



Breath, Eyes, Memory by Edwidge Danticat

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The Caco Bond

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is a heartbreaking yet hopeful tale of the women of the Caco family; Danticat's fictional characters and their interactions and histories become windows for the reader into what must be the Haiti of Danticat's memory. (The author was born and spent the first 12 years of her life in Port-au-Prince, Haiti). Told through the eyes of the story's young protagonist, Sophie Caco, the plot of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* unfolds around the main theme of love and what we do in its name and what we allow ourselves to endure and forgive because of it.

The book opens in Croix-des-Rosets, Haiti. Danticat's description of the village and its inhabitants immediately brings to life this small, impoverished town in a place which, for most readers, is most likely foreign and obscure, a country and a culture about which most know very little. It is not that, after reading the novel, one could speak as an authority about the history of Haiti and its people, but then, this is most likely not the author's intention. Instead, by the time the reader finishes the book, it is certain that she will have in her mind a clear and vivid picture of Croix-de-Rosets, of its typical smells, how oppressively hot it can be, and how the dirt on the roads feels beneath bare feet. By the time the reader finishes this book she will know its characters inside and out, be able to describe with unbelievable detail the color of Sophie's skin, the way that Tante Atie walks, and the number of wrinkles on Grandme Ife's wizened old face. Throughout the work, the author implements her capacity to write with what seems to be a sort of effortless ability to pay close attention to even the most minute of details. Danticat's descriptive style is rich, and hinted, most often, with a bit of nostalgic undertone and it is her undeniable attention to detail that causes the reader to have no choice but to really invest herself into the story Danticat tells. The author makes it impossible for the reader to deny that Sophie Caco is a living, breathing, suffering human, a human with whom one cannot help but sympathize, and perhaps even empathize.

Breath, Eyes, Memory is broken into four distinct yet flowing sections which parallel with a specific time period and coming-of-age moment in Sophie's life. Early on in part one, the reader is made aware of the fact that Sophie, the narrator, lives in Croix-des-Rosets with her mother's sister; this woman, her Tante Atie, is the woman who has raised Sophie since she was an infant. It is not immediately clear why Sophie's mother is not living in Haiti with her daughter, but the reader soon discovers that Martine, Sophie's mom, is living in New York City and has requested that her daughter, at the innocent and naive age of 12, finally join her there.



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So it is that young Sophie finds herself in a new and foreign land with a mother whom she has never met. Danticat does a marvelous job of implying our protagonist's apprehensions with a scene at the airport involving her first encounter with her mother's car. The account serves as an analogy to the broadness of the more general situation of Sophie making the transition from her native Haiti to America. Martine's car is old and run-down; its many shortcomings and faults include a cracked windshield, peeling paint, and tattered cushions. Sophie is hesitant to enter the car, just as she is hesitant to enter this new life and world which also is full of shortcomings and faults. In the end, Sophie is forced to enter the car, just as she is forced to adapt to her new way of life. And it is here in America that Sophie discovers her past. It is here that she will uncover truths about herself and her mother that will leave her forever changed-for better or for worse.

The novel progresses as Sophie emerges from childhood into life as a young woman. Our main character finds love, but simultaneously discovers that "there are secrets you can't keep". She is introduced to the painstaking ritual of "testing", which in some Haitian families is a tradition mothers keep in order to ensure that their daughters are kept pure and chaste. It is, by all accounts, a traumatizing experience, but one done out of love, and it is because of love that the tested daughters can forgive: herein lies the central and, perhaps, ironic theme of the novel.

In order to "empty out her head" (184), and to find some sort of escape from the things that have come to torment her in her new life with a husband and a baby girl of her own, Sophie returns to her native Haiti to visit her Grandme Ife and her Tante Atie. Here, instead of escaping as she might have hoped, she is confronted by her past and made to deal with her present problems in more ways than she could have imagined. And it is at this point in the novel when all four generations of the Caco women are together that the depth and breadth of their bond is undeniably apparent. When Sophie's grandmother sees for the first time her great-granddaughter she speaks volumes to this bond when she says: "The tree has not split one mite. Isn't it a miracle that we can visit with all our kin, simply by looking into this face" (105). This eloquent syntax is indicative of the writing used throughout the novel; Danticat's exquisite prose permeates the pages of *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and makes the story of Sophie and those that loved her an enlightening though tragic read.



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The Caco women are bonded by love and history; these are what connect them, and these are the themes that weave in and out of the text of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In her dedication, Danticat writes: “To the brave women of Haiti, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, daughters, and friends, on this shore and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall” (v). If it does nothing else, the novel broadens the mind of its reader and allows her to know intimately the lives of Sophie and those “brave women” who have shaped her, which, in turn, in some small way perhaps, brings to light the lives and struggles of Haitian women everywhere. Both dense with description and stylistically stunning, Danticat’s first published attempt at fictional writing seems to be not the work of a novice but that of a proven master.

Reviewed by Robyn Haugan