Allan Vorda

Interview on “Girl,” with Jamaica Kincaid

AV: There is a litany of items in “Girl” from a mother to her daughter about what to do and what not to do regarding the elements of being “a nice young lady.” Is this the way it was for you and other girls in Antigua?

JK: In a word, yes.

AV: Was that good or bad?

JK: I don’t think it’s the way I would tell my daughter, but as a mother I would tell her what I think would be best for her to be like. The mother in “Girl” was really just giving the girl an idea about the things she would need to be a self-possessed woman in the world.

AV: But you didn’t take your mother’s advice?

JK: No, because I had other ideas on how to be a self-possessed woman in the world. I didn’t know that at the time. I only remember these things. What the mother in the story sees as aids to living in the world, the girl might see as extraordinary oppression, which is one of the things I came to see.

AV: Almost like she’s Mother England.

JK: I was just going to say that. I’ve come to see that I’ve worked through the relationship of the mother and the girl to a relationship between Europe and the place that I’m from, which is to say, a relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The girl is powerless and the mother is powerful. The mother shows her how to be in the world, but at the back of her mind she thinks she never will get it. She’s deeply skeptical that this child could ever grow up to be a self-possessed woman and in the end she reveals her skepticism; yet even within the skepticism is, of course, dismissal and scorn. So it’s not unlike the relationship between the conquered and the conqueror.

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