An Interview with Jamaica Kincaid
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Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in 1949 on the island of Antigua. At seventeen she was sent to Westchester, New York, to work as an au pair to help support her family. Later on she studied photography at the New School and attended Franconia College in New Hampshire.

In 1973 she changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid. It was about the same time that her writing caught the attention of William Shawn, editor of The New Yorker. Kincaid later married the editor’s son, Allen Shawn, and they now have two children.

Kincaid has published four books: At the Bottom of the River (a collection of short stories); Annie John (a novel); A Small Place (nonfiction), and Lucy (a novel).

The following interview took place on February 13, 1991, in the lobby of the Wyndham Warwick Hotel in Houston, Texas.

Allan Vorda: Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, while writing about your work, stated that, “Genius has many surprises
and one of them is geography.” In what ways has geography both helped or hindered you as a writer?

Jamaica Kincaid: I can’t say it has hindered me at all, and if it has I don’t know of it. It seems to me that it has been more of a help since I can find nothing negative to say about the fact that I come from the place I’m from. I very much like coming from there. It would be false for me to take pride in it because it’s an accident really. It just seems to be sort of happenstance that I was born in this place and happenstance that I was born with black skin and all the other things I was born with. All that aside, the fact that I was born in this place, my geography has been, I think, a good thing for me. I experience it as just fine. I am not particularly glad of it and I’m not particularly sorry either. The reality of my life is that I was born in this place. I find it only a help.

I can’t say what it would have been like if I had been born a white English woman. Actually, I think I can say. It seems as if it would have been quite wonderful because whenever I was growing up and looked at white English women they seemed to have a life denied me. This isn’t to say if I had been born a white English woman, I wouldn’t have been perfectly miserable. They didn’t seem perfectly miserable; they seemed rather privileged and had all the things I couldn’t have. I think I just made the best of what I had. What I had was my mother, my father, my mother’s family, my father’s family, all of that complication, my history, which, as far as I know, began on boats. I’m part African, part Carib Indian, and part, which is a very small part by now, Scots. All of them came to Antigua by boats. This is how my history begins.

AV: The critic and black studies scholar Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr. has stated about your work that “she never feels the
necessity of claiming the existence of a black world or a female sensibility. She assumes them both. I think it’s a distinct departure that she’s making, and I think that more and more black American writers will assume their world the way that she does. So that we can get beyond the large theme of racism and get to the deeper themes of how black people love and cry and live and die. Which, after all, is what art is all about.”

I agree with Gates’ comment, but is this a conscious attempt by you not to overtly claim you are a black and/or female writer? Also, do you mind that you are still stereotyped as a black female Caribbean writer?

JK: No, I thought what Skip said was very revealing to me because I did not know that I had been doing that. I come from a place where most of the people are black. Every important person in my life was a black person, or a person who was mostly black, or very deeply related to what we call a black person. So I just assume that is the norm and that it is the other people who would need describing. I assume most of the people who are important to me, and not last among them is my own self, are female. When I write about these people it would never occur to me to describe their race or their sex except as an aesthetic. I wouldn’t say, “She has two eyes.” I assume everyone has two eyes and the only reason I would mention the eyes is if it were a superficial decision. It’s not conscious at all that I leave out a people’s race. Race is important, but the thing I know deeply is that when you say someone is white or black it is a shorthand way of describing positions of power. In actual life “white” is powerful and “black” is powerless. I never say people are white. I never say people are black. I describe them. When you get to know people, you don’t describe someone as, “My wife that white woman.” Or
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that man we just met [Jamaica is referring to a strange fellow who interrupted the taping of the interview for half an hour to pontificate on his unusual views of the world], would you say, "He is a white man"? No. What you would say is that he's a very intrusive person and that he was somewhat crazy, except we were sort of interested in his lunacy. So you look at him and immediately identify him as someone who is intrusive. Then from there you pick up on certain characteristics, but the least thing about him is that he's white.

To answer the second part of your question about being stereotyped, I think for the people who want to do it that it must be a very convenient way, but it really belittles the effort being made. When I sit at my typewriter, I'm not a woman, I'm not from the Caribbean, I'm not black. I'm just this sort of unhappy person struggling to make something, struggling to be free. Yet the freedom isn't a political one or a public one: it's a personal one. It's a struggle I realize will go on until the day I die.

I'm living rather an ideal life. I think I want to live a long life in which I attempt to be free. Perhaps we all want that. It's a paradox because the freedom only comes when you can no longer think, which is in death. You don't want to die, but you want to be free and that's the outcome of the freedom. Perhaps I should say this is only a very personal view. In the meantime you struggle to make sense of the external from the things that have made you what you are and the things that you have been told are you: my history of colonialism, my history of slavery, and imagining if that hadn't happened what I would have been. Perhaps I would have been an unhappy woman in pre-European Africa. Who knows what I
would have become. That’s what I struggle to understand about myself.

