

ANNIE JOHN

LIVING  
LITERATURE  
SERIES

JAMAICA KINCAID

A PERMA-BOUND PRODUCTION

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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**SYNOPSIS**

The title character evolves from a young girl to an aspiring nurse and from innocent to realist during the 1950s: she buries a friend, experiences her first menstruation, gradually establishes a life independent of her mother, and overcomes a serious illness. The powerful ties between mother and daughter are explored by tracing the various stages of Annie John's progress from childhood to adolescence, while describing the wrenching struggle to separate from their mothers that characterizes early adolescence for many girls.

Annie John was born on September 15 on the Caribbean island of Antigua. The specific year of her birth is not noted. Her mother's name is also Annie; her father Alexander is thirty-five years older than her mother. Two of his children are four and six years older than she is. Annie and her parents live in a house that her father, a carpenter, built himself. He also built all the furniture. Her mother, a homemaker, made all their linen, curtains, and most of their clothing.

The novel is divided into six sections, a cycle of interlinking short stories. The first, "Figures in the Distance," begins with a loss of innocence, as the young Annie John experiences death in many forms. The dead people Annie John has heard about come closer and closer into focus when she is ten years old. At that time, she finds out that a girl younger than she is has died in her mother's arms. "Until then," she notes, "I had not known that children die." She comes to link death with her mother, especially with her mother's hands, since her mother has prepared the dead girl for burial. This imagery foreshadows the symbolic death of her own "girlhood" as she moves inexorably into adolescence. The separation from her mother is like death in its severity, for Annie John is an especially beloved only child.

"The Circling Hand," describes how Annie John and her mother are inseparable. The mother and child bath together, the swirling waters linking them closer. Annie and her mother wear identical clothing. Annie John is completely wrapped up in her mother's daily routine. The child follows her mother throughout her day, seeing how she shops and cooks, eats and laughs. The child's identity is created through these daily chores as well as her mother's vivid memories. Her mother has stored all of Annie John's childhood belongings in a trunk. Annie remembers looking through the trunk full of keepsakes with her mother, and as her mother held each thing in her hand, she would tell Annie a story about herself. Annie describes her childhood as a "paradise," but the summer she turns twelve, the paradise starts to crumble. With the onset of puberty, Annie is forbidden to dress like her mother. When Annie attempts to play in the trunk as she had done in the past, her mother answers "Absolutely not! You and I don't have time for that any more." Annie feels a deep sense of betrayal and she begins to fester with rage. Annie John sees her father as a bitter rival who has replaced her in her mother's affections. The anguish of being cast out of her mother's

world shifts her affections from her mother to her school friends.

In "Gwen" Annie tries to recapture the closeness she had with her mother. She writes about swimming with her mother as if they were one creature. Unable to swim alone, Annie recounts watching her mother from an island as she swims. A ship comes between them, cutting her mother off from her view, and she panics, like a baby when its mother vanishes from sight. When the ship passes, Annie is devastated to discover that her mother has not been paying attention to her. As her mother pays less and less attention to her, Annie is forced to create a secret world with her friends.

This process continues in "The Red Girl." Gwen and the Red Girl, two of Annie's friends, are opposites, Annie's light and dark sides. Gwen is neat, clean, and serious—everything that is safe, familiar, and acceptable to Annie's mother. Gwen even smells like Annie's mother, the smell of lavender. The Red Girl, in contrast, is rebellious, dirty, untamed and free. She plays marbles, a game that Annie's mother had forbidden. From the Red Girl, Annie learns how to be treacherous. She lies and steals, hiding her treasures under the house.

In "Columbus in Chains," Annie's estrangement from her mother continues. Annie feels especially betrayed when her mother tricks her into eating breadfruit, a food Annie violently dislikes.

"Somewhere, Belgium" takes Annie to her fifteenth year. The conflict between Annie and her mother reaches full force. Feeling "more unhappy than I had ever imagined anyone could be," Annie must nevertheless continue with her daily routine. As a result, she goes to school, to church, and worst of all, continues to live with a mother who has "suddenly turned into a crocodile."

Annie experiences a mysterious illness in "The Long Rain." Annie's mother believes that Annie's illness has been brought on by a hex administered by one of her husband's former mistresses. In addition to the British physician Dr. Stephens, she also consults an obeah woman named Ma Jolie. When Annie John continues to be sick despite the efforts of Ma Jolie and Dr. Stephens, Annie's maternal grandmother Ma Chess, herself a formidable obeah woman, appears. The reader learns that conjuring is like a family trade: "Whatever Ma Jolie knew, my grandmother knew at least ten times more. How she regretted that my mother did not show more of an interest in obeah things." Although her mother has rejected voodoo, Annie's extraordinary nature suggests that she is focusing more on her own formidable power. Ma Chess leaves as mysteriously as she arrived, and Annie is cured after three-and-a-half months. The cure for Annie's recovery is not credited to Ma Chess, however. It is Annie who cured herself. She reasons her way back to sanity and eventually finds a place for herself in life.

In "A Walk to the Jetty," Annie decides to leave Antigua to become a nurse in England, although this decision results in

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a painful, and necessary, separation from her mother. "No, I am not you," Annie John tells her mother in this chapter, "I am not what you made me." By the end of the novel, Annie has left her mother, father, and homeland to pursue a career in nursing.

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jamaica Kincaid is the pen name of Elaine Potter Richardson. She was born on May 25, 1949, in St. John's, Antigua, West Indies. Annie John, as with Kincaid's subsequent novel *Lucy*, is highly autobiographical. Like her character Annie John, Kincaid's father was a carpenter. Also like Annie John, Kincaid lived in a home without electricity or running water. As Kincaid described in *Annie John*, she herself had a bitter separation from her mother and left her island paradise. Rather than going to England to become a nurse, however, she came to America and worked as an au pair, a live-in child-care worker. This part of her life is described in detail in *Lucy*.

