My Brother Study Guide

My Brother by Jamaica Kincaid

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Introduction

Many readers and critics had long suspected that Jamaica Kincaid's fiction was highly autobiographical, and the publication of *My Brother,* which was nominated for a National Book Award for non-fiction, confirmed those suspicions. Ostensibly inspired by the death of her younger brother Devon Drew from AIDS in 1996, this memoir is most striking for the way that Kincaid presents her own memories and thoughts about her family in light of this tragedy. While her relationship to Devon, who was just three when Kincaid left Antigua in 1966, is important to the book, it's her corrosive and wounded relationship to her mother that readers will remember.

My Brother has been widely praised, and occasionally criticized, for its striking style. Kincaid's sentences are full of short blunt words, but they're intricately constructed, often circling back on themselves in such a way that they mimic the disorderly way that human beings recall their most unsettling memories. Another hallmark of the book is its disarming honesty. Kincaid doesn't shy away from difficult feelings, anger chief among them. Devon's unhappy life is, Kincaid believes, the one she might have lived had she not left Antigua for The United States. Anna Quindlen, writing in the *New York Times,* observes: "Ultimately that is what that memoir is about, about the chasm between the self we might have been and the one that we have somehow, often inexplicably, become. It is about leaving, and leaving people behind, about being a stranger in your own home, to your own family."

Author Biography

In *My Brother,* Kincaid's memoir of the illness and subsequent death of her youngest brother, Devon Drew, many details of her own history emerge. Kincaid has three younger halfbrothers, and the four siblings have all struggled with their difficult mother. Three years after Devon was born, Kincaid left Antigua to live in the United States. The event that precipitates this memoir is the death of Devon on January 19, 1996, at the age of thirty-three. He died of AIDS.

Because *My Brother* is an unconventional memoir, other biographical facts are not revealed. Kincaid was born on May 25, 1949, in St. Johns, Antigua, and was named Elaine Potter Richardson. In 1966, Kincaid immigrated to the United States to be a live-in babysitter for a family in Scarsdale, New York, a job she's told interviewers should be rightfully called "servant." Later, she worked as an au pair for a family in New York City. During these years, Kincaid took classes at Westchester Community College and studied photography at the New School for Social Research. In 1973, she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid, choosing the new name because *Jamaica* evoked the Caribbean, and *Kincaid,* a name she says she borrowed from a George Bernard Shaw piece, went well with Jamaica; the new name, she says, gave her the freedom to write without worrying about her family's reaction.

While living in New York, Kincaid befriended George Trow, a *New Yorker* columnist who began to quote her observations in the magazine and later helped her get her own work published in the "Talk of the Town" section in the magazine. In 1983, Kincaid published her first book, a collection of short fiction entitled *At the Bottom of the River*; it was immediately hailed as an important work of literature.

A devotee and close friend of former *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, Kincaid, in 1979, married his son, Allen Shawn, a composer and Bennington College professor. The pair live in North Bennington, Vermont, with their two children, Annie and Harold. Kincaid was a longtime staff writer for the *New Yorker* but quit in 1995 after a much-publicized feud with former editor Tina Brown. Kincaid criticized the magazine for treating celebrities and pop culture too reverently. Although Kincaid is often described as "angry," in 1997 she told *Mother Jones* magazine that "whatever I say in mywriting, in my personal life I'm really incredibly lucky. I suppose that's what gives me the freedom to express negatives."

Plot Summary

Part I

Kincaid sets the pace for the nonlinear story she tells in the opening paragraph when she describes first visiting Devon in the Gweneth O'Reilly ward of the Holberton Hospital, where he was said to be dying of AIDS; she then skips immediately to the circumstances of his birth. The ostensible connection between these thoughts is tenuous at best: Devon is the only one of Kincaid's mother's four children who was not born in a hospital. The logic of this leap makes increasing sense as the reader learns to follow Kincaid's idiosyncratic and winding thought processes.

Kincaid describes having distanced herself from her family only to have been drawn back into their orbit by her brother's illness. She reminisces about her family, especially her mother, discussing everything from her mother's dislike of her daughter's faculty for remembering to her mother's skill at gardening. She talks of the sorry state of health care in Antigua, the dirtiness of the Holberton Hospital, and the isolation of AIDS patients. At one point, Kincaid thinks that something good has come of Devon's illness: it's made her realize she loves him. She tells Devon of her love, and he responds in kind.

Kincaid procures the AIDS drug AZT for Devon, and he soon begins to recover and eventually leaves the hospital. But wellness is not a perfectly happy state for him. While Devon was hospitalized, his oldest brother, Joe, moved into his house. Devon returns home to live with his mother, sharing a bed with her. Kincaid also learns that Devon is having unprotected sex with a woman who doesn't know of his disease and that he is drinking beer every night. This section ends as Kincaid learns that her brother is once again ill.

Part II

The opening words of this section summarize what's to come: "My brother died." And yet Devon does not die in the simple terms that Kincaid first suggests with that three-word sentence. Instead, hisdeath is relived many times, from different perspectives. First, Kincaid describes the last time she saw her brother alive. She then recalls the moment that she learns he has died. Having returned home from a trip to Miami, she checks on her sleeping children, Harold and Annie, and they ask her to climb into bed with them and snuggle. She falls asleep, and in the morning, her husband wakes her and tells her that Devon has died. Kincaid's first response is to be relieved that the grieving is hers, not his, because she loves her husband dearly and would prefer to be in pain than to worry about his suffering.

Once again, Kincaid circles back to the last time she saw Devon alive, recalling that she didn't kiss him goodbye. At that moment, she felt anger, and "my anger was everything

to me, and in my anger lay many things, mostly made up of feelings I could not understand ..." This mention of anger leads her to a discussion of her mother and the still fresh anger she feels toward her. She then relates the defining story of her relationship to her mother. At fifteen, Kincaid was asked to baby-sit for Devon. Instead of watching the two year old, she spends the day reading, allowing Devon's dirty diaper to go unchanged. The sight of this neglect so enrages Kincaid's mother that she sets fire to Kincaid's most prized possessions: her books.

As is typical of this book, many of the stories are told aslant. Before hearing of Devon's funeral, the reader learns of the funeral of a four-year-old child whose mother vomits thin liquid at the horror of his death. Later, instead of confronting Devon's homosexuality directly (which can't be done; the fact is learned third hand through an Antiguan woman who approaches Kincaid in the United States after he has died), Kincaid writes about Freeston, an openly gay man who feels it's his duty to speak of having the HIV virus but is reviled for his honesty.

Perhaps because grief is irrational and sometimes incoherent, Kincaid's story becomes even more disjointed after Devon's death. Kincaid learns that as Devon was dying, he called out for all the members of his family but not for his sister. His last word is "Styles," his nickname for his brother Joe, the one he didn't get along with as an adult.

The penultimate scene is Devon's funeral. At the funeral, Kincaid is displeased with the minister's sermon. When the minister suggests that the family will be reunited after death, she thinks that she'd rather not see any of these people again. She then discusses how she is writing about her brother's death in order to understand it, how writing has been her salvation. And she ends this memoir on a very personal note, describing how she wrote for William Shawn, the editor of the *New Yorker,* a man she calls "the perfect reader." Although Mr. Shawn has died, she continues to write for him.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

My Brother opens with Jamaica Kincaid seeing her brother lying in a bed in the Holberton Hospital in the Gweneth O'Reilly ward on the island of Antigua, where he is said to be dying of AIDS. Jamaica recalls his birth at their family home when she is thirteen years old. The family has just eaten their evening meal of boiled fish, bread, and butter, and her mother sends her to fetch the midwife, a large woman whose buttocks roll up and down while she walks, and who says that she will attend once she has finished eating.

The arrival of the new child disrupts the family life, and the other children are sent to sleep at neighbor's houses. The new baby has a reddish-yellow skin, and the author hears his first cry, and listens to a discussion taking place about how they should dispose of the afterbirth. A small piece of this is pinned to the child's chemise as a talisman to ward off evil spirits. When he is two days old, the new baby is attacked by red ants, which would probably have killed him had he not been found in time. During his illness, when he is dying of AIDS, the author reminds her mother of this, comparing the attack of the red ants to the attack of the AIDS virus within his body.

The news of her brother's condition comes from a friend, who telephones Kincaid. Jamaica Kincaid is reading a gardening book at the time the call comes, and urges her to speak to her mother to discuss her brother's illness. However, the author and her mother are going through one of their frequent periods of not talking to each other. Kincaid's friend is reluctant to tell her that her brother is infected with the AIDS virus, but Kincaid guesses, and asks the friend directly, who confirms that this is the case. The author is not surprised to learn that her brother has AIDS, because his lifestyle is one of promiscuity and drug-usage.

When she visits her brother at the hospital in Antigua, he is very frail. Kincaid's brother is in a bad hospital, one where people go who cannot afford to go somewhere better. Kincaid looks at him in the hospital bed and notices the deep blackness of his skin and the golden-coated blisters on his scarlet lips. Kincaid sits beside him, reading the same gardening book that she was reading when she learned of his illness, and reflects that she and her brother have both inherited their love of gardening from their mother. Kincaid is shocked when she learns that her mother has cut down a lemon tree that her brother had planted, because it is one of the few things that would have remained behind after his death.

Kincaid feels this action by her mother is very heartless, and yet, at the same time, she recounts her mother's devoted care of her sick son, whom she visits each day, setting out early in the morning before the heat rises, and climbing up a long steep hill to take food and drink for him, helping him to eat, bathing him, and changing his clothes and bed linen.

Because his throat and gullet are infected with thrush and he has a sore on his tonsils, Kincaid's brother finds great difficulty eating. His mother has to encourage him to swallow. The author recalls how, when she was a small child who tired of chewing her food, her mother chewed it up and regurgitated it for her. It is because her son is ill and helpless that his mother loves caring for him; it is only when her children are totally dependent upon her that she is capable of loving them.

