



Aunt Jen

CARIBBEAN CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS

Written as a series of letters from the child Sunshine to her absent mother, *Aunt Jen* traces the changing attitudes of a child entering adulthood as she tries to understand the truth behind her mother's departure and make sense of her relationship with her family.

A painfully one-sided correspondence, *Aunt Jen* reveals the complex inheritance we pass on to our children.

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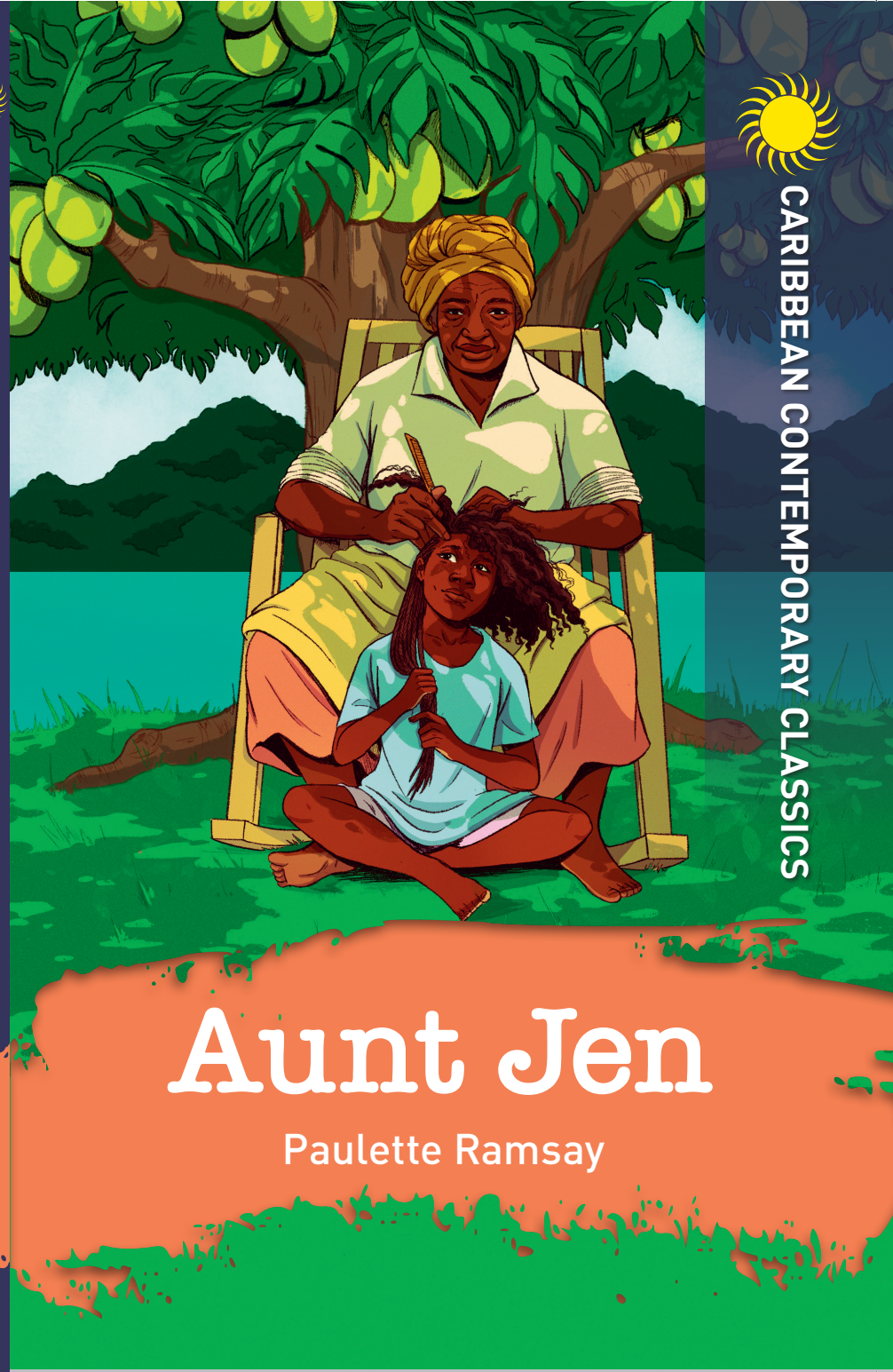
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Aunt Jen

