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My Brother by Jamaica Kincaid (Book Review)

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BOOKS

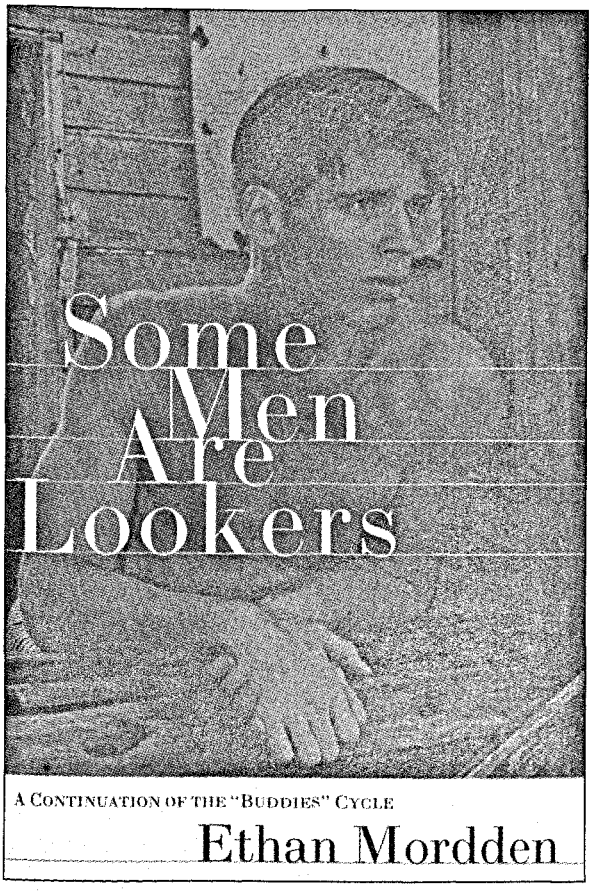
Some Men Are Lookers

By Ethan Mordden
St. Martin's Press

Ethan Mordden's Buddies stories—which first appeared in the pages of *Christopher Street* and later in three hardback collections—surface again in *Some Men Are Lookers*. The fourth installment, a loose hybrid of novel and short story cycle, continues the tale of opera queen Bud, his best friend Dennis Savage, and their respective flighty boyfriends, Little Kiwi (now Virgil) and Cosgrove.

By now, this circle of friends is turning on itself—tension mounts between Bud and Dennis due to Dennis' refusal to visit another friend dying of AIDS. Virgil and Cosgrove are up to their old, amusing tricks, but their once youthful glee now seems forced, at times embarrassing as they curdle into poster children for the Peter Pan syndrome.

Somebody should have made Mordden stop at book number three.



Part of the trouble with *Some Men Are Lookers* is in the telling. For instance, a fight scene among dog walkers is heavily mediated by narrative summation even though it's written in present tense—the most immediate voice available to a writer. This dilutes what could have been a wonderful comic effect. Time and again, serious themes and comic aesthetics butt heads in this book instead of providing the sharp relief necessary to appreciate each extreme. Granted, that's a difficult task to achieve, but this is Mordden's fourth time out with these characters. By choosing to write about them again, he raises the bar himself.

Only the newcomers breathe fresh life into this tale—chief among them the wonderful Peter Keene, who straddles the span of having one foot planted at home in straight America and the other off tiptoeing through gay camp. Keene, a book editor "just coming out and a little cock-crazy," disrupts a dinner party to attack a gorgeous Venetian youth before going on to transform into a kid in the candy shop of gay Manhattan. This Ivy Leaguer's delayed coming out evokes humor and poignancy in a way that shows Mordden at his best since *How Long Has This Been Going On?*

