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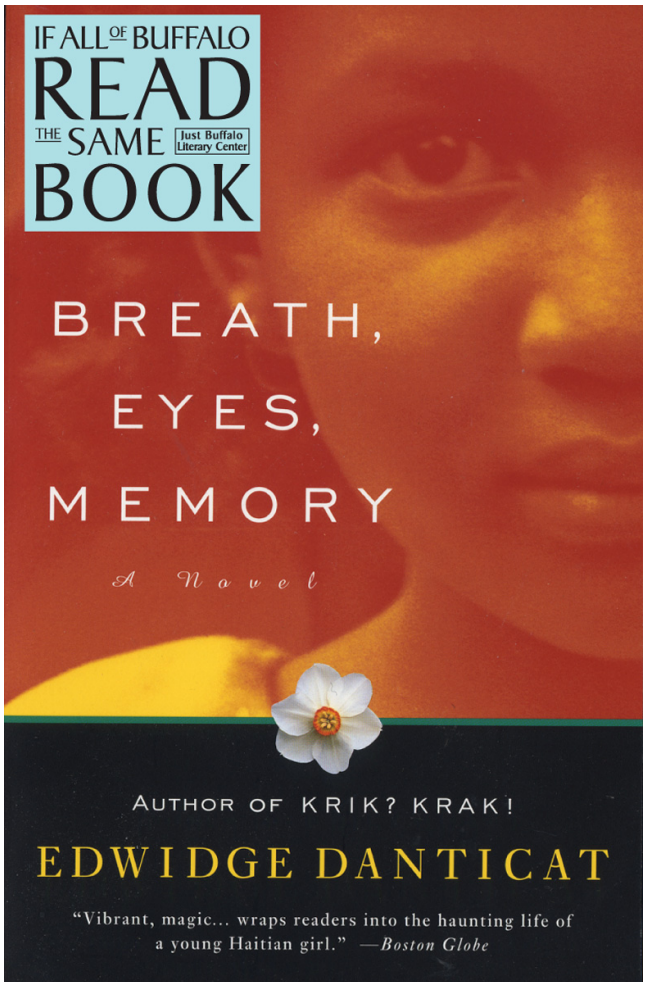
Edwidge Danticat



Edwidge Danticat

Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat was born in Haiti in 1969 but spent most of her life in America. Since creating a successful writing career, she has split her time, her literary research and writing, and her personal life between those two countries, searching as her characters do for truths that speak for the immigrant and for the native.

Danticat spent her first twelve years in Haiti, but barely knew her parents there; she was only two when her father, a cab driver named Andre, emigrated to New York City, and her mother, Rose, a textile worker, followed him to Brooklyn two years later. Danticat and her younger brother stayed behind and were raised by her uncle Joseph, a Baptist minister, for eight years, during which time Danticat learned the Haitian art of storytelling—a rich oral tradition steeped in the myths, familial histories, and religious beliefs passed on by generations of women searching for forms of self-expression within Haiti's strictly religious, patriarchal and, especially in rural areas, illiterate society.

When Danticat was just nine, she wrote her first short story about a girl who was visited each evening by a clan of women. She eventually moved to America to join her parents—then strangers—and she spoke little English at the time. The culture shock and discrimination were so difficult in her family's Brooklyn neighborhood that Danticat remained quiet and shy, turning to books as a means of escape and comfort. Her studiousness paid off; after publishing two critically-acclaimed novels by the age of 26, she has become one of the United States' most talented younger writers and has found a literary voice that blends passion, poetry, and precision.

Danticat has an undergraduate degree in French literature from Barnard College and a master's of fine arts from Brown University. She began writing her first book, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, originally titled "My turn in the fire – an abridged novel," at Barnard, finishing a draft for her MFA thesis at Brown. The novel's narrator and heroine, Sophie Caco, is a Haitian girl born as a child of rape. Like Danticat herself, Sophie comes to New York to reunite with her mother when she is twelve; but, unlike the author, Sophie then discovers her mother's dark secret, which also becomes her own. Danticat says that many people assume that her mother, too, was raped, which isn't true; she did, however, base the book on the "sadness and desolation" she felt during her childhood separation from her parents. Unlike non-fiction, the book is what Danticat calls an "emotional autobiography" that uses her own feelings and memories to create narrative. "I have always split my memories into two realms: one of real memory and one of fictional memory," she has written. "Fictional memory has a series of plot devices, ordered scenes, convenient settings, clever dialogue and revisions aimed at the ending of your choice. Real memory is fragmented, messy, disorganized, has no clever dialogue and you don't always get the ending of your choice. That's why I prefer to write fiction, though it is fiction that draws heavily from certain moments in my life."

