



Jamaica Kincaid

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I would be lost without the feeling of antagonism that people have towards me. I write out of defiance.

— Jamaica Kincaid at the University of Minnesota, February 5, 2001

I hope never to be at peace! I hope to make my life manageable, and I think it's fairly manageable now. But -- oh, I would never accept peace. That seems death. As I sit here enjoying myself to a degree, I never give up thinking about the way I came into the world, how my ancestors came from Africa to the West Indies as slaves. I just could never forget it. Or forgive it. It's like a big wave that's still pulsing.

— Jamaica Kincaid, in an interview with the New York Times, 1990

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1949
- * Raised in Antigua, moved to the United States when she was 17 years old
- * First novel published was *Annie John*

Biography

According to Frank Birbalisingh, “[Jamaica] Kincaid is probably the most important West Indian woman writing today” (*Contemporary African American Novelists*, 263). Her experiences growing up in Antigua under the pressures of poverty, colonialism, and an ambivalent mother inspire and inform the movement of her evocative, edgy, and sometimes controversial prose.

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Jamaica Kincaid

Biography continued

Her writing erupts with sharp, piercing emotion as she identifies herself with a “partially remembered, partially dreamed reality” (*World Literature Today* 466). Thematically, issues of race, gender, colonialism, adolescent angst, loss, and tenuous mother-daughter relationships suffuse Kincaid’s fiction and non-fiction writing.

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson, in 1949 in St. John’s, Antigua. As an only child, Kincaid maintained a close relationship with her mother until the age of nine, when the first of her three brothers were born. The growing size of the family not only brought about a “keener sense of their poverty” but also enhanced Kincaid’s growing sense of isolation from her mother and her environment. Interviewer and *New York Times Magazine* journalist Leslie Garis writes, “Kincaid has never gotten over the betrayal she felt when she began to suffer from her mother’s emotional remoteness” (70). Much of Kincaid’s writing is intimately inspired by these bitter tensions of her youth. The emotional onset of adolescence, as well as the rigid control of a British colonial education system heightened Kincaid’s sense of isolation. The Government schools provided few opportunities for a “gifted, indeed brilliant, child” (Garis, 70). Kincaid, while considered bright by her teachers, was also labeled as troublesome and sullen. Kincaid explains, “Because I gave some back chat. I moved very slowly. I was never where I should be. I wasn’t really angry yet. I was just incredibly unhappy” (Garis, 70). It was at this time in her young life when Kincaid started her retreat into reading and stealing books. She says: “When I was a child I liked to read. . . I didn’t know anyone else who liked to read except my mother, and it got me in a lot of trouble because it made me into a thief and a liar. I stole books, and I stole money to buy them. . . Books brought me the greatest satisfaction. Just to be alone, reading, under the house with lizards and spiders running around” (Kincaid in Garis, 42).

At the age of 17, with a growing ambivalence for her family and a rising contempt for the subservience of the Antiguans to British colonialist rule, Kincaid left Antigua, bound for New York and a job as an au pair. After working for three years and taking night classes at a community college, Kincaid won a full-scholarship to Franconia College in New Hampshire. However, after a year of feeling “too old to be a student,” Kincaid dropped out of school, returned to New York, secured a job writing interviews for a teen-age girls’ magazine, and changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid. Changing her name was, as Kincaid says, “a way for [her] to do things without being the same person who couldn’t do them -- the same person who had all these weights”(Garis, 78). Kincaid, unencumbered by the “weights” of her past, began to write.



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It was at this time that Kincaid's work in *The Village Voice* and *Ingénue* magazine drew the attention of the legendary editor of the *New Yorker*, William Shawn. William Shawn's legitimization of Kincaid's work was a turning point in her career as a writer. Kincaid reported in an interview with Dwight Garner that "it was William Shawn who showed me what my voice was. . . He made me feel that what I thought, my inner life, my thoughts as I organized them, were important. That they made literature" (salon.com). She became a staff writer for the magazine in 1976 and a featured columnist for the highly visible "Talk of the Town" section of the magazine for the next nine years. In 1978, Kincaid's first piece of fiction was published in the *New Yorker*, and it later became part of her first book, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983). This short story collection, composed of a series of lyrical vignettes or "prose poems," focuses on the growing consciousness of a young girl in the Caribbean (*Contemporary African American Novelists*, 261). "Girl," the first and probably most important piece of the collection, highlights Kincaid's evocative use of language, as she explores themes of enculturation and the "patriarchal politics of oppression" (263).

In "Girl," a mother offers to her daughter a string of hypnotic, militaristic admonitions: "Wash the clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the sun . . . soak salt fish overnight before you cook it . . . on Sundays try to walk like a lady, and not the slut you are so bent on becoming" (3). For its mesmerizing prose and gripping, dreamlike repetition, *At the Bottom of the River* was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and won the Morton Darwen Zabel Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters (261-263). Two years later, in 1985, Kincaid published her first novel, *Annie John*, a story that many critics consider to be an expansion and refinement of the ideas originally presented in *At the Bottom of the River*. In *Annie John*, Kincaid once again draws upon the angst, isolation, and wonder of her own childhood in Antigua, to craft a touching narrative about the tenuous nature of mother-daughter relationships. The protagonist Annie John -- much like Kincaid in her youth -- is a willful, intelligent 10-year old who grows increasingly confused and cynical throughout her teenage years.