After several years in America, Kincaid became a U.S. citizen. She married Allen Shawn, an actor, filmmaker, dramatist, and composer. Shawn is the son of former *New Yorker* editor-in-chief Wallace Shawn, who was for many years one of the most powerful literary arbiters in America. Kincaid and her husband have one child, a daughter.

Kincaid began her career as a magazine journalist. Editors at the prestigious *The New Yorker* invited her to write for the opening feature "Talk of the Town" after her playful insights into American culture caught their attention. Soon after, Kincaid began to explore her childhood and adolescence in short stories.

Kincaid's fiction was first published in installments in *The New Yorker*. Widespread critical success came when the stories were collected and published as a book entitled *At the Bottom of the River*. The book contained a series of sketches describing life in the Caribbean.

Kincaid remained as a staff writer on *The New Yorker* until 1996, when she had an argument with the new editor-in-chief about hiring television personality Roseanne to edit an issue of the magazine. Kincaid felt that Roseanne lacked the literary credentials to be associated with a magazine as respected as *The New Yorker*; the editor disagreed and Kincaid severed her staff connection.

### CRITIC'S CORNER

With only a handful of books, Jamaica Kincaid has become a prominent American writer—even though her books are set in a foreign land. She is highly acclaimed for her descriptions of life in the Caribbean, her sensitive examination of the theme of maturity, and her concern for mother-daughter relationships. Her works are also celebrated for their poetic literary style, especially their rhythm and imagery. She has been called a master of characterization and elliptical narration. For example, Ike Onwordi, reviewing Kincaid's writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, said, "Jamaica Kincaid uses language that is poetic without affectation. She has a deft eye for salient detail while avoiding heavy symbolism and diverting exotica. The result powerfully captures the essence of vulnerability." A review in *The Atlantic Monthly* praised the "cool, precise style of *Annie John*"; the *Nation* noted that the rich language of *Annie John* works best when "it is undercut by ironic detachment or not overburdened by intense feeling." And the *Los Angeles Times*' reviewer wrote: "Kincaid's imagery is so neon-bright that the traditional story

of a young girl's passage into adolescence takes on a shimmering strangeness, the familiar outlines continually forming surprising patterns."

Patricia Ismond is equally enthusiastic about *Annie John* and Kincaid's writing in general. Ismond argues that in *Annie John*, Kincaid "gives testimony of the powerful ties between mother and child in what must rank among the most penetrating studies on the subject so far." Ismond believes that the roots of Kincaid's brilliant style lie in the child's instinct for fantasy, the free play between imagination and the world of fact. She sees this ability to capture the essence of childhood as Kincaid's special achievement. "In exploring it," Ismond claims, Kincaid "renews our understanding of the meaning of innocence and the values and possibilities of our first world."

Critic Roni Natov notes that "Like the writing of other contemporary black women, particularly the work of Paule Marshall and Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid's fiction focuses on the importance of continuity and community as they are preserved and kept alive by mothers, through their stories and through their connection with their daughters." She sees *Annie John* as a novel based on that bond.

The eminent writer Salman Rushdie is equally captivated by Kincaid's work. He describes her writing as "a jeremiad of great clarity and a force that one might have called torrential were the language not so finely controlled"

Kincaid's achievement has been recognized by others as well. In 1983, Kincaid received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

### GENERAL OBJECTIVES

1. To define the meaning of maturity
2. To understand the intense emotional bonds between parents and children
3. To explore the effects of maturation on both generations
4. To discuss the reasons for a child's defiance
5. To explore the dynamic of an adolescent in crisis
6. To probe the nature of dependence
7. To contrast the needs of the family versus the needs of the individual
8. To understand irony
9. To contrast settings
10. To describe different cultural norms

### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the relationship between Annie and her mother, especially its ambivalence
2. To note Annie's love for her mother
3. To describe how and why Annie John defies her mother so strongly
4. To comprehend why Annie's mother starts to push her daughter away
5. To analyze how Gwen and the Red Girl express the two different sides of Annie's character
6. To contrast the characters of Annie's mother and father
7. To understand and appreciate the family's attempts to deal with Annie's difficult maturation
8. To define the nature of Annie's mysterious illness
9. To discuss the patriarchal West Indian family
10. To understand why Annie leaves Antigua for England, despite her last-minute misgivings

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### MEANING STUDY

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint the context in which the item appears.