Paulette Ramsay

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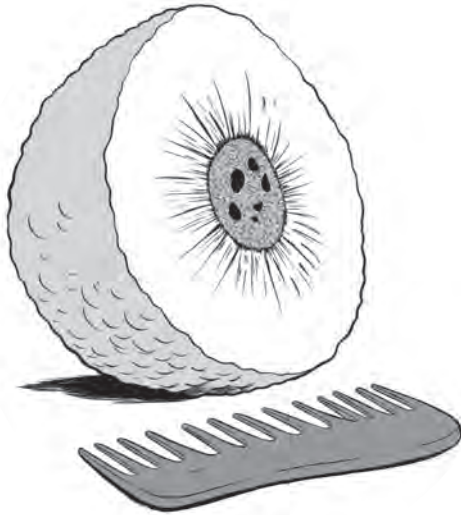
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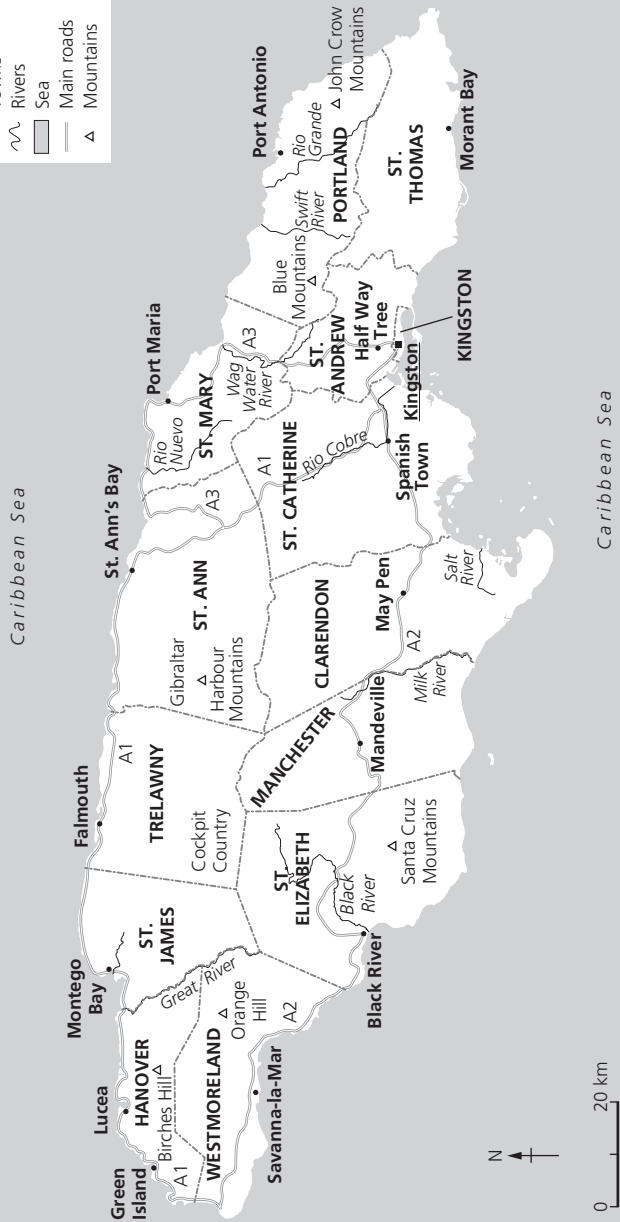
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Map of Jamaica

Key

- Regions
- Capital city
- Towns
- Rivers
- Sea
- Main roads
- Mountains



Caribbean Contemporary Classics

Introduction

Over the last century, Caribbean authors, overflowing with stories about the life and society around them, have written many great and enduring works of literature. The Caribbean novels in this *Caribbean Contemporary Classics* collection were written from around the mid-1900s to the present day, and we are proud to publish them. They serve as unique and personal records and are also works of art, running parallel to what historians say about the region, and revealing to wider audiences the depth and brilliancy of generations of Caribbean writers.