But overall, narrative drama threatens to collapse beneath the old characters' arched awareness of their own melodrama. Part of the problem? Narrator Buddy is as self-indulgent with his own cleverness as many of his friends are with sex. Never has the island of Manhattan seemed so insular, populated entirely of gay men either dying, on the make, or shoring up shaky relationships. Clearly, Mordden is more concerned with mapping the gay ghetto than he is with his subjects' place in the larger world. That would be fine if the story worked better. But too often it reads like a diary foisted on the reader, lacking the shape and substance of literature. Transitional devices designed to ease readers into flashbacks or provide backstory show their seams. "All stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, ideally in that order; but this story has two beginnings, and here's the first one," begins one section. The circuitous narrative that follows fails to make significant exactly why breaking a tenet of good storytelling is central to the section; what could have been profound becomes perfunctory.

In general, the jabs at comedy and wit in *Some Men Are Lookers* aren't sharp enough to support what the book would like to be about—how aging gay men survive their surrogate families.

Mordden, hopefully, will shelve these gay blades until they reach retirement age. By then maybe they'll have grown up enough to be worth looking at again.

—Rhomylly B. Forbes

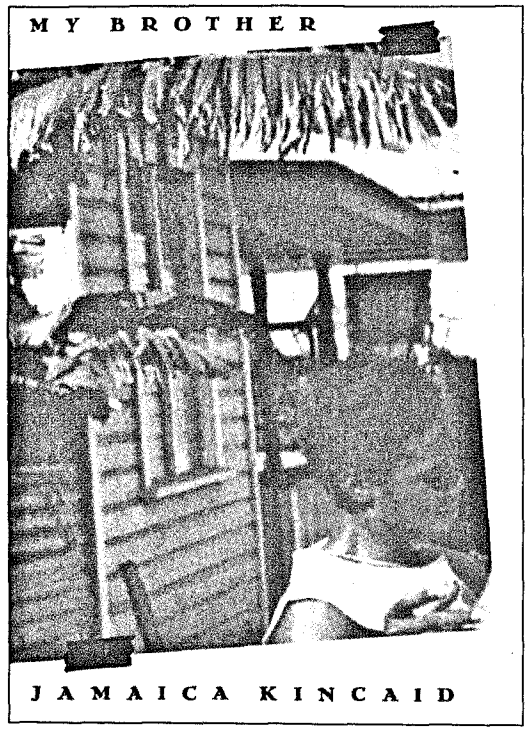
My Brother

by Jamaica Kincaid
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

In Jamaica Kincaid's six previous autobiographical novels and essays (*At the Bottom of the River*, 1984; *Annie John*, 1985; *A Small Place*, 1988; *Annie, Gwen, Lily, Pam and Julie*, 1989; *Lucy*, 1990; and *The Autobiography of My Mother*, 1996), her readers have the feeling that she has told all about her troubled life in Antigua and her painful emotional conflicts with her family (especially her mother). We discover with her new memoir, *My Brother*, however, that some things have been just too painful to tell—until now. Clearly the most obvious omission from these earlier works is her three brothers, whose appearance after Jamaica was nine years old was one of the many "betrayals" for which she can never forgive her mother. Their disruption of her previously Edenic family life as an only child was apparently so traumatic that she chose to write her brothers out of her family history—until now. In the previous autobiographical pieces set in Antigua, notably *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*, her persona is an only child; and the brothers' appearance is only briefly mentioned in *Lucy*. Only with the death of Devon Drew, the youngest of these brothers, does this obsessively confessional writer finally reveal the degree to which her bitterness towards her mother stems from the birth of these boys. That he (like his brothers) is a messy interloper whose dirty diapers Jamaica is not about to allow