1. When my eyes rested on my father, I didn't think very much of the way he looked. But when my eyes rested on my mother, I found her beautiful. (Chap. Two, p. 18)  
*(Annie admires her mother's graceful neck, long braided hair, and beautiful nose. She finds her mother's mouth entrancing; her teeth, like perfectly matched pearl buttons. In short, Annie thinks her mother is the most beautiful person on earth. Her admiration is so great as to border on adulation. Love this strong can only result in disappointment as Annie matures and naturally grows away from her mother. The second half of the novel traces the traumatic break between Annie and her mother.)*
2. My mother said that usually when I kicked around in her stomach and she told me to stop I would, but on that day I paid no attention at all. When she told me this story, she would smile at me and say, "You see, even then you were hard to manage." (Chap. Two, p. 21-22)  
*(With enormous affection and a touch of pride, Annie's mother describes Annie's great activity in utero. Annie is delighted that her mother was able to visualize her even before she was born. She is pleased that her mother remembers even the smallest details of her existence. This suggests to Annie that she is the center of her mother's existence, even more important than her father. Readers can also infer from this anecdote that Annie and her mother had a vital bond even before Annie's birth. The story is significant because it is highly ironic. Annie's mother tells the anecdote to praise Annie's spunkiness and spirit. But as the story progresses, Annie's spirit will swell to outright rebellion, culminating in a mysterious illness. The idyllic love will become outright hatred. By the end of the story, the breach between the two women will be so strong that Annie travels with great relief as far from her mother as she can—to England.)*
3. What a new thing this was for me: my mother's back turned on me in disgust. (Chap. Two, p. 28)  
*(As Annie matures, her naturally high spirits turn to rebellion. As a perfect clone of her mother, the child had been petted and praised. Now, Annie is sent off to learn manners and so get her final polish. But Annie refuses to accede to authority. She is thrown out of the manners class for making vulgar noises each time she had to practice a curtsy, which made the other girls laugh. Annie is also thrown out of her piano lessons for eating the plums that had been put out purely for decoration. Knowing that she has behaved very badly, Annie tries to lie her way out of the situations. Disappointed and embarrassed, Annie's mother tries to discipline her daughter with disapproval. Annie is shocked by her mother's abrupt turn around.)*
4. "Annie is an unusually bright child. She is well behaved in class, at least in the presence of her masters and mistresses, but behind their backs and outside the classroom quite the opposite is true." (Chap. Five, p. 79)  
*(Annie recounts what her teachers are forced to write on her report card because of her contrary behavior. This causes Annie's mother to burst into tears. She had hoped to dazzle her friends with Annie's report card; instead, she hides the report card in the trunk, on the very bottom. This passage shows Annie's ambivalent feelings toward her mother, which is manifest in her increasingly contrary behavior.)*
5. My mother said, "You just ate some breadfruit. I made it look like rice so you would eat it. . . . When she laughed, her mouth opened to show off big, shiny, sharp white teeth. It was as if my mother had suddenly turned into a crocodile." (Chap. Five, p. 84)  
*(Annie detests the taste of breadfruit, a large, round, starchy fruit. It must be cooked before it can be eaten. It is usually baked or roasted. On one level, Annie's mother is concerned that her daughter is so thin. The starchy breadfruit is high in vitamins and very healthful. But Annie sees her mother's actions as another betrayal. The hands that had previously caressed Annie are now being used to betray her; the teeth Annie had previously admired now look predatory to her.)*
6. My mother and I each soon grew two faces: one for my father and the rest of the world, and one for us when we found ourselves alone with each other. (Chap. Six, p. 87)  
*(This passage shows how Annie and her mother become locked in conflict over Annie's maturation. To Annie's father and the rest of the world, the two women are polite and kind, yet to each other everything darkens. Alone with her mother, Annie feels enormous hate—and enormous love. One level, she wants to kill her mother, yet if her mother died, she, too, must die. Annie deals with her love/hate feelings by sublimating them in a dream. In her dream, Annie imagines that her mother would kill her if she had the chance. She chants this line to herself as a mantra as she walks down the road.  
In 1976, the feminist poet and novelist Adrienne Rich wrote that the bond between mother and daughter—"essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature, more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement." The mother/daughter conflict forms the center of Annie John.)*
7. As if to save myself, I turned to her and said, "Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter." (Chap. Six, p. 102)  
*(Annie had remembered a boy laughing cruelly when he tricked her into sitting in a nest of stinging ants. As a teenager, she meets the same boy again. Once more he humiliated her. The first time, Annie's mother had come to her daughter's rescue. She had sheltered her daughter and shunned the boy's mother. But this time, Annie's mother turns on her daughter and calls her a "slut." This final assault on Annie's sexuality increases the gulf between mother and daughter. The mother becomes a "darkness"—a shadow—that stands between Annie and the rest of the world.)*

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8. "Until this moment, in my whole life I knew without a doubt that, without any exception, I loved you best." (Chap. Six, p. 103)  
*(After Annie says, "Well, like father like son, like mother like daughter," the world seems to stop spinning on its axis. Annie's mother is so shocked that her daughter would say this that she withdraws her unconditional love. To reinforce her point, Annie's mother turns her back on her daughter. Annie is rooted in her spot, unable to understand her pain. Her muteness and lowered gaze suggests her own descent, the fallen state in which she feels trapped with her mother.)*
9. Days before it was decided that I was not well enough to go to school, I walked around feeling weak, as if at any moment I would collapse in a heap. (Chap. Seven, p. 109)  
*(Annie finally retreats into illness, a mysterious sickness permeated by silence and darkness. She regresses into an infant state and cannot understand what her parents are saying. "I can see the words leave their mouths," she says. "The words traveled through the air toward me, but just as they reached my ears they would fall to the floor, suddenly dead." She cannot understand; she cannot speak. Paradoxically, this infant state allows her to heal the rift between her feelings of love and hate.)*
10. None of the people in the wedding picture, except for me, had any face left. (Chap. Seven, p. 120)  
*(In her illness, Annie tries to cleanse herself of any impure feelings by washing. In her delirium, she actually washes some family photographs she finds when she is briefly left alone. In the photograph of her aunt's wedding, Annie tries to wash away the creases from her aunt's wedding veil and remove the dirt from the front of her father's trousers. When she is finished, she dries the pictures completely with talcum powder. This symbolizes Annie's attempt to restore herself to the presexual world of her childhood. In another picture, she washes away every part of her confirmation shoes, the symbol of rebellion against her mother, who thought the shoes were vulgar.)*

### COMPREHENSION STUDY

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages from the novel.

