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# The Writer's Presence

## *A Pool of Readings*

EIGHTH EDITION

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# Jamaica Kincaid

## GIRL

JAMAICA KINCAID was born in Antigua in 1949 and came to the United States at the age of seventeen to work for a New York family as a nannies. Her novel *Lucy* (1990) is an imaginative account of her experience of coming into adulthood in a foreign country and continues the narrative of her personal history begun in the novel *Annie John* (1985).

Her other books include a collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983); a collection of essays, *A Small Place* (1988); *My Brother* (1997), which was a National Book Award Finalist for nonfiction; *My Favorite*

*Plant: Writers and Gardeners on the Plants They Love* (1998); *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005), and *See Now Then* (2013). Her writing also appears in national magazines, especially the *New Yorker*, where she worked as a staff writer until 1995. "Girl" is the first piece of fiction Kincaid published; it appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1979.

For more information on Jamaica Kincaid, see page 169.

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WASH THE WHITE CLOTHES on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk bareheaded in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little clothes right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna<sup>1</sup> in Sunday School?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing henna in Sunday School; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street—flies will follow you; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday School*; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for

<sup>1</sup> *benna*: Popular calypso-like music.—EDS.

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LL: | Listen to an audio version of "Girl," read by the author.  
e-Readings > Jamaica Kincaid, *Girl* [audio]

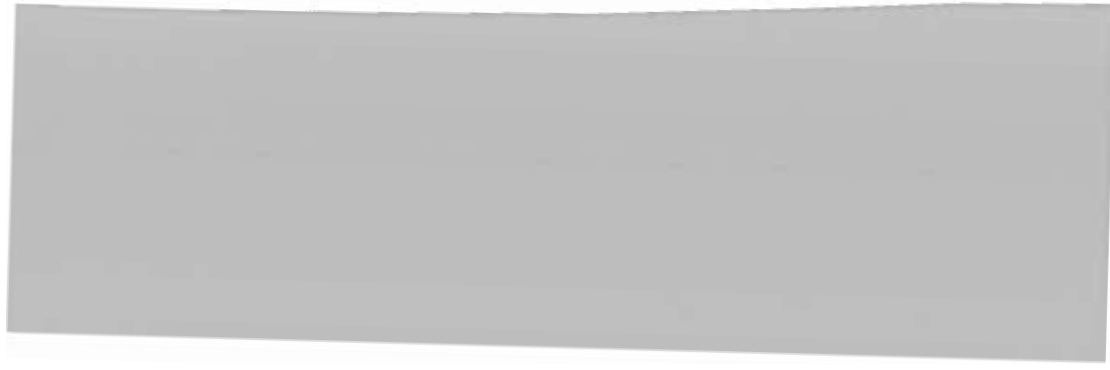
the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra-far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen,<sup>2</sup> make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard: this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles-you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers-you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona;<sup>3</sup> this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; *but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

**The Reader's Presence: Using the writing process, answer the highlighted parts of each question. Do not forget the Works Cited page.**

1. Whose voice dominates this story? To whom is the monologue addressed? What effect(s) does the speaker seek to have on the listener? Where does the speaker appear to have acquired her values? Categorize the kinds of advice you find in the story. Identify sentences in which one category of advice merges into another. How are the different kinds of advice alike, and to what extent are they contradictory?
2. The girl speaks only two lines, both of which are italicized. In each case, what prompts her to speak? What is the result? Stories generally create the expectation that at least one main character will undergo a change. What differences, if any, do you notice?

<sup>2</sup> *dasheen*: A starchy vegetable. -EDS.

<sup>3</sup> *doulcona*: Cornmeal. -Eris.



between the girl's first and second lines of dialogue (and the replies she elicits), differences that might suggest that such a change has taken place? If you do notice any differences, in whom do you notice them? Analyze the girl's character based not only on what she says but on what she hears (if one can assume that this monologue was not delivered all none sitting, but is rather the distillation of years' worth of advice, as heard by the girl).

- 3. CONNECTIONS: Consider the role of gender in this story. What gender stereotypes does the main speaker perpetuate? Look not only at the stereotypes that affect women but also at those that define the roles of men. What can you infer about the males who remain behind the scenes? Read Amy Cunningham's "Why Women Smile" (page 369). What gender stereotypes influence whether-and when-women smile? To what extent do gender roles and cultural expectations determine the patterns-and consequences-of when men and women smile?

### The Writer at Work



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tell her what I think would be best for her to be like. This mother h "Girl" was really just giving the girl an idea about the things she would need to be a self-possessed woman h 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.