

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

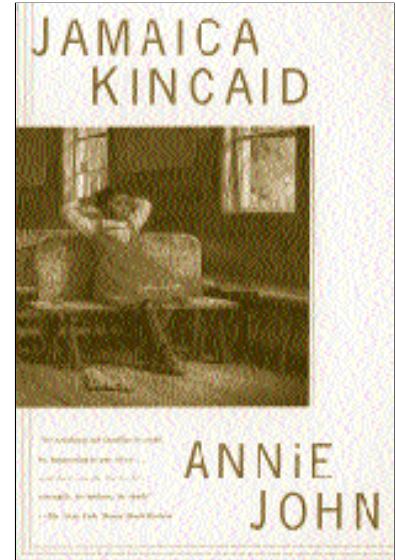
TEACHER'S GUIDE

# Annie John

by Jamaica Kincaid

“So touching and familiar it could be happening to any of us . . . and that’s exactly the book’s strength, its wisdom, its truth.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*



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## TO THE TEACHER

*Annie John* is a haunting and provocative story of a young girl growing up on the island of Antigua. A classic coming-of-age story in the tradition of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Jamaica Kincaid’s novel focuses on a universal, tragic, and often comic theme: the loss of childhood. Annie’s voice—urgent, demanding to be heard—is one that will not soon be forgotten by young readers.

An adored only child, Annie has until recently lived an idyllic life. She is inseparable from her beautiful mother, a powerful presence, who is the very center of the little girl’s existence. Loved and cherished, Annie grows and thrives within her mother’s benign shadow. Looking back on her childhood, she reflects, “It was in such a paradise that I lived” (p.25). When she turns twelve, however, Annie’s life changes, in ways that are often mysterious to her. She begins to question the cultural assumptions of her island world; at school she instinctively rebels against authority; and most frighteningly, her mother, seeing Annie as a “young lady,” ceases to be the source of unconditional adoration and takes on the new and unfamiliar guise of adversary. At the end of her school years, Annie decides to leave Antigua

and her family, but not without a measure of sorrow, especially for the mother she once knew and never ceases to mourn. “For I could not be sure,” she reflects, “whether for the rest of my life I would be able to tell when it was really my mother and when it was really her shadow standing between me and the rest of the world” (p.107).

## PREPARING TO READ

The questions, discussion topics, assignments, and suggested reading list that follow will enrich your students’ understanding of the many rich themes of Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*. They are also designed to help place the novel within its historical context and within a literary tradition of coming-of-age novels. Encourage your students to read other accounts of growing up and leaving home. What do Kincaid’s book, her heroine, and her point of view have in common with those of other such novels? In what way is her account unique? Encourage your students to write about their own experiences: their parents, their schools, their friends, the culture they live in, and that culture’s tacit assumptions. In what way does growing up in 1950s and 1960s Antigua resemble their own experiences? In what way is it markedly different?

## UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

### FIGURES IN THE DISTANCE

1. Why is this chapter named “Figures in the Distance”? Does this title have more than one meaning?
2. Why were Annie and her friends afraid of the dead? Is such a fear common to people all over the world? Why?
3. Why does Annie begin to look at her mother’s hands differently after Nalda’s death?
4. If Annie loves Sonia, why does she feel compelled to make her suffer?
5. Why does Annie think it is shameful for Sonia that her mother has died and left her alone in the world?
6. Why does Annie begin to go to funerals? Why is she so eager to attend the funeral of the humpbacked girl?

## THE CIRCLING HAND

1. What is an obeah woman? What services does she perform for Annie's mother?
2. "How important I felt to be with my mother," Annie says proudly (p.15). From this chapter, what impression do you get of Annie's mother? What sort of person does she seem to be?
3. Annie says that her father had loved other women and had children with them before he married her mother. Why are these women hostile toward Annie's mother but not her father, who left them? Why does he pass them in the street without acknowledging them?
4. Why did Annie's mother leave Dominica to come to Antigua?
5. Why does Annie's mother save so many souvenirs from her daughter's childhood? What message does this give Annie about her own importance?
6. Why does Annie feel sorry for her father?
7. "It was in such a paradise that I lived" (p.25). What specific aspects of Annie's childhood make her world a paradise?
8. Why is Annie so devastated when her mother decides she should have her own clothes? Do you think that she overreacted or that her reaction was natural?
9. Do you think that Annie's mother really changes as much as Annie says, or might the difference be in Annie's own changing mind, body, and viewpoint?
10. What does Annie discover when she runs home with her certificate from Sunday school? What does this experience mean to her?
11. When Annie sees her parents in bed together, why does she focus on her mother's hand?
12. Why is Annie deliberately rude to her mother later that same afternoon? Why does she pull her hand away from her father's when they go out walking?