#### Questions 1-5 Literal Level

1. What tragic event happened to Annie's father when he was a child?  
*(When Annie's father was a little boy, his parents kissed him good-bye and sailed to South America. The child was left in the care of his grandmother. He never saw his parents again—the only contact came in the form of gifts at Christmas and on his birthday. The child grew to love his grandmother and consider her his mother. Grandmother worked very hard and took good care of Annie's father. She awoke every morning at half past five while the boy still slept. She prepared his bath and breakfast to help him get off to work on time. The two were very close: they always slept in the same bed, even when the child was mature. One morning she did not awake at five thirty to prepare breakfast for her*
2. Who is Gwen and how does Annie feel about her?  
*(Gwen is Gweneth Joseph, a girl whom Annie meets in class. On the day that they meet, Gwen reaches into her tunic and gives Annie a small black rock. Annie accepts the rock, which smells of lavender, and places it in her hand. At that moment, Annie feels as though she and Gwen have fallen in love. After school, the girls walk home together and compare their likes and dislikes. As they walk, Gwen and Annie set themselves apart from the other girls. Gwen and Annie are soon inseparable; if you saw one, you saw the other. They walk to and from school together every day and tell each other their most private secrets. The only thing that Annie does not share is her changed feelings toward her mother. Annie especially likes the neat way that Gwen wears her school clothes.)*
3. How does Annie's mother react to her daughter playing marbles?  
*(First Annie's mother reacts with astonishment. "Marbles?" her mother says. "I had heard you were playing marbles, but I just couldn't believe it." Since Annie's mother is convinced that playing marbles is a vulgar, lower-class pursuit because it is a form of gambling, she then reacts with great anger. She crawls under the house and begins a furious search for the illicit marbles. Obsessed with her search, Annie's mother looks behind some planks, tears apart neat piles of books, and overturns hatboxes. Days go by, and Annie's mother continues her search. She continues to question Annie about the marbles and attempts to trick her into revealing the truth.  
The reaction seems extreme but is not totally unwarranted because Annie has been lying and stealing to avoid detection. Annie lies to her mother about her marble-playing and hides the evidence of her pastime under the house. In addition, Annie steals marbles from the other girls.)*
4. What is the dunce cap? How and why is it used?  
*(The dunce cap is in the shape of a coronet, with an adjustable opening in the back so that it can fit any head. It was made of cardboard and shiny gold paper with the word "DUNCE" written in shiny red paper on the front. When the sun shines on it, the dunce cap glitters, making it appear to be something desirable. Just the opposite is true. Miss Edwards, the teacher, uses the dunce cap to humiliate recalcitrant or slower students. Every Friday morning, the students are given a test to see how well they are doing with the lessons for that week. The girl who scores the lowest is made to wear the dunce cap all day the following Monday. A girl named Ruth wears it much of the time.)*
5. What happens when Annie defaces the textbook?  
*(Normally, when Miss Edwards gets upset she stands in front of the class, her face so red that it seems to be on fire. Her eyes seem to bulge out of her head; the small pimples on her face look like they are about to explode. her head shakes from side to side and her bottom*

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seems about ready to touch the ceiling. Overcome with emotion, Miss Edwards screams at Annie—or the other disobedient student—with all her power. But when Miss Edwards sees that Annie had defaced the textbook, she is absolutely speechless. Her eyes stop, her pimples stop, her bottom stops. Unable to comprehend the enormity of the transgression, Miss Edwards sends Annie to the headmistress. Annie is removed from her position as prefect, a position of great respect and power. Further, as an added punishment, Annie is forced to copy books I and II of Milton's *Paradise Lost* within the week.

Annie assumes that her mother will console her, but her mother greets her absent-mindedly because she is deep in conversation with Annie's father. Then Annie's mother tricks her into eating the detested breadfruit, and the child's humiliation and sense of betrayal are complete.)

### Questions 6-8 Interpretative Level

6. Who is the Red Girl and what does she represent?

(The Red Girl [never identified by a more specific name], is Annie's friend. The girls are close in age, although no specific numbers are mentioned. The Red Girl has hair the color of "a penny fresh from the mint," so unruly that it has to be tied into corkscrews. Her face is big, round, and red, like a red moon. She has large, broad feet. Her most outstanding physical characteristic, however, is her lack of cleanliness. Her dress is dirty, her hair matted and tangled. Her fingernails are caked with dirt and it is apparent from her smell that she never bathes. Later, Annie learns that the Red Girl bathes only once a week and rarely combs her hair or brushes her teeth. Annie, on the other hand, bathes twice a day and cannot go outside without her shoes and hat. Annie's mother pays a woman to dress her hair.

The Red Girl's behavior is as wild as her appearance. She plays marbles all the time. If this isn't scandalous enough, the Red Girl is so good at marbles that she plays with the Skerritt boys. Annie's mother, in contrast, will not let her daughter even mention the Skerritt boys, much less play with them. The Red Girl plays in the forbidden lighthouse and engages in all sorts of off-limit actions.

The rebellious, dirty, untamed, and wild Red Girl symbolizes all of Annie's notions of impropriety. She is linked to Annie's budding sexuality—especially with the menstrual blood that sets off the gulf between Annie and her mother. With the Red Girl, Annie acts out the forbidden and dark sides of erotic love. It is love tangled with rage and guilt, linking pain and pleasure, as this passage from page 63 illustrates: "Then, without saying a word, the Red Girl began to pinch me. She pinched hard, picking up pieces of my almost nonexistent flesh and twisting it around. At first, I vowed not to cry, but it went on for so long that tears I could not control streamed down my face. I cried so much that my chest began to heave, and then, as if my heaving chest caused her to have some pity on me, she stopped pinching and began to kiss me on the same spots where shortly before I had felt the pain of her pinch. Oh, the sensation was delicious — the combination of pinches and kisses. And so wonderful we found it that, almost every time we met, pinching by her, followed by tears

from me, followed by kisses from her were the order of the day."

7. What does Annie mean when she says on page 106 that our "two black things" got the better of her and her mother? What are these "black things" and what do they mean?

(On page 106, Annie says that she and her mother try their best to keep up appearances, but the "two black things" get in the way. The image reappears on page 111, when Annie first takes ill. In this scene, Annie drinks an egg cordial laced with rum, a drink she usually detests. But since nothing has any taste, she is able to drink the vile mixture. The sound of her parents talking rocks back and forth in her head and seems to echo off the walls. As the rain drives into the roof, Annie looks inside her head. "A black thing was lying down there, and it shut out all my memory of things that had happened to me." She is unable to recall a single memory. She falls asleep, numb. The same image comes up a third time on page 114.

Annie imagines the word "Brownie" is hanging just in front of her eyes, the black thing inside her head becomes even more oppressive. Then "a part of the black thing broke away, as if it had been dropped to the ground, and a small yellow light took its place." Inside the light, Annie sees herself as a Brownie, a small toy Brownie.