The author is generally unable to cope with the needs of her family, and so she distances herself from them, but when she learns of her brother's illness, she is obsessed with the fear that she might not see him again. Kincaid is surprised to realize she loves him, having not seen him since he was three years old, and therefore, not knowing him well at all. When she sees him in hospital, she thanks him for making her realize she loves him.

The isolation hospital room, in which AIDS victims like her brother are kept, is sparsely furnished, with no table lamp, and a broken television set in one corner that serves as a seat for visitors. The room and the furniture in it are dirty and dusty, which is harmful for somebody with breathing difficulties. The author wants to run away screaming from the place.

When her brother is first told that he is suffering from the AIDS virus, he tells his mother that he has cancer, and he tells somebody else he has bronchial pneumonia. Everybody knows what he has, because he has been put in the isolation room in the hospital, which is where people with AIDS are put.

When Kincaid returns from visiting at the hospital, she takes a hired car to her hotel and passes the place where the old mortuary used to be, before it grew rotten and the smells of the bodies escaped. Kincaid passes the traffic lights that are broken. The author writes that she also passes her old school and the school where her mother says her brother first started getting into trouble and became involved in a robbery and murder. Kincaid's brother has spent a short time in prison for this offence, although he is not believed to have pulled the trigger. Their mother does not allow any discussion of this event.

The car passes the funeral home, the home where the author's godmother used to live, the home of the Englishman who sold tomatoes to her mother, and it passes the place where the Happy Acres Hotel used to stand. Finally, the car arrives at the hotel where the author is staying. Kincaid's mother is annoyed she is staying in a hotel, but she does not wish to stay with her mother who only cares for her children when they are sick or in jail. Kincaid's mother believes everything she has done for her children has been in their best interests. She does not recognize that she has done them any damage and refuses to apologize for the pain she has caused the author, saying that she always has good reason for anything she does. The author's mother believes Kincaid does not like her, because she has brought her up very strictly, to prevent her from having ten children by ten different fathers.

The author's dying brother tells another brother that he feels his life has been worthless, and he wishes he had listened to his mother when she told him how to behave. The dying brother used to believe the things she said were just the sayings of an old woman, and now he cannot believe he is dying of AIDS, which he calls "the stupidness."

After she has seen her brother for the first time since he has started to die, Kincaid drinks five rum and cokes, and confides about her dying brother to the manageress of the hotel where she is staying. Kincaid says that her brother has AIDS; she needs to hear herself say these words so that she can accept what is happening to him. The manageress tells her of a Doctor Ramsay in Antigua who is an authority on the disease, and Kincaid looks up the doctor's telephone number in the directory and telephones him to make an appointment with him.

In Antigua, people who are diagnosed with the HIV virus are regarded as dying of AIDS and beyond help, and since the outcome is inevitable, and because resources are limited, and because there is no point on wasting money and drugs on people who cannot be cured, there is no medicine in the hospital to help control her brother's illness. The only medication that can help, AZT, is not available on the island, because it is too expensive to buy and stock.

Dr. Ramsay arrives punctually for his meeting with the author, something which is unusual in Antigua where, the author believes, people are generally unreliable. The doctor examines the sick man carefully, talks to him in his own language, and makes him laugh. The doctor tells Kincaid that her brother could certainly benefit from AZT, and she manages to gets a prescription for it, and for the more powerful drugs he needs for treating pneumonia and thrush. Dr. Ramsay says that he believes in keeping people who are HIV-positive, or suffering from AIDS, alive, because you never know when a cure might be discovered. The author attends a lecture given by Dr. Ramsay, where she meets a couple whose daughter has died of AIDS, and who are seeking to comfort other people in similar situations. This is an unusual concept for the author, who believes that Antiguans are generally callous people who are cruel to others who are suffering.

Dr. Ramsay shows photographs of the horrible effects of the virus on people suffering from AIDS. Because it is a disease that is caused by sex, Kincaid feels that she will never again wish to have sex with anybody, even herself. Dr. Ramsay had started a campaign to make women in Antigua aware of birth control methods, and it has been a success. When he first starts trying to teach the men about sexually transmitted diseases, however, they believe that he is trying to frighten them away from the women so he that can have them all for himself.

The author wonders how her brother has become HIV-positive. Kincaid does not think it is as a result of intravenous drug injection, because he would not like to hurt himself by sticking a needle into himself. Kincaid believes he was infected with the disease through having sex, and she believes it would be heterosexual sex, because as far as she knows, he is not a homosexual, although he could be, without having advertised the fact. Kincaid likes to know the details of other people's sex lives, because her own is boringly conventional.

When her brother was well, he had many friends, but now that he is ill nobody comes to see him any more. His friends come and stand in the doorway to look at him, and then they go away and never come back. When he sees an attractive woman, he says he would like to have sex with her, and the author is amazed that a man who is so ill and unattractive could imagine that anybody would want to have sex with them.

Kincaid recalls a day, many years before, when she was in her brother's room. The walls were covered with posters of successful, black Americans. Her brother had wanted to be a singer, and had made a tape recording of himself singing, which he had given to his sister. Kincaid regrets having lost the tape when she moved to a new house.

The day she leaves Antigua to return home, her brother is weighed at the hospital, and has gained one pound in weight, and his temperature has dropped. Kincaid is proud she has bought the AZT for him, which has led to an improvement in his condition.

When she returns home, she wonders whether her brother is now sitting in the sun, and whether he is well enough to read the book she has given him. Kincaid remembers a woman, whom she had met some time previously, who had suggested that she should take her brother to the United States for the treatment he cannot get in Antigua. Kincaid is angry the woman should have suggested this without being aware of her circumstances, that she was not rich, and that she had her own family to consider, her children and husband.

Once the author is back in her home, she misses her brother, but she does not think she loves him the way she did when she was with him watching his suffering. Kincaid's brother begins to get better, and to grow stronger. Her brother becomes well enough to sit in the sun with the other patients at the hospital, who no longer avoid him. The hospital wonders what to do with him, because he seems to be recovering, which is something they have never seen before in a person with AIDS.

Kincaid's brother is discharged from the hospital, and having nowhere else to go, because one of his brothers has occupied the place that was previously his home, he goes to live with his mother, and to sleep in her bed with her.

Dr. Ramsay telephones Kincaid to ask if she has heard how her brother is behaving. The doctor is concerned, because the sick man has asked one of his nurses for a date, and has denied to her that he is infected with the AIDS virus. Kincaid's brother has asked to be tested again, because he does not believe he has the virus. Dr. Ramsay believes, from the way he is talking, that her brother is taking drugs again, but the author thinks that her brother's voice is simply a reflection of his happiness at being alive and feeling better. Kincaid feels her brother has had the potential to have been an important and successful person, but he himself had not believed it.

When he runs out of the AZT medication, he telephones his sister, who panics in case even one day without the drug might harm him. Kincaid does not understand why he, or his mother, had not let her know in good time to send more, and she wonders why she

had not thought of it herself. Kincaid orders more and has it delivered to him by courier. Her brother's health continues to improve.

When the author goes to visit her brother the next time, she takes her children with her. They love their grandmother, and they eat all the food that she cooks, which surprises the author, because normally her children do not have large appetites. Kincaid's mother says the children love her, and that they might love her more than their mother. Kincaid's brother asks if she has brought the children so they can see him before he dies. Kincaid's brother is looking very well and feeling very well. Kincaid thinks that at least the medication she is buying is keeping him alive longer. She telephones and thanks all those people who have been kind and helped her brother.

A social worker, whom she speaks to, tells her that the tonic her brother is taking is mainly alcohol, and that he is having unprotected sex and not telling his partners that he has the AIDS virus. The social worker is angry that the man is drinking alcohol, after she has asked him not to, and asks him how he would feel if somebody who knew they were infected with HIV had unprotected sex with him, without telling him that they were infected, or how he would feel if such a person had unprotected sex with his sister. The social worker supplies him with a hundred condoms, and he promises he will use them in future, when she tells him that if he has sex with people who have the virus and don't tell him, his illness will develop more quickly.

In a meeting with Dr. Ramsay, Kincaid tells him about her brother's behavior, but he replies that unless he has sex at least every two weeks, he feels funny, and in any case he does not believe he has the virus. Kincaid's brother demands to have a new test. Dr. Ramsay reminds him that he has recently had a test which had given positive results.

When he hears that Dr. Ramsay is also a producer of calypso singers, Kincaid's brother is very excited and says that, when he sings, girls take off their clothes for him. The author wonders what kind of man her brother is, who cannot make anything or do anything useful, but is solely interested in getting girls to take off their clothes when he sings.

At the beach, Kincaid watches her mother and brother swimming together, and she thinks what a beautiful face he has, even though his body is too thin. She recalls that it was the birth of this brother that caused her mother to change, to lose her beauty and her good nature. Kincaid watches him approach some white women and flirt with them, and understands that he is entirely driven by his attempts to have sex with women.

Kincaid's mother tells her that God will bless her for having bought the AZT for her brother, but she thinks that God would have been better employed preventing him from contracting the disease in the first place. Kincaid remarks to herself that if her mother had her way, she would have prevented Kincaid from becoming a successful and educated person, and she would not today be in a position of being able to afford expensive medicine for her brother. Kincaid's mother and brother talk about a plant, a fern that was special to the mother, and which he had taken and sold in order to get

money to buy drugs. The author's brother is embarrassed, which is what his mother had intended.

Before she returns home, Kincaid's brother asks her to go for a walk alone with him. Kincaid expects he will ask her to give him something. That is why he usually wants to be alone with her. Kincaid tells him one thing he should do is to make his own life, away from his mother, to find a job and a home of his own. The brother replies that this is something about which he is thinking. They walk through the botanical gardens, discussing the trees there, and past the jail, but he does not mention he has been in it. They walk past his old school and find the fruit of a mahogany tree, which neither of them has ever seen before. They walk past the recreational grounds, where he shows his sister a pavilion, where he used to take girls for sex.