It’s not connected to the shell you see sitting at the typewriter. It’s connected to the inner thing. Whatever I may say about being black, Caribbean, or female when I’m sitting down at the typewriter, I am not that. So I think it’s sort of limited and stupid to call anyone by these names. The truth is, would you say John Keats is a white man who was a poet from nineteenth-century England? No, we just say he is John Keats. You think of these people in terms of their lives and so that’s what I’m saying. When you think of me, think of my life. My life is not a quota or an action to affirm an idea of equality. My life is my life. If it helps people to get to something I’ve written, I’m glad, but, on the whole, I wish these terms would go away. Is my work any good? That is what I wish to know.

**AV:** Why was your childhood, which often serves as a basis for your stories, filled with sadness and anger? Most readers would expect to find growing up on a Caribbean island to be happy and carefree.

**JK:** I can say to most readers, try living on a Caribbean paradise and see if they find it happy and carefree. The thing I’ve learned is that all of life in every stage is hard to live. How much more interesting it would have been for the world, not to mention less painful, if the Europeans in the fifteenth century had decided that the trouble with the part of the world they were in should be worked out within their borders. Life is hard whether you live on a Caribbean island or somewhere else. **No one living in these places you might think of as a paradise thinks it is paradise. They all want to leave.** Even if someone could live the life of a tourist, no tourist goes to these places and wants to spend the rest of his or her life there. It was
hard to grow up in a place like that in particular because it doesn’t have the comforts you think a place like that has. A person living in a place like that finds the sun hard to take. They find the nice days after a while hard to take. After a while it becomes a prison. Life is just extremely hard. I don’t know of one person who lived in the West Indies as a child who thinks, “Oh, I always wish to remain a child in this wonderful atmosphere.”

AV: There is a reference in the magazine W that you dearly loved the St. John’s library in Antigua which closed in 1974 because of an earthquake. You stated, “Antigua used to be a place of standards. There was a sort of decency that it just doesn’t have anymore. I think the tragedy of Antigua for me, when I began to see it again, was the loss of the library.” Would you comment on the microcosm of this incident and does it apply to other countries as well?

JK: I hate to speak for other countries that have been and are in the situation Antigua is in, which is a former colony that is now independent. The sad fact is that they are all in the same boat. It’s very hard to admit this, but they were all better off under colonial rule than they are now. This isn’t to say that I want colonial rule back. I’m very glad to get rid of it. I’m only sad to observe that the main lesson we seem to have learned from colonial rule is all the corruption of it and none of the good things of it. We seem to have learned none of the good things about Europe. I don’t say Western Civilization because I think this is the new term that implies white people of the world. So I’m not going to say that. What I’m going to say is that we learned none of the good things from Europeans, such as their love of education or their documenting the historical past—even if they lie about it, which they often do. Another
great thing about the Europeans was their understanding of a community, even if they violated it sometimes—no, they violated it all the time! They understood the idea of a community even as they limited it only to people who looked exactly like them. So that the French are excluded from the English idea of community and the Welsh are excluded and Scots are excluded and so on and so forth. Yet there are some great things Europeans had when they were among us, when they were ruling us, and one of them was education. The library in Antigua was a colonial institution and had Antigua still been a colony when we had that earthquake, then the library would have been rebuilt and perhaps made better. So things like that are sad to admit, but we learned only the bad aspects. We have kept and refined all the bad aspects of the colonial power.

In Zimbabwe they have on their books laws that were put in place by the whites to oppress the blacks. The blacks, when they got power, kept those laws on the books and now use them against each other. In all of these places they practice oppressive political ideas. There is always a ruling power that behaves like the colonial power. They treat the citizens in the worst colonial way, but the only difference is that the countries are independent. We have no one to rebel against. There isn’t any dividing line. It’s like people in your own family doing these terrible things. They look like you. They’re not white. They’re not from far away. Yet they are behaving in the same way the colonial powers did.

So I come from one kind of corruption, the moral corruption of Europe, and now I find myself in a new kind of corruption. My background is that I am a product of corruption.

AV: There is a litany of items in “Girl” from a mother to her daughter about what to do and what not to do regarding the
elements of being “a nice young lady.” Is this the way it was for you and other girls in Antigua?

JK: In a word, yes.

AV: Was that good or bad?

