

***A Small Place* in Wisconsin: A Guide for Reading Groups**

**Great World Texts Program
Center for the Humanities**



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Teaching *A Small Place* in Wisconsin

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A *Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid Discussion Guide

Historical Context

Antigua is an island in the West Indies. The island has an area of roughly 108 square miles — for comparison, Milwaukee has an area of roughly 96 square miles. Christopher Columbus named the island Antigua upon his arrival in 1493 but the island was not settled by Europeans until the arrival of Thomas Warner in 1632. The European colonization of Antigua marked a turning point in the island's history. Sugar became the island's primary export and thousands of slaves were transported to Antigua to keep up with rising demand for labor.

Great Britain formally emancipated slaves in the colonies in 1834, but sugar cane remained the dominant economic force until the rise of tourism in the mid-20th century. In 1981, Antigua achieved independence from Britain and combined with Barbuda, a neighboring island, to form the nation of Antigua and Barbuda. Although it fully gained independence in 1981, Antigua and Barbuda remains a British commonwealth nation, meaning Queen Elizabeth II is the official head of state. Currently, the dominant economy in Antigua and Barbuda is tourism, which accounts for over half of the country's GDP. The majority of tourists who visit Antigua are from the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.

Kincaid's Background

Jamaica Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson in St. John's, Antigua in 1949. *A Small Place* was published in 1988. At the age of 17, she left Antigua to work as an au pair in Scarsdale, New York. She has not resided in the Caribbean for a significant portion of time since. From 1979 to 2002, Kincaid was married to Allen Shawn, a musician and the son of William Shawn, an editor at *The New Yorker*.

Kincaid became a staff writer and columnist for *The New Yorker*, and published her first collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, in 1983. Her first novel, *Annie John*, was published in 1985. Much of Kincaid's work has a distinctly autobiographical tint — her books are often centered around the legacy of British colonialism, racism, imperialism, mother-daughter relationships, and class. Kincaid is currently a Professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. She lives in North Bennington, Vermont during summers.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Kincaid's novel is a work of postcolonial literature that strives to present a different image of the Caribbean than those typically seen in mainstream media. What image of the Caribbean came to mind for you when reading *A Small Place*? How does this differ from your image of the Caribbean prior to reading the book?
- 2) Why do you think *A Small Place* has so resonated with readers, decades after its publication? Why do you think it has been chosen as the "Great World Text" for Wisconsin high schools in 2018?
- 3) Discuss the different canons that the novel can exist in. Why does it make a difference if we call this "Caribbean," or a "postcolonial" novel? How else could we describe it? Does the

novel defy being definitively placed in one canon? What do we gain/lose in our reading of the text by “placing” it in these different ways?

- 4) How did you feel initially reading *A Small Place*? If you have ever been a tourist in the sorts of places Kincaid describes, did you feel attacked? Angered? Defensive? Did learning more about the context of the book and the history of colonialism in Antigua change your reaction? Why or why not?
- 5) What do you think the significance of reading *A Small Place* in Wisconsin is? How does your personal geographical location affect the way you read the book?
- 6) How would you characterize the genre of *A Small Place*? Is it a memoir, a travel narrative, an essay or all three? Why do you think Kincaid divides the book up into four short vignettes and so often employ the second voice?

Potential Passages for Discussion

- This passage comes on page 26, when Kincaid is describing the various businesses on High Street.

In the middle of High Street was the Barclays Bank. The Barclay brothers, who started Barclays Bank, were slave-traders. That is how they made their money. When the English outlawed the slave trade, the Barclay brothers went into banking. It made them even richer... Do you ever wonder why some people blow things up? I can imagine that if my life had taken a certain turn, there would be the Barclays Bank, and there I would be, both of us in ashes. Do you ever try to understand why people like me cannot get over the past, cannot forgive and cannot forget? There is the Barclays Bank. The Barclay brothers are dead. The human beings they traded, the human beings who to them were only commodities, are dead.

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?
 - Why is it significant that Kincaid fixates on a bank in this passage? What might a bank represent or symbolize?
 - How would you describe the tone of this passage?
 - Why does Kincaid ask “do you ever wonder why some people blow things up?”
 - Why might she include such a long, run-on sentence at the end of this first paragraph?
- This passage comes on page 42 and 43, when Kincaid is discussing the old library that was damaged in 1974.

Why is the old building that was damaged in the famous earthquake years ago, the building that has the legend on it THIS BUILDING WAS DAMAGED IN THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1974. REPAIRS ARE PENDING, not repaired and the library put back in the place where it used to be? Or why, years after The Earthquake damaged the old library building, has a new library not been built? Why is the library above a dry-goods store in an old run-down cement-brick building?...If you

saw the old library, situated as it was, in a big, old wooden building painted a shade of yellow that is beautiful to people like me, with its veranda, its big, always open windows, its row and rows of shelves filled with books, its beautiful wooden tables and chairs for sitting and reading, if you could hear the sound of its quietness (for the quiet in this library was a sound in itself), the smell of the sea (which was a stone's throw away), the heat of the sun (no building could protect us from that), the beauty of us sitting there like communicants at an altar, taking in, again and again, the fairy tale of how we met you, your right to do the things you did, how beautiful you were, are, and always will be; if you could see all of that in just one glimpse, you would see why my heart would break at the dung heap that now passes for a library in Antigua.

- What are your gut reactions to this passage?
- What literary devices stand out to you in this passage?
 - Hint: If you are having trouble locating devices, you might ask what the library symbolizes or you might draw your attention to the line “sitting there like communicants at an altar.” What device is this?
- What is the effect of these literary devices? Why does Kincaid describe the old library at such length? Why do you think the library remains damaged after all this time?
- While describing the old library, Kincaid evokes many traditional descriptions of tropical islands — the sun, the ocean, the balmy weather, the beauty. Yet the effect of these descriptions seems markedly different from more one-dimensional representations of island life which merely present the Caribbean as an island paradise. Why do you think the effect is different in Kincaid’s passage?