

# Mr. Potter

*Jamaica Kincaid*

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## Mr. Potter Jamaica Kincaid

In this luminous, bewitching new novel Jamaica Kincaid tells the story of an ordinary man, his century, and his home. The island of Antigua comes vibrantly to life under the gaze of Mr Potter, an illiterate taxi chauffeur who makes his living driving a navy blue Hillman along the wide-open roads that pass the only towns he has ever seen and the graveyard where he will be buried. The sun shines squarely overhead, the ocean lies on every side and suppressed passion fills the air. Kincaid conjures up a moving picture of Mr Potter's youth - beginning with memories of his father, a poor fisherman, and his mother, who committed suicide - and the outside world, that presses in on his life. Within these confines, Mr Potter struggles to live at ease: to buy his own car, to have girlfriends, to shake off the encumbrance of his many daughters, one of whom will return to Antigua after he dies, to tell his story with equal measures of distance and sympathy. In Mr Potter Jamaica Kincaid brings alive a figure unlike any in contemporary fiction, an individual consciousness emerging gloriously out of an unexamined life to cast a long shadow.

## Mr. Potter Details

Date : Published August 7th 2003 by Vintage (first published 2002)

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Author : Jamaica Kincaid

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Genre : Fiction, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review Mr. Potter for online ebook

### Sandy Brusin says

I just dig Jamaica Kincaid. Unusual style, but she can say the most profound things in the most surprising ways. Like this: "And he died and his death seemed sudden even though he had been marching toward its inevitability . . . his death was a surprise just the way each death is, and his death made all who heard of it and all who knew him pause, stop, and wonder if such a thing could happen to them also, for the living always doubt the reality of death and the dead do not know of doubt, the dead do not know of anything."

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### Ann says

The melodic narrative of this short novel has its pluses and minuses -- through the course of the book, it subtly reflects the complicated relationship between narrator and subject, but also kind of soothes the reader into a dangerously sleepy state that may require the book to be put down and picked up later. Having said that, I really enjoyed this and could imagine learning quite a bit more from it on closer inspection, analysis, or re-read.

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### Joyce says

I thought I had read something by Kincaid, but this may be my first. Extraordinarily interesting author and to this point in her career (2002), her works were mostly biographical in some way. This is the story of her father, and it's a memory piece, with him remembering his parents and events in his life. But the real narrator is one of his many unacknowledged daughter, Kincaid herself. And while she cuts him no slack, she paints a surprisingly compassionate portrait as she makes him into something of a Caribbean Everyman. I can always tell when the book is Literary Fiction, as my notes are full of references to language/style and characterizations, with less about tone, story, frame, pacing. No surprises here: this is stylistically complex as it moves among different time frames, and the language is lush, lyrical, and cadenced. This last may be annoying in print but in audio, in Robin Miles's fabulous reading, the repetitions of phrases, sentences, and stories become a kind of hypnotic mantra, an incantation which is very effective. Characterizations are also detailed, but we're observers, not really invited to become involved. The story line reflects family memories, both his and hers, and these frame the book; leisurely pace matches island life; tone is unsentimental and evocative. Even if you've read it, you might want to revisit through this excellent audio version.

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### Matthew Hittinger says

At first the method of repetition turned me off, but I soldiered on and halfway through I began to understand what Kincaid was up to and accept some of the repetition in the following ways:

1. A refrain or chorus that is repeated throughout, such as the repeating of Mr. Potter's birth and death dates, who his parents were, who Elaine (the narrator's) parents were, that Potter could not read and could not write but Elaine could, and so forth--all facts that as they repeat and repeat accumulate in meaning until by book's

end you realize why the narrator dwells on such facts as she tries to make sense of this father she never knew, this father who never claimed her. If the book were a song or a suite of songs or an opera, they'd be melodies and choruses and refrains that would convey meaning to us whenever they appeared in the structure.

2. Anaphora where the same words or phrases are repeated at the beginning of sections or chapters or even within a paragraph lifting the prose into not quite poetry but quite poetic passages. "There was a line drawn through me" was one of the more successful moments of this.

