

**Friends: A Dialogue**  
**(based on reading and almost misreading**  
**Jamaica Kincaid's 'Annie John'\*)**

*Kathy Mezei*

**Dialogue entre amies**

*Ce texte de fiction nous entraîne dans une direction tout à fait différent de Annie John, le roman de Jamaica Kincaid, bien qu'il traite des deux mêmes personnages principaux, Gwen et Annie. Dans le texte de Mezei, les deux adolescentes engagent un dialogue silencieux dans lequel elles se révèlent aux lecteurs indiscrets et dévoilent l'absence d'un vrai dialogue entre elles.*

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The hero [heroine?] is located in a zone of potential conversation with the author, in a zone of *dialogical contact*. – M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 45.

1. *Gwen*

if I phone her now it will seem as if I am too eager, I'll wait. Annie is my best friend, though. We look good together – she's so tall and dark, that white skin, big eyes; if I were her I'd wear my hair different, blunt cut or something; it hangs in her face too much as mom would say, as mom *does* say – I think she thinks its sexy or something. It really mostly looks messy, breaking into thin strands, uneven, split hairs. I'm smaller and fair, and my hair is curlier, much curlier, and I'm too fat. Mom says I'm going to lose it when I get older, but I've always been too fat and I am going on a diet soon. I wonder if Ross likes girls thin or

\* Annie narrates her own story and slowly emerges as an (naturally) unreliable, not entirely likeable, and irascible narrator. When I reached the chapter called 'Gwen,' entitled after Annie's friend, I thought for a moment, good, now we will have Gwen's narration and version of events, but instead Annie continues to narrate her own story, and in this chapter ostensibly focuses on her friendship with Gwen. In line with my 'mis' reading, in this story (another) Annie and Gwen are in dialogue.

fat; he's been looking over to Annie a lot lately. I wonder if she likes him – we tell each other everything like best friends do – Tracy says she and Debby tell each other absolutely everything. Would Tracy tell Debby about a fight, like the one I had with dad, when he wouldn't let me learn how to drive.

'You never let me do anything,' I yelled. 'I can't stay out past 12. I can't smoke in the house. You make a fuss if I have a beer! All my friends can! I want my driver's licence!'

'When you're mature enough,' said dad. 'You can't even keep your room clean. Or help your mother. I don't see you behaving responsibly yet.'

'How can I when you never let me do anything.' I slammed the door to my bedroom. For once, mom didn't come after me, to make up; she agreed with dad. Everyone is against me. Would Tracy tell Debby she can't learn to drive; I'll be the only one who isn't driving. I'll be the laughing stock of my friends. Annie already drives. Shall I call Annie now and tell her how upset I am. She gets most everything she wants; her mom and dad have promised her a car when she graduates, if she gets a C+ average. C+! To get a car I'd have to get an A+, and I get A's anyway. We both like Ross, but I wonder who Ross likes – he hasn't asked either of us out. Well, no one's really asked me out yet, unless you count my second cousin taking me to his sister's wedding, and anyway, the whole family went. It was o.k., but that's hardly a date. Annie's been asked out by Doug and by Steve; she's gone out with Steve about 5 times, and she won't tell me what they do. Is she still a virgin? she won't talk about sex or anything like that; all the other girls will, but she won't; she smokes too; if I smoked, I think mom and dad would throw me out; well they wouldn't throw me out, but something like it; ground me for weeks, yuck. I met Annie one fall; we were in the same class; her parents made her go into the same special programme for advanced kids; some programme, we just end up with more homework than the other kids.

'Keeps you out of trouble,' chants Miss Prim (her name is really Mrs. Pringle, but we call her prim, she's such a prick).

The first day I could see Annie like me hated being there; she sat there in a dark cloud, taller than the other girls; her face more interesting, sculptured somehow, as if she had been places or perhaps thought things other people hadn't. Right away I wanted to get to know her; I kinda vowed to make her my friend. So at lunch time, I

edged towards where she was sitting; I could hear her talking with some other girls.

'This is a shit school,' she was saying, 'Who wants to learn more; I just want to get out of school, get my own place, earn my own money; do stuff.'

'What sort of stuff?' said one of the other girls, 'you mean dope?'

'Na,' said Annie, 'just things that I like to do, and not be interfered with.'

That made her sort of interesting to me; I wanted to find out what sorts of things she meant.

