Kincaid, Jamaica (1949 – )

Definition: **Kincaid, Jamaica** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US writer born in the West Indies. She has won recognition for her collections of short stories, such as *At the Bottom of the River* 1983, and *Annie John* 1985, a short story cycle. Her work is noted for its telling detail and poetic diction, such as in *Mr. Potter* (2002), which uses both prose and poetry to examine the issues around being a fatherless child.

Born in St John's, Antigua, she emigrated to New York City and became a staff writer for the *New Yorker* in 1976.

Summary Article: **Kincaid, Jamaica**

From *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*

Jamaica Kincaid was born in Antigua in 1949, and at 16 moved to America, where she became an au pair; after some schooling and work on publications such as *Ingenue* and the *Village Voice*, she was hired at *The New Yorker*. It wasn't until 1983, however, with the publication of *At the Bottom of the River*, that Kincaid became a recognized and important voice in America. She is a prolific writer who is still publishing works on Caribbean and other themes from her home in Vermont. The mother-daughter conflict is central in much of her writing.

Kincaid has published poetry and short stories, written on travel, and even edited an essay collection on gardening, but she is best known for her novels. Her fiction often takes the form of semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* (a novel about character growth), and it deals broadly with motherhood, daughterhood, independence, colonialism, sexuality, and shame. Her tone is often angry, with her sharp social critique aimed at her own and her protagonists’ oppressors: mothers who invariably fail to love daughters enough and who are unable to prepare their offspring for healthy sexual maturity; the colonist and the colonial subject alike; men of all stripes who use women; and white women with whom a true sisterhood is inevitably impossible in her works.

*Lucy* and *Annie John* are among the most well known of Kincaid's works. *Annie John* (1983) is the story of a young Antiguan girl's coming of age, and the violent rupture and abrupt break from her mother and her colonial-subject status that must happen if she is ever going to be able to define herself. *Lucy* (1990) continues Annie’s story under a different name and in a different country, with the protagonist acting as an au pair in 1960s Manhattan. In this novel, the protagonist’s efforts to rail against colonialism and find her own identity is much stronger (and more successful) than in the previous novel. The mother-daughter conflict is still central, but in this novel of migration, Annie/Lucy now finds herself as a representative of her people and deals with racism and colonial issues in a much more forthright manner.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), another Kincaid novel to clearly have the (absent) mother central to the story line, the protagonist explores the choice to be infertile and to use painful abortifacients to prevent herself from becoming a/her mother. Even in *My Brother* (1997), whose title seems to suggest a different focus in this clearly autobiographical work, Kincaid is still reworking and rewording her relationship with her mother and the residual anger she feels as her neglected and
Kincaid's writing is not always about the mother-daughter conflict. *A Small Place* (1988), for instance, utilizes second-person narrative and holds the reader, colonialists, and Antiguan subjects themselves accountable for the poverty and lack of viable choices available on the island. Her writing, though, is always unapologetic in its anger and criticism, using these forces to help her forge her identity and clarify her position on a number of issues.

*At the Bottom of the River* was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and won the Morton Darwen Zabel Award. *Annie John* landed Kincaid as one of three finalists for the 1985 international Ritz Paris Hemingway Award. She has also won the Anifield-Wolf Book Award and The Lila-Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund Award, along with a nomination for the 1997 National Book Award for *My Brother*. These accolades, however, have not prevented criticism, sometimes extremely harsh, for the anger (and perceived formlessness) found in her writing. Though her writing causes controversy, it is striking for both its form and content and refuses to let the reader sweep these issues under a rug.

Kincaid's writing about motherhood is most often from the daughter's perspective, and is largely about the struggle to gain independence and recover from the mother and her (often colonial) teachings. In her writings, colonialism engenders the fracturing of familial bonds, but she also reflects on the hope that she is finding ways to heal herself and overcome the conflict in her relationship with her own daughter.

See Also:
African Diaspora, Literature, Mothers in, Mother/Daughter Plot (Hirsch), Postcolonialism and Mothering, Race and Racism

Bibliography


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