## GWEN

1. How would you describe Annie's new school? What kind of girl are those who run this school trying to produce?

2. How does Annie view the headmistress, Miss Moore? Does she see her as typically English, and if so, what does she mean by that?
3. What do you think Annie and her mother think of the English?
4. Why does Annie like, and want to please, Miss Nelson?
5. Annie presents herself as a powerful figure within the school community. Do you think she is really as influential as she claims, or is this merely schoolgirl egotism?
6. Why was Annie's childhood experience on Rat Island so traumatic? Why does it still haunt her years later? When Annie's mother comforts her by saying she will never leave her, is she really telling the truth? How does the story relate to Annie's adolescent relationship with her mother?
7. What does the dream that Annie relates (p.44) have to do with her real-life experiences?
8. "I didn't exactly tell a lie about the last part," (p.45) Annie reflects. In what way was she untruthful and why?
9. Annie says that she and Gwen "fell in love" (p.46). How pervasive are the sexual overtones between the girls? Is their relationship typical or atypical of other adolescent friendships between girls? Do you think this kind of relationship is more likely to develop in an all-girls school?
10. Why doesn't Annie tell Gwen about her changed relations with her mother?
11. When Annie is given responsibility for overseeing the class, how does she behave? Is she fair or unfair? Why?
12. How does Annie's mother treat her when Annie comes home on the day she has menstruated for the first time? Why does Annie choose this moment to observe that she no longer loves her mother?

### **THE RED GIRL**

1. Why does Annie steal things? Do you think she has any sense of guilt about her actions?

2. Why is the Red Girl so attractive to Annie? Is it because her mother would disapprove of the friendship? How does the Red Girl's life differ from Annie's?
3. "And now I started a new series of betrayals of people and things I would have sworn only minutes before to die for," (p.59) Annie says. What betrayals does she commit?
4. Why does Annie become enthusiastic about marbles?
5. Annie now sees each of her chores as a "small rehearsal for that faraway day, thank God, when I would be the mistress of my own house" (p.61). How has her attitude changed since the beginning of the book?
6. Annie enjoys the combination of pinches and kisses she exchanges with the Red Girl. How is this relationship different from the friendships she has with other girls, even Gwen?
7. Why does the altercation with her mother over the marbles become so important to Annie? Why does Annie's mother tell her the story of the snake in the load of figs? What is Annie's reaction to this story?
8. Annie fantasizes about living on an island with the Red Girl and causing passing ships to crash. "How we laughed as their cries of joy turned to cries of sorrow" (p.71). Where does this cruelty come from? Do you think that such cruelty is characteristic of Annie? Explain your answer.

### **COLUMBUS IN CHAINS**

1. The prize Annie wins in school is a book called *Roman Britain*. What does this tell you about the sort of education the girls are getting?
2. Why is Annie so hostile toward Hilarene? Is it just because she is a "good girl"?
3. The minister's daughter, Ruth, "had such a lot to be ashamed of, and by being with us every day she was always being reminded. We could look everybody in the eye, for our ancestors had done nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenseless" (p.76). Do you think that Ruth really has something to be ashamed of? Is the other girls' treatment of her fair?
4. "I was sure that if the tables had been turned we would have acted differently" (p.76). Do you believe that? Why does Annie make this claim?

5. Why does Annie dislike Columbus and enjoy the picture of him in chains? Why does she write on the picture?
6. How does Annie deal with teachers and those in authority? Would you call her hypocritical? Manipulative? Do many young people behave this way?
7. What is the subject of *Paradise Lost*? How does it relate to Annie's own life, and why is it appropriate that she copy out that particular text?

### **SOMEWHERE, BELGIUM**

1. Referring to her mother, Annie says, "Suddenly I had never loved anyone so or hated anyone so" (p.88). Which emotion predominates for Annie, love or hate?
2. "My mother would kill me if she got the chance. I would kill my mother if I had the courage" (p.89). Is that statement literally true? Explain.
3. Why does Annie dream of living in Belgium? What does that unknown country signify to her? In what ways does it differ from Antigua?
4. Why is Annie so appalled when Gwen says, "It would be so nice if you married Rowan" (p.93)? Why does she begin avoiding Gwen after this?
5. Why is Annie struck by the painting entitled *The Young Lucifer*? What does she have in common with Lucifer? How does Lucifer's expulsion from Paradise resemble her perception of her own life?
6. What is Annie's reaction on seeing Mineu again after so many years? How does he respond to her?
7. Why did Annie not call for help when Mineu accidentally hanged himself?
8. After Annie says, "like mother like daughter" (p.102), her mother seems "tired and old and broken," and Annie feels "happy and sad at the same time." Why does she have such mixed feelings?
9. "For I could not be sure whether for the rest of my life I would be able to tell when it was really my mother and when it was really her shadow standing between me and the rest of the world" (p.107). What does Annie mean by this?