Through Sophie's eyes, Danticat explores Haitian foods, landscapes, language, and cultural taboos and traditions, including the ancient Creole stories woven into African *vaudou* (voodoo) beliefs. Among her grandmother's many teachings was the practice of "doubling," or being spiritu-

ally split in two in order to protect oneself or keep watch over another. Myth and belief help comfort Sophie and all the women of her family, sheltering them from the painful events they experience in Haiti and in America: loneliness, discrimination, poverty, political oppression, and physical violence. This includes Sophie's mother's rape at age 16 by a soldier, as well as the generations-old Haitian practice of "testing" a daughter's virginity—a traditional rural practice passed on from mother to daughter. Even in America, Sophie still cannot escape the trauma of this female rite of passage, and ultimately follows in the tragic steps of her mother, Martine, as both try to cope with Haitian culture's obsession with female "purity" and Martine's lingering shame from the sexual assault.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is partly about Danticat's fictional memories of straddling a "doubled" life in Haiti and in America, and all of the confusion contained in that reality. In many of her books, she combines her memories with what she has researched about its history and current events in order to make sense of the immigrant experience. "I blend the Haiti I see today with the Haiti I once lived in and try to create interesting and complex situations for my characters who are facing the current reality as well as the past," she has said in an interview. "Though I don't live in Haiti, I feel very connected to it."

Among Danticat's other published works are *Krik? Krak!* (1995), a short-story collection with settings throughout Haiti, from rural villages and the capital city Port-au-Prince to the dangerous boat crossings to Florida; *The Farming of Bones* (1998), a novel based upon the brutal 1937 massacre of Haitians attempting to cross the border of the Dominican Republic; and *The Dew Breaker* (2004), the story of a former torturer, or dew breaker, who tries to forge a new life in America. *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (2002) is a non-fictional account of how she overcame her fear of Haiti's raucous Carnival festival, and one of her series of young adult novels, *Behind the Mountains: The Diary of Celiane Esperance,* was published that same year. A memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying* (2007) was followed by *Eight Days* (2010), a children's book about one little boy's survival and courage following an earthquake. Her latest book, *Haiti Noir*, is due out in January 2011.

Danticat's literary awards include a Pushcart Short Story Prize, a National Book Award nomination in 1995 for *Krik? Krak!* (she was the award's youngest nominee at 26), an American Book Award for *The Farming of Bones* and fiction awards from *Essence* and *Seventeen* magazines. In 1996, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* earned her a place on *Granta* magazine's Best of Young American Novelists list, and she received a McArthur Fellows Program Genius grant in 2009. Danticat has taught at New York University and the University of Miami, and she currently lives in Little Haiti, Miami, with her husband, Faidherbe Boyer and their daughter, Mira.

Danticat also continues to build her reputation as a passionate advocate for cultural freedom and gender equality in Haiti and beyond. After receiving her master's degree, she took a job as an associate producer with filmmaker Jonathan Demme's New York City office, where she helped produce "Courage and Pain," a 1996 documentary about Haitian torture survivors. She also helped write and narrate the 2009 documentary, "Poto Mitan: Haitian Women Pillars of the Global Economy," which explores the impact of globalization on five women from different generations. She is the editor of *The Beacon Best: Great Writing by Women and Men of All Colors and Cultures* (2000) and *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Dyaspora in the United States* (2001), an anthology of essays, poems, letters and stories that speak to the "double" identity of Haitians living abroad.

By converting her literary gifts into other mediums that help translate the Haitian-American experience, Danticat has become a cultural storyteller and ambassador who speaks in a language that displaced people throughout the world can understand. Her narratives, like the one told by Sophie's family, span oceans. They are about the immutable connection of blood and memory, and the often painful but transformative disconnection of having left a homeland behind.

The Women of the Haitian Diaspora

When Edwidge Danticat moved to the United States in 1981, she joined other native Haitians who, like millions of immigrants from other countries, have been forced to split their lives and identities in two. Like Sophie, the main character in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat reinvented herself—first as a student, and then a mother and wife. She moved to New York, which has one of the largest populations of native Haitians and first-generation Haitian Americans outside Florida. This reinvention serves a purpose for all immigrants: to survive, they must adapt. And, perhaps no country has adapted more readily than the Caribbean island of Haiti.

Haiti stands out culturally and politically as the world's oldest black republic—it gained independence from France in 1804—and one of the first republics in the Western Hemisphere. The majority of its population has ethnic roots in Africa as well as other nations—France and Spain in particular—that colonized and exploited the island as they explored the New World. Because of all the traffic to and from the island, Haiti's population is still culturally varied today but most native-born citizens, including Danticat, consider themselves to be one people. "It was like there was this boat that left Africa and made a lot of stops; some of us got off here, some got off there," Danticat has explained.