The "black thing" is the intense rage that drives Annie and her mother apart. Both Annie and her mother are reduced to a terrifying "black thing" that lives within them both. For Annie to make some peace with this overpowering rage, she must completely break down and retreat to infancy. Annie sees herself as a distorted remnant of her childhood, small and mechanical, a "toy Brownie." She has been cut off from the world of adults. The deluge of rain, so unusual in Antigua, can be seen as a cleansing river that washes away the rage—the "black things"—and allows Annie to complete her difficult journey to adulthood.)

8. What role does Ma Chess play in the novel?

(Ma Chess is Annie's maternal grandmother. She is an obeah woman, a practitioner of voodoo. When Annie's condition doesn't improve despite intense nursing, Ma Chess appears in Antigua as if by magic.

Ma Chess is fully involved with the mysterious, eerie world of Caribbean voodoo. When Annie's mother was thirteen, her brother John had died. He was twenty-three and adored by all who knew him. To Ma Chess, John had died because she deferred to her husband's wishes and relied on a doctor rather than on an obeah woman. The doctor had known nothing about John's illness; the obeah woman had known it all. Ever since this experience, Ma Chess had made a total and unwavering commitment to the spiritual world of voodoo.

Ma Chess settles on the floor of Annie's room. When Annie is having especially difficult nights, Ma Chess climbs into her bed and stays with her until the child is once again comfortable. Ma Chess feeds Annie all her meals, bathes her, and changes her clothing. Annie finds her presence and ministrations very comforting.

One day three and a half months later, Annie's illness leaves as mysteriously as it came. Ma Chess leaves the



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island as strangely as she had arrived—on a day when the boat was not due in port. It is significant that Ma Chess arrives and leaves when there is no scheduled boat. This is simply another sign of her power over good and evil. Ma Chess is the mythical “flying African” able to cross the seas without a boat.)

### Questions 9 and 10 Critical Level

9. What is Annie’s attitude toward death?

*(Annie’s feelings toward death are ambivalent. On one hand, she understands that death could rob her of the person she loves the most—her mother—which would be tragic at this crucial stage of her development. “I was afraid of death,” she says, “as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of death because we never could tell when it might show up again.” (page 4) On the other hand, Annie wishes to learn more about death so she can be like her parents, important participants in the rituals of death. Annie especially wants to learn more about death to become closer to her mother, the person she worships at this stage of her development.*

*Annie’s mother must be available to help her neighbors in times of sickness and death. This is an accepted part of the Caribbean culture in the 1950s, especially for women. Often, she must help take sick children to the doctor and then to nurse them back to health. If they do not recover, Annie’s mother is often called upon to help lay out the body and support the family in their grief. Annie becomes aware of this very early in the book, when a neighborhood girl named Nalda dies. Annie’s mother performs her duties by helping the dead girl’s mother lay out the body. “Nalda’s mother wept so much that my mother had to take care of everything, and since children were never prepared by undertakers, my mother had to prepare the little girl to be buried (page 6).*

*After the incident, Annie is fearful. “I began to look at my mother’s hands differently. They had stroked the dead girl’s forehead; they had bathed and dressed her and laid her in the coffin my father had made. My mother would come back from the dead girl’s house smelling of bay rum—a scent that for a long time afterward would make me feel ill.” (page 6)*

*Annie’s father assists by making the coffin for the child. He is involved physically, but not emotionally as is Annie’s mother. Significantly, it is Annie’s mother who asks her husband to prepare the coffin; he does not volunteer to do it on his own.)*

10. How does Kincaid use imagery in this book?

*(An image is a word that appeals to one or more of our five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, or smell. Writers use imagery to help readers more clearly visualize the people and places in their novels. Kincaid’s work is especially rich in imagery, which contributes to her lyrical style. For example, Kincaid uses images that appeal to touch, sound, and sight to describe Gwen’s appearance: “If a small breeze blew, it would ruffle the ribbons in her short, shrubby hair and the hem of her tunic; if the hem of her tunic was disturbed in that way, I would be able to see her knees. She had bony knees and they were always ash-colored, as if she had just finished giving them a good scratch or had just finished saying her prayers. The breeze might also blow back the brim of her hat, and since she always walked with her*

*head held down I was able to see her face: a small, flat-tish nose; lips the shape of a saucer broken evenly in two; wide, high cheekbones; ears pinned back close against her head.” (page 47) These sharp images enable readers to imagine clearly how Gwen looked.)*

### Questions 11 and 12 Creative Level

11. While Annie is suffering from her nervous breakdown, she is unable to communicate with others. With great concentration, she can hear her mother’s voice and distinguish some of the words. The message, however, remains disjointed. Combine the words listed on page 116 to construct what you think Annie’s mother is saying to her daughter. Here are the words: imagine, that, most, nicely, because, down, little, basket, connive, well, trust, behavior, beads, beasts, and blight. Add whatever additional words you need to complete the message. You may want to create two or three different messages with the words.
12. Annie’s mother tries two main ways to cure her daughter’s puzzling illness: she calls the English Dr. Stephens and she tries the voodoo medicine of her mother, Ma Chess. Create a cure for Annie’s mysterious illness. Be ready to explain why your cure would be effective.

### LITERARY TERMS AND APPLICATIONS

For a better understanding of Jamaica Kincaid’s style, present the following terms and applications in her novel:

**point of view** the position from which a story is told. In the first-person point of view, the narrator is one of the characters in the story. The narrator explains the events through his or her own eyes, using the pronouns I and me. In the third-person omniscient point of view, the narrator is not a character in the story. Instead, the narrator looks through the eyes of all the characters. As a result, the narrator is “all-knowing.” The narrator uses the pronouns he, she, and they. In the third-person limited point of view, the narrator tells the story through the eyes of only one character, using the pronouns he, she, and they. Jamaica Kincaid selected the first-person point of view because it gives the story an immediacy and sense of drama. It also narrows the focus to the viewpoint of one person, Annie John, which helps readers filter experience and thus understand what is happening in an unfamiliar setting.