## THE LONG RAIN

1. What sort of illness do you think Annie is undergoing? Is it physical, psychological, or both?
2. When Annie sits on her father's lap, "A funny feeling went through me that I liked and was frightened of at the same time, and I shuddered" (p.113). What does this feeling mean?
3. Annie remembers her meetings with the Brownies. What is the Union Jack (p.115)? Why must the children consider England "our country"?
4. Do you find it contradictory or normal that Annie's mother believes in both Dr. Stephens's and Ma Jolie's methods? Explain.
5. Why do you think that Annie hallucinates about the family photographs? Why does she feel compelled to wash them? What is significant about the parts of the wedding and confirmation pictures that she erases?
6. What does Ma Chess mean when she says, "Not like Johnnie. Not like Johnnie at all" (p.124)? Why did Ma Chess never speak to her husband again after Johnnie died?
7. In what ways has Annie changed when she recovers from her illness? Would you say that she is a "grown-up" now?

## A WALK TO THE JETTY

1. Why is Annie so eager to leave Antigua?
2. "When I look at things in a certain way, I suppose I should say that the two of them made me with their own hands" (pp.132–33). What does Annie mean by this?
3. "The bitter thing about it is that they are just the same and it is I who have changed. . . . Why . . . didn't I see the hypocrite in my mother when, over the years, she said that she loved me and could hardly live without me?" (p.133). Is Annie's mother really a hypocrite?
4. Why does Annie find the thought of marriage "absurd" (p.136)?
5. What are Annie's feelings for Gwen now? Pity? Disdain?

6. Are all of Annie's feelings toward her parents hostile ones? What does it mean when she finds herself "gripping their hands tightly" (p.146)?

1. The story *Annie John* tells is related entirely from Annie's point of view. The narrative is obviously not objective. Do you think it is truthful? Or do you think that it distorts events? If so, what is the author's purpose in distorting them?
2. It has been said that, as an author, Jamaica Kincaid makes no concessions to convention or sentimentality. What might be meant by that comment, and how does it apply to *Annie John*? Do you respond to the tone she establishes and see it as honest, or do you find her tone excessively harsh and unforgiving? Defend your answer.
3. How is the parent-child struggle—the struggle between power and lack of power—extended to other conflicts within the novel? Can you discern the theme of power and its abuses in the novel's presentation of the colonial subjugation of the island of Antigua, of the ruling British versus the subject Antiguan? If so, provide examples.
4. *Annie John*, like many narratives of adolescence, is a story about a young person finding her own identity, separate from that of her parents. At what point in the story does Annie realize that she has a separate identity from that of her mother? How does she assert it? Why is this assertion so painful to her?
5. Annie lies to her parents and becomes an accomplished thief, stealing books from the library and money from her mother. What is your reaction to these acts? Do they change your feelings about Annie? Do you admire her for her honesty in telling about this, or do you find the moral climate she establishes offensive?
6. How would you describe Annie's school and the kind of education she receives? Do you find the imposition of a British curriculum on Caribbean children absurd or in any way admirable? What kind of outlook on the world, and on their place in it, does it give these children?
7. As Kincaid tells the story, she relates it as an expulsion from Paradise. What was the original expulsion from Paradise? Who was expelled and why? What do the references to Lucifer and *Paradise Lost* indicate to you?



8. After school, Annie and her friends sit on the tombstones “of long-dead people who had been the masters of our ancestors” (p.50). What other references does the book give to Antigua’s history of slavery? Does the history of her people and her island explain anything about Annie’s character that might otherwise seem strange to you?
9. Annie says, “I could see how Ruth felt from looking at her face. Her ancestors had been the masters, while ours had been the slaves. She had such a lot to be ashamed of, and by being with us every day she was always being reminded. We could look everybody in the eye, for our ancestors had done nothing wrong except just sit somewhere, defenseless” (p.76). Annie reflects, “If the tables had been turned we would have acted differently.” Do you believe that Ruth should feel responsible for what her ancestors did, or that the other girls should feel virtuous? Do you think that Kincaid herself believes what she has Annie say? Consider the manner in which both slavery and colonialism are depicted in this novel.
10. Annie’s three-month illness changes her deeply; she seems a different person after her recovery. In what ways has she changed, physically and emotionally?
11. By the end of the book, Annie has rejected every aspect of her home and childhood: “As I was lying there my heart could have burst open with joy at the thought of never having to see any of it again” (p.132). Is this sort of rejection an inevitable part of the process of growing up? Or is Annie’s hostility and rejection unusually extreme? If so, why?
12. Though Annie is more or less a grown-up by the end of the book, does she ever fully accept that fact? Does she see herself as independent and adult, or does she still think of herself as a child?
13. Jamaica Kincaid has said that her leaving Antigua “was a means of personal liberation” (*NOW*, 10/12/89). Why do you think Kincaid was only able to find liberation by leaving home? Is Annie the same in this way? Can you think of any other literary characters who, like Annie, make this move almost from necessity?
14. To what extent are Annie’s experiences and emotions universal, and to what extent are they individual products of her own personality, family, and environment? Do you feel that you have a lot in common with her? What aspects of her life resemble your own?

