



The Autobiography of My Mother

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The narrative in seven episodes recapitulates and foretells, in starkly poetic language, the events in Xuela Richardson Bailey's life. The fragmentary photograph of a Caribbean woman that introduces each section is completed in the seventh section.

The central fact of the narrator's life is the death of her mother when Xuela was born, its recital a repeated incantation. Her maternal grandmother was abandoned at birth by an unknown woman. Xuela's father, of Scottish and African ancestry, gave his daughter—along with his dirty clothes—to be cared for by the woman who did his laundry.

From this unpromising beginning, the narrator creates a life for herself in a world from which she expects nothing. A highly sensual woman, she nevertheless withholds herself emotionally from those who might have loved her, refusing to compromise her fierce personal independence. Aborting the children she conceives, she refuses motherhood. Her power comes from herself: "I could sense from the beginning of my life that I would know things when I needed to know them."

Kincaid, who was born in Antigua and came to the United States in 1969, works strongly against the tradition of black women writers who portray women bonding with each other against the racist, patriarchal oppressor. The women in this narrative distrust or hate each other. The politics of power fascinates Kincaid. In her reading of Caribbean history, there are the victors and the vanquished—all failed human beings. The strength of the black woman comes not from her Carib-African heritage, nor from those whom she loves. She lives in the existential present, creating herself, refusing to mourn her fate or regret her past.

Sources for Further Study

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