**setting** the time and place where the events take place. The setting of a story may be stated outright, or readers may have to infer it from details in the story. Writers give clues to the setting in the characters’ speech, clothing, or means of transportation. *Annie John* is set in the Caribbean island of Antigua in the 1950s. In some scenes, the setting becomes a crucial plot element, reinforcing the theme. For example, Annie’s nervous breakdown coincides with a torrential rainstorm that lasts for three months. Rain is very unusual in Antigua; despite an annual rainfall of 44 inches, the country suffers from bouts of periodic drought. Kincaid uses the rain as another variation on the water symbolism to underscore the relationship between Annie and her mother. Whether presented as amniotic fluid, the ocean water, a bath, or finally as rain, the water shows that the link between Annie and her mother is a natural one that cannot be severed.

**style** an author’s distinctive way of writing. Style is

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made up of elements such as word choice, sentence length and structure, figures of speech, and tone. An author may change his or her style for different kinds of writing and to suit different audiences. In poetry, for example, an author might use more imagery than he or she would use in prose. Kincaid uses a highly poetic, lyrical style, as the following passage illustrates: "She burned some incense in one corner of the room. She put a dozen tiny red candles—with white paper on their bottoms, to keep them afloat—in a basin of thick yellow oil. When she lit them, they threw a beautiful pink glow all over my room." (page 117)

### ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

#### Art

1. On page 77, Annie describes the picture of Christopher Columbus that appears in her textbook. Columbus is seated in the bottom of the ship, looking quite dejected. Draw this picture, using the description on page 77 as a guide.
2. Annie is mesmerized by the caption under the picture of Columbus. Under the picture, she writes her own caption in Old English lettering. Write the caption "The Great Man Can No Longer Just Get Up and Go" in Old English script. Use the masthead of the *New York Times* or a calligraphy book as a guide.
3. With its tropical climate, lush vegetation, and warm ocean, Antigua is a popular vacation destination. In fact, more than sixty percent of Antigua's economy is based on tourism. Create a travel brochure for Antigua, persuading people to visit the country and enjoy its many attractions.

#### Music

1. Annie refers to a calypso song on page 80. Find two popular Caribbean calypso songs and play them for the class. Explain their rhythm.
2. With her friends, Annie often replaces the words in popular songs to create new songs. Using the rhythm of a popular song, write new words to describe the problems that Annie experiences as she matures. Share your song with the class.

#### History/Social Studies

1. While she suffers from her illness, Annie has visions of a miniature Brownie. Annie is remembering her time as a Girl Guide, the British equivalent of Girl Scouting. Brownies are the second level of Girl Scouts, after Daisies. Find out more about Girl Scouts and Girl Guides. Here are some areas to research: the Girl Scout Law and Promise, special Girl Scout rituals, the Brownie story, Juliette Gordon Low, Sir Robert Baden-Powell and his sister Agnes, Girl Scout age levels, Scouting uniforms, and Scouting insignia and recognitions.
2. Learn more about the structure of the British educational system, the basis of the school system in Jamaica Kincaid's home country of Antigua. Find out about such things as "forms," subjects studied, degrees granted, and tests. Compare and contrast the British educational system to America's schooling.
3. Was Christopher Columbus a brave explorer or a selfish despoiler? Find out more about his life and expeditions.

Then debate this issue with a small group of classmates.

4. Write a report on the history of Antigua. Include information on the country's "discovery," name, colonial period, independence, government, and leaders.

#### Science and Health

1. Annie has her mental breakdown in the 1950s, more than forty years ago. She is treated with rest and different medicines. How are mental breakdowns treated today? Share your findings with the class.
2. Annie and her family eat a great deal of fish and vegetables. Is this a healthful diet? Make a menu for one week showing a healthful diet to follow.

#### Language Arts

1. Annie John includes words from British English, such as cricket, rounders, and sweet (for candy). Create a British English/American English dictionary. Try to include at least ten different words from each language. Here are some to get you started: trunk/boot, elevator/lift, call up/ring up, movies/cinema, baby carriage/pram, vacuum/hover, crisps/chips.
2. Annie is punished for writing in a book by having to copy over two books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Find out more about *Paradise Lost*. When was it written? Why? How long is it? Why is considered a "classic"? What is the story Milton tells in this poem? Then read at least three pages of the poem and summarize them in your own words.
3. Imagine that you are Annie. Write a letter to one of your friends, explaining how you feel about your mother when you are fifteen years old. Be sure to describe your emotions clearly.
4. Annie is very influenced by *Jane Eyre*. Read the novel and then write a reaction essay explaining why you did or did not like the book. Explain why you think Annie liked the book so much.
5. Annie's mother believes that her daughter should study piano and manners as well as Latin, French, mathematics, English, and science. List subjects that you think a well educated young woman should know.

#### Drama

1. Working with a small group of friends, act out the scene at the end of the book where Annie leaves the island for England. Try to capture each character's emotions at their leave-taking.
2. With a partner, improvise a scene between Annie and her mother in which they put on one face for themselves and another for Annie's father. Try to show the stress of their conflict and the reasons for their deception.

#### STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Imagine that you are Dr. Stephens, the physician treating Annie's mysterious illness. Write a medical report explaining what is wrong with Annie and how you would treat her illness. Is her illness caused by a hex, as her mother believes? Or is it caused by stress or overwork? Perhaps she has a viral infection. Cite specific examples from the novel to make your point.
2. For many different reasons, Elaine Potter Richardson took the pen name "Jamaica Kincaid" when she started writing. Find the real names of these famous writers:

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Currer Bell, Mark Twain, George Orwell, Ellis Bell, Dr. Seuss, Ed McBain, Joseph Conrad, Constant Reader, O. Henry, Nathaniel West, Moliere. See how many more pen names you can find for famous writers in America and abroad.

