

About This Volume

Mildred R. Mickle

The authors in this volume discuss the complexities of some of Jamaica Kincaid's prolific production of prose. As of 2020, Kincaid has published five novels, a collection of short stories, six nonfiction books, two children's books, and several pieces of short fiction and nonfiction. Arguably her most famous works are *Annie John: A Novel* (1985) and *Lucy: A Novel* (1990), fiction that melds elements of autobiography; a reluctant nostalgia for her family and for the familiarity of Antigua; a critique of colonial rule by Great Britain that entrenched patriarchy into Antiguan culture; and a desire to escape the limitations imposed by British rule. These novels have elicited much scholarly discussion, and some of the essays in this book will showcase their impact on African American letters. As well, the essays in this book will also treat some of Kincaid's nonfiction, compare her fiction and nonfiction with other authors' works, and make available some of her interviews.

This volume has four sections: The Author, Critical Contexts, Critical Readings, and Resources. In the Author section, Robert C. Evans begins with an essay that argues Kincaid's success as a writer in the 1980s stems from reviews of her works in mainstream periodicals that targeted a more sophisticated clientele, well versed in literature and the arts. Mildred R. Mickle's Biographical Sketch of Jamaica Kincaid gives an overview of Kincaid's life, highlighting some of her achievements carving out a steadily growing niche for Caribbean literature in American letters. Kincaid's works provide insight into spaces many tend to ignore: a small island in the Caribbean that is slightly larger than Manhattan, New York; a black girl's desire to find autonomy and fight marginalization; the corruption that Great Britain's involvement in the Trans-Atlantic

Slave Trade and subsequent colonization of Antigua brought; and the trickster ethos Kincaid crafts into some of her works.

The Critical Contexts section offers essays by Tahirah Walker, who discusses evocative themes in select works by Kincaid and notes how those works establish points of entry and departure with womanism. Robert C. Evans transcribes four interviews Kincaid gave in 2012 and 2014 that are available on YouTube, paraphrasing some parts and highlighting her responses. Tomeiko Ashford Carter compares and contrasts one of Kincaid's articles from *The New Yorker* with works by a South African male writer, a Caribbean American female writer, and two major African American female writers. Kelley Jeans concludes the Critical Contexts part with a survey of scholarship on Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*.

The Critical Reading part contains essays that critique specific texts. Two essays by Robert C. Evans continue to look at the impact of positive and negative reviews of Kincaid's works from 1990 to 2013 that mainstream periodicals published, thereby advertising her works to a larger demographic that expanded to academia. Martin Kich provides a survey of scholarship that compares Kincaid's works with some African American writers and a variety of Caribbean writers and concludes that more scholarship should be done situating Kincaid's works among more Caribbean and European writers. Robert C. Evans provides insight into Kincaid's time writing for *The New Yorker* in the 1970s and early 1980s, taking a closer look at the compilation of select nonfiction articles anthologized in Kincaid's *Talk Stories*. Kirsten Bratt discusses how Kincaid's *Lucy* reveals the historical rifts between white feminists and feminists of color, noting that what mars many white women's approach to feminism is an inability to think critically about how one enacts a feminist agenda that is compromised by a blind adherence to oppression. Abandon GawinWaya Shuman takes an in-depth look at Kincaid's *My Brother*, applying queer theory and discussing how Kincaid uses the narrative as a means of articulating her own story through the lens of discussing her grief over her brother who is dying from HIV/AIDS. Tahirah Walker investigates Kincaid's development of womanism in *Lucy* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Megan Pitz explores how Kincaid and illustrator Ricardo Cortés use narrative and pictures to critique negative stereotypes of black children in her children’s book, *Party: A Mystery*. And, Kirsten Bratt discusses how Kincaid, who is well versed in British literary tradition, uses her experimental writing to dismantle patriarchal oppression inherent in British imperialism.

The Resources section contains a chronology of Kincaid’s life, a list of works by Jamaica Kincaid, a select bibliography of scholarship critiquing Kincaid’s works, and the biographies of the contributors to this collection.

Jamaica Kincaid: Critical Insights is designed to convince more people to read and enjoy the rich literary innovation in Kincaid’s prose and to encourage more scholarly engagement with the complexities of the works of Jamaica Kincaid.