JK: I don’t think it’s the way I would tell my daughter, but as a mother I would tell her what I think would be best for her to be like. This mother in “Girl” was really just giving the girl an idea about the things she would need to be a self-possessed woman in the world.

AV: But you didn’t take your mother’s advice?

JK: No, because I had other ideas on how to be a self-possessed woman in the world. I didn’t know that at the time. I only remember these things. What the mother in the story sees as aids to living in the world, the girl might see as extraordinary oppression, which is one of the things I came to see.

AV: Almost like she’s Mother England.

JK: I was just going to say that. I’ve come to see that I’ve worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I’m from, which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful. The mother shows her how to be in the world, but at the back of her mind she thinks she never will get it. She’s deeply skeptical that this child could ever grow up to be a self-possessed woman and in the end she reveals her skepticism; yet even within the skepticism is, of course, dismissal and scorn. So it’s not unlike the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror.
AV: What is the connection in the story "In the Night" between the jablesse and her night-soil father with the woman she wants to marry? Is the woman a jablesse?

JK: No. That story is really a portrait of night in Antigua. I don’t remember it as being a story about a particular person. It’s a portrait of a character within twenty-four hours.

AV: Why does the narrator skip from one sex to another in such stories as "In the Night" ("Now I am a girl, but one day I will marry a woman"), "At Last" ("Sometimes I appeared as a man"), and "Wingless" ("I myself have humped girls under my mother’s house")?

JK: In a way I can’t answer that because I wouldn’t want to explain it very much. I think when I was writing those stories I really wanted to disregard certain boundaries, certain conventions. These were stories written in my youth. (I think of the time before I had children as my youth.) These are stories in which I had endless amounts of time to consider all sorts of things and endless amounts of silence and space and distance. I could play with forms and identities and do things then that I can’t do now, because I don’t have the time to plumb that kind of depth. They were attempts to discard conventions—my own conventions, and conventions that exist within writing. I still try to forget everything that I’ve read and just written. That was what that was about and it really doesn’t bear close interpretation from me. The reader would have to do that.

AV: Your prose style often depicts ordinary events. Are you trying to show that the most ordinary events can become extraordinary?

JK: Oh, yes! I think there is no such thing as an ordinary event. I believe everything is of the deepest significance. If
you could isolate an event, it would lead to profound things. For example, if you would trace the ancestry of everybody who has crossed this room, you wouldn’t be able to do anything else.

AV: There are a number of scenes in your stories that incorporate a type of magic realism. Are these phantasmagoric scenes derived from other writers of magic realism, such as Borges or Marquez and even possibly Lewis Carroll?

JK: If it went back to anyone it would be Lewis Carroll. Borges is the kind of writer when I read I’m just absolutely in heaven. I wouldn’t say the same thing is true of Marquez. I like reading Marquez, but I don’t feel it’s the most wonderful thing, like when I read Borges. The truth is I come from a place that’s very unreal. It’s the reason for its political malaise, because it will not just look at the thing in front of it and act on it. The place I come from goes off in fantasy all the time so that every event is continually a spectacle and something you mull over, but not with any intention of changing it. It is just an entertainment. It’s just some terrific thing you told yourself that happened today. I wouldn’t say that I was influenced by these other writers you mentioned, because for me, it’s only an accident. It’s really the place I grew up in. I’m not really a very imaginative writer, but the reality of my background is fantastic.

AV: You were born in 1949 as Elaine Potter Richardson, but in 1973 you adopted the pseudonym Jamaica Kincaid. Was the name given you by George Trow? How was it chosen? You said that changing your name was a way of disguising yourself so that you wouldn’t have to be “the same person who had all these weights.”
JK: By the time I met George Trow, I had already changed my name. I wasn’t that young. It’s really more of the second question. I wanted to write. No one I knew had ever written. I thought serious writing was something people no longer did. By the time I discovered it was still being done, I didn’t know how I could do it as the person who left home. I thought, and I think I would have been correct, I would have been judged pretentious. I would have been judged as someone stepping out of the things that had been established for her. I would have been laughed at. I didn’t want anyone who knew me to know I was writing. I thought quite possibly my writing would be bad. The choosing of the name is something that is so private—because it also involves a lot of foolishness—that I can’t even begin to tell you. It would involve remembering worlds of things that I remember quite well, but I’m no longer sure how to interpret what I was doing. I remember what I was doing, but I don’t quite understand why I was doing it. So I’d rather not quite figure that out.

AV: If you don’t want to answer the question directly, that’s fine, but why Jamaica instead of Antigua?