Absence was a common theme for Haitians like Danticat who were alive during two of Haiti's most repressive dictatorships. Between 1957 and 1986, Dr. François Duvalier, or "Papa Doc," followed by his son, Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, ruled through manipulation and fear. Initially popular among the middle and lower classes, they offered some hope by improving such basic services as paved roads and access to medicine. But they also used their paramilitary police force, the Volunteers for National Security (VSN, commonly known as the "Tonton Macoutes" after a Haitian mythological monster), to intimidate writers, politicians, and everyday citizens with nighttime kidnappings and public executions. "In Haiti, death was always around us," Danticat once wrote, referring to both the political killings and witnessing her grandmother's natural passing. She remembers seeing Baby Doc and his wife throwing money out the windows of their Mercedes Benz to poor children in her neighborhood—showy acts that did little to ease the constant fear of persecution.

The decades of violence under the Duvaliers crippled Haiti's economy, already weakened from more than a half-century of constant military revolutions, political coups and citizen uprisings on the tiny island. The chaos eventually drove thousands of Haitians—both rich and poor—out of the country during the 1960s and 1970s to seek asylum in Western nations like the United States, Canada, and France. Many Haitians still risk, and lose, their lives on overcrowded boats headed to Florida.

Sophie Caco's parents were part of the Duvalier-era migrations and, after they left, her life was shaped by loss. Danticat has noted of her own mother whom she barely knew until they met in Brooklyn, "I didn't understand... I didn't get it at all—and not just the fact that she was absent, but the conditions that drive that and that separate families...."

Haitian immigration to the U.S. began with its French settlers but grew to include all levels of Haitian society during the Duvalier-era exodus; today, more than one million native-born Haitians live abroad, and thousands more leave the country temporarily every year. These newcomers often discover that America's large cities inflict their own brand of economic and social hardships. In Danticat's New York, for example, racism, crime and joblessness spiked during the economic downturn in the

"Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier

1970s and 80s, and despite Brooklyn's reputation for ethnic variety, Danticat remembers violent conflicts erupting in her neighborhood between African Americans and Haitian immigrants—the "boat people" whose French-Creole accents and dress immediately marked them as outsiders.

The irony of the black-on-black racism Danticat discovered in Brooklyn was the fact that cities like New York and Miami were centers for Africa's largest diaspora at the turn of the 20th century as its people fled discrimination, corruption, and violence. From her years living within the Haitian-American communities of New York and Little Haiti in Miami, Danticat writes about a culture struggling with the same disparities in wealth, status and freedoms she witnessed back home as a girl.

Haiti is still one of the poorest countries in the world, and at times has claimed the lowest literacy rate in the Western Hemisphere. In response to the chronic lack of social infrastructure and educational resources, Haitian women developed a powerful set of cultural tools—primarily language, food, religion and a dynamic, agricultural-based local economy—in order to keep their families and communities intact.

Haitian Creole, or kreyol, is the most common ethnically-merged language in the world—an amalgam of African, French, English, Spanish languages and some dialect from the island's former indigenous people, the Arawak Indians. Considered by Haiti's colonizers and many Haitians themselves as a primitive, uneducated dialect, Creole was finally recognized as an official language in 1987, and its cultural importance cannot be denied. Based on African speech and history as well as the influence of French and Spanish colonization, Creole, like Haiti's vibrant art and music, sought to subvert its colonial oppressors and serve as a means of communication among the illiterate by using clever symbolism: animals and people swap places, colors have meaning, and folktales and fables disguise political discourse.

"The women who came before me were women who spoke half of one language and half another," Danticat writes in the essay "We Are Ugly, But We Are Here." She continues: "They spoke the French and Spanish of their captors mixed in with their own African language… Even though they were afraid that their old deities would no longer understand them, they invented a new language—our Creole patois —with which to describe their new suroundings, a language from which colorful phrases blossomed to fit the desperate circumstances."

As Danticat illustrates, although women were primarily responsible for Haiti's oral traditions and were socially revered as mothers, storytellers, and healers, their voices

were silenced by traditions that expected them to obey men and guard their virginity above all else. However, females have always played a vital role in rural life, and more recently, urban middle-class and elite women have made some gains in business and politics. Women inherit land equally with men and harvest the crops that their husbands plant—not to eat, but to sell at regional markets where they exchange rice, beans, sweet potatoes, yams and corn for earnings they control. They prepare the foods that, even in the best of economic times, are treasured; it is said that Haiti's national dish—rice and beans—is prepared a different way by each Haitian woman who passes the recipe on to her daughters. Priestesses in Haiti's famous vodou (voodoo) religion are also granted the same spiritual powers as males.