When she has returned home, the author often speaks on the telephone to her mother and sick brother. Kincaid does not speak to her oldest brother, for a reason she does not mention. The author learns her brother's health is continuing to improve, and that he has managed to find a job, until his employer runs out of money. Kincaid's brother is drinking beer and seeing a lot of girls. The brother and their mother have frequent quarrels and say unforgivable things to each other, but once the quarrels are over, they disregard the things they have said.

One day, during a telephone conversation with an old friend about some books that have been stolen, the author asks if she has seen her brother, and the woman replies that he always has a bottle of beer and a girl with him, and that his hair has become very thin and his lips very red.

Kincaid's brother dies.

Kincaid visits him two months before his death, when he is lying in a bed she has bought for him, which is a child's bed, sufficiently large for his body. Because his body is so small, his head seems disproportionately large, and he is lying motionless upon the bed, covered by a sheet, with his eyes and mouth opened wide. He looks the same way when she goes to the undertaker to see him after he is dead.

In a photograph album Kincaid's husband has collected, there is a photograph of her brother when he was a young and healthy man, and beautiful. However, when he was that beautiful, healthy, young man, he did unspeakable things, and he was a liar and a thief.

When she visits him before his death, Kincaid watches him through a louvred window, and thinks that if she had not left home when she did, she would have probably died at his age, or have become insane. Kincaid wishes he would hurry up and die, because she does not like the emotions his condition arouses in her. The house smells strange, as though her mother is not cleaning it properly, but she realizes that it is the smell of her dying brother. Kincaid's brother shows her his penis, in panic and fear, because it is horribly diseased. She does not want to see it.

When the author returns home from a visit to Miami, she carries two large rhododendrons in five-gallon containers. People help her to get on and off the airplane carrying the two plants. When she arrives home in Vermont, she finds her two children sleeping, and when she kisses them, they awaken, and ask her to come into bed with them. Kincaid falls asleep in their bed and is awoken by her husband at the first light of morning. Her husband tells her he has to talk to her, and when she goes into the hall, he tells her that her brother, Devon, has died. When she hears the news, she is glad for her husband that it is not one of his relatives who has died, so he will not have to grieve. Kincaid would rather be sad, herself, than have her husband be sad.

When the children have gone to school, she makes arrangements to travel to Antigua for the funeral, and then she is interviewed at great length by a newspaper reporter. Kincaid does not tell the reporter about her brother's death. The author telephones all the doctors who have looked after her brother to tell them he has died, and then she telephones the pharmacist to tell him her brother has died. Kincaid also tells the village grocer her brother has died. Everybody she tells that her brother has died expresses their sympathy, although had they known her brother personally, they would not have liked him, even though he was charming and well-mannered. Although the author did not love or even like her brother, now that he is dead, she is comforted to hear people say they are sorry.

The last time she saw her dying brother, she was buying medicines for him that she could not afford to pay for; she got them on credit. At the time, he was very near death, but still breathing, in a fashion, and his heart was still beating, somehow. Kincaid was tired of his illness and his demands, and she did not care whether he recovered or whether he died, as long as he left her alone. When she leaves him, she only says, "Goodbye." She does not hug or kiss him.

Two months before her visit, there has been a powerful hurricane on the island, and people talk of the noise caused by the wind and rain. While the trees crashed around the houses and the electricity pylons fell, her brother could only lie helplessly in his bed, listening to the noise outside.

The author remembers a time when she saw her brother, after twenty years, when he was smoking marijuana with a friend, and they were planning a career together in music. When she subsequently meets the same friend and tells him of her brother's illness, he is not interested, and although he says he will visit him, he never does.

Kincaid recalls lying on her brother's bed in 1986, looking up at the beams that were rotting away, and hearing her mother moving about outside, preparing food. In that climate the people mostly spent their time outside, except when they are doing foreign things, like learning European table manners, which they do indoors. Two of her brothers refuse to eat the food their mother cooks, and only speak to her when they have to, and then address her as Mrs. Drew. The author decides, at that time, she will stop eating the food her mother prepares, as a sign of distancing herself from her mother.

Remembering her father's death (although he was not her biological father, whom she never knew), she did not learn of his death for three months, because she and her mother were not speaking to each other. Kincaid learned of his death in a letter from her mother, who wrote that the family is impoverished by his death, and that his burial was afforded by the charity of friends. When the author returns to her family, ten years after her step-father's death, she wants to visit his grave, but nobody wants to take her there, because her mother says that somebody else probably will have been buried in the plot by now, because they had not paid for the plot within the seven years necessary to keep it, and there was no gravestone. While Kincaid is visiting her dying brother she insists on going with her mother to the cemetery, because she has a sentimental hope that her brother, when he dies, can be buried near his father. Kincaid's mother cannot remember where her husband had been buried; only that it was not where the Anglicans, Methodists, Moravians, or Catholics are buried, so they do not find his grave.

Kincaid notices a tree is missing from her mother's land, and asks what has happened to it. Kincaid's mother tells her she burned the tree down, because it was infested with parasites, which invaded the house, and as she was unable to kill the insects with chemicals. Therefore, she set the tree alight with kerosene and burned it. The author is reminded of her childhood, after the birth of her brother who has died, and how it was at the time of his birth that her mother had changed, because her husband was frail and unable to support the growing family that he had fathered. Consequently, the young girl is expected to make personal sacrifices for the benefit of her family. Kincaid resents this, and does not like her family, because all she wants to do is read books, and instead, she has to run errands or look after her younger brother. Instead of looking after him, she reads all day, so that when her mother returns in the evening, the baby is wearing a soiled and unchanged nappy. In her anger, the author's mother collects all her stolen books, or books paid for with stolen money, and burns them.

On her final visit to her brother before he dies, she finds him in great pain, and she goes to try to find Dr. Ramsay. Kincaid learns the doctor is at the funeral of a four-year-old child, and so she goes to the church where the funeral is taking place, but the doctor is not there. The dead child, who has been adopted from the United States, is in a coffin covered with white velvet and designed to look like a jewel box, but instead it looks cheap. Kincaid observes the mourners, and watches while the child's coffin is lowered into the ground. The mother vomits at the sight. The other mourners do not watch this, because it is impolite to do so, and because public displays of emotion are not acceptable in Antigua.

Each time the author remembers her brother is dead, it is as though he has just died. Kincaid remembers the vivid colors associated with him: the whiteness of his mouth, infected with thrush; the redness of his lips; and the accentuated blackness of his skin. After his funeral, she returns to the United States, and while at a literary function in Chicago, she sees a woman whom she recognizes from somewhere. Kincaid remembers they had met at an AIDS support meeting in Antigua, and she tells this woman that her brother has died. Kincaid is surprised when the woman replies that she knows, and she explains that she is a lesbian, living in Antigua, who used her house as a meeting place for homosexual people who had nowhere else to go to socialize with

each other. This is when the author learns for the first time that her dead brother was a homosexual, and that all the flirting that he did with women was just to disguise his homosexuality, and that he lived his life in secret. She feels a great sadness for her dead brother that his life had been like a ripening bud that had withered and dropped before it could flower.

When her brother dies, he calls out to his mother, and to his brothers, but he does not call his sister's name. He dies without having anybody of his own, except his mother and siblings, and with no home of his own, nor any furniture of his own. His sister does not mind that he does not call her name, because she has only known him for the first three years of his life, and the last three years, while he is dying, and so she accepts that she was not a true part of her brother's life or family

Once he has died and been taken from his mother's house, together with the smell of him, his sister visits the undertaker's, because she wants to see what her brother looks like now that he is dead. Her brother is zipped up in a plastic bag, the type of bag used to protect expensive clothes, and when the bag is unzipped and she sees her brother, he does not like her brother, with his mouth and eyes wide open, and his hair untidy, and his face unshaven. Later though, when she next sees him, he is in his coffin, looking like an advertisement for the dead, with his hair died black, his lips clamped together, and his eyes sewn shut. Kincaid keeps repeating that his eyes are sewn shut. His mother, his brothers, his mother's friends, and his old school friends all come to the undertaker's to look at the dead man's body. The author has paid with traveler's cheques for her brother's coffin, which is made of pitch pine, darkly varnished, and in which the dead man's emaciated body has to be packed with bed linen to stop it shaking around inside.

There are few mourners at the funeral, because firstly there is shame attached to people who have died as a result of sexual activity, and also, the dead man is not well-known. Kincaid's mother remarks that the dead man does not look like himself, and the author thinks of him in many ways: as the newborn child attacked by ants; as the two-year-old, left in her care, with a soiled nappy; as a criminal, or a cricket-player, or a smoker of marijuana; a sick man told that he was dying from the HIV virus; or as the man who believed he was getting better and was having sex with women, and maybe men. Kincaid wonders which of these people her brother had enjoyed being the most. Another man who has died from AIDS is being buried at the same time, in the same cemetery, but the two families do not speak to each other. When the preacher speaks about resurrection at a future date, the author does not want to think that she would want to meet any of the people present at the funeral again, because she has had enough of them and their ways. The dead man's brother, who lives in the same house as his mother, but who will not speak to her, (and who is not the brother who broke his mother's neck when she threw stones at him) weeps when he speaks about his brother, and this makes the author weep too, although she does not really know why.

The books closes with the author reflecting that she began writing in order to save herself, and that she has written of her brother's death in order to try and understand it.

Analysis

The title of this work is rather misleading, because it is not so much about the author's brother, whom she has not seen for twenty years and barely knows, as it is about the author herself. Kincaid's brother's death, and the period leading up to it, are simply a platform for her to express the bitterness, resentment, and contempt she feels toward her family in Antigua, and in particular, toward her mother. Kincaid concludes that she has written about his death for her own purposes, and not as any kind of memorial to her brother.