JK: You see, you’re trying to give it a logic that it did not have at the time. I was playing around with identities. When you’re young you don’t know how old you’ll get to be and you feel every moment is the moment. In my case, there were many possibilities and that is the one I settled on. I had no idea anyone would one day be asking me how it all came to be or I would have made better sense of it at the time. I wanted to write and I didn’t know how. I thought if I changed my name and I wrote and it was very bad, then no one would know. I fully expected it to be bad, by the way, and to never be published, or heard from again. So I thought they’d never get
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to laugh at it because they wouldn’t know it was me. So I changed my name. It was done one of those nights when you’re sitting up late with friends who were trying out identities. If you saw photographs of me then, you would see how easy it was to do that. It was around this time I had started to write. When I started to get published, no one ever called me Elaine. I’d always been unhappy with my name. You can almost say I became a writer just so I could change my name.

AV: Too English?

JK: No, the name Elaine always seemed stupid. (I hope there are not many Elaines out there.) At the time I changed it, I didn’t know there were African names, although I don’t think I could have done that because by this time I have as much connection to Africa as you do. The connection I have to Africa is the color of my skin and that doesn’t seem enough to have changed it to an African name. My new name unconsciously had the significance I wanted it to have since that is the area of the world I’m from. Jamaica is an English corruption of what Columbus called Xaymaca. Kincaid just seemed to go together with Jamaica, but there were many combinations of names that could have been chosen one night when my friends and I were sitting around.

AV: You also said that changing your name was a way of disguising yourself so that you wouldn’t have to be “the same person who had all these weights.”

JK: I could never lose the Elaine Potter Richardson identity, but I wanted to say things about the people in Antigua. This was a way to talk about things without people knowing it was me. I wanted to be able to be free of certain things. I wanted to speak truthfully about what I knew about myself without
being myself. I suppose I had no idea it would have significance for anyone else.

AV: You left Antigua in 1966 when you were seventeen and moved to Westchester, New York. Why did you move and was the decision yours alone?

JK: No. I left because of economic reasons. We thought I'd be able to help my family by going away to work and perhaps get an education. I come from a very poor family who worked very hard. At the time my father was getting older and couldn't work as much as he used to. Actually, my education was cut short because I was supposed to go and help my family. I didn't go on to study at university. I got to a certain level at school and was taken out so that I could come to America to work and help my family.

AV: So you didn't want to go to New York?

JK: No. I would have preferred to stay in school and gone on to university. I was so depressed about what was happening to me. I wasn't going to be a university-educated woman. Those type of women come back to Antigua and become schoolteachers and they are very impressive, very important people to the community. I wasn't going to be like that. Instead, I was just going to be this supporter of my family and I was so miserable. Everyone said I was really very bright. So I didn't want to go and I was very depressed, but it wasn't really my decision.

My decision would have been to be one of these very respected women who come back from the university and just sort of push everyone around. They are very well thought of. I wanted to be one of those. There is a certain kind of West Indian woman who's got great authority. All of them go to the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and become teachers.
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or librarians. These are wonderful people who could run the world in a snap.

AV: It’s lucky you didn’t become a librarian, because you wouldn’t have a job in Antigua.

JK: You’re right, I wouldn’t have a job. I probably would have gone to Canada. That’s another thing that happens. All of these educated people in the West Indies can’t find work there, so they go to Canada and the United States. In Trinidad every Saturday there are people from American hospitals recruiting nurses. So Trinidad and places like that are robbed of their best nurses because the nurses get paid better here. In my case, I ended up going to Westchester because that was where I was going to be a nursemaid and go to school.

AV: *Annie John* appears to be an autobiographical novel. You have said that “lying is the beginning of fiction.” Do you think fiction works best when reality is mixed with fiction?

JK: Well, I certainly can’t make a fast rule about it and say that about everything. It seems to be that those things are true for me so far and I don’t know what I’ll do in the future. How I’ve written, so far, is to exploit my personal experiences. I have no idea of writing as an objective exercise. I only write about myself and about the people connected to me or the people I’m connected to.

For instance, I could not write a marvelous novel about someone living in Houston, Texas. I would not know how. I can only write about the things I know. I happen to be that sort of writer. The process of fiction is the most successful way to do what I do.

