

A. M. Homes

A. M. Homes (b. 1962) was named Amy Michael Homes when she became the adopted daughter of a painter whose young son had died of kidney disease six months before she was adopted. Growing up in Maryland, she saw herself as an outsider in the family, made to feel that "something huge had happened before I got there and that everybody was forever in the process of recovering from it and not particularly talking about it." This mood of having missed out on something important in childhood that can never be recovered is captured in "Things You Should Know," the title story of her collection of short fiction in 2002.

When Homes was a child in Maryland, she haunted the Chevy Chase library. As a young reader she admired the writing of John Steinbeck:

I never wanted fiction to be difficult to read, in and of itself. The ideas could be complicated but the object is to make something that anybody could read. I do my work within a very traditional-seeming structure. I really loved Steinbeck. I loved the fact that you could read those books in fourth grade or in college and every time you read them . . . they changed. They are very rich, and not judgmental. . . . I never want to say this is what you should think. I want to say, "Here is a world, what do you think of it?"

As an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College, Homes took classes in creative writing from Grace Paley, who taught her the importance of imagining the lives of her characters. "Grace really talked about figuring out what's accurate for the people you're writing about, not what's accurate for you." As a nineteen-year-old undergraduate, Homes wrote her first novel, *Jack*, about a young boy, the son of divorced parents, who discovers that his father is gay. It was published in 1989, and she adapted it for television in 2004, when it won an Emmy Award.

Homes has published several other novels, including *Music for Torching* (1999), which had its origin as the short story "Adults Alone" in *The Safety of Objects* (1991), her earliest collection of short fiction. She has received numerous awards for her writing, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts stipend. Homes has also been active on the boards of directors at various writing programs, including the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Writers' Room, and Yaddo. She recently published her memoir *The Mistress's Daughter* (2007), describing her experience of "being found" as an adult by her birth mother, who had been the mistress of a married man when Homes was born and who begged to be adopted by the daughter she had abandoned decades earlier.

Things You Should Know

1998

THERE ARE THINGS I do not know. I was absent the day they passed out the information sheets. I was home in bed with a fever and an earache. I lay with the heating pad pressed to my head, burning my ear. I lay with the heating pad

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until my mother came in and said, "Don't keep it on high or you'll burn yourself." This was something I knew but chose to forget.

The information sheets had the words "Things You Should Know" typed across the top of the page. They were mimeographed pages, purple ink on white paper. The sheets were written by my fourth-grade teacher. They were written when she was young and thought about things. She thought of a language for these things and wrote them down in red Magic Marker.

By the time she was my teacher, she'd been teaching for a very long time but had never gotten past fourth grade. She hadn't done anything since her Things You Should Know sheets, which didn't really count, since she'd written them while she was still a student.

After my ear got better, the infection cured, the red burn mark faded into a sort of a Florida tan, I went back to school. Right away I knew I'd missed something important. "Ask the other students to fill you in on what happened while you were ill," the principal said when I handed her the note from my mother. But none of the others would talk to me. Immediately I knew this was because they'd gotten the information sheets and we no longer spoke the same language.

I tried asking the teacher, "Is there anything I missed while I was out?" She handed me a stack of maps to color in and some math problems. "You should put a little Vaseline on your ear," she said. "It'll keep it from peeling."

"Is there anything else?" I asked. She shook her head.

I couldn't just come out and say it. I couldn't say, You know, those information sheets, the ones you passed out the other day while I was home burning my ear. Do you have an extra copy? I couldn't ask because I'd already asked everyone. I asked so many people—my parents, their friends, random strangers—that in the end they sent me to a psychiatrist.

"What exactly do you think is written on this 'Things to Know' paper?" he asked me.

"'Things You Should Know,'" I said. "It's not things to know, not things you will learn, but things you already should know but maybe are a little dumb, so you don't."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "And what are those things?"

"You're asking me?" I shouted. "I don't know. You're the one who should know. You tell me. I never saw the list."

Time passed. I grew up. I grew older. I grew deaf in one ear. In the newspaper I read that the teacher had died. She was eighty-four. In time I began to notice there was less to know. All the same, I kept looking for the list. Once,

in an old bookstore, I thought I found page four. It was old, faded, folded into quarters and stuffed into an early volume of Henry Miller's essays. The top part of the page had been torn off. It began with number six: "Do what you will because you will anyway." Number twenty-eight was: "If you begin and it is not the beginning, begin again." And so on. At the bottom of the page it said, "Chin San Fortune Company lines 1 through 32."

Years later, when I was even older, when those younger than me seemed to know less than I ever had, I wrote a story. And in a room full of people, full of people who knew the list and some who I was sure did not, I stood to read. "As a child, I burned my ear into a Florida tan."

"Stop," a man yelled, waving his hands at me.

"Why?"

"Don't you know?" he said. I shook my head. He was a man who knew the list, who probably had his own personal copy. He had based his life on it, on trying to explain it to others.

He spoke, he drew diagrams, splintering poles of chalk as he put pictures on a blackboard. He tried to tell of the things he knew. He tried to talk but did not have the language of the teacher.

I breathed deeply and thought of Chin San number twenty-eight. "If you begin and it is not the beginning, begin again."

"I will begin again," I announced. Because I had stated this and had not asked for a second chance, because I was standing and he was seated, because it was still early in the evening, the man who had stopped me nodded, all right.

"Things You Should Know," I said.

"Good title, good title," the man said. "Go on, go on."

"There is a list," I said, nearing the end. "It is a list you make yourself. And at the top of the page you write, 'Things You Should Know.'"

Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1930. The book is a collection of her folk tales and stories from the South. It was one of the first books to be published by a Black woman in America. "place,"

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