CRITICAL
CONTEXTS

Jamaica Kincaid in the Constellation of Womanist Literature

Tahirah Joyce Walker

In 1985, Professor Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi published one of the first articles that defined womanist praxis in literary arts. Her foundational piece “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English” illuminates a constellation of womanist works and explicates various factors that connect them. This essay seeks to add Jamaica Kincaid to that constellation by demonstrating that Kincaid, like other womanist authors, is consistently engaged in centering Black women in stories that are not solely for the benefit of a feminist agenda. The factors that connect womanist works include concern for a global Black family, support for and belief in Black men, young girls’ inheritance of womanism after traumatic events, complicating the rosy portraiture English literature so often offers of white women, negotiations of madness and the necessity of survival, and infusion of inventiveness and experimentation in form and literary style. In this essay, we will visit the themes of inheritance, negotiations of madness, and inventiveness in some of Kincaid’s works: *At The Bottom of The River*, *Lucy*, and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. I will begin with connections between Ogunyemi’s theory of womanist literature and Kincaid’s themes.

Ogunyemi’s concept of womanism was developed as she studied African and African American literature. She writes that she “arrived at the term ‘womanism’ independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that my notion of its meaning overlaps with Alice Walker’s” (72). Indeed, Ogunyemi connects womanist themes explored by Alice Walker to the writing of Black women in other geographic settings. Like Walker, Jamaica Kincaid is in alignment with Ogunyemi’s themes of womanist work. The central connector

of this alignment is a destabilization of the Black female protagonists and a reconciliation rooted in the natural and super or supra-natural worlds (Ogunyemi 74). Ogunyemi points to authors doing this with the character development and storytelling within their works. She also asserts that womanist writers draw on forms of earlier works including epistolary, gothic, and the mix of sketch, poetry and prose to create an inventive form (77). Kincaid expresses that her work is “magic and real but not necessarily magical realism” (Frederick 316). A focus on each of those areas begins with considering the context of this alignment inclusive of a look at the historical context in which Jamaica Kincaid’s writing process as well as her characters are found.

Historical Context

Jamaica Kincaid’s writing spans five decades beginning in 1973 and appearing as recently as the 2010s. When Kincaid began publishing work in 1973, it was a very different time for Black women authors. Toni Morrison would not become the first Black woman to win a Nobel Prize in Literature for another twenty years. And Wole Soyinka would not become the first Black man to win the prize for another thirteen years. Ogunyemi’s article coincided with the publication of Kincaid’s first novel, *Annie John* in 1985. The threads of womanism from Alice Walker’s 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, can be found throughout both Ogunyemi and Kincaid’s expressions. Walker was particularly interested in how Black foremothers wrote and produced art and their abilities to create in the face of tyranny. She describes her own mother’s artistry as a gardener who was known across several counties for the beautiful flowers she grew. Walker notes her mother’s position in the intersection—poor, Black, and female. She focuses on how her gardening uplifted her and uplifted others who came to get floral arrangements or spend time learning from her mother in the garden, Walker writes:

I remember people coming to my mother’s yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever

rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother’s art. (3)

Walker established a need to reclaim model writers and artists like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen who had been forgotten or dismissed. She explains that she was looking for the creativity and work left behind by Black women in literature and art in places both “high and low” (1). Walker states “And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the Black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day” (1).

The historical context of the four Kincaid works featured in this essay is late and postcolonial Caribbean experiences that move into the space of immigration to the United States. These included important political, social, and economic movements. The womanist literary tradition born of late and postcolonial experiences across Black societies is distinct from the literary traditions of white feminists handed down from Jane Austen to Charlotte Brontë to Virginia Woolf. While, as Ogunyemi recognizes, womanist writers indeed draw from these authors, they inherit from a rich tradition of Black women (and men) struggling against lack of access to the freedom offered to white women. The tradition of Phillis Wheatley, Bessie Head, Sojourner Truth, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, Margaret Walker and Paule Marshall are the additional context of Jamaica Kincaid’s works. Womanist writers also inherit from folks who may not have had the privilege of writing but told stories and handed them down in different modes of expression that the womanist might know herself and her kinfolk as Zora Neale Hurston called those who would strive to tell Black women’s stories in truth. This inheritance in womanist literature is spent on character development, storytelling and form that enriches the audience. Ogunyemi notes “the young girl inherits womanism after a traumatic event . . . or

sudden responsibility. Through coping with the experience, she moves creatively beyond the self to that concern for the needs of others characteristic of adult womanism” (72). Thus, this inheritance is also a critical component of the stories themselves.

