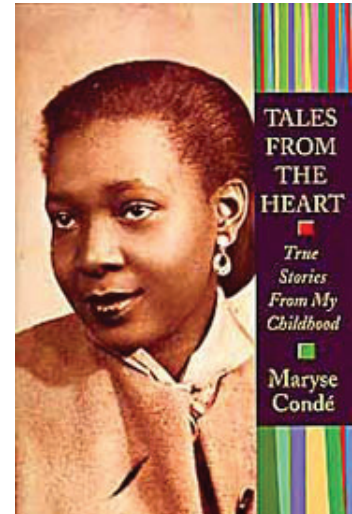


Voices
from the
Gaps*Tales from the Heart*
by Maryse Condé

Maryse Condé recalls the most influential and meaningful moments of her childhood in her book *Tales from the Heart*. This book is a collection of autobiographical essays that guide the reader through moments in a young girl's childhood. This childhood is not just any childhood, however. Condé is a black girl with West Indian heritage. Her parents are quite wealthy and very intelligent. Her family lives in Paris, France, which has a primarily white population. Through her powerful yet humorous depictions of the seventeen influential moments that she chose to write about in this book, Condé guides her readers through her struggle to understand both what it means to grow up and what it means to be alienated because of her racial identity.

Condé includes seventeen precise and vivid memories from her childhood in *Tales from the Heart*. These seventeen memories are split into chapters where each one can then be given the attention that it asks for. Each chapter represents a different moment in Condé's childhood that symbolizes a rite of passage into adulthood and a deeper understanding of human kind as a whole. The book moves in a linear fashion with chapter two appropriately titled "Birth" and chapter seventeen titled "Welcome to the Real World." Condé guides her readers through such moments as her first crush, losing her best friend, the deaths of her mother and grandmother, and her first encounter with racism. Through these moments, Condé tells her story of learning to fit into the world and trying form understandings of foreign people, places, and ideas.





Tales from the Heart by Maryse Condé

The first chapter is an overview of who is in Condé's family. As it turns out, she is the eighth child and was very much an accident. At ages sixty-three and forty-three, her parents were getting on in their years and never expected to be having another child. Nevertheless, she was considered a blessing and as the youngest, she received the benefits of having parents that had worked their way to the top. Her father was an esteemed civil servant and her mother was one of the first black schoolteachers in France. Both had an extreme sense of pride in their West Indian heritage and never let on that they were any different from the white citizens of Paris. Thus, Maryse grew up in an extremely sheltered environment never realizing that others may see her as being different from themselves.

In chapter one, she gives her first indication of the main theme of the book. She says, "Alienated? What did that mean?" (6). This is something, this alienation, that she would strive to understand throughout the whole of her childhood and thus permeates each and every one of the moments that she paints in this collection of essays. One of the most vivid memories that Condé recalls is the very first time that she was pointed out as different and discriminated against because of it. She talks about how she went on evening walks with her parents and when they reached the park; she would play by herself until it was time to go home. One night, she met a little white girl named Anne-Marie. Maryse was ecstatic. She relished in the idea of playing with another little girl her own age. This girl, however, dominated their games, kicked her, punched her, and rode her like a horse. Maryse did not understand and told Anne-Marie to, "Stop hitting me!" to which she replied, "I have to hit you because you're black," (56). Maryse did not understand what this girl meant and so she asks her mother, "Why is it black people have to be beaten?" her mother replies, "How can a little girl as intelligent as you ask such a question?" (56). These are the type of responses that she got from everyone and thus Condé had an incredibly difficult time pinpointing her identity both as a young woman with West Indian heritage and as a citizen of the predominantly white city of Paris.

Condé tells her stories of going to school, losing her mother, and then, of losing herself in solitude. At the end of the novel, she goes with her friends Jacques and Adrien to a lecture by Olnel who is a mulatto agronomist. She adores this man and he compliments her on an essay that she had written. When she leaves the house that night, she is overwhelmed with feelings. She writes, "My solitude broke away from me and bade me farewell. She had been my faithful companion for over two years. I no longer needed her. I had just met the real world, with its long procession of tribulations, failures, unspeakable suffering, and belated happiness," (147). Thus, she ends the novel with a feeling of accomplishment and hope for the future.



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Maryse Condé was awarded the Prix Yourcenar in 1999 for excellence in French writing by an author that lives in the United States. She has also received numerous other awards such as La Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme, the Prix de L'Académie Française, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is currently the Chair of the Center for French and Francophone Studies at Columbia University and she lives in New York City with her husband Richard Philcox. Because Condé writes only in French, her husband is also the translator of her works. Some of her other works include *Hérémakhonon*, *Une saison à Rihata* (*A Season in Rihata*), *Segu*, and *Windward Heights*.

Reviewed by Grace Ryan