The novels in this collection are re-issued in their original forms even though some words and phrases may seem derogatory in the eyes of modern readers. Some words have been partially redacted, but none have been removed. We acknowledge the sensitivities of persons who have experienced discrimination especially in the verbal form and would like to state without reservation that the publisher in no way supports discrimination against any persons or groups of persons by the publication of these works. As in all works of literature, the language used in these novels reflects the authors' experiences and insights and forms an integral part of the text they set out to produce.

As the publisher, we have followed a number of principles in bringing these works to a wider audience. First, it is important to us to allow readers to interpret the authors' words in the context of the story as a whole, reflected through the readers' own experience, but without trying to dictate what that interpretation should be. Second, we respect the authors' integrity and their intellectual property. Third, we believe it to be important to experience works of art from specific geographic and historical contexts in their original form. The choice, as we see it, is whether to publish the book or not, rather than whether to change its language or not. In the present series, we have opted to publish a series of books which we believe to be significant, valued and important parts of the canon. They are rich, engaging and luminous works, in the authors' authentic voices, and we offer them to readers in the hope that they will delight, entertain and inform.

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21 February 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

Last night I had a very bad dream. I dreamt that I was on a ship which was sinking. I jumped from the ship to try to swim to shore but I began to sink. You were also on the ship and you jumped off to try and rescue me but as I reached out to grab your hand you turned into a River Mumma and swam away.

I told Ma about my dream and she said is not a good one. She said that a River Mumma is a sign of bad luck and she doesn't like it at all at all. She asked me to describe the ship and when I did, she said that it looked just like the one you went to England on.

This is the third time I'm dreaming about you. The first time, I dreamt that you were standing in a boat in John's River and you were calling me but when I started to come towards you you disappeared and left the empty boat rocking from side to side.

In the second dream I saw you boarding a boat with some other people. I decided to follow you on to the boat and I was just about to put my foot on the plank when a big, tall, strapping man pulled it up and the boat sailed away.

You didn't have a face in the dreams. Well, maybe I just didn't see your face, but I know it was you. In any case, I don't know what your face looks like – I really don't remember. But I know that you are the woman I saw in my three dreams. Something, I can't explain what, makes me know it was you.

That is why I decided to write to you. I asked Ma if she thought it was a good idea to write to you and she said she will neither say yeah nor nay. She said maybe if she was me she wouldn't write

Aunt Jen

but she not me so I must decide for myself cause is ebry dankey to him sankey. So I decided to write.

Apart from telling you about my dreams I don't really have much to say. In any case Ma says when you are writing someone for the first time the letter should not be too long.

The part I find strange about my second dream is that you didn't seem to see me at all. You walked away with the other people without seeming to notice that I was there. Anyway, I want to ask you before I close if you ever dream about me and can you send a picture of yourself for me?

Ma says I must never ask anyone for anything, but it's just a picture, so maybe that is not so bad.

Bye,

Sunshine

.....

27 May 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

It's been three months since I wrote to you and I have been going to the post office every day to see if you replied to my letter. Ma said give it one month for my letter to get to you and another month for your reply to get to Jamaica but still I haven't got a letter from you.

I am thinking that maybe you didn't reply because you are upset that I called you Aunt Jen in my letter. Maybe you think that is too familiar. Ma always says familiarity breeds contempt. I mentioned it to Ma but

she said not at all because is jus a name and you couldn't be so finniki about a name. I did not explain in my first letter that everybody in the house here always calls you Aunt Jen. Ma always says to me, 'You Aunt Jen sen some money for you or you Aunt Jen say she sendin a parcel for you.' I always call you Aunt Jen in my mind.

So I hope that is not why you did not reply. Well if that was why you can reply to me now that I explained it all. I am anxious to get your letter.

Love,

Sunshine

PS: Please remember the photograph.

.....

3 June 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

I got a letter from Uncle Roy today. He writes to me very often. He says he always thinks of me as his daughter because I used to call him 'Dada' when I was little. It's funny but I think of him as my father too. I remember how he used to play with me and tickle me. He would throw me up in the air, catch me and put me down and then run and hide and shout, 'Come an fine me!' I used to have so much fun searching for him under the beds, behind the doors and in the closets. One day he hid in Gramps' big hamper basket and I couldn't find him until Ma showed me where he was. Ma used to say he was just like a lickle chile, so jokify, but he was just happy and loved to make me happy too. I remember everything just like it was yesterday.