The part about “lying is the beginning of fiction” was true when I was a little girl. I used to be accused of having a strong imagination and that was why I was a liar. I lied all the time.
It was a way, I thought, of protecting my privacy. They tried to beat the truth out of me, sometimes literally, by giving me a spanking—no, a beating! (There is great cruelty to children in the West Indies.) I was always mistrusted. The other thing I was accused of was that I had a good memory. I never forgot anything that happened. I would hear people telling something that happened and they would leave out, in my opinion, the crucial parts. Every part was crucial. If someone left something out, then I would tell what happened and they’d look at me in amazement. So my memory was considered an act of treachery and I was asked not to have such a good memory. Essentially, I would be told that I should just forget certain things that happened. It was considered one of my greatest faults, but I’d remember everything and then I would invent things. For instance, if something happened, such as a little smoke coming out of a building and the fire truck came, then I would say, “Oh, it was the biggest fire you ever saw and hundreds of fire trucks had to come.” I was incapable of just describing something as it really happened. I would remember that it had happened and I might exaggerate the details, but other people would forget it happened. So that is essentially what my fiction is. It really happened, but the details became exaggerated.

**AV:** Antigua appears to be paradise on the outside, but there is evil which you metaphorically depict with the basket of green figs on the head of Annie’s mother which has a snake hidden within. Do you view this evil from a biblical or Conradian perspective or something else altogether?

**JK:** It would be biblical, although these things are very unconscious or subconscious. I did not know how much until very recently, when I began to read my writing out loud and
eventually collected the images of my writing. I began to realize how my writing and my use of images are based on my own understanding of the world as good and evil, as influenced by two books in the Bible, Genesis and Revelation. If that's all any writer has been influenced by, it would be enough. My understanding of the world is influenced very much by those two books, which were my favorite books to read in the Bible. I used to read the Bible as a child just for fun. I really loved reading it, especially Revelation, which I could not get enough of. I used to make myself afraid just by reading it. I took it literally. It was very real to me. So I'm very influenced by the first book of the Old Testament and the last book of the New Testament. Everything in between is just sort of picturesque, but the beginning and the ending are the real thing. I did not know how much of an influence those biblical images had on my writing and understanding of the world until very recently.

It also turns out that there are recurring images of Lucifer, whom I apparently identify with, from Paradise Lost which I did not know, I did not know. I did not know how much I was rooting for the devil.

AV: Would you also apply Lucifer's comment from Paradise Lost that it's "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" to Antigua's colonial situation?

JK: Yes. It is better to reign and to have self-possession in Hell than to be a servant in Heaven. You know how people would say, "Better red than dead"? I'm someone who would never say that. I always say, "It's better to be dead than to live like this. It's better to risk dying than to live as a slave." Always I say that.
AV: Is Annie John’s love for Gwen supposed to be a substitution for her mother’s lost love? Or are these tendencies simply homosexual in nature?

JK: No, they weren’t meant to be. I think I am always surprised that people interpreted it so literally. The relationship between Gwen and Annie is really a practicing relationship. It’s about how things work. It’s like learning to walk. Always there is the sense that they would go on to lead heterosexual lives. Whatever happened between them, homosexuality would not be a serious thing because it is just practicing. The stories in *At the Bottom of the River* about the relationships between women are not meant, at least in my mind, to be homosexual. They were meant not to observe the convention of men and women because I was trying to do away with certain conventions. I don’t know if it comes up any place else, but Americans rather like to have things very much defined or to have things very much to be what they say they are. The question of sexuality in these stories is not meant to be dwelt on because that is not the main thrust—so to speak—of them.

AV: There is a scene in *Annie John* where the narrator looks at a window and sees her reflection yet doesn’t recognize herself because she “had got so strange.” Do you see yourself, both as a person and as a writer, still changing, or have the changes become less noticeable with age?

JK: By nature I’m the sort of person who is never the same. Sometimes it’s disturbing to me because I find myself in a moment I like very much and wish I could stay that way, but I don’t. I change very much. I’m still changing, but I don’t always like it because it is not always convenient.

AV: Annie John’s request to make a new trunk indicates she wants to start her own life, while the recovery from her
illness as the long rain stops indicates she has grown from adolescence to womanhood. Is this metaphorically and symbolically correct?

JK: I think it is, but again at the time I was writing it, I wasn’t conscious of these things as you point them out to me. If I were an objective reader, I’d be able to see it. I was writing these stories and I was far less conscious of things than I am now. The sickness in the long rain actually happened when I was seven years old with whooping cough, and I would get delirious. It’s actually to that moment that I trace my fear of rodents. I was lying in my bed when I looked up and around edges of the ceiling that had this boarded mantle I thought I saw hundreds of rats running in a circle. I thought there were hundreds of them, but I think there was only one. I was powerless to do anything. I put that incident into the teenage life of the girl and made it a period of transition. I exaggerated the details.

AV: In A Small Place you criticize tourists who go to Antigua to “escape the reality of their lives,” which implies tourists are an unthinking lot of mediocrity, and that tourists and their ancestors have profited from using Antigua. Isn’t this a generalization that is unfair and discriminatory?

