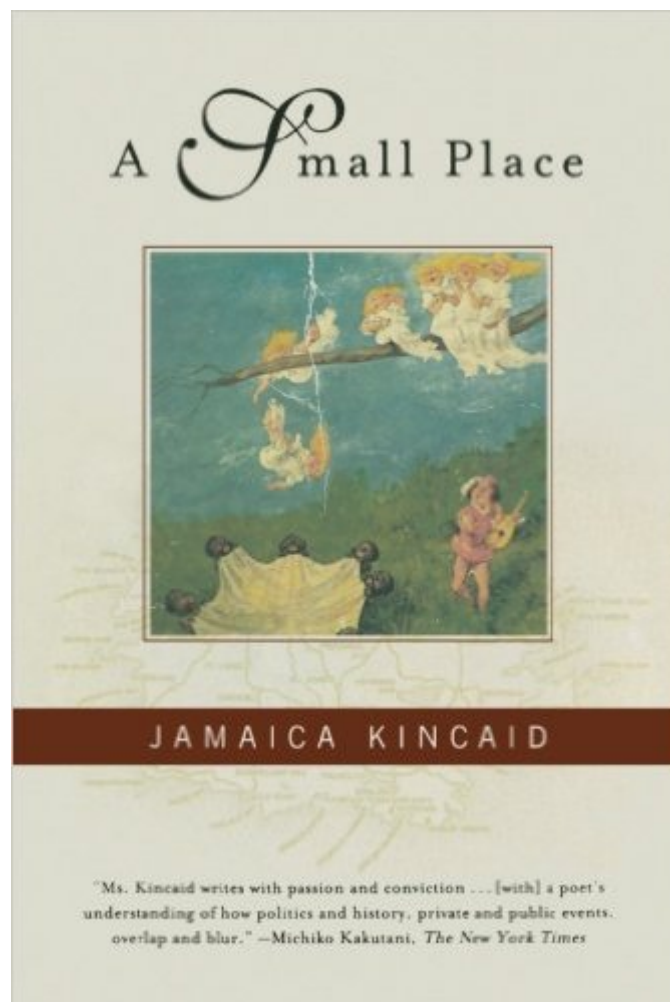


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A Small Place



Synopsis

A brilliant look at colonialism and its effects in Antigua--by the author of *Annie John*"If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see. If you come by aeroplane, you will land at the V. C. Bird International Airport. Vere Cornwall (V. C.) Bird is the Prime Minister of Antigua. You may be the sort of tourist who would wonder why a Prime Minister would want an airport named after him--why not a school, why not a hospital, why not some great public monument. You are a tourist and you have not yet seen . . ."So begins Jamaica Kincaid's expansive essay, which shows us what we have not yet seen of the ten-by-twelve-mile island in the British West Indies where she grew up. Lyrical, sardonic, and forthright by turns, in a Swiftian mode, *A Small Place* cannot help but amplify our vision of one small place and all that it signifies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A Small Place," by Jamaica Kincaid, is a nonfiction prose piece about the Caribbean island of Antigua. The author bio at the beginning of the book notes that the author was born on Antigua. A lean 81 pages, this is nonetheless a powerful text. Kincaid discusses British colonialism, the corruption of the Antiguan government, racism, and greed. It seems to me a key question raised by the book is whether post-colonial Antigua is worse than colonial Antigua. The book is very much haunted by the spectre of New World slavery. This book is a dark, angry jeremiad. I think it works better when seen as an extended prose poem rather than as an essay. As the latter, it could be criticized as full of invalid generalizations and undocumented claims. But as a poetic/prophetic text, it is chillingly effective. Ultimately, Kincaid's vision of the human condition is extremely negative. But

her haunting, almost hypnotic prose really held me. I recommend the book to anyone planning a trip to a poor country for their own pleasure.

Published in 1988 Kincaid's "A Small Place" is an unflinchingly angry portrayal of post-colonial, post-slavery life on the island of Antigua. To put it simply: Kincaid is as mad as hell, and she's not going to take it anymore. If you're white and can shelve your defensiveness for a moment this book is actually really enjoyable, it's written in first person and directed at "you," the British colonizer and/or the fat white tourist. Kincaid's sense of humor is wonderfully dark, and there are a lot of moments of humor if you keep an open mind. Still, at the heart of the matter is the story of Antigua's decay, left to rot by the British colonizers, with a population that doesn't vote openly corrupt officials out of office. She openly points out the irony of the celebration of emancipation alongside the valorization of the Hotel Training School, which teaches the residents of the island to be servants. In the end Kincaid concludes that no one is to blame, that after slavery the masters are no longer evil and the slaves are no longer "noble," but that everyone is merely human. She problematizes the matter, but offers no solutions, which might irritate those concrete sequentials among us. Also, she refers to Columbus, and the explorers in general, so adored in American culture, as "human rubbish" on multiple occasions. You might not agree with Kincaid, but this is one topic someone should be angry about, and her unapologetic narrative is about as honest as you can get.

A Small Place is Kincaid's short memoir/essay on the island nation of Antigua. It is divided into three parts, and the work reflects Kincaid's anger and bitterness about political and economic conditions there. Part one is a rant directed against tourists. Kincaid uses second person, "you," as if lambasting the reader directly in this part of the book. She vilifies tourists and accuses them of harming the economy of the island. She goes into detail about how the people of the island scorn and despise tourists. In the remaining sections, she severely criticizes the Antiguan government and reflects on her childhood on the island. In both of these sections, she is hyper-critical and vitriolic. The book reflects Kincaid's attitude, which is not a good one. While there is undoubtedly some truth in what she says, her in-your-face anger spoils her message. Other Antiguans have responded to her criticisms, saying they are unfair (one woman on the island wrote a book called *A Small Place Writes Back* to challenge Kincaid's assessments). Others have noted Kincaid lives comfortably in the United States and has done nothing to remedy the situations she thinks are so deplorable in her place of origin. The book, I would say, is interesting but not pleasant to read.

I recently attended a Q and A session with Jamaica Kincaid, and one of the attendees asked how she reacted to the criticism that many of her works come off as too angry and cynical. She replied with a simple answer: What some call anger I call truth. What a great answer, and I started to question the role anger deserves in expressing and exposing deep injustice. This book is certainly an interesting and biting appraisal of the wounds colonialism inflicted on her homeland, Antigua, both past and present. Every word weighs in on how blacks in Antigua have systemically been robbed of their humanity, and in some instances, even turned against themselves as a consequence of post colonial politics and economics. She moves from the ignorance of white tourists who currently visit her country via an interesting third person account, to a consideration of the wider breadth of white ignorance and hate since the landing of Columbus in 1493. She names no one, but the finger is pointing so sharply that the many characters she describes in her account surely would have felt guilty if they read her words. Be prepared for a depressing, yet necessary read. Its only 80 pages, so after a few hours you can move on to something a bit lighter. But for all its perceived negative qualities, I believe the anger and depravity imposed on her people deserves the sword of her tongue. As someone who was able to escape, educate herself, and wield a position of stature, Jamaica reserved every right to strike back at those who were still abusing power. A stunningly powerful expression of the human condition, and one that should be read to further understand the extent of how whites used and suppressed blacks for malicious gain, and the consequences thereafter.

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