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At the core of Annie John's angst is the loss of her mother's unconditional love from childhood. Kincaid's vivid imagery encapsulates the moment of Annie's devastating break with her mother:

“ “ *At that, everything stopped. The whole earth fell silent. The two black things joined together in the middle of the room separated, hers going to her, mine coming back to me. . . I wanted to go over and put my arms around her. . . But I couldn't move, and when I looked down it was as if the ground had opened up between us, making a deep and wide split. On one side of the split stood my mother--on the other side stood I, in my arms carrying my schoolbooks and inside carrying the thimble that weighed worlds (102-103).* ” ”

In addition to exploring emotions of loss inherent in the mother-daughter bond, Kincaid also crafts her main characters as metaphors for the oppressive forces of colonization. Moira Ferguson comments in her critical analysis of Annie John, that Annie's mother exists as an allegory to “an imperial presence,” an external force that “protects and indoctrinates” and inspires the girl's rejection of colonial domination. The colonialist themes that run throughout Kincaid's fiction infuse depth and political significance into her work. As Diane Simmons in *World Literature Today* states, “At heart, Jamaica Kincaid's work is not about the charm of a Caribbean childhood, nor is it about colonialism. Nor, finally, is it about black and white in America. At heart, her work is about loss” (466). In other words, to read *Annie John* solely on a polemic level is to miss much of the artistic texture and universal themes that give life to her prose.



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For her work on *Annie John*, Kincaid was selected as one of three finalists for the 1985 international Ritz Paris Hemingway Award. In addition, Kincaid is a recipient of the Anifield-Wolf Book Award and The Lila-Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Award. Kincaid also received a nomination for the 1997 National Book Award for *My Brother*, a gripping chronicle of her relationship with her youngest brother, during his losing battle with AIDS. Despite the praise and numerous honors, there are those who condemn Kincaid's work, specifically *A Small Place*, for its "ill-chosen rage." *A Small Place*, is "a short but powerful book, that can best be described as an antitravel narrative" (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 135). In this 81 page, slim volume of nonfiction, Kincaid examines the brutal effects of Antiguan colonial oppression and relentlessly indicts its white perpetrators. She writes accusatorily and directly to her white readers: "Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss bank accounts? Have you ever wondered why it is that all we seem to have learned from you is how to corrupt our societies and how to be tyrants? You will have to accept that this is mostly your fault" (34-35).

Richard Gottlieb, the *New Yorker's* new editor in the 1980's, labeled *A Small Place* "too angry," and rejected its inclusion in the magazine. Once published as a book, by Farrar, Straus, Giroux in 1988, *A Small Place* again stirred immediate controversy. Critic Isabela Fonseca, in a generally unfavorable review in 1989 wrote that "the force of [Kincaid's] argument is furiously undercut by a curiously willful scrappiness," and her "savage tone is also diffused by the shapelessness of the essay" (*Black Literature Criticism*, 1172). However, Diane Simmons, the author of *Jamaica Kincaid*, praised the book for being controlled and unsparing in its criticism (19). Despite the mixed reviews Kincaid, who is frequently asked to justify the anger that infuses her writing, makes no apologies for her strongly held beliefs and willfully voiced opinions.

In fact, in an interview in 1990, Kincaid admitted that she "liked it even more when a lot of reviews said that [*A Small Place* was] so angry. . . [because] the first step in claiming yourself is anger" (*Contemporary African American Novelists* 263). In a more recent article in *People Weekly*, titled "Jamaica Kincaid: An Author's Unsparing Judgments Earn Her an Unwanted Reputation for Anger," Kincaid quips, "I don't feel angry. . . and I certainly don't feel any more angry than I think most people ought to be. I'm not Timothy McVeigh. What have I done? I've just written a book" (109).



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Whether critics praise or condemn Kincaid's "angry" tone, the earnest content and lyrical form of her prose is irrefutably engaging. Perhaps the single most striking quality in Kincaid's writing is its honesty, or what Susan Sontag calls its "emotional truthfulness." Derek Walcott, renowned West Indian poet, essayist, and playwright comments further on the multifaceted appeal of Kincaid's writing: "As she writes a sentence, the temperature of it psychologically is that it heads toward its own contradiction. It's as if the sentence is discovering itself, discovering how it feels. And that is astonishing, because it's one thing to be able to write a good declarative sentence; it's another thing to catch the temperature of the narrator, the narrator's feeling. And that's universal, and not provincial in any way" (In Garis, 80).

Kincaid's writing is compelling because it captures complex emotions and exposes divisive issues in a deceptively simple style. Kincaid's other major works include *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), and *My Garden* (1999). Kincaid presently lives in Bennington, Vermont with her husband, Allen Shawn, a composer and son of the former editor of the *New Yorker*, and their two children. She teaches creative writing at Bennington College and Harvard University and continues to create for her readers prickly, lucid, and provocative prose.



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