The author remembers details of events that have occurred decades previously, and this is the thing her mother most dislikes about her, which gives the reader the impression that, whereas the mother prefers to forget unpleasant or distressing incidents, the author clings to them and allows them to fester within her.

There is no sense within this account of any affection by the writer towards her family in Antigua, and although she pays for the AZT and other drugs that her brother needs, one wonders why she visits the island, unless it is purely to gather material to write about, because she neither seems to give, nor receive any pleasure seeing her relatives nor the country of her birth.

Kincaid's mother is portrayed as a ruthless person, who deals with most inconveniences in her life by destroying them: she burns or chops down any trees or plants that harbour parasites, and she burns the books that she believes will lead her daughter into trouble. The author's mother will do anything to protect and care for her children when they are in need. The mother's role as a mother is paramount to her, and she is unable to accept her children's' need for independence and is angered by it. The birth of several children, whose father is too sick to work and support them and with whom she is no longer in love, has turned her from a beautiful and intelligent woman, who reads biographies of Florence Nightingale and Louis Pasteur and who knew how to use food to combat vitamin deficiencies, into a bitter and quarrelsome one, but still a woman who cares for her children when they need her, and loves plants and animals, and can build an extension on her house if she needs to. The author shows no sympathy for her mother's situation, seeing it purely from her personal viewpoint about how it affected her own, young life. The only generosity of spirit she shows is relief that it is she and not her husband, who has learned of the death of a relative, because she prefers her own unhappiness to his.

The reader learns little about the author's three brothers. One is a hard-working businessman, one an electrician, and the third, whose name we learn is Devon, is dying of AIDS. There appears to be no affection between the three men, either towards each other, their mother, or their sister. One brother has occupied the house of the sick man, leaving him nowhere to live when he is discharged from hospital, and no longer speaks to his mother. One brother breaks his mother's neck, because she throws stones at him in disapproval of a relationship he has with a woman. The sick man is seemingly content to infect other people with the HIV-virus. The writer and her mother frequently

go through long periods of not talking to each other, and the author also does not speak to her oldest brother. What the writer paints, is a picture of a dysfunctional family, united only by the circumstances of their birth. On her final visit to her dying brother, she leaves him simply, with a dispassionate, "Goodbye."

"I did not kiss him goodbye when I was returning home to my family. I did not give him a goodbye hug. I said to him at the end of my visit (four days), Goodbye, and he said, So this is it, no hug no nothing?"

Visiting her homeland, she sees a land of decay and dilapidation, where everything is falling down or broken, aptly symbolic of her family.

When a young girl, Jamaica Kincaid sought refuge from her family life by reading; later she turned to writing to help her come to terms with her emotions. Paradoxically, she has become the immensely gifted writer she is today, because of her background, and not despite it, but this is something she does not appear to recognize.

Characters

Annie Drew

In this portrait of Kincaid's mother, there's one central and shocking truth that Kincaid revisits many times: "my mother hates her children." In an interview in the *Boston Globe,* Kincaid said, "Mother loves us best when we are dying. We need her. It's when we're walking around that she's critical of us. When we're thriving." In an interview in *Salon* Kincaid says that the core of her novel *The Autobiography of My Mothe*r is "drawn from an observation I' ve about my own mother: That all her children are quite happy to have been born, but all of us are quite sure she should never have been a mother."

Capable of deep maternal devotion, Annie Drew cares for Devon tirelessly and with great tenderness when he is ill. Likewise, Kincaid recalls that when she was a child with a clogged nose, her mother would suck the mucus from her nostrils, and, when eating felt too tiring, her mother would chew her daughter's food and then return it to her mouth. Drew possesses the traits of a maternal woman; she is a gardener with a knack for growing all sorts of vegetables and herbs.

Although occasionally kind, Annie Drew's cruelty is what strikes the reader most forcefully. When Kincaid is struggling to become a writer in New York City, her mother's words are typically harsh: "It serves you right, you are always trying to do things you know you can't do." Not only is she capable of blistering cruelty, but Annie Drew is a woman who refuses to apologize for her actions, nor will she ever subordinate herself to anyone. Kincaid's brothers live with their mother, not vice versa, because she would never allow herself to be in the position of living with anyone. Drew has so enraged her grown children that neither Jamaica nor Dalma, who lives with his mother, will eat any food she's prepared. Dalma and Devon until he becomes ill refuse to call Annie Drew "mother," instead calling her "Mrs. Drew." Dalma believes his mother is evil and will not speak to her. Once when Joseph, the oldest of the three brothers, dated a woman against his mother's wishes, Annie Drew was so furious that she threw stones at him.

When Kincaid returns to Antigua after having spent twenty years distancing herself from her family, she looks at a soursop tree that is now nothing more than a charred trunk. Kincaid's mother says that the tree became the home of a colony of parasitic insects and to rid herself of the insects, she burned down the tree. Kincaid attributes this easy way with destruction to her mother's powerful sense of herself. She sees her mother as a tyrant. "It's possible that in another kind of circumstance the shape of the world might have been altered by her presence. But this woman, my mother, had only four people to make into human beings."

Dalma Drew

Dalma is the middle brother, and he is eleven years younger than Kincaid. In contrast to Devon, who was careless with his life and health, Dalma is industrious. At the time of Devon's death, Dalma held down three jobs: accountant, peddler of imported foods, and bass steel-drum player in the most prominent steel band in Antigua. Yet for all his hard work, Dalma must live with his mother, a woman whom he describes as evil and to whom he no longer speaks. He refuses to eat anything his mother has cooked, and he refers to her as "Mrs. Drew," not "mother."

Devon Drew

Born at home on May 5, 1962, Devon Drew was intelligent, well-read, athletic, and deeply troubled. Kincaid is frank about his shortcomings. At age fourteen, Devon was involved in a gas station robbery in which the attendant was murdered; Devon testified against his friends, and his mother used her political connections to reduce his sentence, but he still spent time in jail. As an adult, he lived as a Rastafarian, a religious group whose members view Africa, and especially Ethiopia, as the promised land. Devon also used marijuana and cocaine, had many sexual partners, both men and women, and stole from his mother and brother Joe.

Despite his many failings, Devon was deeply charming. Kincaid sees him as a brilliant man who would have spoken to the world in an important way. Although Devon appreciates what Kincaid says about him, he can neither act on nor even fully imagine her vision of him:

But he was not even remotely aware of such a person inside him. It is I who told him this and he agreed with me at the moment I told him this, and he said yes, and I saw that he wished what I said were really true, would just become true, wished he could, wished he knew how to make the effort and make it true. He could not. In his daydreams he became a famous singer, and women removed their clothes when they heard him sing.

Above all, Kincaid sees her brother Devon as a dreamer, an observer, and a man who never fully knew himself. For the reader, Devon is a disturbing figure.When his AIDS virus goes into remission, Devon becomes convinced he's been cured, and he resumes sexual relations without using adequate protection. After Devon dies, Kincaid learns that her brother was probably a homosexual, a man who couldn't admit his own sexual inclinations to his family and friends in Antigua.

Joseph Drew

The oldest of the three brothers, Joe, is an electrician. Devon nicknamed him "Styles" because he is meticulous about how he dresses. Once, after his mother became

irrationally angry at him and began to stone him, he threw her to the ground and broke her neck.

Jamaica Kincaid

Jamaica Kincaid, the narrator of My *Brother*, is an Antiguan who left home as a teenager and is compelled to return only when she learns her much younger brother is dying of AIDS. Because of her geographical distance, Kincaid can understand and comment upon the Antiguans and the family members she left behind. She is now a successful writer in the United States, happily married with a husband, two children, and a garden, and she's put so much distance between herself and her past that she can barely understand the Antiguan patois that her family speaks. Equally, they find her diction either funny or incomprehensible.

Because Kincaid is the narrator of this story, her character traits tend to emerge by inference. Readers know that she has an exceptional memory, a faculty that she feels her family, especially her mother, resents. "This is what my family, the people I grew up with, hate about me. I always say, Do you remember? "As a child, Kincaid's memory was a source of pride to her mother, but as she grew up, it became an irritant. Kincaid speculates that her mother hates her daughter's ability to remember because Kincaid recalls unpleasant things that her mother wants forgotten.

Kincaid is an enormously honest narrator, one who doesn't shy away from confronting contradictions and even perversities in her own personality. For instance, she both enjoys her role as healer, the successful family member who can now afford the AIDS drug, AZT, while feeling weighed down by the responsibilities she's assumed. Nor is Kincaid afraid to articulate the negative feelings she harbors. Kincaid tells us that she wishes her brother would die and be done with it. When she returns to the United States, she feels relief, but she also admits, "I missed him. I missed seeing him suffer." One way that Kincaid and Devon are alike is that both are dreamers; she describes Devon as an observer, a man who likes events best when they ask nothing of him, and this description fits Kincaid as well. That the illness of her brother forces her to become an active participant in her brother's tragedy is apparently the source of some of her anger.

Finally, Kincaid is deeply curious about people and their motives, eagerly delving into her brother's life and death, so that she can better understand herself. Kincaid wonders what her own life would have been like, "if I had not been so cold and ruthless in regard to my own family, acting only in favor of myself when I was a young woman." In that way, there's yet another source of kinship with Devon, who acts on his own sexual urges despite his highly contagious disease.

Dr. Prince Ramsey

Dr. Ramsey is a figure of Antiguan possibility, and his goodness stands in contrast to most of the other islanders. He is, for instance, punctual, something Kincaid says that

most Antiguans are not. "He was something I had long ago thought impossible to find in an Antiguan with authority: he was kind, he was loving toward people who needed him, people who were less powerful than he; he was respectful."