Inheritance of Womanism

The story “Blackness” in *At the Bottom of the River* depicts the experience a woman has with war, violence, and death. The prose is written in a liminal state between coherent description and poetry or stream of consciousness, a state one might expect of a person dealing with the processing of trauma. The woman describes a heaviness of heart beating beyond extreme grief. “Its four chambers exposed to love and joy and pain and the small shafts that fall with desperation in between” (48). In this end of the opening section, we recognize that something traumatic has occurred and our narrator is trying to tell us about it as if she were gasping between sobs. She continues the tale with a band of men bearing arms and marching through her pastoral setting to her house. The men’s presence blocks the light of the sun, destroys flowers, and the men crush the foundational structure of the house in which our narrator lives. After the men leave, she realizes that a fundamental change has occurred in her child.

The child may be meant literally but is also poignant when taken figuratively as in the child inside being severed from the self as she copes with posttraumatic stress. The woman cries for an understanding of the disappearing child who she relates is “made transparent. Her eyes are ruby, revolving orbs and they burn like coals caught suddenly in a gust of wind” (50). In this scene the child is transforming into a magic woman. As Ogunyemi has described for us, this transition is what prompts the inheritance of womanism wherein the Black protagonist experiences a whirlwind of blues and hope. In the ending paragraph the narrator creates a summary of the new voice she hears as her child has now completely vanished. The new voice is a silent one that “stands opposite this blackness but does not oppose it, for conflict is not part of its nature” (52). As she gets more familiar with this voice, the blackness fades, and

she finds the voice is boundless. She describes unfenced pastures, lions roaming, continents and continents unseparated. This is what Ogunyemi refers to as the leaving of self at which point a womanist develops a concern for a broader community across African people around the world. Kincaid's band of men in this story may be seen as colonial powers in lockstep with sexual predators exploiting the bodies of Black women for power and domination in the social and economic spheres. The narrator becomes a heroine able to transcend this traumatic event and see the hope of a collective Black freedom.

This transcendence is also found in Lucy at several points in the novel *Lucy*. One in particular is connected to the devastating portraits of white women Ogunyemi refers to in her piece. Lucy's employer Mariah causes her to wonder over and over about how she has come to be who she is. Lucy is often doing this wondering in silence. At one point Mariah is upset by the weather and Lucy thinks to herself "How do you get to be a person who is made miserable because the weather changed its mind, because the weather doesn't live up to your expectations? How do you get to be that way?" (20). At another point Mariah mentions being part Indian which makes Lucy wonder "How do you get to be the sort of victor who can claim to be vanquished also?" (41). But reaches a point of new responsibility where she feels she can no longer abide these idiosyncrasies without asking Mariah to examine them. Lucy finally asks Mariah how she has gotten to be who she is. As Mariah tries to hug Lucy in this moment after Mariah has assumed so many privileges, powers, and controlling assertions over her, Lucy steps away. Refusing to become Mariah's trophy or doll who is a symbol of her power, Lucy asks again, this time aloud "How do you get to be that way?" As Lucy later begins to question her own becoming, we are introduced to her negotiations of madness and the imperative of her survival. While we see this happen in hyper focus to Lucy, we see it in many different women characters of *The Autobiography of My Mother*.