to soil her hands and interrupt her life either during his infancy or his death at thirty-three from AIDS is a major, though perhaps inadvertent, theme of this book. Though she recalls changing his diapers as a baby, the recurrent recollection is of the time she was left to look after her baby brother all day, and her mother returned to find her engrossed in a book while her brother was in a dirty diaper with a hardened stool. Her mother was in such a fury that she gathered all of Jamaica's books, doused them with kerosene and set them on fire. The reader is constantly reminded of Devon's incontinence as his AIDS progresses, but though Kincaid returns to Antigua, sits with him, talks with him, and arranges for him to get advanced medical attention, it is clear that she does not change his diapers. Indeed it becomes quite apparent that, from the perspective of the narrator, his dwindling manhood, his regression into infancy and his ultimate death are merely poetic justice removing this thirty-three-year inconvenience and allowing her to go on with her life. After all, the arrival of these male siblings with their "hog guts" (to borrow words of Lena in describing her brother Milkman's sense of privilege in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*) meant only additional labor, economic deprivation, and the end of an education for their sister. Kincaid cannot understand her brother Devon's "compulsion to express himself through his penis." Despite the privileges her brothers enjoyed at her expense, the intelligent and charming Devon had dissipated his life in crime, drugs and careless sex. When she had earlier warned him to use condoms, he replied "Me no get dat chupidness, man." She was appalled that after the AZT that she purchased in the United States provided the almost expired Devon a new lease on life, he immediately returned to casual and unprotected sexual activity, even lying to women about his infection and bragging about his sexual appetite. Thus it is symbolic that, on his death bed, this macho man who defined himself in terms of his ability to seduce women throws the sheet aside and shows his sister his penis:

> *...he grabbed his penis in his hand and held it up, and his penis looked like a bruised flower that had been cut short on the stem; it was covered with sores and on the sores was a white substance, almost creamy, almost floury, a fungus.*



> *When he grabbed his penis in his hand, he suddenly pointed at me, a sort of thrusting gesture, and he said in a voice that was full of deep panic and deep fear: "Jamaica, look at this, just look at this."*

The ultimate irony is Kincaid's discovery after his death that her brother was actually a homosexual.

Kincaid's presentation of this brother is couched in inconveniences to her and "her" family. On the night of his birth, "the routine of life was upset": she had to go for a midwife and all of the children had to go out to stay with neighbors. It is to this brother's birth that Kincaid attributes her mother's change for the worse—in her relationship with her husband, in her relationship with her daughter, and even in her physical beauty. She recalls that after the birth of her brothers, "I was always being asked to forgo something or other that had previously occupied my leisure time, and then something or other that was essential (my schooling), to take care of these small children who were not mine." When she receives the call informing her that her youngest brother has AIDS, "I was in my house in Vermont, absorbed with the well-being of my children, absorbed with the well-being of my husband, absorbed with the well-being of myself." Elsewhere she informs, "At the time the phone call came telling me of my brother's illness, among the many comforts, luxuries, that I enjoyed was reading a book"; as in her childhood memories when she was supposed to have put her book down to change his diaper, again she must interrupt the Eden that is her life in Vermont to fly to Antigua. The events of that and other trips to see this brother during his struggle with AIDS are the subject matter of *My Brother*. In the process we learn a little about him. She informs us, "Nothing came from him: not work, not children, not love for someone else"; and yet throughout there is the recollection of his love of growing things and scores of images of plants and trees to remind us of the possibility that this life cut down too short might have blossomed and grown under different circumstances. In the course of this memoir, we also learn a great deal about the process of dying of AIDS. His suffering is presented in Kincaid's usual direct, unflinching honesty, and some descriptions turn the reader's stomach ("a stream of yellow puss flowed out of his anus constantly; the inside of his mouth and all around his lips were covered with a white glistening substance, thrush"). The pain Devon suffers is exacerbated by the lack of medication and adequate medical facilities (they are actually primitive and filthy) to deal with this disease in a third world nation like Antigua, and the absolute desertion by friends, a few of whom would make one visit to stand outside the door of his room and never return again. Kincaid is appalled at someone's suggestion that she take her brother to the United States where he can receive better care: "I can't do what you are suggesting—take this strange, careless person into the hard-earned order of my life."

