what they fear, then suddenly there is a natural, logical path and I love that point in the novel where you're no longer having to wonder what might happen or to look at several possibilities. You just know.

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, because every choice that you make narrows the choices that you can make, like it moves together ideally to that perfect, powerful ending in which all the storylines add up and coincide, and that is exactly what happens in this book. Of course, I'm not going to say what the ending is, but you nail the ending, and so I'm trying to make you as awkward and uncomfortable as I can, because praise, the only thing that you can't stand is praise, I think. You're not comfortable with it, so that's what this is, the whole thing—

**Jill McCorkle**

Well, thank you for that. I'm happily uncomfortable with it, thank, and you know, that is where us writers, our readers and the reaction that comes in from early readings and then working with Kathy Pories was just wonderful, to have her eyes as an editor to come in and just see immediately things that I had missed. It's like when you think you've painted everything or you've decorated it, I'll just write and somebody says, oh, you didn't pay the ceiling and you didn't do this. I think a good editor can just come in and straighten everything up and give new vision to me, and then I think revision is also a very exciting process because suddenly it really is like you have the clearest vision possible. It's as close as you'll ever get to what was in your head along the way.

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, I had Kathy as an editor too, and she's a great editor. She's really great at showing you things that you didn't do, and she can see them. She has that distance on them, and it's really remarkable how much… how an editor, that partnership between a writer and an editor changes the story and ideally makes it a better story, and I think a lot of people don't realize that. A book really is a partnership, is a collaboration, even with an editor and maybe with other people as well.

**Jill McCorkle**

Oh, wow, I mean, and what copy editors do. I mean, I was, like, holding my breath. I've got so many years and dates and I'm amazed at someone who can… the way a copy editor reads, I was actually amazed to learn that Cheetos are older than Nilla wafers.

**Daniel Wallace**

Oh, no way.

**Jill McCorkle**

You learn a lot, right?

**Daniel Wallace**

Actually that seems really hard to believe. The Nilla wafers seem to be… I mean, I think that they were in the Garden of Eden.

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes, yes. I mean, Cheetos, I think of as much more contemporary.

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, I agree.

**Jill McCorkle**

But anyway, yes, it is, that kind of collaboration is such a necessary part.

**Daniel Wallace**

You've had nothing but great editors in your life and been so lucky, is Shannon Ravenel, and now Kathy. Your career, I mean, you have a career that has spanned your entire adult life, and even maybe late childhood, adult life, and it's like rings in a tree, your books mark your growth as a person, and your experiences, drawn from all your experience as you move through life. It's very, I think… it’s so fortunate to have that. How has your writing changed over the course of your life and the things that you're drawn to and the way you write?

**Jill McCorkle**

Oh, that’s a good question and that's a very UNC kind of question because, I mean, I wrote as a kid, I always loved to write. I had no idea you could actually grow up to do such a thing, and then I get to UNC and take a beginning writing class thinking, oh, well, this sounds like a slide because I do it all the time anyway, and it was with the wonderful Max Steele, and I was just completely hooked. I mean, that became my whole motivation, that was my college existence and in so many ways, that creative writing department, and I think my early work, I think, I've always written… had a lot of humor in my work and I enjoy it, both in life and on the page. I'm always looking for what might spark a laugh, but I remember Max Steele one time telling me something like he said, you’re a very good puppeteer, and I'm like, oh, thank you, and then I get on the bus and I'm, like, riding around campus and it occurs to me maybe an hour later, maybe that wasn’t a compliment after all, and so the next day I'm waiting outside his office door before he even got there, and I said, what did that mean, and he said, well, you’re very good at controlling and manipulating everyone, and you're holding them far out, arm's length. They are nowhere near your heart, and I was like, whoa, and it was just… it was a wonderful moment, and I would say my whole career has been about pulling these people closer, closer, closer, while also trying to maintain the comic relief throughout because I think it's so necessary. At least in my world, it seems necessary, so I think that's somewhat of a change.

I think that the older I've gotten and the more confident I've gotten, the more willing to step into those darker places and stay there without the laugh. I think I would get really nervous when there were long passages without a laugh, and I remember the first time I gave a reading without getting a laugh, and I was horrified because it was really, really frightening to do that.