3. A way of thinking that spins out an idea or fact and repeats the idea or fact in the same words but a different order, almost as if Elaine is stating the facts and then turning them over and over again in her hands, looking at them from different angles, dissembling the parts and rebuilding the shapes to see if the shapes change, to make sense of the shapes.

And I liked this quote:

"...often a thing that is ugly is ugly in itself, and often a thing that is ugly is only a thing that is forgotten, kept from view and kept from memory, and often a thing that is ugly is not only a definition of beauty itself but also renders beauty as something beyond words or beyond any kind of description."

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### **Patty says**

A hard book to review, mainly because it doesn't really have a plot and barely has characters and it isn't even entirely clear as to which genre it belongs – memoir or novel – though the one thing it is closer to than anything else is poetry.

Let me demonstrate with the opening paragraph:

*And that day, the sun was in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky, and it shone in its usual way so harshly bright, making even the shadows pale, making even the shadows seek shelter; that day the sun was in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky, but Mr. Potter did not note this, so accustomed was he to this, the sun in its usual place, up above and in the middle of the sky; if the sun had not been in its usual place, that would have made a great big change in Mr. Potter's day, it would have meant rain, however briefly such a thing, rain, might fall, but it would have changed Mr. Potter's day, so used was he to the sun in its usual place, way up above and in the middle of the sky. Mr. Potter breathed in his normal way, his heart was beating in its normal way, up and down underneath the covering of his black skin, up and down underneath his white knitted cotton vest next to his very black skin, up and down underneath his plainly woven white cotton shirt that was on top of the knitted cotton vest which lay next to his skin; so his heart breathed in its normal way. And he put on his trousers and in the pocket of his trousers he placed a white handkerchief; and all this was as normal as the way his heart beat; all this, his putting on his clothes in just that way, as normal as the way his heart beat, the heart beating normally and the clothes reassuring to Mr. Potter and to things beyond Mr. Potter, things that did not know they needed such reassurance.*

The entire book goes on this way, full of repetitions and a focus on oddly specific little details while the larger picture is left vague, only gestured at rather than depicted. Certain phrases occur over and over again throughout the book until they take on the feeling of a chorus or chant: *a line drawn through him; Mr. Potter was my father, my father's name was Mr. Potter; Mr. Potter was born in nineteen hundred and twenty-two and he died in nineteen hundred and ninety-two; Mr. Potter could not read and Mr. Potter could not write.*

The story, such as it is, is about Roderick Potter, a poor chauffeur on Antigua: his parents (his father who never acknowledged him and his mother who committed suicide when he was young), the man who owns the car Mr. Potter drives (from Lebanon, with his own tragic history of exile), one of his customers (Dr. Weizenger, about whose past we never learn more than that he is fleeing Prague in the 1940s, but really, what more is there to say than that? – to say someone is fleeing Prague in the 1940s is to say exactly what they're fleeing from), Mr. Potter's own many illegitimate children, one of whom grows up to be a writer and becomes the narrator of this book. More than a story, it's a lyrical observation of colonialism, racism, poverty, sexism and broken families, tragedies carried down the generations, all the general global and individual ills of every life, and the ability – or the lack of it – to recognize and articulate such problems. And, most of all, whose voice will be heard doing so.

I think I liked it, overall, though it's a weird book to grapple with. It's a very good example of a very particular thing, but if a 150 page prose poem about the narrator's unknown harsh-but-suffering father doesn't sound appealing, I don't think the actual experience of *Mr. Potter* will change your mind.

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### **Joey Diamond says**

some deep stuff. poetic repetition. sad sad history. i sense she is doing some very deliberate writing back to colonialism in this and i think i need someone to explain it to me. the stuff about subjectivity was really good and brain warpy.

