Daryl Cumber Dance

In Search of Annie Drew: Jamaica Kincaid's Mother and Muse. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2016. xi + 246 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.50)

Daryl Cumber Dance's *In Search of Annie Drew* revisits the life of Annie Drew, the mother of Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid, offering readers a comprehensive portrait of an enigmatic mother who has famously haunted her daughter's body of work. This critical endeavor is unique in its ambition to reconstruct *actual* facts about the largely unknown life of a woman through a daughter's mainly *fictional* work. In the introduction, Dance suggests following the footsteps of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), an essay that gives voice to (black) characters who, though ignored, are the answer to "the figure in the carpet." As she shows with great brilliance, Kincaid's resentment toward her mother fuels her monumentally fierce and brutally honest writing. Kincaid holds on to her anger like a badge of honor, and Dance is able to provide valuable clues as to its source. Her reading of Kincaid's *My Brother* (1998) is a particularly welcome component of the book as it walks readers through a memoir known for its emotional intricacies. If one recalls, *My Brother* depicts Kincaid's complex feelings about her younger brother dying of AIDS, but more importantly, it offers a conflicted portrait of a sacrificial mother devoted to—yet despised by—her children.

There is no doubt that the mother figure is the key to Kincaid's *roman à clef* literary production, but what makes her writing particularly enticing is the very fact that her emotions and thoughts are brutally unedited. In other words, there is no need, and no means, to clarify or pass judgment—as Dance at times seems to do—on what makes a daughter hate a seemingly devoted mother. Dance's stand comes across very much like that of a person who knows about a friend's grievances concerning her parent, but, with a tinge of reproach tells this friend after meeting the parent, "your mother [or father] seems so nice." As the book progresses, more of Dance's personal feelings in favor of Annie and against Kincaid come to the surface; this becomes apparent when she says about Kincaid's mouthy young daughter, "I recall thinking that this little outspoken tot was her grandmother's revenge" (p. 186). Dance does not claim to be an impartial biographer. On the contrary, she admits to be "a shameless Kincaid devotee [with] an intensely emotional response to Kincaid's work" (p. 9). She also boasts that she understands her conflicts with her own mother better than Kincaid does with hers. This upper hand makes the biographer feel equipped to "help Kincaid achieve the victory that she never experienced in her battle with her mother" (p. 10). Dance qualifies her book as "biography" (p. 8), but of a sort that also incorporates fiction, personal impressions, and therapy.

Dance's premise requires a leap of faith, as it not only asks readers to accept Kincaid's fiction as the main biographical source, but also ambitiously promises to resolve the unresolvable: the archetypal yet so personal and complex relationship to the mother. Readers willing to take the leap will delve into Kincaid's magnetic world of raw emotions through Dance's acute eye, which makes for a gripping reading experience. At the end of the book, Dance mentions Kincaid's bewilderment at the interest people have shown in her life, quoting her: "What do they think I am? A famous person? What is it about me that makes people want to know?" (p. 201). *In Search of Annie Drew* raises the possibility that the figure in the carpet in Kincaid's work may not be the mother but rather Kincaid's reader, a relentless and obsessive intruder. The most enthralling aspect of Dance's book is not the (unreliable) biography about Kincaid's mother, but rather the indirect portrait of Dance as an emotional reader who became obsessed with Kincaid, the inhospitable writer.

Dance explains that Kincaid was at first supportive of her project. But near its completion, Kincaid felt that Dance was taking possession of something that was, in fact, "hers" (p. 10), and she ceased to collaborate. Indeed, as the biography progresses, one gets the sense that Dance usurps Kincaid's resentment. Her acerbic tongue vilifies Kincaid for being too famous and high class to stay at her mother's house in Antigua, for ignoring what Kezia Page (writing in *Small Axe*, October 2006) calls the "Western Union culture" of the Caribbean, for speaking about Blacks in a disparaging way, or for acting like the tourists that she criticized in *A Small Place* (1988). Kincaid's anger slowly crawls into the biographer's skin and transforms Dance into the perfect Kincaid reader.

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