

Story of the Week:

Girl, Jamaica Kincaid (1978)

“The greatest gift we owe to art,” says George Eliot, “is the expansion of our sympathies.” The world – and perhaps especially Britain and America this week, as we confront our painful histories of racist oppression – could use such an expansion of sympathies. In that spirit, I will share with you one very brief work, by a great Black author, which has helped me broaden my horizons.

This is Jamaica Kincaid’s famous short short story, *Girl*, published in *The New Yorker* in 1978. Kincaid, born Elaine Potter Richardson, grew up in Antigua when it was still a British colony. This story consists of one long sentence, in which each clause is either an instruction about how to be a good woman in Antiguan society (don’t sing benna [Antiguan call-and-response music] in Sunday school”) or an italicised reaction to the instructions (“*but I don’t sing benna at all, and never on Sundays*”). From the detailed, personal nature of the instructions, we get the sense that this is an older woman advising a younger woman on how to behave.

What I find particularly compelling about the story is the rich complexity of tones which Kincaid manages to pack into such a small space. Mundane aspects of domestic life – “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” – jostle with jarring discussions of the painful assumptions women face, both from men and from older women like the speaker: “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.” “How to make medicine for a cold” is followed immediately by “how to make medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child.” The most agonising decisions blend seamlessly with the most ordinary ones, as they often do in real life: during a great shock or tragedy, someone still has to clean the clothes and cook the meals, and often that person is a woman.

But a woman’s life as represented by Kincaid’s story isn’t – quite – one long round of oppression and self-restraint. There are, near the end, glimmers of humour and hope: “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”. A woman, even in a society where she is expected to cook, clean, and constantly worry about being labelled a “slut,” need not “feel too bad” about giving up on a man she does not love. Despite the constant injunctions to maintain delicacy and dignity, a woman can “spit up in the air” if she feels like it. These are the small, closely-guarded corners of freedom in a woman’s life.

Girl will not take you very long to read, but you may find yourself – as I have done – thinking about it for years. It is a window on a set of experiences which are foreign to most of us: closely tied to a place we may never get to visit, set in a time which has passed away. Yet it also invites us to think about how our common troubles and joys persist even in the most disparate of circumstances. How familiar to us all is the struggle to be the right kind of woman – or the right kind of man; to live up to the world’s expectations; to jealously protect those tiny pleasures in our lives which serve no greater purpose than spitting up in the air. The sense of what we share as human beings is perhaps best seen in those works of literature that seem at first to belong to a different world from our own. It is this tension between difference and sameness, between distinct individuality and common humanity, which literature can teach us.

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