But this book is not so much about Devon's life and his dying from AIDS as it is about his sister's continued inconvenience by his life and death. During his new lease on life he asks her for a pair of khaki shorts she has: "I gave them to him, and even though I could easily replace them, I did not like giving them to him at all. I did not want them back, I wanted not to have had to give them in the first place." She takes some pride in the new lease on life that the AZT she supplied gave him—he became the first HIV-infected person in Antigua to leave the hospital "alive, even well"; and yet we are also constantly reminded of her resent-

ment for the economic toll he exacts on her life: "I could not pay for any of the [medication Devon required] with cash, I could pay for it only with credit; and in that way, though not solely in that way, his illness and death reminded me again and again of my childhood." She does not attempt to hide the inconvenience that his lengthy illness causes her: "I began to distance myself from him, I began to feel angry at him, I began to feel I didn't like being so tied up with his life, the waning of it, the suffering of it. I began to feel that it would be so nice if he would just decide to die right away and get buried right away and the whole thing would be done with right away."

Jamaica Kincaid makes no bones about the fact the she enjoys the privilege of having the last word: "these are my thoughts on his dying and on his life—and that is one of the reasons to outlive all people who can have anything to say about you, not letting them have the last word." She makes no bones about the fact that after the interruption that was his death and dying, "I resumed the life that his death had interrupted, the life with my own family, and the life of having written a book and persuading people to simply go out and buy it."

Apparent here as elsewhere in her works is the unending conflict with her mother, that everlasting mother whom she so passionately loves and hates (but mostly hates), whose domination is relentlessly portrayed by Kincaid. Though the author is furious at the thought that her mother would tell her friends and sons about her, she does not hesitate to reveal the most personal shortcomings of her mother to the world in her best-seller novels and essays. And with each return to her mother, there is some new painful revelation of her perfidy. Here, in addition to the introduction of the sons into their Eden, we are told of her sending her to help out at home with the brothers. Of course, one always suspects that the author, like her Annie John in her class in *Gwen* (Annie John), is constantly modifying events to make the story turn out in a way to make her feel good.

In *My Brother*, for the first time too, we are made aware of the pain Kincaid feels that her father is not really her father. (She was raised by a stepfather and never met her biological father until she was in her thirties.) Each time she refers to him in this novel she adds some variant of the phrase "the man who was not really my father."

These commentaries appear ad nauseam (sometimes on two or three consecutive pages), reinforcing the painful fact that among the other infuriating advantages that these brothers enjoy is a real father. For many readers the blunt baring of Kincaid's angst in *My Brother* has been played just one too many, but rare is the reader who is not again captivated by her lyrical phrasing, her deceptively simple imagery, and the mesmerizing effect of her ritualistic repetitions. And even as one shudders at the bitterness and anger and unforgiving vindictiveness in the face of her brother's suffering and death, one also recognizes that Kincaid is truthful, if nothing else, as she all so casually exposes those bitter truths most of us would never admit even to ourselves. We would perhaps agree with her own observation that many of her memories are "something only a mind like mine would think about"; and certainly there are painful revelations here that only a Jamaica Kincaid would give voice to. Recalling an interview immediately after her brother's death, she declares, "Whatever questions she [the interviewer] asked me about anything, it was easy to be without mercy and to answer truthfully." Throughout this book, Kincaid is indeed without mercy an truthful, whether she is describing the gruesome attack of AIDS on the human body, her brother's wasted life, her mother's "villainy," or her own selfish and self-centered life. And we as a society, a nation, a sister or brother, and a daughter or son are not simply viewers of this flawed and tragic family facing the worst epidemic of our times, but we are implicated in it.

—Daryl Cumber Dance

ABOUT THE REVIEWERS:

Daryl Cumber Dance is a Professor of English at the University of Richmond. She is the author of *Shuckin' and Jivin: Folklore From Contemporary Jamaicans; Long Gone: Fifty Caribbean Writers;* and *Honey, Hush!*

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