I cried so much when he went to America, but I was very happy when I got his first letter and now even though I still miss him a lot, I love to get his letters. He sent me a picture of himself with his wife. She looks like a nice lady. Her face is sort of pretty, not very pretty, but she looks all right. I was wondering if you would look like her in your picture, or maybe better.

I told Uncle Roy that I wrote to you and you have not replied. He said he would talk to you about it. I didn't tell him to ask you anything. I just told him that you never reply to any of my letters. Anyway, I hope he gets you to write to me. He says he doesn't think you are vexed with me about anything, but maybe you're just working hard right now.

Ma is a bit upset with you for not replying to my letters. She does not say so to me though and I know she doesn't want me to know that she is upset because when I ask her why she thinks you did not reply she says I must just be patient. But the way her face changes every time I ask her about it makes me realise that she is not pleased.

Anyway, I was just sitting down doing nothing so I thought I would write to you. Actually, I like to write. Sometimes I write poems or letters to myself so I enjoy doing it. Sometimes I think that maybe you didn't get my letters. Sometimes letters get lost. Still it would be strange if my two letters to you got lost. Uncle Roy always gets my letters.

I am going to end the letter now because I hear Ma calling me. I think she wants me to go to the shop to buy something. Every time I go to the shop Miss Mabel asks me, 'Sunshine, how is your Aunt Jen?' I always say, 'Fine ma'am.' That's what Ma tells everybody when they ask her, except Aunt Sue. Sometimes I hear her telling Aunt Sue that she hasn't got a letter from you for a

long time and sometimes she tells her that you sent an empty letter even though she told you things hard hard. Anyway, she says she prays for you night and day because she doesn't know if your life in England is rough or easy. You don't tell her the full full story, she told Aunt Sue. Anyway, the last time I went to the shop, Miss Mabel said to tell you that it's time for you to come back to Jamaica and look at your old friends' faces before they die. She asked me if you didn't have any plans to come back to Jamaica this year and I told her that I didn't think so. When I told Ma she said Miss Mabel is a nice lady, but she mind everybody business. Ma says I must realise that people will always ask questions but shet mouth don't ketch fly.

Well, this is a very long letter so I will end it now. I hope you get it and reply to me soon. I am looking forward to your letter and photograph.

Love,

Sunshine

PS: This morning when I told Ma I wrote you another letter she just looked at me and said, 'Sunshine, less turkey, less yaws.'

.....

26 June 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

I sat and thought about you for a long time today. I tried to picture you in England, walking, talking, going to work. I keep wondering what you are doing and thinking about. I think you must be a busy busy lady why you haven't replied to my letter. I

thought you would be so happy to get a letter from me that you would write to me quick quick.

I'm trying to remember what you looked like when you were here but the only thing I remember is when you used to take all of us children to buy ice cream at Miss Mabel's shop on Sunday evenings. I was the littlest one and sometimes Pam would say, 'Aunt Jen Sunshine wastin her ice cream' and you would say, 'Is awright Pam she is jus enjoyin it.' I don't remember what you look like though. Why don't you send a picture?

I told Ma what I remember the other day, but she said she doesn't think I remember anything about you at all because I was so young when you and Pam were here. She says I'm mixing it up with something else that happened with somebody else. Ma says that Pam's mother came for her right after you left and Willie's mother came for him exactly one year after that and I was only about three at that time so there is no way that I could remember these things. But I know what I remember.

I can't write you a longer letter because I hear Ma calling me. She says I spend too much time writing writing and my writing getting me nowhere. She's not in a good mood today because she can't find her teeth. She took them out and she can't remember where she put them, so she's really miserable. I have to stop now.

Sunshine

PS: I just had a funny feeling that maybe you're not getting my letters. I am sure you would not get my letters and not reply to me.

5 July 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

Ma thinks I should stop pushing up on you. She says if you want to write you will write and I must stop badda badda you. Last night I heard her telling Aunt Sue that she cannot believe that a daughter of hers would treat her own child the way you are treating me. She didn't know I was listening but she told Aunt Sue that she's not going to let me write any more letters to you until you reply. She doesn't know that I'm writing this one or she would be very upset with me.