JK: Not at all. If you think it’s unfair and discriminatory, try it the other way around. Imagine that your existence depended on people who are very different looking than you and whose differences seem to give them privileges that you can not even imagine. Just imagine the situation in reverse. For example, in Vienna they depend mostly on tourism. You and the Viennese look alike so that alienation just isn’t there, but even if you’re a tourist among people who look like you, they resent it. I can tell you there are differences in going to Vienna
and going to Antigua. If you don’t go to Vienna for fun, you can also go to experience all of the cultural benefits and gain a deeper understanding of the Western world. If you go to a place like Antigua, it’s to have a rubbish-like experience. You want to forget who you are for the moment. You’re not interested in these people. You’re not interested in their culture except in some sort of anthropological way that offers you psychic relief. They have nothing of value you want to bring home. It’s an escape, a moment to forget who you really are. If you think there isn’t anything wrong with it, then try living it, and you’ll see how quickly you want to shoot every tourist you ever met. It’s deeply wrong.

AV: The Antigua you grew up in no longer exists, but it is the one you love. Yet you wrote a scathing diatribe against the English for trying to make Antigua English. Now the English are gone and you hate Antigua even more. Why?

JK: The question isn’t whether the current system doesn’t work so let’s bring back the old system. The English were wrong when they were there and it is wrong today. I think, dare I pat myself on the back, that it’s very good that I’m able to admit that we’ve made a mess of things. I don’t wish the British to come back. I wish the British to stay in Britain. I wish everyone would stay where they come from because when we go to other places, you eventually exploit. Antigua is in terrible shape and it should be changed into something better. It’s not a question of degrees of morality, but simply just morality. Just because Antiguans behave like fools doesn’t mean that we should have other people—the British—who are also fools ruling over us.

AV: You make the analogy that Antiguans who graduate from the Hotel Training School become nothing better than
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contemporary slaves who wait on tourists. Isn’t this extending the metaphor a bit too far? After all, aren’t they free to choose to work for a hotel as well as the right to earn income?

JK: Antigua used to have a Teachers’ Training College of which we were all proud, but it seems it was a peculiar choice to change a teachers’ college to a school for graduating hotel employees. First of all, have you ever heard of anything more ridiculous? I don’t believe the Italians or the French go to training schools to be waiters. If you have to go to a training school, then there must be something desperately wrong. We’re not talking about a scientist or a brain surgeon. We are talking about putting a pineapple on a table. If you need to go to school to learn how to do this, then what are we really talking about?

I can’t see there is a sense of freedom because that seems to be the wrong word. It implies you are free to be a hotel waiter or to starve. I know how to set a table. I did that in Brownie Scout meetings. These are things everyone knows how to do. If you don’t know how to bend and kiss behinds, do you mean you are going to school for that?

I don’t mean to take lightly the institution of slavery, but it seems to me the mentality of these small islands is very much related to slavery. These island rulers are pretentious since they pretend their little islands are nations. Back home they talk about the nation of Antigua, but it’s only a stupid little island. If they’d only do something ordinary and logical, such as educating their citizens, that would be fine, but you don’t want them to pretend to be something they are not. The fact is, they don’t even do the things that a small village in the U.S. would try to do.
AV: You live in America, you are married to an American, and you are published by an American publisher; yet you continue to use British spellings (e.g., colour). Why?

JK: I’ve lived in America longer than I’ve lived in Antigua. I lived in Antigua sixteen years and I’m now forty-two. From the time I was seventeen to now, it has been twenty-five years I’ve lived in America. When I talk about going home, my husband says, “What home are you talking about?” I think of Antigua as my home. I’m not an American citizen. I have no intention of becoming an American citizen. I don’t become an American because I don’t think America needs another writer. Antigua needs a writer more than it needs an American citizen. My children are American and they can say the Pledge of Allegiance just like my husband can, but they don’t have to say it because they’re Americans. No American has to say it.

AV: What has been the response in Antigua regarding your book A Small Place? I can’t imagine you’re looked upon very favorably by the government and perhaps they wouldn’t want you to return.

JK: I think about that all the time. I imagine that I’d be shot. I haven’t been back since the book was published. I wanted to go this year, but I didn’t want to be separated from my children. I booked a flight the day the war in Iraq started, yet I didn’t know how it would turn out and I decided not to go. Now I don’t have the time. God knows if they would shoot me, but it’s a criminal place. I wouldn’t be surprised if they had henchmen who would do it because politics in the West Indies is very tribal. People take their colors very seriously. They divide themselves into people who wear red and people who wear blue. My mother is a blue. I’m nothing. When I was growing up we were reds. Then my mother joined the party...
that had broken away from the reds, and they are blue. She takes it so seriously. For example, I bought her a red T-shirt and she said, "No, I could never wear that." Even though she was visiting me in the United States, she brought her loyalties with her. This makes you think there isn't any hope for people in Antigua who think like this.