Allen Shawn

Kincaid tells us that she loves her husband deeply and that he's a man who "takes suffering too seriously, too hard."

Mr. William Shawn

The fabled editor of the *New Yorker* was Kincaid's mentor. She says she was driven to write because she loved his praise. Knowing Mr. Shawn would read her work made writing worthwhile. Kincaid describes Mr. Shawn, as she calls him, as having been curious about things that he would not have wanted to know about. She envisions him as the person she writes for: the perfect reader.

Themes

Anger

Anger is a recurring theme in both Kincaid's feelings toward her family and toward Antigua, the country of her birth. Kincaid reflects on her own anger, admitting that anger often manifests itself in small transactions. When Devon asks Kincaid to go for a walk alone with him, she suspects that he'll ask her for something of hers and that she'll resent the request. She remembers how Devon had once asked her for the khaki shorts she was wearing and can articulate why the request annoyed her: "I did not like giving them to him at all. I did not want them back, I wanted not to have had to give them in the first place."

In Kincaid's family, quarreling is a way of life. One family member often stops talking to another, and these angry silences take on a life of their own. At one point, Kincaid identifies her own mother as "his mother," meaning Devon's mother, noting that "she is my mother, too, but I wasn't talking to her then, and when I am not talking to her, she is someone else's mother, not mine." After Devon temporarily recovers, she remembers, "He and my mother had huge quarrels and unforgivable things were said, but after the quarrels were over, they would both feel that everything said had not really been meant." Anger has its own rules in Kincaid's family, and people who have done and said terrible things can also be unexpectedly loving.

Mothers and Motherhood

Closely linked to the theme of anger are issues of mothering and its aftereffects. Kincaid says that the extraordinary thing about her mother's love for her children is its ability "to turn into a weapon for their destruction." Critics have observed that Kincaid's fascination with mother-daughter relationships stems from her preoccupation with colonialism, which is essentially the coercive and quasi-parental relationship of one nation toward another. In *A Small Place,* Kincaid spoke of the English people who colonized Antigua in terms that would also have described her mother's parenting style: "no natural disaster imaginable could equal the harm they did."

Although Kincaid is unequivocal in her harsh portrayal of her mother, she understands that therole of mother must almost, by definition, inspire negative feelings from time to time. Kincaid talks about how her son loves her and hates her, and how this is necessary and right: "This state of profound contradiction, loving me and hating me, is what will be for the rest of his life, if I am a good mother to him. This is the best that it can be. If I should fail him□and I very well might, the prime example I have is not a good one□he will experience something everlastingly bitter and awful: I know this, the taste of this awfulness, this bitterness, is in my mouth every day."

Gardening

Gardening is one link connecting Kincaid with her mother. Kincaid recognizes that her own love of gardening, as does Devon's, springs from her mother. "What would my brother say were he to be asked how he became interested in growing things? He saw our mother doing it. What else?"

Throughout, gardening is Kincaid's metaphor for nurturing. When she talks of Freeston, the Antiguan who openly acknowledges that he has AIDS, the harmony of his family is apparent in the flourishing houseplants: "he lived with [his mother] in a house with a beautiful garden full of zinnias and cosmos and some impatiens and all sorts of shrubs with glossy and variegated leaves." Yet the gardening metaphor is most effective and poignant when Kincaid uses it to describe Devon: "in his life there had been no flowering, his life was the opposite of that, a flowering, his life was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet."

Sex and sexuality

Gardening can be equated with nurturing, but it also is a link to Kincaid's themes of birth, death, and sexuality. Sexuality is central to this memoir because Devon has contracted a fatal disease through his own undisclosed sexual activities. One of the discoveries Kincaid finds most disturbing about her brother Devon is that even though he has a fatal disease that's transmitted through sexual contact, he continues to have sex with women, without first informing them he has AIDS. Devon is not particularly concerned about the danger to which he exposes his sexual partners; his rationale for his irresponsible behavior is "that he could not live without sex, that if he went without sex for too long he began to feel funny." His attitude seems consistent with prevailing views in Antigua. There, men who attend Dr. Ramsey's lectures on AIDS leave and go immediately to the section of town where the prostitutes are found. It's well known that a majority of these women ("butter women" they're called because they're from Santo Domingo and have light skin) are HIV positive. The men cavalierly tell Dr. Ramsey that "they would rather die than leave the butter women alone."

Like other subjects, sexuality is not simple to Kincaid. She is frank about her own interest in sex: "on the whole I like to know whom people have sex with, and a description of it I find especially interesting. My own life, from a sexual standpoint, can be described as a monument to boring conventionality. And so perhaps because of this I have a great interest in other people's personal lives." Yet for all her desire to glean facts about her brother's sexual past, she doesn't learn the truth until after Devon's death, when she's told that he sometimes had sex with other men.

Style

Diction

The diction of each family member is revealing. Kincaid's writing is formal, almost distant, and her carefully constructed sentences stand in direct contrast to the casual island diction of her mother and brothers. Devon speaks in an island dialect by which AIDS is always referred to as "de chupidness." Kincaid can no longer readily understand her brother□she's always asking him to repeat himself□and he finds her way of speaking comical.

Metaphor

Diction is one metaphor for what separates Kincaid from the family in which she was raised. There's also a sense in which the cruelty of Kincaid's childhood has now manifested itself as adult sickness, a physical metaphor for the psychological pain she and her brothers experience. Not only has Devon become fatally ill, but after Kincaid's mother visits her in the United States, she recalls, "I was sick for three months. I had something near to a nervous breakdown, I suffered from anxiety and had to take medicine to treat it; I got the chicken pox, which is a disease of childhood and a disease I had already had when I was a child."

In Kincaid's memoir, metaphor sometimes leads in unexpected directions. When Kincaid learns that her brother was probably a closet homosexual, she sees his life as a flower that failed to bloom, the bud becoming brown and dropping off at her feet. And here, the failure of metaphor to carry her readers to its logical end haunts her. "But the feeling that his life with its metaphor of the bud of a flower firmly set, blooming, and then the blossom fading, the flower setting a seed which bore inside another set of buds, leading to flowers, and so on and so on into eternity□this feeling that his life actually should have provided such a metaphor, so ordinary an image, so common and so welcoming had it been just so, could not leave me ..."

Although Kincaid uses metaphor throughout this memoir, she's also distrustful of the potential for using the device to reach overwrought or incorrect conclusions. When Kincaid hears the opening of the zipper on the bag that contains her dead brother Devon, she compares it to a dangerous reptile announcing its presence.

Style

Here's how Anna Quindlen describes Kincaid's writing style in a 1997 *New York Times* review of *My Brother:'* 'The stylistic ground she covers in this book is also recognizable from her past work, the endless incantatory sentences a contrast to the simple words and images□a tower built of small bricks."

Kincaid's style is consistent both with a rigorous search for truth and an acknowledgement that the truth can never be known. As Kincaid repeatedly tells the reader things they take for granted that Kincaid's husband is the father of her children, that Kincaid's mother is the mother of her brothers she makes the point that there are no givens, everything must be examined and either confirmed or refuted.

Historical Context

Antigua is a small West Indian island, twelve miles long and nine miles wide. Christopher Columbusarrived in Antigua in 1493, and he named the tiny island after the Church of Santa Maria de la Antigua in Sevilla, Spain. Soon after, Antigua was settled by the Spanish, French, and British, and in 1667 it became a British colony under the Treaty of Breda.

Although Antigua was still governed by the British, when Kincaid was growing up there, it became self-governing on February 27, 1967, and was known for the next fourteen years as an Associated State of Britain. In 1981, Antigua became an independent nation within the Commonwealth. Because Antigua was an outpost of British rule for so long, the educational system was British, which accounts for the fact that Kincaid and Devon both love John Milton, and Devon's favorite sport is cricket. In a *New York Times* interview, Kincaid said, "In my generation, the height of being a civilized person was to be English and to love English things and eat like English people. We couldn't really look like them, but we could approximate being an English person."

In *A Small Place,* Kincaid recalls that May 24th, Queen Victoria's birthday, was a holiday in Antigua. Instead of being incensed because the birthday of this unappealing person was meaningless to Antiguans, the Antiguans were grateful for a holiday from work. When Kincaid grows up and finds herself sitting across from an Englishman at a dinner party, he laments that he too celebrated the meaningless event. Her response is that at least he understood that Queen Victoria was dead. In that angry book, Kincaid writes that she has no tongue other than that of the criminal and that her language is built to express Englishmen's points of view. English cannot, she believes, adequately contain or express the horror, injustice, and agony of the criminal's deeds.

One of Kincaid's trademarks is writing about the curiously ambivalent feelings the colonized harbor toward the colonizers. This is evident in her fiction as well as in *My Brother.* She recalls that Devon was obsessed with "the great hero-thieves of English maritime history: Horatio Nelson, John Hawkins, Francis Drake... he thought (as do I) that this history of ours was primarily an account of theft and murder ("Dem tief, dem a dam tief"), but presented in such a way as to make the account seem inevitable and even fun ... he liked the people who won, even though he was among the things that had been won."

Kincaid writes about the odd ways of Antigua in *A Small Place.* She describes her birth place as hopelessly disorganized; for instance, a sign saying the library was damaged in the earthquake of 1974 and is pending repairs, hung there for more than a decade without the repairs being made. And yet she doesn't feel that it's right to criticize today's Antigua without noting that the country is the way it is because Antiguans lived under the dysfunctional and infantilizing relationship of colonialism for so long.

Critical Overview

Fittingly enough, one of Kincaid's fortes□writing about anger□has earned her extreme critical reactions. One review of *My Brother* opens this way: "Jamaica Kincaid is great at describing rage." Sarah Kerr, the author of that review, believes that Kincaid's memoir of her brother succeeds because it ultimately moves beyond rage. "Still, rage is only one shade on the spectrum of human experience. Kincaid's new memoir is more expansive than her fiction□and at times more moving□because in it, she begins to explore some of the others."