Last night I opened the box that Ma keeps your old things in. I searched and searched for a photograph but I didn't find any. I only found some figurines, your old clothes, some books and your letters to God. Oh, I almost forgot the wigs! I was really surprised to see all those wigs. I cannot imagine why you would need to wear all those different wigs. I think they are all ugly and the hair looks like goat's hair. I would never wear those things on my head. I prefer my own hair. I think it's softer and prettier than those wigs. Anyway, I hid and read the letters. There was one very short one which is still puzzling my mind because all it said was:

Dear God,

Je veux quitter cet endroit.

I can't tell Ma about it because she always says I am not to interfere with that box. I didn't even know that you knew another language. I had to doublecheck the letter to make sure

I'm spelling the words correctly here. You can send and tell me what it means.

Anxious to hear from you,

Sunshine

PS: Sometimes I wish I could see you face to face to talk to you.

.....

19 July 1970

Dear Aunt Jen,

I can't wait to get your letter before I write to you. I feel that what I have to tell you is so important that I must write and tell you right away.

Ma went to Madda Penny about my dreams yesterday. She said Madda Penny said they are serious serious dreams and she doesn't like what she's seeing at all. She told Ma that she could only tell her the meaning of the second dream because she needed me before her, so she could read me up and see what the first and third dreams mean.

She says the second dream means that you have a man who plays an important part in your life. She says he is a strong man. He is domineering. He rules you. He controls you. She says you are afraid of him and he doesn't know that you have a child in Jamaica. She says the dream means that when he finds out about me he is going to cut off all communication between us, just like how the man in the dream pulled up the plank and prevented me from getting to you.

Ma says she'll take me to hear what the other two dreams mean next week when Uncle Johnny gets paid and gives her some money. She says I'm to wait until I know the meaning of the other two dreams before I write and tell you anything. But I can't wait for two weeks before asking you if any part of Madda Penny's interpretation of the dream is true. Do you really have a man who is ruling your life? Did you get married again?

I really don't think you have, because you would tell Ma and Uncle Roy, and Uncle Roy would tell me. In any case I heard Ma tell Aunt Sue that your life is mashed up for ever because my father says he's not giving you the divorce and you won't be able to marry another man. So I'm thinking that maybe Madda Penny is not so good at interpreting dreams because her explanation makes it seem as if you are married again and Ma said she was sure you can't marry again. I have to go now, Ma is calling me.

(Two days later)

I am just getting a chance to finish this letter. Ma caught me writing it and said that this writing writing thing is going to damage my eyes. She says I do too much reading already and if I add all this writing writing to it my eyes will go right back to where she brought them from. Every time Ma thinks that I'm using my eyes too much, as she puts it, she talks about where she brought them from. Even though I know that nothing will happen to my eyes, every time she says that she makes me a little worried. I wouldn't want my eyes to go back to where Ma took them from. That was a long time ago – about seven years to be exact. I woke up one morning and my two eyes were red like ackee pods, as Ma put it. They itched and itched and itched. Nobody could figure out what happened to them. Ma took me to Lucea every Friday to an eye specialist but he said he didn't know

what to do to stop the itching and clear up the redness. Even now when I think about it I can feel the itching. Ma gave me carrot juice every day until I hated the sight of carrots. That didn't help. Every week somebody else came to Ma with a different remedy. None of them worked.

One day Granny P. came and told Ma that she heard about a remedy that would cure my eyes. Ma decided to try it. She would try anything at that stage. So every morning she woke me up early early to wash my face in the dew on Gramps' dasheen and coco leaves. That was bad enough but after that I had to go to Blossom's house (Aunt Mirrie's daughter) and she would squeeze milk from her breasts into my eyes. Well, I don't know if it was the milk or the dew or both that worked but my eyes got better quick quick after that. The itching stopped and the redness cleared up. Every time I look at Blossom's son now I remember how I used to get some of his milk in my eyes.

I really wouldn't want my eyes to go back to where Ma brought them from, but I don't think that writing these two little letters will do anything to them. I will just make sure that Ma doesn't see me writing. I have to go now, but I hope to get a letter from you soon.

Until I hear from you,

Sunshine

PS: There is so much you don't know about me and there are so many questions that I have for you. I'm sure you will explain everything when you write and I know that your letter will be very long because you have a lot of things to tell me. Please write soon and don't forget the photograph. Send one which shows your face plain plain.