Well I still don't know quite what she meant, though I've asked in all kinds of ways. When I pushed her once she looked at me strangely and said:

'Don't you sometimes just like to be on your own, doing what you want, get up when you want, read a book, have toast, go for a walk, we're always so programmed. Do you realize we hardly know anything about the life that goes on around us. We're always indoors, turning on lights, on heat. What do you know about flowers, or birds, or how they live, do you ever see birds with their babies in their nests? where are the nests, where are the babies? – they must be there, because next spring we see more robins and crows than last year or at least the same number, so they must be there somewhere.'

Then she turned away as if she had said too much. I wondered what to say, I knew it was important that I say the right thing, everything depended on it. I was silent and thought desperately for a few minutes. It's like that black hole you fall into when you have to think and everything is blank, like Mrs. Pringle asking you the answer to something you forgot to do the night before, forgot or couldn't.

'Yes, I know what you mean,' I decided to say.

But it must have been the wrong thing for she looked back at me with a little smile at the side of her mouth, and asked me if I had a match on me.

I tell Annie things, like the time I almost drowned, falling off the dock, and the weird feeling of sinking, darkness, choking till dad pulled me out. Or the time I had a terrible fight with mom; she said I was talking back, I said I wasn't, and there we were yelling, screeching at each other, and I never saw mom so mad. Or the first time I got my period, and I thought I was sick with something, dying, cause there was a brownish patch in my pants, not red like blood was supposed to

be. I tell her about the boys I like, and the girls I don't like, and what everyone says, and what does she think it means. I like discussing songs, the new ones on the radio, and if Ross likes me. She doesn't say too much, just lets me talk. I tell her really everything because you need to talk with someone, and she's my best friend.

## 2. *Annie*

Last night with Ross was not bad; he made me come, most of the other boys don't know how. But I better keep going out with Steve, he's boring, but I have a feeling about Ross; he may disappear on me. I have to want him and all the others. I can still feel his body pressed against me, hard and long and sweaty, his male smell. And the chlorine smell of semen, all over. It feels good just to be lying here by myself in bed, staring out the window, I can see the branches swaying slightly in the wind. Later I'll get up and go for a walk, before mother starts telling me to help clean up the kitchen. Before Gwen phones. Gwen. She tells me everything, I'm her best friend. That first day of class, when I saw her open face looking at me, I had a feeling she would want to be my friend. She's so earnest and insecure, blows with the wind, but I don't mind her. She talks away and that gives me some idea how girls of sixteen should talk, should think. I always feel I'm off track. I don't know how to be like others. Then I look at her face, and it's a reflection of the world I live in – its music, cruising shopping malls, the right haircut, dates.

I read the wrong books, alchemy, Greek mythology – Gwen would laugh that bewildered giggle of hers, she reads teen romances – but I think I must be a witch, and there's things I need to know – oh hell, I hear mother calling me; no, she's calling father, I can't call him dad, imagine calling you father, dad, imagine having a father who drove you places, picked you up at dances, rumpled your hair at breakfast, gave you \$20.00 to go shopping. What am I saying, father gives me money for shopping, he will even buy me a car when I graduate, if I get a C+ – what a joke I could get an A+ if I cared, but I hate the bloody school, he only sent me there to impress his friends, his business associates as he calls the other crooks he wheels and deals with. Father, all I know about fathers, is that they fuck you Tuesday nights when mother goes out to play bridge. Not anymore though; I'm too big and strong now; he's even a little afraid of me.

'If you say a word to anyone I will kill you and your mother,' he told

me when I was 5 the first time, hurting, bleeding, scared so bad, and he told me the last time when I was 15. Now I try not to be alone in the house with him. Thank God he works late and is seldom home. I lock my bedroom door. Always. Even during the day. And soon I will leave and maybe one day I will kill him. He'll give me money to live; I know how to make him; I'll get an apartment, or maybe move to the country. Then I can be left alone, without mother always asking me to help clean the house, that scared rabbit look on her face as if a spot of dust will be her downfall; without that hypocritical bastard pestering me; without Mrs. Pringle's sarcasms.

'Is it too much to expect you to complete your assignment on time. It's a privilege to be in this programme; you musn't abuse that privilege. I want it on my desk by 8:30 tomorrow morning.'

You old bag, I would think to myself, I was lying in the back of Ross's car, doing things you probably never heard of. I didn't have time for that silly assignment. An essay on the images of blood in *MacBeth*. Blood for Christ's sake.

No, in my country place, one day, I will look out the window and see birds dipping in the sky, feeding their young, I will search out their nests, and watch all day long, even all night. I will watch but I won't have to talk to anyone, there will be silence, the silence of birds and sky, and there won't be Gwen to show me how to behave like the rest of the world behaves. Maybe I'll call Gwen; we haven't talked for a whole day, and we can go for a walk together. Is that what girls do?