

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying* (Scribe Publications, 2009)

Edwidge Danticat is a contemporary writer of Haitian heritage who resides in the United States. Although she was unable to speak English until the age of twelve when she moved to New York, she has since become an award-winning novelist and writer. Her debut novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was released in 1994. Most recently, she was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize which honours 'the power of literature to promote peace and non-violent conflict resolution'.¹

Hailing from a tradition of women storytellers, Edwidge Danticat longed to be a teller of tales. In her much lauded memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* she initially charms the reader with her chronicle of a childhood spent in Haiti both before and after she is temporarily abandoned by her parents. Edwidge is then raised by her father's brother, Joseph, with whom she develops a loving relationship which subsequently shapes her future as a writer. Hers is a selfless memoir, essentially the story of two brothers: the writer's father Mira, and her uncle Joseph. Their stories seesaw from the quotidian of Queens, New York, to the belligerence of Bel Air, Port-au-Prince while Danticat expertly recounts the story through the eyes of a daughter and a niece.

The heartbreaking simplicity with which *Brother, I'm Dying* is written belies the potency of the story's inherent significance. Ultimately, the narrative is a testament to the strength of will in and over adversity. Danticat's account and memory of her childhood could have belonged to any child growing up in any part of the world; her message is universal and yet culturally specific references feature throughout the pages of the book. The imagery used is sensually evoked. The reader can almost taste the coconut *freskoes*, smell her mother's soups and stews, and can visualise the vibrancy of the salmon pink house in which she grew up. Mules and plantains, tree bark-soaked tonics, and smatterings of Creole are found all the way through the narrative; used-booksellers, women water-carriers, and crippled beggars abound. *Brother, I'm Dying* is at the same time an exotic enriching journey, and a document of survival over hardship which transcends all cultural boundaries

Part two of *Brother, I'm Dying* is steeped in an atmosphere of fear which increasingly pervades each chapter. Danticat details how, in the wake of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's 2004 (and second) ousting, Haiti descends into unprecedented violence and hostility which is wreaked by the *Tonton Macoutes*, rebel local gangs, and is aided and abetted by the United Nations peace-keeping forces. Danticat's hilltop neighbourhood of Bel Air which overlooks Port-au-Prince harbour, and was always a poorer district of the capital, has now disintegrated into a bullet-ridden shanty town in which mutilated corpses litter the streets.

After years of reasoning that '[e]xile is not for everyone', and amid the enveloping bloodshed, Joseph finally attempts to flee his native Haiti (140). However Joseph's reluctant desertion of Bel Air for Miami, despite death threats against him, results in a series of unparalleled disasters. *Brother, I'm Dying* then goes on to document, in devastating detail, the events leading up to Joseph's imprisonment, and the harrowing, minute-by-minute account of how his last days are spent in immigration custody as a

¹ Michael Rogers, 'Book News: Junot Diaz and Edwidge Danticat Win Dayton Literary Peace Prize', *Library Journal*, 12 Oct. 2009 <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6594760.html>.

detainee of United States Customs and Border Protection. In *Brother, I'm Dying*, sinister and underlying shades of racism and xenophobia are exemplified by Joseph's treatment in the Krome Service Processing Center, a former United States Air Force airbase built during the cold war. The themes of exile and immigration make the circumstances which result in the final resting place of Danticat's father and uncle ironic, especially after living apart for more than thirty years. The division of the book into two seems to separate much of the positive from all that is negative, the peaceful from the horrific.

As a participant, Danticat herself is almost absent from this memoir. Her role is that of an observer, of curious spectator. Indeed, the author declares: 'I've said this before, I think of *Brother, I'm Dying* as not a me-moir, but a nou-moir, a we-moir; it's not just my story but all these stories intertwined'.²

The title, *Brother, I'm Dying*, refers not only to a chapter heading, taken itself from a line in the book spoken in Haitian Creole: '*Frè, map mouri*' (41). Each chapter has as its title a fragment of dialogue which is revealed among the corresponding pages. This device effectively engages the reader and encourages that 'ah ha' moment upon its discovery. This memoir is unique in that it does not follow the customary chronological or linear form of autobiography. It is penned in terms of what the author's memory dictates. As Danticat declares (and justifies) at the outset: 'What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness ... I am writing this only because they can't' (26). She is also writing for another group of people mentioned before the start of *Brother, I'm Dying*. The meaning of the author's dedication; 'For the next generation of "cats"', is only understood at the end of the story which looks optimistically to the future and is directed at the children of her extended family. 'Cats' refers to the 'cat' of 'Danticat', a misspelling of the author's original family name 'Dantica' generations before. The error appeared on her father's birth certificate and has become her legacy and that of her children.

Danticat has a high profile and is a sought-after artist and commentator in the area of Afro-Caribbean literature. This is reflected in her impressive list of acknowledgments which follows her story. In the context of transnational discourse *Brother, I'm Dying* as a whole is both highly successful and effective in that while it recalls the utter turmoil in Haiti not long ago, it also contextualises it on an individual level. To conclude, some final words must come from Edwidge Danticat herself: 'Many of us have turned to literature in difficult times and have found comfort and greater understanding there. I hope my work ... will continue to help contribute to that conversation'.³

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² Martha St Jean, 'Genius: a Talk with Edwidge Danticat', 1 Oct. 2009 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/martha-st-jean/genius-a-talk-with-edwidg_b_295040.html.

³ Dayton Literary Peace Prize 13 Oct. 2009 http://www.daytonliterarypeaceprize.org/2008-nonfiction_winner.htm.