

Jamaica Kincaid. *Annie John*. (New York: New American Library, 1986) 148 pp., \$6.95 paper.

Annie John, even though set in the West Indies and about a black Caribbean girl, is a work whose universally felt experience goes beyond allowing the novel to be neatly categorized as a piece of “ethnic” or “women’s” writing. Born on Antigua, the island in which she sets the novel, Jamaica Kincaid catches many of the ways of being peculiar to this place. Maybe it is because Kincaid makes the setting home that we as readers find it so easy to slip into the story.

Not only do we feel at home in Antigua, we find ourselves in familiar territory as we view the world from inside Kincaid’s protagonist. We are with Annie from age ten through seventeen. The freshness with which Kincaid presents the story—the careful attention she pays to the growing girl’s changing perspective; the depth to which she goes inside her character, and without sentimentality, the choice of detail—make for a story which is familiar but which is at the same time unique. We are all unique beings, if only we can articulate the complexity of ourselves as Kincaid has allowed *Annie John* to do.

Moviemakers have limited the range of our uniqueness. Kincaid gives us a much needed break from the caricatures moviemakers have made of young people. We are reminded of our own stirrings of imagination, independence, a voice that we were told could not exist—“You don’t know; you’re just a kid.” And most of us will remember when we changed from loving our parents as gods to finding them fallible humans we think we hate, as Annie does hers. We know from the movies that we are supposed to love perfectly, but we have always felt more deeply that life is not like that.

Even though the voice in the novel is that of a seventeen-year-old looking back on childhood experience, Kincaid does not make the John-boy Walton mistake of analyzing or interpreting her character for us—and perhaps Annie, at seventeen, is not yet far enough away from childhood to do that. And thank goodness; it is this immediacy of the child’s perspective that appeals to us. Annie’s fogginess of youth which we understand has shrouded us all, limited our vision, especially in these adolescent years, even that foggy limitation is allowed honestly to exist. Kincaid doesn’t waste her time, and ours, explaining Annie or the follies of youth to us. And since we are not told how to feel, we, as readers, also are allowed to be.

Annie is young, but she is never innocent (just as we do not look back on our childhoods and think that we were innocent); Annie just lives through different stages, ages of reality. Kincaid gives us a gift in prodding us to acknowledge this wholeness of young self within our own lives, wholeness there since our lives began, wholeness which is the essential self.

The immediacy and credibility as well as the universality of Kincaid’s

novel is felt through her use of exacting detail, detail which is true to her Antiguan setting, and which is rarely predictable or superfluous.

...I had written in my nice new notebook with its black-all-mixed-up-with-white cover and smooth lined pages (so glad was I to get rid of my old notebooks, which had on their covers a picture of a wrinkled-up woman wearing a crown on her head and a neckful and armfuls of diamonds and pearls—their pages so course, as if they were made of cornmeal) (40).

Because the voice is so clear and unadulterated—genuinely Annie’s—the story is powerful, disturbing, unsentimental. Annie grows up and is a product of her environment—her parents, teachers, white and black society. But because she is whole and strong, even in the acting out of her adolescent wickedness, she is never a victim; she is Annie John busy living.

A girl’s growing up seems a simple enough story, and Kincaid does tell it in a brief 148 pages. But the story does not stop; there is no real ending when a character you have lived with steps, at seventeen, onto the boat that will take her away from her childhood. Since the time in each of our lives when we took a similar step, has our journey ever really ended? Kincaid takes us through one brilliant girl’s journey and by doing so allows us a fuller awakening to ourselves.

—Elizabeth A. McNeil
Arizona State University

Jack Kugelmass, ed. *Between Two Worlds: Ethnographic Essays on American Jewry*. Anthropology of Contemporary Issues Series. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988) vii, 327 pp., \$36.50; \$12.95 paper.

This volume contains twelve varied, academically insightful, and often just plain entertaining chapters, along with the editor’s lengthy and instructive introduction. Each chapter includes helpful explanatory footnotes, in-text translation of Hebrew and Yiddish terms, and abundant references to the large body of literature drawn upon by the individual authors. The book should not only be of interest and utility to students specializing in Jewish studies but also to those scholars analyzing the general processes of ethnicity in the United States. For the latter audience, a separate over-all glossary might have enhanced the volume beyond the translations within the text.

The editor provides a nice introduction by laying out the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of Jewish identity. Particularly interesting is his discussion of the centrifugal and centripetal forces affecting ethnicity. The first section of the book (entitled “The Search”) includes