**Daniel Wallace**

It is so frightening. If you don't read a passage that has some humor in it, and you don't hear the reaction of the crowd, you don't have any idea how they're responding to it, they could just be hating on it, and I think that's limiting, at least for me, because there's a fear I have of writing something serious or something that doesn't go for the laugh, it's a bravery to do that, and I hate to tell you, but this book is funny in lots of places.

**Jill McCorkle**

Oh, I'm relieved. I'm glad it is.

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, I mean, it has to be in order for us, I think, to stick with it, and it's another illustration of how your vision takes in the whole of life and not just one superficial condition of it.

**Jill McCorkle**

That’s where Shelley and Harvey, they became my go-to, because even though Shelley's life is in a pretty dark place, she is one of those characters I love to have. She has no filter and if you want to ride a rant, there's no recipient better than a character like Shelley.

**Daniel Wallace**

Do you have a filter?

**Jill McCorkle**

Do I have a filter? Not when I'm writing.

**Daniel Wallace**

What about in your life?

**Jill McCorkle**

What do I do in life? I think y'all… I think you would have heard if I was, like, going around saying too many things, but I hope I have a filter, but when I sit down as a writer, I have no filter. I mean, I try to encourage my students to put the filter on hold for that first draft. If you give yourself enough time to write that first draft without a filter, I mean, what is more satisfying than just full throttle, anything Goes?

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, there's a t-shirt I saw, which takes that to an extreme. It said, “Write Drunk, Revise Sober”. This is kind of what you're saying.

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes, but just in the moment, in the work, in the fantasy.

**Daniel Wallace**

You touched on this earlier, something really interesting to me, the way that these two real life tragedies coincided, and it coincided in your life and then they became the heart of the – at least the plot of the book. You had to do a lot of research, I imagine, to get everything right. I'm wondering how, if you like research, and how that functions in your creative life, making stuff up that’s true at the same time.

**Jill McCorkle**

This was the first time I had done something to this degree. Usually, I'm just checking behind myself about a year on weather and things, which is always fun to look up the weather of a certain day in a certain place, I love that. But I had read all there was to find about the train wreck, there wasn’t that much, and I had read about the Cocoanut Grove fire, just because I was really fascinated by it and it sort of reshaped fire codes, the way burn victims are treated, so I had already read a lot about it, but I went back again. During my years living in Boston, it was not uncommon to see an obituary that would say this person had lost so and so in the fire, or it might say, ‘on November 28th 1942, she was supposed to be at the Cocoanut Grove, and at the last minute had a change of plans’, so there were also all of these people who almost were there.

And it just invited this whole notion of fate and little tiny choices we make that seem like insignificant choices. I mean, it was hard not to think of the other… every 9/11 when you hear people interviewed, those stories are endless and poignant, and it very often comes to that little, ‘I ran out for coffee’, or…

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, I think life sometimes feels like a series of really minor choices that change everything or that can change everything. I remember driving around with my son when he was just four or five years old and coming to a light and saying, I can either go left or go right. If I go left, who knows what might happen, our lives could change. If I go right, it could change in a completely different way. That’s how I screwed him up from early on.

**Jill McCorkle**

I thought you were going to say he got to choose.

**Daniel Wallace**

He also did get to choose, but I do believe that’s true, these minor choices. And there are some choices, I think, that we make that we don’t ever see the consequences of that could have been a near miss.

**Jill McCorkle**

Also, along those same lines there are all the letters we mean to write and don’t, the phone calls we mean to make and don’t. I often say in class, sometimes it’s just enough to have a character think he wants to reach out to this person, sometimes it’s even more powerful because you can move through the thought process of what you would say to this person, and then you have the added dimension of what did not happen all at once. I'm always fascinated by that. I think we all probably are haunted by something we wish we… either we wish we had done, we wish we had not done. I think those become mile markers of a sort, because they do change us.

**Daniel Wallace**

I want to talk about the other aspect of your writing life, a huge aspect of it, which is writing short stories. You're a master of that form, and have written some incredible ones, like Alice Munro, feel like novels in and of themselves. I'm wondering which one… are you attracted more to one than another and do you ever start what you think is going to be a short story and then it turns into one of our books (a novel).

