



Breath, Eyes, Memory

By Edwidge Danticat

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The 20th anniversary edition of Edwidge Danticat's groundbreaking debut, now an established classic--revised and with a new introduction by the author, and including extensive bonus materials

At the age of twelve, Sophie Caco is sent from her impoverished Haitian village to New York to be reunited with a mother she barely remembers. There she discovers secrets that no child should ever know, and a legacy of shame that can be healed only when she returns to Haiti—to the women who first reared her. What ensues is a passionate journey through a landscape charged with the supernatural and scarred by political violence. In her stunning literary debut, Danticat evokes the wonder, terror, and heartache of her native Haiti—and the enduring strength of Haiti's women—with vibrant imagery and narrative grace that bear witness to her people's suffering and courage.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Oprah Book Club® Selection, May 1998: "I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head. Where women return to their children as butterflies or as tears in the eyes of the statues that their daughters pray to." The place is Haiti and the speaker is Sophie, the heroine of Edwidge Danticat's novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Like her protagonist, Danticat is also Haitian; like her, she was raised in Haiti by an aunt until she came to the United States at age 12. Indeed, in her short stories, Danticat has often drawn on her background to fund her fiction, and she continues to do so in her debut novel.

The story begins in Haiti, on Mother's Day, when young Sophie discovers that she is about to leave the only home she has ever known with her Tante Atie in Croix-des-Rosets, Haiti, to go live with her mother in New York City. These early chapters in Haiti are lovely, subtly evoking the tender, painful relationship between the motherless child and the childless woman who feels honor bound to guard the natural mother's rights to the girl's affections above her own. Presented with a Mother's Day card, Tante Atie responds: "'It is for a mother, your mother.' She motioned me away with a wave of her hand. 'When it is Aunt's Day, you can make me one.'" Danticat also uses these pages to limn a vibrant portrait of life in Haiti from the cups of ginger tea and baskets of cassava bread served at community potlucks to the folk tales of a "people in Guinea who carry the sky on their heads."

With Sophie's transition from a fairly happy existence with her aunt and grandmother in rural Haiti to life in New York with a mother she has never seen, Danticat's roots as a short-story writer become more evident; *"Breath, Eyes, Memory"* begins to read more like a collection of connected stories than a seamlessly evolved novel. In a couple of short chapters, Sophie arrives in New York, meets her mother, makes the acquaintance of her mother's new boyfriend, Marc, and discovers that she was the product of a rape when her mother was a teenager in Haiti. The novel then jumps several years ahead to Sophie's graduation from high school and her infatuation with an older man who lives next door. Unfortunately, this is also the point in the novel where Danticat begins to lay her themes on with a trowel instead of a brush: Sophie's mother becomes obsessed with protecting her daughter's virginity, going so far as to administer physical "tests" on a regular basis--testing which leads eventually to a rift in their relationship and to Sophie's struggle with her own sexuality. Soon the litany of victimization is flying thick and fast: female genital mutilation, incest, rape, frigidity, breast cancer, and abortion are the issues that arise in the final third of the novel, eventually drowning both fine writing and perceptive characterization under a deluge of angst.

Still, there is much to admire about *"Breath, Eyes, Memory,"* and if at times the plot becomes overheated, Danticat's lyrical, vivid prose offers some real delight. If nothing else, this novel is sure to entice readers to look for Danticat's short stories--and possibly to sample other fiction from the West Indies as well. --*Alix Wilber*

From Publishers Weekly

A distinctive new voice with a sensitive insight into Haitian culture distinguishes this graceful debut novel about a young girl's coming of age under difficult circumstances. "I come from a place where breath, eyes and memory are one, a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head," says narrator Sophie Caco, ruminating on the chains of duty and love that bind the courageous women in her family. The burden of being a woman in Haiti, where purity and chastity are a matter of family honor, and where "nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms," is Danticat's theme. Born after her mother Martine was raped, Sophie is raised by her Tante Atie in a small town in Haiti. At 12 she joins Martine in New York, while Atie returns to her native village to care for indomitable Grandmother Ife. Neither Sophie nor Martine

can escape the weight of the past, resulting in a pattern of insomnia, bulimia, sexual trauma and mental anguish that afflicts both of them and leads inexorably to tragedy. Though her tale is permeated with a haunting sadness, Danticat also imbues it with color and magic, beautifully evoking the pace and character of Creole life, the feel of both village and farm communities, where the omnipresent Tontons Macoute mean daily terror, where voodoo rituals and superstitions still dominate even as illiterate inhabitants utilize such 20th-century conveniences as cassettes to correspond with emigres in America. In simple, lyrical prose enriched by an elegiac tone and piquant observations, she makes Sophie's confusion and guilt, her difficult assimilation into American culture and her eventual emotional liberation palpably clear. Paperback rights to Vintage; author tour.

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From Library Journal

Told from the viewpoint of a young Haitian American, this novel concentrates on relationships between generations of women, both in Haiti and in the United States. Sophie's mother leaves Haiti to find work in the States, and Sophie soon follows, growing up troubled in New York until she exorcises her demons in a Santeria ceremony. The book's strength lies in the rarity of its Haitian viewpoint, a voice seldom heard in American literature. However, the writing itself falls a bit flat. The characters and plot are interesting, but the narrative style doesn't evoke the emotional response that would seem appropriate to the action. Danticat is herself a 24-year-old Haitian American who, like the novel's narrator, came to the United States in her early teens to join her family. Her first novel shows promise of better works in the future. Recommended for larger fiction collections.

- Marie F. Jones, *Muskingum Coll. Lib., New Concord, Ohio*

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Users Review

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