**AV:** Lucy appears to be a character similar to Annie John except she is a few years older. Did you consider keeping the name Annie John for this character?

**JK:** I don't consider it a continuation because I would never write a continuation. It's a continuation only in the sense that it's about my life and it's the same life I'm writing about, but they weren't meant to be the same person at all. In any case, a key to Lucy is the name Lucifer, so she couldn't be called Annie at all. It's a very shallow, though understandable, connection to make, because the reader isn't me, in my mind observing what I'm doing. I'm not interested in making the thing whole. I'm interested in parts of things. When Annie left her mother, that was it. We're not going to hear from Annie again. We're not going to hear from Lucy again. You might very well hear about a woman's life in the metropolitan area of the world, whether it's London, New York, Toronto or wherever.

You might very well hear about how this life turned out, but to say it's a continuation of Lucy would be a mistake. Very, very crucial to understanding Lucy is her name. I think most people in America have such a different background than I do that people in America, especially in universities, are so obsessed with race that they miss the crucial things about Lucy. The great influences on that young woman's life are Genesis and Revelation and, strangely enough, *Jane Eyre*. I think all sorts of things escape American readers.
I suppose my writing is as mysterious to an American reader as someone like Zora Neale Hurston is to me. She’s a woman who wrote in the twenties, part of the Harlem Renaissance, who had a very brilliant career and then died a maid in poverty. It’s one of those stories which either you think is an American story or you think it is a racial story. Lucy is a very moralistic person and she’s very judgmental. Her view of the world is very much shaped by a nineteenth-century view, filtered through the mist of colony and mother country.

**AV:** When Lucy tells her dream to Lewis and Mariah, it is an uncomfortable scene because the couple looks at the dream from a Freudian and sexual viewpoint, whereas Lucy views the dream as having accepted them into her life. Did you have a scene like this happen to you in real life?

**JK:** Well, that I will not say. The scene really explains itself because the people had become real to her. If you show up in someone’s dream, it means they are finally real to you. It’s a cultural gap. I tried to show what Lucy did not understand. She can only report. Of course, I understand at that point, Lucy cannot interpret. Lucy doesn’t know who Dr. Freud is and it’s said with a certain simplicity. I think it’s the sort of thing I wouldn’t have been able to write five years ago. I wouldn’t have been able to separate the knowledge I have of Freud from the knowledge I did not have.

**AV:** There is the contrast of the island girl Sylvie who has the teeth-bite mark on her cheek and Mariah who “looked blessed, no blemish or mark of any kind on her cheek or anywhere else.” Lucy does not identify with pleasant smelling Mariah, but prefers to have a powerful odor. Why is Lucy, as well as Annie John, so iconoclastic? She seems to rebel
against most things that are good, yet she seems to have no reason to act this way.

JK: I think it’s that “better reign in Hell, serve in Heaven” problem again. A person like Sylvie seems more self-possessed to Lucy. Even in her embryonic consciousness-raising, she knows that it’s better to feel self-possessed, that it’s better to be Sylvie rather than Mariah, spiritually speaking. There’s something sad about Mariah and ultimately defeated. She’s the victim among the conquerors, whereas Sylvie is the victor among the defeated.

Later on, Lucy develops sympathy and grows to love Mariah. Lucy is the sort of person who, no matter what happens to her, would never identify with the victors. Lucy is naive, but she is not stupid.

Mariah is a lovely person. She didn’t think the world would turn on her. What undoes Mariah is trusting in human nature, but this is not possible for Lucy who trusts and mistrusts at once. It’s not the sort of thing Mariah would understand because she thinks love is all. Lucy thinks love is fine, but she doesn’t look upon love as an absolute reality.

AV: Mariah shows Lucy the daffodils in the garden, but Lucy wants to kill the flowers. Why do your characters have such negative thoughts and such conflicting feelings?

JK: Let me answer that in a roundabout sort of way. My husband and I went to Paris last September on a boat. We sailed on the QE II and after we arrived at Southampton, we spent a couple of days in London. Every time I go to England I almost have a nervous breakdown. I have such conflicting feelings of England. I love it and I hate it. It’s not possible for me to be a tourist. I realize I’m a visitor, but when I go to England what happens is that I also confront my past.
AV: Lucy identifies with the French painter Gauguin, who found his homeland to be a prison and wanted something different. Essentially, Lucy and Gauguin are much alike even though Gauguin escaped to the islands while Lucy left the islands. Do you feel much in common with Gauguin, whose painting *Poèmes Barbares* was used for the cover of *Lucy*?