Indeed, the same oral storytelling tradition that overcame the population's illiteracy was also deeply rooted in vodou, a uniquely Haitian belief system that combines Catholic ritual with ancient African religious myths, legends, and stories passed down from generation to generation. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the French-Creole who still practice vodou today in parts of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, eastern Cuba, the Bahamas, and the United States, do not dabble in "black magic," but instead seek to heal the sick and expel unwanted spirits while keeping a healthy respect for the connections between the living and the dead. It is a deeply communal way of life that connects Haitians to their family members, villages, and even dead ancestors, no matter where they are in the world.

Haiti's immigrant-based culture, then, either at home or abroad, has learned to walk a fine line between the old and the new as well as between life and death. Haitian Americans must reconcile the memories of Haiti's violent history with its present reality, and the horrific chapters of that past with the many aspects worth celebrating, honoring, and revisiting. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* focuses on the women of the Haitian diaspora: Sophie, her mother, and Danticat herself. It is about how one family's struggle to survive can give voice to the experiences of a people scattered throughout the world.

Readers Questions

1. What is the secret that Tante Atie is keeping from her niece, Sophie Caco? What are some other secrets in the book that people keep from each other, and ask others to keep?

2. Why does Tante Atie refuse Sophie's Mother's Day card?

3. In Chapter 2, Tante Atie tells Sophie, "Your mother and I, we had no control over anything. Not even this body." What events later reveal what she is talking about? How is the human body represented differently by each of the Caco women?

4. The Caco family name refers to a red bird, and the color of Martine's New York apartment. But her former favorite color, yellow, surrounds Sophie as a child in Haiti. What might these colors represent, and why do you think Danticat uses them where she does throughout the book?

5. Why is education so important to the Haitian characters like Tante Atie and Martine? What do reading, words, and books signify?

6. How did Martine's mother and sister react to her rape? Why is sexual purity so prized in Haitian culture, and what might it and rape represent in terms of Haiti's history?

7. The *vaudou* (voodoo) concept of "doubling," or splitting the soul in two, is a common theme in the book, starting with Sophie's two "families" and her journeys in Haiti between her home in the town of Croix-des-Rosets and her ancestral home in La Nouvelle Dame Marie. Where else does doubling appear specifically, and indirectly? What does it allow Sophie to do? What are some other instances of "doubling?"

8. What is the significance of Grandmè Ifé's vision of the young girl?

9. Tante Atie and Martine wanted to be "women doctors" and engineers, despite Atie telling Sophie, "We are a family with dirt under our fingernails." What kept each woman from reaching her dreams? What is Danticat saying here about the Haitian-American experience? The female experience?

10. The "Macoute" soldier who raped Martine was part of a violent military gang named after a mythical monster, a "bogeyman" that kills wayward children. What other Haitian stories does Sophie learn, and why do you think they are so important to Haitian culture?

11. Why did the soldiers kill Dessaline, the blacksmith? What is Danticat trying to say about the Haitian government and its treatment of its citizens?

12. What does food represent for Sophie as a child, and why do you think that changes into an eating disorder later on? How, and where, does Danticat connect eating with Haitian culture and community?

13. Why does Tante Atie suffer from chagrin, and why is that word used like a medical condition in the book? Who else suffers from it, and why?

14. Who are the "people of Guinea?"

15. What is it about New York that doesn't agree with Sophie? With her mother? How does life there compare to life in Haiti?

16. How do Sophie and Martine's dreams relate to their real lives? What might Danticat be saying about the power of dreams, both literally and figuratively?

17. Men play a secondary, but important, role in this book. Who do you think are portrayed as being more powerful, men or women?

18. Sophie's husband, Joseph, is American. Why does Martine distrust him?

19. Why does Sophie make up a name to hide Joseph's identity from her mother?

20. What does Martine mean by "old-fashioned Haitians" and "new-generation Haitians?"

21. What do stars symbolize? Give some examples of where they appear.

22. Why do you think Martine tells the story of the *Marassas* as she *tests* Sophie?

23. What does the *testing* ritual mean for Haitian women, and how does that change once it reaches America?

24. What does Sophie's mother, Martine, mean when she tells Sophie later, "some secrets cannot be kept?"

25. Why does Sophie mutilate herself? What does this act signify in terms of her relationship with her mother, and with her homeland?

26. Erzulie is the Haitian vaudou goddess of love. How is Sophie like the bleeding woman whom Erzulie turns into a butterfly? Where else does Erzulie appear in the book?

27. In Book Three, why does Sophie return to Haiti?

28. Why is documenting the family's property so important to Grandmè Ifé?

29. What does Grandmè Ifé mean when she looks at Brigitte's face and says that "we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face?" How is this different from how Sophie sees herself?

30. What does burning Martine's name do for Sophie? For Brigitte? How are names important in traditional Haitian life?

31. What "double" meaning does the marketplace phrase "*Ou libere*?" have in the book?

32. What is Danticat saying when she writes of Haiti, "somehow, early on, our song makers and tale weavers had decided that we were all daughters of this land?"

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