Negotiations of Madness

We know Lucy struggles with rejection of her mother and the sense that her mother has never been satisfied with her being. Lucy recalls

CRITICAL READINGS

The “Popular” Reception of Jamaica Kincaid’s Writings: 1996–2012

Robert C. Evans

By the early 1990s, Jamaica Kincaid was increasingly recognized as an important new writer on the American literary scene. Her first book, a collection of very brief stories titled *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), while surprising some reviewers because of its unusual style, had been generally well received. Commentators often praised her distinctive voice, even if they sometimes complained that her writing was repetitious in more ways than one. Her second book, a partly autobiographical novel titled *Annie John* (1985), was seen by various critics as fulfilling the promise Kincaid had shown in *At the Bottom*: whereas that book was sometimes faulted for being more a collection of prose poems than of stories per se, *Annie John* was more obviously a narrative work that had a definite plot and told the tale of an engaging young woman. Then, in 1988, Kincaid surprised some readers by publishing a brief book of nonfiction titled *A Small Place*.

The fact that this work was nonfiction, however, was not what made it surprising: Kincaid had already established a reputation, while writing for *The New Yorker* magazine in the 1970s, of telling “true” stories very effectively in her many contributions to that periodical’s famous “Talk of the Town” section. By the time she had begun publishing books she had written many much-admired nonfiction anecdotes. The surprising thing about *A Small Place* was not its subject but its tone. When describing life on the island of Antigua, the homeland she had left in the 1960s to journey to New York, Kincaid often seemed bitter and accusing, especially in her treatment of the island’s legacy as a British colony and particularly in her sarcasm toward the white tourists who now provided much of the island’s income. But she also often mocked and satirized the

islanders themselves. *The New Yorker*, apparently worried that the book might offend its mostly white, upper-middle-class audience, decided not to publish excerpts from this work, although the magazine had often done so earlier and would soon do so again when dealing with one of its most prominent on-staff authors. In fact, *The New Yorker* did publish many parts of Kincaid's next work before it actually appeared in book form. This newest text, a novel titled *Lucy*, was published as a stand-alone volume in 1990. *Lucy* was much-anticipated, widely advertised, widely reviewed, and generally (if not entirely) well received. Some reviewers found the book's titular protagonist a sour, judgmental character whose tone variously recalled the tone some readers had already disliked when reading *A Small Place*.

By this point in her career, Kincaid had begun to attract serious attention from academics—the professors at colleges and universities who can do so much to build interest in writers by assigning them to young people in their classes and by writing serious essays and books about them. Academics often have a good deal to do with helping to build and solidify (or, sometimes, damage or undermine) an author's reputation and an author's place in the literary “canon.” However, as I have argued elsewhere (in another essay in the present volume), academics are not the only figures who can help affect an author's standing. Initially, the most important assessments of a “new” writer usually come not from academics but from writers for the popular press: reviewers for newspapers and magazines; authors of biographical profiles for those same kinds of outlets; and even the reviewers who call new work to the attention of librarians and booksellers.

I say “even” because these reviewers are often at a distinct disadvantage: they usually have little space available to them. They must often squeeze their assessments of a new book into the cramped confines of 250 words or less. But these reviewers, on the other hand, also have some real advantages. In the first place, their reviews are actually likely to be *read* by the people who try to sell books for a profit and by the people who must decide which new works to purchase for public libraries. Few non-academics (sad to say)

read academic essays, but thousands of booksellers and librarians definitely read each new issue of journals such as *Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. These are the kinds of periodicals that can definitely help call brand new books to the attention of people who have a vested interest in selecting the “best” books to sell and/or make available to library patrons.

In the present essay, then, I wish to pick up where my previous essay left off. I want to describe how the works Kincaid wrote following 1990 (after, that is, the appearance of *Lucy*) were received by the reviewers who had to assess her works, very briefly, for the kinds of publications just mentioned.