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### **S says**

#### Placing a Man Under Investigation

Jamaica Kincaid

*Mr. Potter*

Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 2002

*Mr. Potter* tells the life story of the eponymous character as narrated by his daughter, Elaine. Set in a quiet community on the island of Antigua, the story delves into Mr. Potter's formative experiences, and later on, his adult life, discussing his relationships, or lack thereof, with other people, and how he became who he is. The use of the prose, the construction of the timeline, and the way that the imagery is laid out gives the entire story a somewhat timeless, ethereal feel—not in the sense that the story could take place at any time, but that there is little in the way of separating the concrete from the abstract.

Kincaid's prose is the cornerstone of the experience. The narrative relies in part on long, descriptive sentences, often creating sentences that span between a quarter and half of a page. Physical character description is somewhat minimal, but when done tends to concentrate on specific attributes of the character being described. Much more detail and imagery is spared for the environment and to the characters' thoughts. There are no formal chapter titles, either; divisions in the narrative are marked by the beginning of a new page, much like a chapter in a regular book without a title.

Oftentimes, repetition is used to emphasize some details of symbolism, such as the “line” that runs through Mr. Potter and through his father (referring to the line on Mr. Potter's birth certificate where his father's name

would have been, as well as the fact that same line runs through Elaine's birth certificate in the same spot and the same way). In many ways, these repetitions tend to emphasize the similarities between Mr. Potter and his own father as well as the differences between Mr. Potter and Elaine (namely that while Mr. Potter and his father were both illiterate, Elaine is not).

The timeline is established solely from the content of the chapter and context, beginning with the day that Mr. Potter, who works as a chauffeur, meets Dr. Weizenger and his wife, his boss' latest customers, before moving backward to briefly discuss Mr. Potter's parents, Nathaniel and Elfrida, then returning to Mr. Potter and examining how he grows up as an orphan. The tone throughout the story is slightly melancholic, yet introspective, as Elaine examines her father's life, and in some ways, her own—mostly, how it was shaped through his absence.

One of the story's most memorable traits could also be called its weakest one. As mentioned earlier, the narrative is continuous, and so it tends to discuss the characters' thoughts and motivations with the same long sentences as it mixes in imagery. Accordingly, getting a clear fix on what the characters are thinking, or the reasoning behind their actions, is immensely difficult because something may be directly stated and yet carry the feel or weight of imagery, and not prose.

Because of this, it can take a while to really understand the motivation of Mr. Potter or of Dr. Weizenger, and the purpose of some lines that may seem little more than filler. However, considering the tone of the story and the way that it's told, this may have been Kincaid's point—to tell the story of a man without motivation, that lived a joyless, unfruitful life because that was all he knew. Regardless of whether this was her intent, *Mr. Potter* remains a unique experience for those that enjoy more cerebral analysis of what makes a person who they are.

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### **Akilah Zende says**

the book was okay and also the book was just alright and sometimes the book was good but mostly the book was just okay.

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### **Kelly says**

Kincaid, Jamaica. *Mr. Potter*. 1st ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Print.

Jamaica Kincaid has written a beautifully lyrical prose about a father that she never knew personally but knew of. Mr. Potter details not only Kincaid's family history, but also Antigua. She details in repetition the simplicity of life on her homeland of Antigua and subliminally shows that she has risen up and overcome the simple-ness. Kincaid's personal history is well-known: born in 1949 into poverty on the Caribbean island of Antigua, at the age of 17 she emigrated to the U.S. to become an au pair in New York. (During interviews she has said that "servant" is the word she prefers versus au pair.)

In *Mr. Potter* we learn that Mr. Potter is Kincaid's father. He was a chauffeur that simply rambled through life without regards to emotional responsibility. He was a ladies man that was well known on the island, and he could not read nor write. He was son of Nathaniel Potter, who was also a womanizer and simple man. Mr. Potter was not even acknowledged by his father since Nathaniel had so many children scattered across the

island. Mr. Potter's mother was Elfrida Robinson. She was only 16 when she gave birth to him. She was only in his life for a brief stint before he was left in the care of Mr. and Mistress Shepherd. He was not wanted and was treated in that fashion throughout his life. Kincaid makes it clear that she is not her father and that she has become something better, however, she is not bitter or mean about it.