In one of the more glowing reviews of *My Brother,* Anna Quindlen praises Kincaid in the *New York Times* for her ability to recreate the disorderly way human beings remember their lives. "Memory feels exactly like *My Brother,"* Quindlen writes. And later she observes, "Kincaid moves with strange naturalness from the dying of her brother to his birth to his place in their family to her own place, providing, among other things, the deep satisfaction of recognition. This is what the mind does when it remembers. This is not real life, but real life recollected."

Not all critics are so enthusiastic. Some take Kincaid to task for writing an ostensible memoir of her brother that isn't really all that concerned with his life. Diane Hartman, writing for the *Denver Post,* comments that it's "hard to figure why Kincaid wrote this book." She also complains, "the book isn't a tribute or memorial and has no moral or discernible point." Writing in *Time,* John Skow calls *My Brother "*an irritating navel contemplation," in which Kincaid "repeats the pattern of familiar, well-written complaint." His central criticism revolves around the fact that the memoir is only glancingly a portrait of Kincaid's half-brother and its "real subject is Kincaid's scalded psyche."

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *My Brother* is its style. Some critics applaud the circularity of the sentences, while others are put off by the repetitiousness. Hartman calls the style "infuriating," noting that Kincaid "repeats facts over and over, not adding a different perspective or subtle shade of meaning, just providing the same facts. This may remind someone of Gertrude Stein; I found it condescending." And while Quindlen is mainly enthusiastic about Kincaid's style, she thinks the experimentation sometimes goes too far. "There are pitfalls to this," she writes. "Some of the sentences are snarled string, some of the repetitions a tiresome tic."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Judd is a freelance writer and book reviewer for Salon *and the* New York Times Book Review. *In the following essay, she discusses the ways in which Kincaid uses various stylistic devices to explore and illustrate the dynamics of familial distance within her memoir* My Brother.

"Desire," wrote Longinus, a philosopher in ancient Greece, "is full of endless distances." In *My Brother,* Kincaid makes a related but highly personal point: "I am so vulnerable to my family's needs and influence that from time to time I remove myself from them. I do not write to them. I do not pay visits to them. I do not lie, I do not deny, I only remove myself." *My Brother* is Kincaid's account of both the strong desire she feels for her family when separated from them and of the time she spends back in their orbit. From the safe distance of her new life as a successful American writer, she can plumb the depths of who her brother Devon is and what she herself might have become had she not left Antigua at the age of sixteen. In an interview in *People Weekly,* Kincaid says she wanted to write *My Brother* because "I just knew instinctively that my brother's life was parallel to mine. We were both dreamers, both lived in our heads. I thought, 'This could be me.'"

One reason why Kincaid's writing has been described as economical is that she takes a single idea□distance is just one example□and lets it gather meaning until it comes to represent manyimportant and complex truths. The distance Kincaid has personally travelled is evident in many ways, and Kincaid explores all of them, including geographical and cultural distance. Seeing the hospital where Devon is being treated, she is appalled. At Holberton Hospital, the furniture is dirty, the dusty ceiling fans present a danger to patients who have trouble breathing, and even something as ordinary as aspirin is sometimes impossible to come by. As an American, Kincaid is easily able to procure the AIDS medicine AZT for her brother, and the hospital staff is amazed when Devon begins to gain weight and recover his strength.

Physical distance is the most concrete type of distance in this memoir, but emotional distance is what's central to Kincaid's project. The gravity of Devon's illness collapses some of the longstanding emotional barriers in Kincaid's family. Kincaid once again returns to Antigua, allowing herself to be affected by the tragedy of one of her family members. Kincaid's mother excels at caring for her adult son, going so far as to sleep in the same bed with him. Yet most members of this family have also taken drastic steps to distance themselves. When Devon was a drug addict, he stole valuable tools from his oldest brother, Joe, and then sold them; to protect his property, Joe ran a live wire around hisbedroom with enough current that it electrocuted a puppy. This dangerously charged wire represents the power of Joe's desire to keep Devon out of his life.

Yet the children reserve their most ingenious distancing maneuvers for their mother. One form of rebuke is refusing to eat the food she's prepared. When Devon rejects her cooking, Kincaid considers his action "part of a separation he wished to make between himself and his family." For Kincaid even distancing herself from her mother represents

a sort of twisted intimacy, because the habit of refusing her mother's food began when she was a young child: "not eating food my mother cooked for me as a sign of distancing myself from her was a form of behavior I had used a long time ago, when I felt most close to and dependent on her."

In this family, quarrelling is perfectly natural. At any given time, one family member is generally not speaking to another. Like communication, silence has its own code of conduct: "(and this not speaking to each other has a life of its own, it is like a strange organism, the rules by which it survives no one can yet decipher; my mother and I never know when we will stop speaking to each other and we never know when we will begin again)." By downplaying these silences, placing the explanation of them within parentheses as if such silences are socommonplace they need no elaboration, Kincaid paradoxically heightens their significance. Only a member of a deeply troubled family would deem withholding speech unremarkable.

For the members of Kincaid's family, emotional distancing is a form of self-protection. On the morning when Kincaid learns of Devon's death, she chats with the other mothers at the bus stop, and she discovers she can enjoy herself by not acknowledging her brother has died. At another key moment, when Kincaid is visiting Devon two months before his death, she writes,

"I was thinking of my past and how it frightened me to think that I might have continued to live in a certain way, though, I am convinced, not for very long. I would have died at about his age, thirty-three years, or I would have gone insane. And when I was looking at him through the louvered windows, I began to distance myself from him, I began to feel angry at him, I began to feel I didn't like being so tied up with his life, the waning of it, the suffering in it. I began to feel it would be so nice if he would just decide to die right away."

When truth becomes too uncomfortable, Kincaid finds refuge in anger and emotional distance.

Distance, Kincaid believes, was necessary for her to fulfill herself. She writes, "I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best." Similarly, Kincaid views Devon's decision to become a Rastafarian as a distancing maneuver, one she applauds. "The impulse was a good one, if only he could have seen his way to simply moving away from [our mother] to another planet, though perhaps even that might not have been far enough away." Kincaid's outlook on death is naturally shaped by her own longing for separation, since death is the ultimate distance between individuals. Although she mourns her brother, she's displeased by the minister's suggestion in his funeral sermon that the family will be reunited at some later date: "I did not want to be with any of these people again in another world."

One of Kincaid's most intriguing strategies for creating and enforcing distances is her writing style. Diction is the most noticeable sign of the chasm that now separates Kincaid from her brother.

I had lived away from my home for so long that I no longer understood readily the kind of English he spoke and always had to have him repeat himself to me; and I no longer spoke the kind of English he spoke, and when I said anything to him, he would look at me and sometimes just laugh at me outright. You talk funny, he said."

How each sibling speaks is a sign of who he or she has become, but Kincaid consciously magnifies the gulf in the way she chooses to describe the problem. The semicolon in that long first sentence indicates the barrier between two linguistic worlds. In the first half of the sentence, Kincaid is a famous writer speaking as Americans do; in the second half, she's a person whose speech is outlandish to her own brother. Each separate truth exists on its own side of a grammatical divide.

Kincaid's repetitions are another stylistic decision that reinforces the emotional distancing underway. By repeating herself, Kincaid both emphasizes her various messages and then desensitizes the reader to the painful meaning of her words. Hearing that someone's brother has died carries an emotional charge. But when the fact of that death is repeated several times in close succession, the reader becomes deadened to the impact of that sorrow, and the emotions become more remote. Thus, when Kincaid writes, "And my brother died, for he kept dying; each time I remembered that he had died it was as if he had just at that moment died, and the whole experience of it would begin again; my brother had died and I didn't love him," the death itself ceases to shock, but the emotional distance of the speaker and her lack of love for her brother are now what capture the reader's attention.

Distance may be a necessity, but throughout, Kincaid wishes her life could have been otherwise, that she had loved her brother and that her mother wasn't someone she needed to escape. In *Interview* magazine, Kincaid says that she would have preferred a less remarkable mother than the force of nature who, in fact, raised her: "An ordinary mother would have served me better, one that didn' t require great distance to escape from." Distance has saved Kincaid from Devon's fate, but she also realizes that emotional distance comes at a high price because it is the pain of closeness that makes life meaningful. On the morning Kincaid learns that Devon has died, she begins to wish "that this, my brother dying, had not happened, that I had never become involved with the people I am from again, and that I only wanted to be happy and happy and happy again, with all the emptiness and meaninglessness that such a state would entail." Her three repetitions of "happy" make the state seem vapid, frivolous, undesirable.

Perhaps the most wrenching sign of familial distance is conveyed by the way these individuals address one another. Kincaid explains that Devon and Dalma call their mother "Mrs. Drew," and at many times in the memoir, Kincaid is equally unwilling to claim kinship with her. She writes, "He stole from his mother (our mother, she was my own mother, too, but I was only in the process of placing another distance between us, I was not in the process of saying I know nothing of her, as I am doing now)." The language is convoluted because the emotions are snarled, impossible to make simple and smooth again. For a writer who never lets any judgment pass unquestioned, one who always denotes relationships with hairsplitting accuracy (her mother is Mrs. Drew or the mother of her brothers), Kincaid has chosen the most poignant of all possible

titles for her memoir. In the intimacy of writing this book, Kincaid has claimed Devon as her own again. By naming Devon's relationship to her with the utmost directness, the two words "my brother" become the sweetest of all possible endearments.