3. Create Annie's report card, using her achievements and the comment on page 79 as a guide. Include grades for all her major subjects as well as comments about her behavior.
4. How can mothers and daughters learn to be separate but close? Write a booklet giving some guidelines to help teenage girls and their mothers get along more smoothly. Possible ideas include getting to know each other better, speaking directly and straightforwardly, making time for each other, and accepting limitations.
5. Make a Mother's Day card from Annie to her mother. Specify what age Annie is when she makes the card. Be sure to include a message in your card. If you wish, your message can be in the form of a poem.
6. Readers often select books based on critical reviews printed in journals, magazines, and newspapers. Write a newspaper review of *Annie John*. Analyze the novel based on such elements as characterization, setting, plot, theme, and mood. Cite specific examples and quotations from the novel to support your opinion.
7. Suppose that you were casting a movie version of Annie John. List some actors and actresses who you think would be right to play the major characters in the novel. Next to each name, write a sentence explaining why you think this person would be suitable for the role.
8. Take the novel ten years in the future and write a scene showing what has happened to Annie John. Include specific information and be sure that Annie's decisions are in keeping with her character as established in the novel. If you wish, work with a small group of classmates to act out your scene for the class.
9. Rewrite the final scene in the novel from the point of view of Annie's mother or father. Compare and contrast your version with the original.
10. Imagine that Annie did not leave Antigua. What do you think would have happened to her? Write a scene showing a typical day in her life on the island.

### ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT

1. List scenes that show that Annie and her mother love each other very deeply. Try to include at least three scenes from the novel. Then explain the seeming contradiction: why do the two women clash so deeply, if they care for each other so much?
2. Explain how the patriarchal society of the West Indies affects Annie and her mother. Start by analyzing Annie's father and his role in the novel.
3. Describe the major scenes in the plot, especially those that show Annie's feelings, character, and her motivations. Describe each scene in detail and explain why it is important to the plot.
4. Make a family genealogy tracing the relationship of all the people in Annie's family. Be sure to include her parents, Ma Chess and her husband, their deceased son, and the children Annie's father has had by other women.

## OTHER WORKS BY JAMAICA KINCAID

*At the Bottom of the River* (short stories)

*A Small Place* (novel)

*Lucy* (novel)

### RELATED READING

Judy Blume's *Iggie's House*

Arna Bontemps's *Lonesome Boy*

Eloise Greenfield's *Koya Delaney and the Good Girl Blues*

William Hooks' *Circle of Fire*

Ellen Howards's *Her Own Song*

James Howe's *A Night Without Stars*

Dean Hughes's *Family Pose*

Julius Lester's *Long Journey Home*

Virginia Sorenson's *Miracles on Maple Hill* (Newbery Medal)

Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Newbery Medal)

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ANNIE JOHN

VOCABULARY TEST

Using the vocabulary words that follow, complete each sentence. You will have answers left over.

amiss	frail	nook	revered
breadfruit	gaits	oaf	ruffled
chemise	glow	odious	shadow
crocodile	impertinent	papaya	taut
defaces	jocular	prefect	tonic
fidget	mauve	remorse	wolf

1. Annie could be such a fresh, \_\_\_\_\_ child that her teachers were constantly punishing her.
2. To her teacher's horror, Annie \_\_\_\_\_ the school book by writing in it.
3. Worst of all, she did not show any \_\_\_\_\_ for her actions; she did not seem to be sorry at all.
4. In punishment, Annie loses her place as \_\_\_\_\_ to the \_\_\_\_\_ Hilarene, a girl Annie did not like at all.
5. To help Annie feel better, her mother makes her a \_\_\_\_\_ of rum and raw egg.
6. To Annie, Mr. Oatie is a clumsy \_\_\_\_\_, always doing something foolish.
7. Even though Annie is horrified at being caught writing in the book, her mother is unable to tell that anything is \_\_\_\_\_.
8. When she was a young child, Annie was unable to sit still for very long and would always \_\_\_\_\_ in her seat.
9. Miss Nelson had a \_\_\_\_\_ way of speaking to the class, as they secretly amused her.
10. When Annie was a girl, she \_\_\_\_\_ her mother as one would worship a saint.
11. After being tricked into eating \_\_\_\_\_, Annie thought her mother had turned into a \_\_\_\_\_.
12. The lit candles threw a beautiful \_\_\_\_\_ over Annie's room.
13. The breeze \_\_\_\_\_ the hem of Gwen's tunic.

## COMPREHENSION TEST A

**Part I: Matching (30 points)**

Match the following descriptions with each character from the novel. Choose your answers from the list below. Each answer will be used only once.

- A. Annie John
- B. Miss Nelson
- C. Mr. Oatie
- D. Nalda
- E. John Milton

- F. Gwen
- G. Christopher Columbus
- H. Miss Charlotte
- I. Miss Moore
- J. Hilarene

- K. the Red Girl
- L. Ma Chess
- M. Dr. Stephens
- N. Johnnie
- O. Mineu

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. the English doctor who treats Annie's illness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. the headmistress at Annie's school
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. an obeah woman of formidable power
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. an ill-groomed, marble-playing young girl
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. a neighborhood girl who dies
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Ma Chess's son, who died at a young age from a mysterious illness
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Annie's neighbor, who collapsed and died while speaking to Annie's mother
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Annie's neat, well-behaved friend
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. the author of *Paradise Lost*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. the explorer who discovered Antigua
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. one of Annie's teachers
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. the awful girl who gets Annie's place of honor as prefect
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. the girl who writes in her textbook
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. the boy who makes Annie sit on a hill of red ants
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. a clumsy carpenter who works with Annie's father

**Part II: True/False (20 points)**

Write **T** if the statement is true or **F** if the statement is false. Write your answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. When Annie is still a young child, she starts to go to funerals without her parents' permission because she is obsessed with death.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Annie's mother is a careless shopper and homemaker.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When Annie was very young, she did not think that her mother was attractive; she did not like her teeth or neck.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When Annie was a child, she and her mother often bathed together in a tub filled with fragrant water.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Annie's mother was born and raised on Antigua; when Annie's mother was sixteen, she moved to the island of Dominica.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Annie writes her school essay about swimming in the ocean with her mother.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The essay is not very well written and Annie gets a poor grade on it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Under the influence of the Red Girl, Annie starts to do better in school and her relationship with her mother improves.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When Annie is fifteen years old, she is stricken with a mysterious illness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. At the end of the book, Annie leaves her home to take a boat to England.