1. Jamaica Kincaid has stated that “everything in my writing is autobiographical—down to the punctuation” (*Publishers Weekly*, 1/1/96). Research Jamaica Kincaid’s life. Which of Annie’s experiences were also Kincaid’s, and which did Kincaid invent? Kincaid considers even her inventions to be autobiographical. What does that imply? Some years after *Annie John*, Jamaica Kincaid wrote a book called *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996). Read this book. Why does Kincaid call it an autobiography? Might it also be called biography or fiction?
2. Read either *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce. Like *Annie John*, both of these works are coming-of-age novels in which the authors draw very heavily on their own lives and experiences. Write an essay that compares how each uses autobiographical elements. Why and how is it possible for the author to stray from the actual details of his or her life and still tell the truth about the life itself?
3. Jamaica Kincaid has said repeatedly that when she was growing up her favorite book was Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*—a novel she read again and again, and one which had great meaning for her own life. Read *Jane Eyre*. Which elements of Jane’s character might have been important for Kincaid (or for Annie)? Compare the two characters, Jane and Annie. Compare the ways that Brontë and Kincaid chose to bring their heroines to life.
4. The mother-daughter relationship described in *Annie John* can be seen as a paradigm of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. In what ways is the mother powerful and the daughter powerless? What sorts of power does the daughter discover in herself during the course of the story? Bring to school an example of another book—novel, biography, or autobiography—that describes the power struggle between a parent and child. Tell the class about the book, and describe the changing parent-child relationship it portrays.
5. Antigua was a British dependency until 1967, when it became a self-governing associated state of Great Britain. In 1981, it became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth. Research the history of the later British Empire. How did their status as subject peoples affect the lives, characters, and emotions of the inhabitants of places like Antigua, India, Kenya, or Nigeria?

6. In her book *A Small Place* (1988), Jamaica Kincaid wrote about the state of her native island of Antigua, its political corruption and degradation by tourism. Read *A Small Place* and compare the contemporary Antigua she writes about with the Antigua of the 1950s and 1960s described in *Annie John*. What has changed, and have the changes been for better or worse? Do you agree with Kincaid's pessimistic, angry vision?
7. Write a three-page essay on Annie's future experiences as you imagine them. How do you think she will respond to nursing school, to living in a foreign environment, and to being away from everything she knows? Will she miss her mother? Will she come to love and forgive her? When, if ever, will she return to Antigua?
8. Write a story in which you assume the voice of Annie's mother. Speaking as the mother, describe Annie's growing up and the changes that took place in your relationship. Describe the mother's feelings as honestly as you can.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamaica Kincaid is the author of several highly praised works of fiction, among them *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *Lucy*, and *At the Bottom of the River*, and the non-fiction books *A Very Small Place* and *My Brother*. She lives in Vermont with her family.

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#### OTHER RESOURCES

##### **FURTHER READING**

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*; Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*; Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*; Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street* and *The Middle Passage*; Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*; Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*; J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*; Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican*; Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*; Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

##### **ALSO BY JAMAICA KINCAID**

*At the Bottom of the River* (1983), *A Small Place* (1988), *Lucy* (1990), *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), *My Brother* (1997), *My Favorite Plant* (1998), *My Garden (Book)* (1999).

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**I CAPTURE THE CASTLE**, Dodie Smith\*  
**I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN**, Joanne Greenberg\*  
**THE ILIAD**, trans., Robert Fitzgerald\*  
**THE INFERNO OF DANTE**, trans., Robert Pinsky  
**LIE**, Caroline Bock\*  
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**STONEWALL'S GOLD**, Robert J. Mrazek\*  
**THIS I BELIEVE**, Allison & Gediman, editors  
**UPSTATE**, Kalisha Buckhanon\*  
**WE JUST WANT TO LIVE HERE**, Rifa'i & Ainbinder\*  
**WIT**, Margaret Edson\*  
**A YELLOW RAFT IN BLUE WATER**, Michael Dorris

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