Source: Elizabeth Judd, Critical Essay on *My Brother,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Adrian Blevins is a poet and essayist who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System. In this essay, she explores how the digressions and contractions in Jamaica Kincaid's My Brother *ultimately help the author explore her reactions to a family tragedy reveal the way the self is often split between love and hate, obligation and self-preservation, and action and inaction.*

Toward the end of *My Brother,* Jamaica Kincaid says that she "became a writer out of desperation." She elaborates in this way: "when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him. I would write about his dying." Like much of Kincaid's memoir, this statement is ironic because *My Brother* is not really, and certainly not only, about Kincaid's brother's sickness and death. As many critics have observed, it does not move in a straight line through Devon's illness and eventual death in order to give us an honest and straightforward account of the horrors of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in a developing country or anywhere else. Instead, Kincaid *uses* her brother Devon's illness with AIDS and his eventual death as the axis for meditations on a whole series of complex themes about the self in relation to itself, others, and the world. This method□which produces a "sustained meditation on the grinding wheel of family," as American writer Anna Quindlen says□has been underappreciated by too many critics. Diane Hart-man, in a review of *My Brother* for *The Denver Post,* says that Kincaid

has a way of writing□described by one critic as "the circularity of her thought patterns"□that can be infuriating. She repeats facts over and over, not adding a different perspective or subtle shade of meaning, but just the same facts. This may remind someone of Gertrude Stein; I found it condescending.

Yet it is this very "way of writing"□the way Kincaid allows "the circularity of her thought patterns " to dictate structure and theme□that makes *My Brother* an interesting and memorable book. As Quindlen says, "this is what the mind does when it remembers. This is not real life, but real life recollected." *My Brother* ultimately explores one person' s reactions to a family tragedy in order to reveal the way the self is often split between love and hate, obligation and self-preservation, and action and inaction. Kincaid manages to weave these paradoxes into the story of her brother's illness and death by being true to the nature of memory. That is, *MyBrother* mimics the way memory actually works, moving in time and place in an effort to uncover the astonishing self at work within the most unpleasant of circumstances.

The basic narrative of the memoir does follow a straight and even predictable line: the author finds out her brother has AIDS, goes to visit him in Antigua, and sends AZT from the United States, which she buys with her own money. Although the AZT helps for a while, allowing Devon to convince himself he isn't sick at all and to have unprotected sex with women on the island, eventually Devon does die, and the author returns to Antigua for his funeral. Kincaid narrates the details of these main events masterfully, giving us specific images to authenticate the experience and reveal how her brother's

life "was like the bud that sets but, instead of opening into a flower, turns brown and falls off at your feet." She says:

His lips were scarlet red, as if layers and layers of skin had been removed and only one last layer remained, holding in place the dangerous fluid that was his blood. His face was sharp like a carving, like an image embossed on an emblem, a face full of deep suffering, beyond regrets or pleadings for a second chance.

These details of Devon's illness as well as images of Devon after he has died (when his "eyes had been sewn shut," and he looked "like an advertisement for the dead") work as the book's main plot device, tying the memoir into one coherent piece. Because they are so graphic and horrible, however, they are difficult images to sustain for a long period of time. Thus Kincaid's digressions, or her sometimes-startling leaps in time, place, and theme, work to relieve us of the graphic nature of the situation she's describing: they move us from the dying or deadbody, from images of "penises that looked like lady fingers left in the oven too long and with a bite taken out ... and.... labias covered with thick blue crusts" to images of the *living,* of living people struggling to understand and know the self and the world. Toward the end of the book, Kincaid says:

I am remembering the life of my brother, I am remembering my own life, or at least a part of my own life, for my own life is still ongoing, I hope, and each moment of its present shapes its past and each moment of its present will shape its future and even so influence the way I see its future; and the knowledge of all this leaves me with the feeling: And what now, and so, yes, what now. *What now!*

The sense of wonder expressed in this passage works to counter the images of death and dying in Kincaid's memoir. Kincaid's digressions□made up of memories and observations written in her famously meandering sentences, repetitions, and interruptions□help her produce a tone that is oddly evasive and hesitant, revealing that the crisis (and interest) of a tragedy is not often the tragedy itself, but the make-up of selves that live before and after and within it□the mix of personalities that witness (and may even cause) the self-destruction of some people.

The first sentence in the book sets us up for the story of sickness and dying, but that expectation is frustrated very quickly. "When I saw my little brother again after a very long time, he was lying in a bed in the Holberton Hospital, in the Gweneth O'Reilly ward, and he was said to be dying of AIDS," Kincaid begins. But she digresses in the very next sentence, moving backwards in time to tell us about how "the routine of [the family's] life was upset" by Devon's birth. We learn that Devon, unlike Kincaid and her other brothers, was born at home, and that an army of red ants attacked him while he lay beside his mother in bed on his second day of life. This one incident reveals that Hartman is mistaken to suggest that Kincaid "repeats facts over and over, not adding a different perspective or subtle shade of meaning," since Kincaid does return to the story of the ants later in the book, telling us how her mother burned the tree that gave the ants a path through the window to the bed. Kincaid then ties this story to the memory of her mother burning her books, creating a motif of fire that works, to make the book a coherent whole.

After she narrates the day Devon is born, Kincaid moves backward in time to narrate events and meditate on them: the reader finds out that she and her mother "were in a period of not speaking to each other" when the telephone call from her mother's friend comes, and the reader witnesses Kincaid's meditation on a series of questions about how Devon got AIDS in the first place. These details and questions deepen the tension already established by the book's main narrative premise, suspending specific information about Devon and his sickness while we learn about the speaker and her family, specifically their long struggle to separate themselves from their mother's "spectacular" and "unequaled" love.

These details are interesting because they are oddly universal. They reveal the contradictions at work in the self and in the family, and, since they produce a conversational and informal tone appropriate to a meditation that can ultimately ask more questions than it can answer, they do serve the book's ultimate aim. Kincaid suggests toward the beginning of the book that she realized when she first came to see Devon that she loved him. She says: "it surprised me that I loved him; I could see that what I was feeling, love for him, and it surprised me because I did not know him." Then, still in the book's first section, she says:

when I was no longer in his presence, I did not think I loved him. Whatever made me talk about him, whatever made me think of him, was not love, just something else, but not love; love being the thing I felt for my family, the one I have now, but not for him, or the people I am from, not love, but a powerful feeling all the same, only not love.

The apparent contradiction between these statements reveals that it is possible to love and "not-love" at the same time; it reveals that it is not only possible, but perfectly human, to be a "combustion of feelings." Other similar paradoxes infuse *My Brother,* deepening its complexity and appeal. Kincaid tells us that her mother "loves her children. ... in her way" and, later in the book, she says: "I felt I hated my mother, and even worse, I felt she hated me, too." During the passage in which she remembers the day she was supposed to take care of Devon and failed to change his diaper because she was too busy reading, she even says that "when my mother saw [Devon's] unchanged diaper ... she wanted me dead."

Kincaid also tells us that sometimes she is "so vulnerable to [her] family's needs and influence that she.... removes [herself] from them." Still, she visits Antigua many times, buys AZT and a coffin, and becomes so obsessed with the idea of Devon dying that she "felt she was falling into a deep hole." The contradiction expressed betweenKincaid' s actions and her words shows us how easy it is to act against our own feelings, especially when we're faced with another's suffering. Kincaid reveals the reasons she feels she must remove herself from her family (in an alternative act of self-preservation) when she tells us what happened after her mother came for a visit to Vermont:

... after my mother left, I was sick for three months. I had something near to a nervous breakdown, I suffered from anxiety and had to take medicine to treat it; I got the chicken pox, which is a disease of childhood and a disease I had already when I was a child. Not long after she left, I had to see a psychiatrist.

Kincaid's repetitions also serve an important purpose. One of the oddest repetitions in *My Brother* is the idea that Devon's father (Mr. Drew) is not Kincaid's own father. She tells us, often parenthetically, that this is the case, sometimes rephrasing, sometimes using the exact same phrase. This repetition works as a kind of refrain in the book, revealing how important it is for Kincaid to separate herself from the family she was born into. Toward the end of the book, she says that she won't forget Devon "because his life is the one I did not have, the life that, for reasons I hope shall never be too clear to me, I avoided or escaped." Kincaid's repetition about Mr. Drew not being her father has prepared us for this statement, which might otherwise seem to lack compassion. This statement also underscores the fact that the central theme of Kincaid's memoir is not Kincaid's brother or his sickness and death, but Kincaid herself□her realizations about herself and her family that Devon's sickness and death have brought forth.

In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay,* Phillip Lopate reminds us that "the personal essayist looks back at the choices that were made, the roads not taken, the limiting familial and historic circumstances, and what might be called the catastrophe of personality" in order to arrive at realizations that are, amazingly enough, "appetizing and even amusing to the reader." By "catastrophe," Lopate doesn't mean that the essayist must necessarily meditate on the way a self might fail and falter in the world, though this might be (and has been) a fertile topic for our most notable practitioners. Lopate means rather that personal essayists must investigate their own reactions to the world and to themselves as honestly as possible in order to arrive at a full picture of what it means to be human. Kincaid's digressions, interruptions, and repetitions serve the book's purpose because they combine to produce an apt vehicle for the expression of the "catastrophe of personality" that led Devon Drew to his death and, conversely, his sister to an articulation of the complex feelings at work in people who struggle to understand who they have become.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on *My Brother,* in *Nonfiction Classics for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following review, Wachman finds that My Brother *exhibits less anger than Kincaid's previous works and focuses on "the authenticity of the voice her brother's or her own."*

To read Jamaica Kincaid's memoir, *My Brother,* is to re-experience her unforgettable narrative voice, revisiting Antigua over the three years that Devon is dying of AIDS, andre-characterizing the island, her mother and the child/adolescent self chronicled in her earlier books. The lucid, assertive, deceptively simple voice takes its time in fleshing out the figures of the memoir, both in their present and in the past, circling around Devon and the multiple meanings of his life, illness and death. The narrative loops between the United States and Antigua, contrasting Kincaid's "now privileged North American way" with the lives of her brothers and mother. It recalls both the double setting of *Lucy* and the triple denunciation in *A Small Place* of tourist complacency, imperialist oppression and government corruption.