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes, and also I've had characters I've tried moving around in a novel and they need their own space. In fact, I had two other people when I started this, thinking I had three lives, and they got cut off and put over into their own space. Max Steele taught us, he said, “Even numbers are analytical and odd numbers are emotional”, and he said so to go for the odd number when you can on the page is the better choice. So, like [three scenes] or like the way a comic – the turn comes on the third line. Anyway, that stuck with me. But I was trying to do it and I ended up with two. Sorry, I got off track there.

I think that I love working on stories, they're the bigger challenge to me. I think novels come easier; they came first. I was always that person in workshop where people would say, oh, well, there's something here but it feels like part of something bigger, and then my stories just kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. But I've always come back to wanting to practice, because I really, really admire the form, but I think that… I think the story is more akin to a poem than the novel in many ways, and it’s so concentrated and focused and I haven't had a cigarette in over 33 years, but it makes me want one sometimes. It’s like that kind of intense…

So, I dabble in stories, but I'm always then relieved to get back into the bigger space.

**Daniel Wallace**

Do you move to stories after a novel or do you – just to use those muscles – or do you sometimes go from novel to novel without writing a story in between them.

**Jill McCorkle**

No, I always do stories in between. What I have found, this novel and the two prior have become more and more fragmented, so I do think that working on stories has affected the way that I write novels more in these little parts.

**Daniel Wallace**

I feel the same way. I started writing stories and wrote a bunch of stories before I wrote a novel, and I feel like my novels are really just stories that are taped together and glued together, because I was just so used to that form and love the form so much, and had a little bit of trouble going the distance in a novel.

**Jill McCorkle**

I love novellas, I've never written a novella, but there you’ve got the best of both.

**Daniel Wallace**

I want to encourage people to submit questions in the little Question box. One of them, a very penetrating question, if we remember the Mr Ed song?

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes, a horse is a horse, of course, of course.

**Daniel Wallace**

We could go on and go on, *Gilligan’s Island*. These are important things to know. You have *Green Acres.* The challenging thing about this book, though, it is told in a way, not short stories, but each chapter moves from one character to another and they're all telling a different story, but at the same time, they have to come together. I'm wondering how you decided how to order those stories, and did they change? Did the order of the chapters ever move around as you were revising it?

**Jill McCorkle**

A lot, a lot. I started… the novel opened with “Everyone except Harvey at various times”, and what really made the decision about where the different parts should come was that final decision about the present timeline and the present day timeline is quite short, actually. It’s a very short period of days, and then a lot hung on it.

So, once I had… basically, over the course of this day, Frank is leaving and going and hoping he can get inside this house where he once lived as a boy, and so time is marked very much by his journey, and everything else hanging on it. And so when I figured that out, it made it easier, because then Lil’s passages tend to be a lot longer and so some of hers got chopped up and moved, and yes… and then sometimes I wrote little Harvey sections and I actually, in the earliest draft, had some little sections with Harvey’s older brother and then that just didn’t need to be there.

**Daniel Wallace**

So, the revision process is just as or important for you than the first draft?

**Jill McCorkle**

I really think revision is the real art. I have told students, I keep saying that, but I feel like so much of my life has been spent in the classroom talking about this, and I love it. I said in so many ways that first draft is the giddy falling head over heels for someone, and the revision is the settled down relationship that you want to last forever, and so you have to find what doesn’t work and fix it, and you have to find what does work and enhance it. So, it’s very similar that way.

And so, the giddy… every now and then, we’re lucky in that giddy first draft does what it is supposed to and stands, but it’s rare for me. I don’t know about you, but it’s rare for me to write something and have it ready to go.

**Daniel Wallace**

My first drafts are really, really, really, really bad. I feel like I write four or five first drafts, though, before I even get to the second draft. So, it is a process. Do your novels take the same amount of time or is it different for each one?

**Jill McCorkle**

I think they take about the same amount of time. People kept saying when *Life After Life* came out that I hadn't written in 16 years, but that really wasn’t true. I had had like two story collections and I had written essays and I had teenagers and teaching, but I tend to average like five years. Some have come much faster. I always think I'm going to do one really fast and maybe I will one of these days.