JK: I hesitate to say I identify with this man. I must say as I was writing parts of *Lucy* I was reading one of his journals called *The Intimate Journals of Paul Gauguin*. I found it a great comfort. He was very selfish and very determined, yet there are two things that struck me in that book.

His account of his friendship with van Gogh is the most hilarious yet cruel thing I’ve ever read. I never have laughed so much. He describes van Gogh cutting off his ear and you are just aghast because it’s all very astonishing.

The second thing was when he asked Strindberg to write an introduction to one of his shows. Strindberg wrote back a very long letter saying he could not do it because he disliked Gauguin’s work. So Gauguin used the letter as the introduction even though the letter stated what was bad about his paintings. Gauguin wasn’t afraid to use someone’s negative view of his work. He wore it as a badge. I rather admire that.

So I think the criticism I most value comes from people who do not like my writing. There’s almost nothing to make you feel more superior, as the people who don’t like you.

AV: The narrators or main characters of your fiction seem to have a cursory or dispassionate regard for sex. What was your viewpoint of sex as a young woman and how has it changed as you’ve grown older?

JK: Good heavens, I don’t think I could answer the first part of the question, although I must say Lucy rather enjoys it.
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What Lucy doesn’t want is to be possessed again. She has just escaped a certain possession from her mother and she doesn’t want to be possessed again. I think at the end of the book she wishes she could be possessed and loved but she can’t at this point in her life. I suppose what she is saying is she wishes time would pass quickly to allow herself to be consumed.

AV: Your writing style in Lucy is somewhat unusual in that you often start a passage, but before it has fully developed you digress to a previous experience. For example, there is the party at Paul’s where Peggy disapproves of Paul, but then you digress to the story of Myrna and Mr. Thomas on the island.

JK: It’s not anything deliberate, but last night after my reading someone said they really admired the way I had done that scene. It sort of leads you to explain how something was written, but I’ve come to understand there is no such thing in writing as a technique. Quite often you invent what you’re doing while you’re doing it, and it would be quite wrong to apply your style to all writing. I was not aware of any special thing when I did that. I did that in Lucy and that was it, but I have no intention of using it again. If it were to turn up again, it would be because I felt that was what was needed.

AV: With each book your characters have gained both insight and maturity with age, culminating with the ability to possibly love. Will your next book of fiction continue to develop along these lines or do you plan to take off in a different direction?

JK: I really cannot say. For me, writing is a revelation. If I knew what it would be, then it would be of no interest for me to do it. When I sit down to write I will reveal to myself what I already know. I already know all of this. I know how it works, but I haven’t quite said it yet. The minute that I’m
conscious of it then it’s of no interest. When I sit down to write it, it will become conscious to me. I will know it and then I will move on. So I don’t know what will happen. I don’t know how it will work.

**AV:** What are your thoughts about interviews? Do interviews help you to better understand yourself and your writing?

**JK:** I forget interviews once they are done. The two or three times I’ve been interviewed, I have read what I’ve said when I edit it, but I’m shocked that I’ve said these things. I find that some of my responses sound very intelligent or they may sound very stupid. I can’t believe it’s me. So I just simply forget it. I never listen to myself on the radio. I’ve been on television once, but I would never watch myself!

Doing this interview is like having a conversation, but later I will just forget it. It’s of no help and it’s of no hindrance.

**AV:** In the past twenty years, your life has changed dramatically. Do you have a different perspective of the world now than you had back then when you were an *au pair*?

**JK:** Yes, and it’s not good. No, it’s worse than I thought. The world is not a better place than when I was a servant. It’s true if I had gone to England I would have remained a servant and it was only by sheer chance that I came to America. I’m really glad I did come to America, which is a place that has allowed me to denounce it. I think it’s to America’s credit that it can spawn someone like me. I like living in America because it gives me the language and the idea to rearrange the world in what I’d think would be a just equation. I think by now I’m supposed to be a Republican. I’m supposed to be someone who says, “Yes, the system works.” But actually I’m someone
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who says, "I'm not sure that it works." I suppose if my perspective has changed it would be that I'm now a politically conscious person. To America's credit I've become, at least verbally, a politically conscious person. I suspect that if I wasn't writing, being the person I am who has become politically conscious, then I would be throwing bombs. If I didn't have the pen, I would certainly be someone who would take up the sword.