The Autobiography of My Mother

As any reader of Kincaid’s work would have known by the early 1990s, her fraught relationship with her own mother was, and would continue to be, one of the main preoccupations of her thoughts, feelings, and fiction. Thus, the appearance in 1996 of a new book interestingly titled *The Autobiography of My Mother* would have been of real interest to people already intrigued by Kincaid’s writings. Assessing the book for *Publishers Weekly*, the “bible” of the publishing industry and a periodical also widely read by librarians, Sybil S. Steinberg called this newest book a “mesmerizing, harrowing, richly metaphorical autobiography of 70-year-old Xuela Claudette Richardson” (75). (Richardson, in fact, was the real last name of Kincaid’s own mother and had also been Kincaid’s last name before she abandoned it in the early 1970s.) Steinberg described Xuela as “[e]arthy, intractably antisocial, acridly introspective, [and] morbidly obsessed with history and identity, conquest and colonialism, language and silence,” adding that in “Kincaid’s characteristically lucid, singsong prose,” Xuela traces her long life “while interrogating the mysteries of her hybrid cultural origins and her parents, who failed to be parents”—her mother through an early death and her father through a combination of cruelty and smug pretentiousness. Describing various details of Xuela’s own life—including an illicit affair, pregnancy, and an abortion Xuela finds liberating—Steinberg reported that Xuela finally “inaugurates

a life of deliberate infertility, eventually becoming the assistant to a European doctor, whom she later marries.” Steinberg made the novel’s descriptions of life on a Caribbean island sound grim indeed but concluded that Kincaid, using an “aphoristic solemnity at times evocative of Ecclesiastes,” explored “the full paradoxes of this extraordinary story, which, Xuela concludes, is at once the testament of the mother she never knew, of the mother she never allowed herself to be and of the children she refused to have” (75). Steinberg also reported, more pragmatically, that this new novel would be the focus of a major advertising campaign, including an author’s tour and other kinds of promotional efforts. In other words, the book’s publisher was itself treating the appearance of this new work by Kincaid as a major event, and readers of *Publishers Weekly* might therefore want, in Steinberg’s opinion, to take special notice.

Ivan Kreilcamp, describing the novel for a lengthy profile of Kincaid that also appeared in *Publishers Weekly*, called *The Autobiography* “a dazzling new chapter [in] the ongoing fictional autobiography” Kincaid was essentially composing in each of her novels, which were heavily influenced by details from her own life (54). Kreilcamp wrote that the newest book “extends the themes of her earlier work: mothers and daughters; sexuality and power; and the way the legacy of colonialism—‘a common history of suffering and humiliation’—leaves indelible traces on the imaginations and emotional lives of those born in places like Antigua and Dominica.” Kreilcamp predicted that this newest novel would probably not be described as “charming,” as *Annie John* had been. Instead, he called the new work “unrelenting and emotionally devastating, though still written in the elegant, luminous prose that [Kincaid’s] readers have come to rely on.”

Kreilcamp continued:

There’s something quite perverse about this novel, as if Kincaid, tired of seeing her work characterized simply as thinly veiled autobiography, had decided to create an entirely new literary form—that of the invented autobiography of one’s parent. One of the most harrowing takes on motherhood since

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the novel treats family history as a dark mystery to be plumbed. "My impulse is to make everyone uncomfortable," Kincaid comments simply. . . . *Autobiography of My Mother* forcefully engages with the inequities of a world divided into [in Kincaid's words] "the big and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak." (55)

Rubin Merle, reviewing the book in the widely read and much-respected *Christian Science Monitor*, first described its plot in unusual detail, then argued that by "[f]orging her own identity and freedom in a loveless world, Xuela loves only herself. She finds pleasure," he continued, "in sensuality and learns to make use of her considerable sex appeal, but she has no use for love and no desire to bear children. She becomes," he asserted, "an expert at terminating unwanted pregnancies. She marries a man she does not love, and briefly falls in love with a man she cannot marry" (79). According to Merle, the "island where she lives represents a way of life to which she cannot assent," since "[t]hose who prosper have done so only at the expense of others, while the exploited poor, who have her sympathy, have been reduced to a level where they cannot help themselves, try though they may." Merle concluded that Kincaid, using "her poised and crystalline prose, precise and serene as a knife drawn through water, . . . gives us this starkly memorable 'self-portrait' of a calm, thoughtful, utterly alienated woman who has learned to lead a life devoid of love, but not devoid of dignity" (79).