**Daniel Wallace**

But you’ve probably settled into a way of creating now that… I feel like there's nothing that would ever change the way I write. I always think I'm going to nail it and I never nail it, and it’s… each time, though, I come at it with all this hope that it’s going to be different this time, but it’s never different.

**Jill McCorkle**

I felt that way too. My process is very much the same.

**Daniel Wallace**

A question that just came in from Katy, “To my ear, there's a musical lilt to your writing, not so dissimilar from some literary songwriters. Is your writing informed at all by songwriting or songwriters, or is music that important to your writing?”

**Jill McCorkle**

Wow! That’s a great question. I would say if you’ve ever listened to John Prine in interviews talking about his writing process, and I know – the first time I heard this interview, my husband is like you really need to listen to this, and I came and sat down and it’s like everything he said about writing was exactly what I think about writing. And I love his songs, he was a wonderful storyteller.

So, I would say that that kind of… a lot of poets, also, that I've talking – and I consider poets closer to the songwriters. But music I find really inspiring, I can't write while I listen to music, I can sometimes have background jazz or classical, I can't have words, but most often the music is the prelude to the writing time and then I really tend to have silence.

**Daniel Wallace**

I kick everybody out of the house when I'm writing, I can't have anybody around. Laura hates it (my wife), she has to sit outside on the porch until I finish.

It’s funny that you mentioned John Prine, because I just read this book by M.O. Walsh and it is all drawn from John Prine’s songs, every chapter—

**Jill McCorkle**

I wondered when I saw *Big Door Prize*, he is a wonderful writer. I liked his first novel a lot.

**Daniel Wallace**

And I was talking to him last week and he said the exact same thing that you did, that John Prine is as good a writer as anybody, and he had finished the book… right after he had finished the book, John Prine died, and his dream was to get the book to him.

Do you have a favorite character that stuck with you over the years or even from this book?

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes, and I like to sometimes go back and check on people. For anybody who had read *Life After Life,* I brought some of those characters back into the courtroom. Shelley is a court stenographer and so many people at the end of *Life After Life* were upset with me that I did not solve the murder. It seemed a realistic choice to me to leave it unsolved, but people kept asking and it was like, why did you do that? So, I had decided if I had the opportunity to present justice, I would somehow put it in the background.

So, the trial is going on in the background, so by way of that, you would recognize characters from *Life After Life* sitting in the courtroom like Theodore. And other times, I have had characters, I really feel like I will probably check on Shelley and Harvey again at some point.

**Daniel Wallace**

As you should.

**Jill McCorkle**

Are you haunted by characters?

**Daniel Wallace**

I have to… I don’t have a brain capacity to keep more than one storyline in my head at the same time, so after I finish a book, I completely forgot it, and I don’t really remember the characters or what happens in the book. Occasionally, a reader will mention a character that was in a book I wrote that I have completely forgotten. I think that says more about me than it does about the books, or maybe it does say something about the books that all my characters are forgettable.

**Jill McCorkle**

No, it’s interesting. I think it’s about half and half, and some people… Jayne Anne Phillips and I had this conversation and she is like when the book is over, that’s it. I sort of, every now and then think I wonder what they're doing.

**Daniel Wallace**

*Hieroglyphics*, how long into the process did it take you to come up with the title?

**Jill McCorkle**

I had the title almost the whole time.

**Daniel Wallace**

Wow! That must have steered you in certain directions when you were writing.

**Jill McCorkle**

It really did, it really did, because it made me start paying attention to little things that I could not decipher. You know how you will see like half of a sentence, or like in the courtroom, Shelley talks about these sentences like when a man left a note that said, “I will take care of you”, and so the whole question is, I will take care of *you*, or *I* will take care of you.

So, there was all that, and I love to walk every day and I just started noticing things. One day, I actually found this little piece of wood that said [inaudible], and I picked it up. Well, maybe I need to… but I think all those little… yes, it definitely put me on a certain channel to think of the messages you see everywhere, I mean all the ways we say we were here. “For a good time, call…” or everything from the bathroom wall to the hand in the cement to those street numbers they come by and spray on the curb.

**Daniel Wallace**

When you think about your books, this is not a fair question probably, but do you think of any of them more fondly than the others, because they're… you’ve written a few of them and do you have a fondness for one, a favorite child?