In Mr. Potter the use of repetition seems daunting at first but then becomes poetic in its use to describe the situations of poverty and life in Antigua, not only for Mr. Potter but also for everyone on the Caribbean island. The way characters seem to come in and out of the story seem to show Mr. Potter's lack of attachment and care to the world around him. It also seems to enhance his lack of communication skills when he is speaking with Dr. Weizenger.

For someone that is trying to read Mr. Potter as though it is a story with a definite beginning, middle, and end there will be many difficulties. The story starts then flashes back, then it folds upon itself, and then it changes completely. It is more of a thought or an idea that Kincaid has of her father that is being expressed and not a story being told. The use of repetition and long, drawn out sentences may be overwhelming to some. Nevertheless, the imagery will make an impression that will not be soon forgotten.

Jamaica Kincaid's writing style seems to be very lyrical. Her book Mr. Potter reads more like a prose poem than a typical novel or short story. By reading this book I have seen that the typical novel is not the only way to write a book. Although I do not believe that I am able to write like Kincaid, her book has at least shown me a new possibility to explore with my writing.

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### **Benjy says**

I don't understand what I did to this book to make it hate me so much but the feeling is now mutual. The repetitions and childish taunts of the narrator would almost be funny but then a final, recycled parenthetical swoops in and shits on the shoulder of my favorite sweater. It's a daring fusion of fiction and memoir but not a successful one.

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### **Diane says**

3.5 stars

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### **Runwright says**

A middle aged woman learns of her father's death and returns to Antigua to tell the story of his life although she never knew him personally.

In this novel, Jamaica Kincaid explores the universal themes of love, hate, man versus his environment, relationships, generational curses and religion. Although Mr. Potter is the story of one man, his story is also the reality of life in the rural Caribbean countries where the natives are still reeling from their history of slavery, colonialism and its resulting poverty, illiteracy and hopelessness.

Kincaid's unique writing style uses repetition to its full advantage. She describes all the things around Mr. Potter as though she is painting a picture of him, filling in the canvas of his life with all the details that will

make him who he is, and traces a shadow of him through each scene, each one not fully being him since she never knew him in life.

This is a book that will evoke emotions if you are familiar with the situations Kincaid describes, and create a stunning visual if this is your introduction to this kind of life.

One of Kincaid's best work, I think. There is nothing I would change about this story or her telling of it.

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### **Vic says**

If the unexamined life is not worth living, this book exemplifies exactly why the unexamined life is not worth reading as well. Dull and repetitive. Yawn.

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### **Harker US Library says**

*Mr. Potter* is the story of an illiterate Antiguan chauffeur whose father was long-gone by the time of his birth, whose mother drowned herself when he was still a young child, whose clients are disdainful of his social status and the color of his skin, and whose illegitimate daughters are strangers to him because he abandoned every one of them, just as his own father abandoned him. One of these daughters narrates this novel from a distance—a distance of time, since her father died years prior (we watch her visit his grave), but also an emotional distance that causes her to treat him with a mixture of pity and contempt and guarded affection. The best one can say about *Mr. Potter* as a novel is that it's lyrical; in fact, it takes lyricism and extends to an almost illogical extreme. In the interests of lyricism, then, our narrator repeats the same facts and phrases five or six times in the same sentence. "Mr. Potter was my father, my father's name was Mr. Potter," she tells us at least once every chapter. It's an interesting technique, certainly, and one that lends a certain power to this novel, but more often than not it turns Jamaica Kincaid's otherwise impressive prose into a sticky morass.

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### **BookOfCinz says**

The book Mr. Potter, speaks to the life of Mr. Potter, an illiterate chauffeur living on the island of Antigua. We are told of his family history, given insight to his family tree and his overall life.

I have to say, I did enjoy or appreciate this novel. I could not get over the constant repetition. I know it served a purpose but it was lost on me.

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