



Voices
from the
Gaps

My Brother by Jamaica Kincaid

Everyone's life is a collection of stories - stories about family, relationships, joys, and sufferings. Even though everyone's stories are different, they are all made up of the same basic concepts, and even though someone may not be able to truly understand someone else's stories, everyone can relate to everyone else in some way. Because of this, there is always something to benefit from learning about someone else's life. Jamaica Kincaid definitely has a life full of stories to share and from which to benefit, and she tells them in a way that is so heartfelt that it encourages the reader to look at life through her eyes. Kincaid's brother Devon Drew was diagnosed with AIDS and died when he was thirty-three years old. In *My Brother*, Kincaid reflects upon his dying and his death, her relationship with him, and her family's life growing up on the island of Antigua.



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Press, NY, 1997.

The book begins with the image of her brother lying sick in bed, and then Kincaid shifts to recalling the very start of his life, when she was thirteen and he had just been born. Kincaid intertwines with each other stories from the past and her situations and thoughts of the present, focusing not on the chronological order of events but on the predominant feelings that arise out of them. As Kincaid shares what she knows of her brother, she takes the reader on a journey of sometimes crude and often tragic situations that made up her brother's life as a Rastafarian and as a brother.

Kincaid spends a lot of time remembering the first few years of his life, during which she still lived at home in Antigua. She later moved out and lived in America, but once she learned that he was dying, she returned to Antigua to help. *My Brother* is a look at a brother-sister relationship that is distanced by age, parenting, and hundreds of miles, yet held together by common roots and the inevitable and powerful connection that comes with being part of a family. Kincaid's heartfelt words about feelings towards her family through the course of her life touch upon universal truths that most anyone can relate to - feelings of love, loyalty, and ancestry.

Reviewed by Annie
Swerkstrom



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As Kincaid shares the events leading up to her brother's death, the reader gets a sense of what the horrible struggle of AIDS must be like to endure, particularly in a poverty-stricken country like Antigua. Without Kincaid's ties in the United States that resulted in access to better medication, Devon wouldn't have been able to survive nearly as long as he did. However, the story also points out how disease itself doesn't care about race or ethnicity, and how the struggle of watching a loved one suffer and losing them can be transcribed across all cultures and races. Kincaid describes her pain, "His death was so surprising, even though I had been expecting it; it hung in front of me, not like a black cloud but like a block of something hard and cold and impenetrable" (102). Kincaid's honest words cover a broad range of emotions as she comes to terms with her brother's death.

As much as *My Brother* is a book about the dying of Devon Drew, it is about Kincaid's experiences growing up in Antigua, often focusing on her relationship with her mother. She had a mother who also became the mother of three boys who were years younger than Kincaid was. Her mother forced her to watch after these boys who were her brothers, her mother burned Kincaid's books in a fit of anger, and her mother turned away boy playmates to "protect" Kincaid. The challenges of their relationship become a prominent theme in the book as *My Brother* takes a look at the different roles that family members both take upon themselves and roles that are placed upon them.

Kincaid seldom breaks the prose into chapters or even paragraphs, and this in part gives the text its strongly poetic feel. The simple and sober nature of her writing takes on a rhythm that connects one thought to the next, sentence after sentence, page after page, resulting in beautiful passages like, "And when I saw my brother for the last time, alive, in that way he was being alive (dead really, but still breathing, his chest moving up and down, his heart beating like something, beating like something, but what, but what, there was no metaphor, his heart was beating like his own heart, only it was beating barely), I was so tired of him being in this state, not alive, not dead" (107-108). Her voice gives *My Brother* a lyrical quality that encourages its reader to read on to the very last page.

In addition to bringing a poetic nature to her text, the infrequent breaks may also symbolize life, as life always continues on - situations flowing into thoughts, flowing into more situations, never pausing to stop and catch up. In fact, the only division Kincaid has put into the book immediately precedes her statement, "My Brother died." (87), drawing attention to the point that only upon death will one ever get a break from life.



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Kincaid also uses a harsh, frank vocabulary that demands the reader recognize the stories as her reality, and her brother's reality, and the reality of life in Antigua. By doing this, Kincaid has created a powerful narrative about AIDS and the pain it causes directly and indirectly, physically and psychologically. The harshness of her words mirrors the harshness of the disease, and, when used as part of such a deeply poetic voice, harsh words and harsh moments morph into real, human emotions that can be put into words no better than Kincaid has done.

This powerful memoir of reflection, mourning, and life itself is sure to capture the heart and engage the mind of anyone who picks it up. Kincaid has a gift of giving true emotion to her words and she made me think about feelings I didn't even know I had. Her language, voice, and honest subject matter weave together and create a masterpiece that doesn't only just make for a good book, but make for a wonderful look into life.