But Kincaid's voice is less angry here, and more reflective. Indeed, she explicitly distances herself from *A Small Place, "*a... book in which I did nothing but cast blame and make denunciations." There is still rage, however, against conditions in Antigua, where she finds her youngest brother in hospital, dying of opportunistic infections because there is no AZT. But this is a reality that can be altered by individual, middle-class agency: Kincaid buys Devon three more years of life with AZT from the States. And although she is unable to change his living conditions either in the hospital, which isolates AIDS patients in a small, dirty room, or at home when he returns to live with their mother, she finds cause for hope as soon as she meets Dr. Prince Ramsey, the leader of the fight against AIDS on the island. Kincaid is astonished to find such a doctor in Antigua: "He was kind, he was loving toward people who needed him, people who were less powerful than he; he was respectful.... He is a very loving man and the other reason I have for saying this is I saw that wherever he went, people, ordinary people, would go out of their way to greet him and ask him how he was, but not because they really wanted to know: it was just to hear his voice." Kincaid knows how people respond to love. It is the gap between this knowledge and her feelings about her mother that makes much of her writing so poignant.

From the beginning of this book it is clear that this relationship remains at least as troubled as that represented in *Lucy;* Kincaid's life has been punctuated by long periods of not speaking to her mother. But her mother cares untiringly for Devon while he is sick:

My mother loves her children, I want to say, in her way! ... It has never occurred to her that her way of loving us might have served her better than it served us. And why should it? Perhaps all love is self-serving. I do not know, I do not know... All the same, her love, if we are dying, or if we are in jail, is so wonderful, a great fortune, and we are lucky to have it. My brother was dying; he needed her just then.

The pain in the repeated "I do not know" reflects Kincaid's continuous state of conflict about her mother; for a moment she doubts her judgment of her mother's love and also of her own love for others. She acknowledges, too, that her mother's bitter cruelty dates only from the family's descent into poverty when Kincaid was about 13 years old, but she cannot forgive her for burning her books in a rage, taking her out of school to look after her brothers and sending her away alone to earn money for the family. The depth of her distrust is shown by her refusal, along with two of her three brothers, to eat any food her mother cooks. Kincaid knows that "the powerful sense my mother has of herself' is a danger for any thing or person who gets in her path; she is finally convinced that "my mother hates her children."

When *Lucy* was published in 1990I was struck by the number of reviewers who were puzzled or offended by Lucy's unremitting anger, directed at both her mother and her privileged but well-meaning white employer. I have never been able to withstand the relentless analytical clarity of Kincaid's narrative voice. Whatever her narrators tell me about their feelings, however unpleasant or extreme they may be, I accept, as long as I'm reading, as "true." (It doesn't matter whether Kincaid's mother really hates her children; what matters is Kincaid's experience.) So, because the narrative persuaded me to focus on her response to her brother rather than on my own experience and knowledge of AIDS, I believed as I read three-quarters of My Brother that Devon was a heterosexual drug user who did not inject drugs. After he is dead, Kincaid learns that he was in fact bisexual, but Antiguan homophobia is such that Devon has encouraged hissister's supposition that "he got the virus through ... heterosexual sex." He boasts that he is sexually irresistible to women and constantly speaks of his desire for them.

Devon is a man who talks a lot when he is well enough to do so; he seems to be compulsively sociable. Kincaid, back in Vermont, imagines him "sitting on my mother's little front porch":

Whenever anyone passed by, he would have to call out to them a greeting regardless of whether they were familiar to him or not. He would not be able to bear the emptiness of silence... He was not meant to be silent. He was a brilliant boy, he was a brilliant man. Locked up inside him was someone who would have spoken to the world in an important way. I believe this... But he was not even remotely aware of such a person inside him.

Kincaid also sees him as a man who stole and lied and "did unspeakable things ... he was unable to speak openly about. He could never say that anything in front of him was his own, or that anything in front of him came to him in a way that he did not find humiliating." But, her heterosexual privilege blinds her to what is really unspeakable□ to her, at any rate□in his life.

When Devon dies, Kincaid is in the middle of her book tour for *The Autobiography of My Mother*; she takes it up again after the funeral. At a reading in a Chicago bookstore she sees a woman she recognizes; they had met once in Antigua three years earlier at an AIDS support group organized by Dr. Ramsey. This white "lesbian woman"□the redundancy of "woman" concisely conveys how strange lesbianism is to Kincaid□knows

that Devon is dead. She tells Kincaid how, saddened by "the scorn and derision heaped on the homosexual man," she had opened up her home on Sundays and "made it known that .. . men who loved other men could come to her house in the afternoon and enjoy each other's company." The reader is left wondering about this gay Antiguan subculture, wanting to know more about these meetings and what they meant to Devon. The gaps in Kincaid's knowledge of her brother are finally exposed. Reading as a "lesbian woman," I am momentarily estranged from this unreliable narrator.

But this estrangement may be the crux of the memoir, emphasizing the unknowability of those whom we love as of those whom we have made Other. After the lesbian's revelation, Kincaid feels a new empathy with her brother:

Who he really was□not a single sense of identity but all the complexities of who he was□he could notexpress fully: his fear of being laughed at, his fear of meeting with the scorn of the people he knew best were overwhelming and he could not live with all of it openly. His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best... in his life there had been no flowering.

This identification with Devon escapes being an appropriation because Kincaid's resolute sense of self is vital to the authenticity of the voice□her brother's or her own□that she is right to value so highly. At Devon's funeral, distanced by the unreality of his body after the ministrations of the undertakers, she mourns what she knows to be loss: "his farawayness so complete, so final, he shall never speak again; he shall never speak again in the everyday way that I speak of speech." *My Brother* is a memoir of a voice.

Source: Gay Wachman, "Dying in Antigua," *inThe Nation,* Vol. 265, No. 14, November 3, 1997, pp. 43-44.

Adaptations

My Brother was adapted into an audio book performed by Jamaica Kincaid. The audio book runs for 360 minutes and was published by Penguin Audio books.

Topics for Further Study

Research how Antigua became independent from British rule and discuss the implications of that event for the modern-day Antigua of Kincaid' s memoir.

Kincaid never discusses psychology explicitly, but she is clearly interested in the mother-daughter dynamic. Research what psychologists say about children separating from their mothers and apply it to the feelings Kincaid harbors toward her mother.

Up until very recently, people suffering from AIDS in the United States didn't want to discuss their disease publicly. Research how attitudes toward people with AIDS have changed, concentrating on how legal protection against discrimination of people suffering from this disease has helped change attitudes.

Consider how *My Brother* differs from more conventionally structured family memoirs. Ask yourself why Kincaid chose to arrange her story the way she did.

Kincaid describes at length how encountering the Antiguan woman from her AIDS support group and learning that Devon was a practicing homosexual was not like the falling and breaking of a miniature water-filled glass dome that is associated with childhood. Why does Kincaid use the metaphor of the glass dome in such a contradictory fashion?

What Do I Read Next?

National Book Critics Circle Award winner *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (1997) is Anne Fadiman's nonfiction story of a Hmong child diagnosed with severe epilepsy. The girl's parents, now living in Merced, California, are refugees from Laos, and their notions of what will cure their daughter are desperately at odds with the American medical establishment.

Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) is a coming-of-age story told in eight separate chapter vignettes, stories that span the Antiguan girl's childhood from the age of ten to seventeen. Like much of Kincaid's work, the stories are preoccupied with Annie's love for (and subsequent anger with) her mother. At the end of the book, Annie leaves home, headed for England.

The slim but emotionally intense *A Small Place* (1998) has been described as an "anti-travel narrative." It's Kincaid's imagined visit by a North American or European tourist to a Caribbean island that his or her people have colonized. Although Kincaid is critical of the corruption of present-day Antigua, she repeatedly reminds the reader that the island's problems stem from its long history of colonialism.

Like all of Kincaid's work, *Lucy* (1990) borrows heavily from the details of the author's life. Having moved from her Caribbean home to New York City, Lucy works as an au pair in the home of an upper-middle-class couple, and there she witnesses the disintegration of the couple's marriage.

In her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1998), Edwidge Danticat covers much of the same emotional terrain as Kincaid does. The novel begins when Sophie leaves her happy existence with her aunt and grandmother in rural Haiti to live with the mother she's never known in New York.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, ed., "Jamaica Kincaid," in *Caribbean Women Writers,* Chelsea House, 1997, pp. 104-116.

This overview of Kincaid's work was written prior to the publication of *My Brother.*

Graham, Renee, "A Death in the Family: Jamaica Kincaid's Wrenching, Incantatory Story of her Brother Devon," in *Boston Globe,* November 2, 1997, p. N1.

Graham describes Kincaid's memoir as one of "unsparing honesty" in this detailed review of her book.

Hainley, Bruce, *"My Brother,"* in *Artforum,* Vol. 36, No. 3, November 1997, p. S27.

In this book review of *My Brother,* Hainley compares Kincaid to writers Michel Leiris and Elizabeth Bishop.

Kaufman, Joanne, "Jamaica Kincaid: An Author's Unsparing Judgments Earn Her an Unwanted Reputation for Anger," in *People Weekly,* Vol. 48, No. 24, December 15,1997, p. 109.

This interview with Kincaid following the nomination of My *Brother* for a National Book Award touches on topics ranging from Tina Brown, editor of *The New Yorker,* to Kincaid's family history, her conversion to Judaism, and her passion for gardening.

Kurth, Peter, *"My Brother: A* Memoir," in *Salon,* October 9, 1997.

Kurth's book review focuses on Kincaid's relationship with her mother, comparing *My Brother* to *The Autobiography of My Mother*

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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