**Jill McCorkle**

You know, it seems to be the most recent usually. I would have said *Life After Life*, and I think now I would say this one. Part of it, I think, goes back to that early question you asked about how my work had changed, because I think I've always had in mind a tone that I was trying to reach, and each time I have felt a little bit closer. I'm really interested in the kind of community impact and the way people make an impact on others and their place, as you said earlier, even when we don’t know that we’re connecting or causing some change. I'm fascinated by that, and I'm fascinated by that kind of overlap of time and what gets repeated and what gets passed from a parent to a child. It’s like a little bit of everything in this stew.

**Daniel Wallace**

You're reading, do you read other books when you're writing, or do you try to just let it all go and just focus on our own work?

**Jill McCorkle**

Like you, I'm teaching and so I have the reading critique channel, and often I try to split it into days, so that a writing day is just that, and then I have the reading days. But I don’t read novels as much as I would like to when I'm writing a novel. I find it’s easier to read stories and non-fiction and poetry, because I can pick it up and put it down and it doesn’t get into the space.

**Daniel Wallace**

So, we’re almost done here, and a question has come in, which is kind of fascinating in a way. It’s, “If you were stranded on a desert island and could have one book to read”, besides my books, “what would it be?”

**Jill McCorkle**

Besides your books? This is so funny, because I actually answered this question for *Garden & Gun* a couple of months ago and I thought and thought, and I finally chose the *Riverside Shakespeare* that I carried around UNC. It weighs about five pounds and it’s huge, because I thought, well, you could just spend hours and it would beg to be read aloud, so that would sort of keep you awake and sane reading the plays aloud, and the I thought it doubles as stepstool, pillow, yoga block.

**Daniel Wallace**

And also protection against wild animals.

**Jill McCorkle**

Yes.

**Daniel Wallace**

I think that’s really a good choice. And also weights, you can stay in good shape and just walking around the island with it.

**Jill McCorkle**

I love that book. Our handwriting has changed through life. Has yours?

**Daniel Wallace**

My handwriting?

**Jill McCorkle**

When I look at my books from college and see my name, my signature is so different.

**Daniel Wallace**

Oh, yes. Before I became a published writer, this is so embarrassing, but I would practice my signature that I was going to write on my books when I got to sign them, so sad.

**Jill McCorkle**

No, that’s not sad. That’s fun. Working on this, because with Shelley in the court, they have a handwriting analyst come in and so I got this whole book on handwriting analysis, which is really fun, so they could tell that you were practicing and disguising—

**Daniel Wallace**

It really looks authorial now, where before it looked like a fourth grader. It’s basically just a line, but it’s a very artful line.

**Jill McCorkle**

My Js have gotten fatter and fatter.

**Daniel Wallace**

Really? What does that say about you?

**Jill McCorkle**

I don’t know. I need to go look it up.

**Daniel Wallace**

Yes, trustworthy, untrustworthy. Well, I think it’s about time for us to turn it back to Elaine and the University Library staff. This has been so much fun and so educational for me.

**Jill McCorkle**

Loads of fun. Thank you so much, Daniel. Wonderful questions and it’s just fun to get to talk about it all, and talk about writing at large, because I… it’s one of my favorite topics for sure.

**Daniel Wallace**

It’s the only thing I know how to talk about.

**Jill McCorkle**

Me too.

**Daniel Wallace**

And you have a great background for Zooming.

**Jill McCorkle**

Thank you. All my… and heres my Harvey moustache.

**Daniel Wallace**

God, you’ve got it all down. Well, thanks again, Jill. Elaine.

**Elaine Westbrooks**

So, Jill, thank you so much. This has been a wonderful evening. I love the book. Thank you for taking the time to chat with us about this wonderful book. Daniel, I would like to thank you for making this a wonderful evening. It was so wonderful to listen to two writers talk about their craft, so I can't thank both of you enough for what you’ve done.

For the listeners out there, I want to thank you for joining us and I want to let you know that we are concluding our “Well Read” Series, but we hope to resume this next year, so I hope to see you next year when we start back up. If you want to know more about the libraries, please visit our website, and if you would like to make a gift in supporting the University Libraries, we have the link right up there on the screen, so that you can visit and support the libraries.

On behalf of the University Libraries, I would like to thank you and have a great evening. Bye.