My Brother

Kincaid's next book—*My Brother* (1997)—was widely reviewed, partly because the topic (death from AIDS) was very much in the news in the 1990s. An anonymous review in *Publishers Weekly* began by quoting Kincaid herself: "I became a writer out of desperation, so when I first heard my brother was dying I was familiar with the act of saving myself: I would write about him" (53). The reviewer then asserted that the "result of Kincaid's self-preserving urge is a memoir that has less to do with her AIDS-afflicted, Rastafarian

RESOURCES

Chronology of Jamaica Kincaid's Life_____

- 1949 Born on May 25 as Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson in St. John's, Antigua, the daughter of Annie Richardson (an immigrant from Dominica) and Roderick Potter (a taxi driver who played no role in raising her). Her stepfather is a carpenter named David Drew. As a child, Kincaid is educated at such institutions as the Moravian school, the Antiguan Girls School, and the Princess Margaret School while also studying how to make clothes.
- 1958 Kincaid's mother gives birth to the first of three sons. Their births help drive a wedge between mother and daughter: Kincaid suddenly feels neglected by her mother, with whom she had once enjoyed a close bond. Kincaid begins to develop an increasing dislike of British colonialism and comes to regard Antigua itself as a kind of prison.
- 1965–72 Kincaid leaves Antigua to work as an au pair, first in Scarsdale, New York, and then in New York City. She soon begins taking college classes at various schools (including Westchester Community College in White Plains, New York, and then New Hampshire's newly founded Franconia College, where she is offered a full scholarship but does not graduate). At this time she has a strong interest in photography, which she studies at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She eventually works at various jobs, including as a secretary, a model, a backup singer, and a writer for *Art Direction* magazine (from which she is fired), *Ingenu* magazine (where she has real success as an interviewer), the newly formed *Ms.* magazine, and *The Village Voice* weekly newspaper.
- 1973 Adopts the name "Jamaica Kincaid."

Works by Jamaica Kincaid

Novels

Annie John: A Novel. 1985

Lucy: A Novel. 1990

The Autobiography of My Mother. 1996

Mr. Potter. 2002

See Now Then. 2013

Short Fiction Books

At the Bottom of the River. 1983

Children's Literature

Annie, Gwen, Lilly, Pam, and Tulip (illustrated by Eric Fischl). 1986

Party: A Mystery (illustrated by Ricardo Cortes). 2019

Short and Excerpted Fiction

"The Circling Hand." 1983

"Columbus in Chains." 1983

"Figures in the Distance." 1983

"The Red Girl." 1983

"Gwen." 1984

"The Long Rain." 1984

"Somewhere Belgium." 1984

"A Walk to the Jetty." 1984

"Ovando." 1989

"Mariah." 1989

"Poor Visitor." 1989

"The Tongue." 1989

"Cold Heart." 1990

"The Finishing Line." 1990

About the Editor

Mildred R. Mickle is an associate professor of English at Penn State Greater Allegheny. She has published extensively in African American Studies, which is her primary area of expertise. She has edited several books and published several essays on African American literature and culture. She is also a published poet, and, when her schedule permits, she has acted in local theater productions and taught theater classes at Greater Allegheny. Also, she is an amateur watercolorist, who has had gallery showings of her paintings at the Hermann Museum.

Contributors

Kirstin Ruth Bratt is an associate professor at Saint Cloud State University, where she recently received the Miller Scholar Award for excellence in teaching and learning. She has published books and articles with the University of Leiden Press (in cooperation with the University of Chicago Press), *Journal of North African Studies*, *Dahlia Press*, *Critical inquiry in Language Studies*, the *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, among others. She has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times in both fiction and poetry, and she is currently completing an MFA program in creative writing. She earned her doctorate from Northern Arizona University with a study on the composing processes of bilingual students.

Tomeiko Ashford Carter is an English and Journalism teacher in the Upper School at Ravenscroft School in Raleigh, North Carolina. She received a PhD in English from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Carter is also the author of *Powers Divine: Spiritual Autobiography and Black Women's Writing* (2008); and she is the editor of *Virginia Broughton: The Life and Writings of a National Baptist Missionary* (2010).

Robert C. Evans is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery. He earned his PhD from Princeton University in 1984. In 1982 he began teaching at AUM, where he has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teaching Professor, and University Alumni Professor. External awards include fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and the Folger, Huntington, and Newberry Libraries. He is the author or editor of over sixty books and of more than four hundred essays, including recent work on various American writers.

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