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**Part III: Cause and Effect (20 points)**

Justify each of these statements. Write your answer in the space provided.

1. Annie goes to funerals and the cemetery because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Annie and her mother shop and cook together because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Annie's mother helps prepare the little girl for her burial because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Annie's mother keeps special things of Annie's in a trunk because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Annie and her mother grow apart because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Gwen and Annie become friends because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. The Red Girl and Annie are drawn to each other because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Annie loses her position as the prefect in her classroom because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Annie has a breakdown because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Annie leaves her home at the end of the novel because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Part IV: Essay (30 points)**

Answer one of the following questions in an essay of at least 250 words. Try to include specific details from the book in your answer.

1. Explain how Annie and her mother feel about each other.
2. Analyze what message this novel conveys about mothers and daughters.
3. Describe the role Annie's father plays in Annie's maturation.

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COMPREHENSION TEST B

**Part I: Matching (20 points)**

Identify the settings that fit the following descriptions. Choose your answers from the list below. Each answer will be used only once. You will have five answers left over.

- |                    |                    |                  |
|--------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| A. Barbados        | F. the cemetery    | K. America       |
| B. the town        | G. Antigua         | L. Dominica      |
| C. under the house | H. the school yard | M. England       |
| D. Puerto Rico     | I. the lighthouse  | N. the sea       |
| E. Belgium         | J. the trunk       | O. the courtroom |

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. where Annie is born and raised
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. where Annie goes at the end of the novel
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. a place that Annie is forbidden to visit
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. where Annie's mother was born
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. where Annie hides her marbles
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. where Annie's mother stores Annie's report cards
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. the setting of Annie's essay about her and her mother
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. where Annie imagines she will live after she finishes reading *Jane Eyre*
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. where Annie and the Red Girl play
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. where Annie is humiliated by a boy she knew as a child

**Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)**

Select the best answer for each question. Write your answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. When Annie is still a very young child, she
  - a. starts to go to funerals without her parents' permission.
  - b. plays marbles nearly every day.
  - c. steals money from her mother's purse.
  - d. is alienated from her mother.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Annie's mother is best described as
  - a. old and worn out.
  - b. attractive and hardworking.
  - c. a careless shopper and homemaker.
  - d. well-meaning but ineffectual.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. When Annie is a child, she
  - a. overeats.
  - b. has many, many friends.
  - c. admires her mother very much.
  - d. does poorly in school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When Annie was a child, she and her mother
  - a. do not spent time together.
  - b. go to the beach every day.
  - c. quietly prepare for mass.
  - d. often bathed together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Annie's mother was born and raised in
  - a. England.
  - b. Dominica.
  - c. Antigua.
  - d. America.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Annie writes her school essay about
  - a. her grandmother.
  - b. Christopher Columbus.
  - c. swimming in the ocean with her mother
  - d. voodoo.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Annie's father works as a
  - a. fisherman
  - b. doctor.
  - c. carpenter.
  - d. farmer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Under the influence of the Red Girl, Annie
  - a. gets better grades.
  - b. starts to lie and steal.
  - c. improves her grooming.
  - d. joins the Girl Scouts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. When Annie is fifteen years old, she
  - a. learns to play marbles.
  - b. learns voodoo.
  - c. becomes a nun.
  - d. is stricken with a mysterious illness.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. At the end of the book, Annie
  - a. is hospitalized.
  - b. kills her mother.
  - c. leaves her home for England.
  - d. becomes a teacher.

**ANNIE JOHN**

**Part III: Identification (20 points)**

Explain the significance of the following details from the novel.

1. water

2. marbles

3. Gwen and the Red Girl

4. Christopher Columbus

5. hands

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Answer one of the following questions in an essay of at least 250 words. Try to include specific details from the book in your answer.

1. Compare and contrast Annie and her mother.
2. Analyze the author's use of humor in the novel.
3. Trace how Annie grows up and changes as a result of her experiences.



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**ANSWER KEY**

**VOCABULARY TEST**

1. impertinent
2. defaces
3. remorse
4. prefect, odious
5. tonic
6. oaf
7. amiss
8. fidget
9. jocular
10. revered
11. breadfruit, crocodile
12. glow
13. ruffled

**COMPREHENSION TEST A**

**Part I: Matching (30 points)**

- |      |       |       |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. M | 6. N  | 11. B |
| 2. I | 7. H  | 12. J |
| 3. L | 8. F  | 13. A |
| 4. K | 9. E  | 14. O |
| 5. D | 10. G | 15. C |

**Part II: True/False (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T  |
| 2. F | 7. F  |
| 3. F | 8. F  |
| 4. T | 9. T  |
| 5. F | 10. T |

**Part III: Cause and Effect (20 points)**

Answers will vary.

**Part IV: Essay (30 points)**

Answers will vary.

**COMPREHENSION TEST B**

**Part I: Matching (30 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. J  |
| 2. M | 7. N  |
| 3. F | 8. E  |
| 4. L | 9. I  |
| 5. C | 10. B |

**Part II: Multiple Choice (20 points)**

Answers will vary.

**Part III: Identification (20 points)**

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. a | 6. c  |
| 2. b | 7. c  |
| 3. d | 8. b  |
| 4. d | 9. d  |
| 5. b | 10. c |

**Part IV: Essay (30 points)**

Answers will vary.

**TEACHER'S NOTES**



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