

Healing Through Literature: A Review of Edwidge Danticat's Cathartic Family Memoir, Brother, I'm Dying.

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A Review by Jen Westmoreland Bouchard

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Known for her visceral and moving commentaries on Haitian society and politics, Edwidge Danticat has fascinated readers since the publication of her first novel, Breath, Eyes, Memory (1994). In her most recent book, Brother, I'm Dying, readers find the linguistic innovation and emotional impact one would expect from a Danticat novel. However, this time Danticat's authorial lens is turned inward as she reflects on the troubled and controversial history of her own family.

Danticat's revealing novels often produce reactions of discomfort, anger, and sympathy from the reader. Though she frequently creates protagonists who are in pain or could be considered unhealthy or unwell (such as the bulimic and sexually dysfunctional Sophie, the protagonist of Breath, Eyes, Memory), the telling of personal stories and the revelation of myriad atrocities in Haitian history is, in itself, a healthy act. Not only does it serve as a sort of catharsis, but it is also a Lacanian "speaking cure" or, in this case, a "writing cure." There is a sense of relief in telling, and we, the readers, feel privileged to be part of the process. Perhaps most importantly, these novels give us faith that even in the ravaged Haitian countryside or the individual psyche, the possibility for healing always exists. Moreover, her corpus reminds us that complete healing can only be achieved through the act of telling.

As Gerise Herndon writes in her critical essay entitled "Returns to Native Lands, Reclaiming the Other's Language: Kincaid and Danticat,": "Memory and trauma live in the physical self, inseparable from the present moment. Remembering in writing, however, fulfills the desire for testimony, so that trauma doesn't isolate the individual self." (5) Thus, giving testimony is essential if one wishes to remain connected to life and rid oneself of the haunting pain of the past.

Articulating past hurts also allows us to forgive, avoid dangerous patterns, and be more aware in our own lives. At times, this sort of testimonial can also serve as a warning to others. We must pay attention to one another's lives and histories; we must heal pain where we are able and listen to those who must tell us their story in order to be rendered whole again.

Brother, I'm Dying is Danticat's healing testimony. It is intimate, sincere, and most of all, life-affirming. In this story about death, there is also much life to be found. I refer to not only the reinvigoration of Danticat's beloved relatives through the written word, but also of the novel's parallel story which recounts the birth of Danticat's first child. As Danticat explains, in the days following the announcement of her pregnancy (and her intention to name her first-born "Mira" in honor of her father), her father's health rapidly declines. Suffering from pulmonary fibrosis, he struggled to walk and speak, and, as a result of his rapid weight loss, eventually donned a heavy coat during summer in New York. In her

writing of this “wondrous and terrible” coming together of events, she reminds us that death and life are inextricably intertwined, and that history and processes of telling/healing bring meaning to them both.

Yet another thread in this rich narrative tapestry is the story of Danticat’s uncle, Joseph Dantica, who raised her in Haiti while her parents were trying to support the family by working in New York. In this sub-story, the reader receives a healthy dose of Haitian history. Following a series of political events, Joseph ends up buried next to his brother in New York after spending a lifetime in Haiti. Danticat writes at the end of her emotional memoir: “I wish I could fully make sense of the fact that they’re now sharing a grave site and tombstone in Queens, New York, after living apart for more than 30 years. Today, Danticat and her daughter live on alongside the memory of Mira and Joseph Dantica.