

Expat spills ink

Financed by 'Jeopardy!,' Phillips pens novel called 'Prague' — though it's set in Budapest

By MICHAEL GILTZ

Jazz musician, repo man, condom wholesaler, stand-up comic: Arthur Phillips has failed at them all. He's only 33, yet this Minneapolis-born Harvard man has already burned through a lifetime of careers.

But thanks to the success of his debut novel, "Prague" (\$24.95; Random House; 376 pages), currently at No. 7 in New York on the Barnes & Noble best-seller list, Phillips might just stick with one occupation for the foreseeable future.

Though young Americans carousing through the detritus of Eastern Europe is already something of a cliché, Phillips' take on ex-pat angst has garnered rave reviews from *The New Yorker*, *Newsweek* and others.

It's also sparked media interest of the kind that hit last year's breakout author, Jonathan Franzen. Last week alone, Phillips appeared on National Public Radio and read from his book at the B&N store at 82nd Street and Broadway — to more than 150 people who crowded in.

Phillips' bemusement with his newfound fame was evident in his rapport with the audience.

"I could read something else," he offered, to much amusement, after one older woman gathered her belongings and trundled away.

"Prague" — actually set in Budapest, where Phillips lived for a few years — deals with the intersecting lives of Emily, an American Embassy employee; John, a reporter trying to reconnect with his abrasive brother; Mark, a gay Canadian subsumed by nostalgia; and Charles, a businessman.

But the novel's bravura moments can be found in the convoluted history of a Hungarian publishing house and in the tale of Nadja, an aging pianist at a local jazz club.

Phillips, who's been living in Paris with his wife, Jan, and their 3 1/2-year-old son in what he termed a "long-term touristic experience," has been shocked by the success of his novel.

He expected the endeavor to turn out like all of his other short-lived careers. "I assumed — as I

think [one] probably should — that it would never get published, and I'd never have an agent, and no one would ever care," he said.

Even so, the process of creating the book was a revelation for Phillips, who had also tried (and abandoned) being a child actor and speech writer.

When he started to write fiction, Phillips says, he realized he'd found his calling. "This is why I haven't been any good at previous jobs!" he remembered thinking.

To his credit, Phillips didn't spend his years in Budapest taking notes. Why bother, when so many others were doing that very thing? "There was a lot of ink being spilled" by would-be Hemingways, notes the author.

Besides, he was too busy honking and squeaking on the tenor saxophone.

"I was serious, but serious and good are two very different things," said Phillips, describing his ability on the instrument. (He says jazz legends Lester Young and Dexter Gordon are his idols.)

The condom business never panned out, because the prophylactics he was trying to sell were from Japan, and he couldn't con-



"It was a lot of sitting in a car with a sandwich," says Arthur Phillips (here at a Barnes & Noble signing, Wednesday) of his n/g as a repo man in Budapest.

vince Eastern European men to buy them, he says.

Repo man proved no better.

"I was working with this Hungarian police detective who was a big fan of Steven Seagal movies," Phillips said, "and he was telling me he thought they were the most realistic police films he'd ever seen."

Despite the hype, his job often involved tedious and fruitless searches for the vehicles of delinquent owners.

"It was a lot of sitting in a car with a sandwich and binoculars, waiting for a Hungarian prostitute to show up. I never found [her] car. I never found anything."

Phillips had better luck with romance, falling for Jan, who is the first reader of all his writing.

"It must have been the summer of '96," recalled Phillips. "We'd just gotten married, and my wife was dubious about my ability to earn a living. I said, 'Not to worry. I'm going on a game show. The

game show should clear up all fears, my darling."

He went on "Jeopardy!" and swept the field for an entire week — proving especially strong in the "Dogs" category. (When "Sports" came up, Phillips would pretend to drop his buzzer.)

"It actually worked out well!" laughed Phillips. "[My wife] said, 'You have a one-year reprieve.'"

And at the end of that year, what promising, lucrative career path did he propose?

Novelist.

Of course, with his reviews, growing press coverage and a reading tour, that's working out surprisingly well. In fact, Phillips is currently at work on his second novel, though he has no deal with Random House or any other publisher.

At the packed Barnes and Noble reading, one audience member asked the author when his next book will be completed.

"I don't know," said Phillips. "I have to lie down now."