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# THE BIG READ

HOLLAND AREA | FALL 2016



***Brother, I'm Dying | By Edwidge Danticat***

Group Leader Resources

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**“I KNEW FROM VERY, VERY EARLY IN MY LIFE THAT I WANTED TO TELL STORIES.”**

***EDWIDGE DANTICAT***

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### **Edwidge Danticat (b. 1969)**

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where she lived with her aunt and uncle until she joined her parents in New York City at age 12. Her parents, Rose and Mira, left Haiti for work and safety in the United States when Danticat was a toddler. Growing up, Danticat was shy, and though teased in her Brooklyn high school for her accent and lack of English, she was proud of her heritage. Danticat grew up in a rich storytelling tradition and loved writing and reading from an early age.

Danticat published her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. She had just graduated from Brown University with a master's degree in creative writing, after completing her undergraduate studies in French literature at Barnard College. Only one year later, Danticat's first collection of stories, *Krik? Krak!*, was shortlisted for the National Book Award.

For several years, Danticat co-produced documentaries for Hollywood director Jonathan Demme and worked as an associate producer on the films *Courage and Pain* (1996) and *The Agronomist* (2003)—both about Haiti. During this period, Danticat began to think seriously about a career as an author, though her parents considered writing somewhat impractical. Having spent most of their lives under dictatorships, they also were concerned about Danticat writing openly of Haiti.

In addition to writing and making films, Danticat was a visiting professor of creative writing at New York University (1996-1997) and the University of Miami (2000-2008). Meanwhile, her writing career continued to evolve steadily alongside her other endeavors. Danticat has published numerous novels and several works of creative nonfiction, including her memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*, which won the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography.

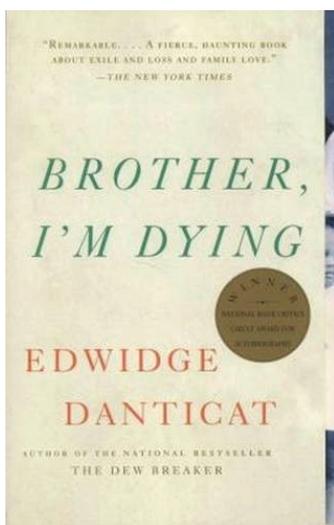
In 2009, Danticat received a MacArthur Fellowship (nicknamed the “genius grant”) and her literary career took a new direction with a collection of essays on art and exile, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2011). Part personal anecdote and part historical narrative, this book focuses on the creative work of individuals who bear witness to violence, oppression, and poverty.

Danticat has often been called upon as an informal diplomat and advocate for Haiti. In 2000, she moved to Miami with her husband and their two daughters, only a 90-minute flight from Port-au-Prince.

### **Additional Reading/Viewing**

- MacArthur Fellowship profile on Edwidge Danticat—includes a short video introduction to the author and her work.
- The New York Times profile on Edwidge Danticat—features the latest news coverage on the author as well as archived essays by and about Danticat.
- Zocalo Public Square discussion with Edwidge Danticat—a short video segment featuring a discussion on immigrant art.

## INTRODUCTION TO BROTHER, I'M DYING?



Brother, I'm Dying, is the true-life story of Edwidge Danticat's father, Mira, and his brother, Joseph. Born in the Haitian countryside, both brothers move to the big city of Port-au-Prince to work and raise families. Many years later, after Edwidge's father marries and begins a family, he decides to immigrate to the United States, while her Uncle Joseph—a community leader and pastor—chooses to remain in Haiti with his congregation. Edwidge, only two years old at the time of her father's departure, is left in the care of her Uncle Joseph and his wife, Tante Denise. Joseph and Edwidge develop a close relationship over the next several years. Edwidge spends most of her free time with her uncle, and after he suffers severe damage to his vocal chords, she acts as his interpreter. Ten years later, Edwidge rejoins her parents in the U.S. and must adjust to an unfamiliar world in Brooklyn, where she struggles to balance her new life with memories of the vibrant home and beloved uncle she left behind in Haiti. Now grown and living in Miami, Edwidge faces the impending death of her father and the birth of her first child. Meanwhile, political unrest and violence in Port-au-Prince heighten due to

government and gang disputes, and Edwidge fears for the safety of her Uncle Joseph and his family. Fleeing for their lives, Uncle Joseph and his son Maxo seek safety in America and come face to face with the complications of the U.S. immigration system. Over the next 72 hours, Danticat's world is forever changed as her father's condition worsens and her uncle's whereabouts are unknown.

### **Additional Reading**

- The New York Times reviews Brother, I'm Dying, focusing on the life of Joseph Dantica and his attempt to seek temporary asylum in the United States.
- The Washington Post reviews Brother, I'm Dying, focusing on the challenges of U.S. immigration and the tensions inherent in being torn between two countries and two families.

## HISTORICAL & LITERARY CONTEXT

### 15th Century-20th Century

- **1492:** Columbus lands on the modern-day island of Haiti, claiming it for Spain.
- **1697:** Spain cedes the western part of Hispaniola (Haiti) to France.
- **1804:** Haiti wins its independence from France through a slave revolt led by Toussaint Louverture.
- **1915:** U.S. occupation of Haiti begins as an attempt to maintain political and economic stability after presidential assassination. Occupation lasts nearly 20 years.
- **1920s:** Harlem Renaissance celebrates black culture and identity in Harlem and beyond.
- **1957:** “Papa Doc” François Duvalier elected president.+

### 1960s

- **1964:** “Papa Doc” François Duvalier declares himself “President for Life”
- **1965:** U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalizes immigration.
- **1969:** Edwidge Danticat is born in Port-au-Prince.

### 1970s

- **1971:** “Papa Doc” dies of natural causes and is replaced by his son, “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier.
- **1971:** Mira Danticat immigrates to the United States.
- **1973:** Rose Danticat joins her husband in New York City.

### 1980s

- **1981:** Edwidge Danticat moves to Brooklyn to live with her parents and three brothers.
- **1986:** “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier’s constitution is annulled and his rule is illegitimized. Haitian immigration to the United States increases.
- **1988:** Lieutenant General Prosper Avril replaces interim military government as president.

### 1990s

- **1990:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Barnard College.
- **1990:** Jean-Bertrand Aristide elected president of Haiti.
- **1991:** Aristide flees Haiti after a coup led by Brigadier General Raoul Cedras.
- **1992:** U.S. Coast Guard rescues more than 40,000 Haitians at sea as they attempt to escape a worsening economy and political unrest.
- **1993:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Brown University with an MFA in creative writing.
- **1994:** *Breath, Eyes, Memory* published.
- **1995:** Aristide restored as president, with support from U.S. troops.

## HISTORICAL & LITERARY CONTEXT CONTINUED...

### 2000s

- **2002:** Edwidge Danticat marries Faidherbe “Fedo” Boyer.
- **2002:** Aristide’s government orchestrates attacks on civilian opposition using police and government supported gangs called “chimères.”
- **2004:** The Dew Breaker published.
- **2004:** Armed rebellion leads to the forced resignation and exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to South Africa.
- **2004:** The United Nations Security Council creates the UN Stability Mission in Haiti in June.
- **2004:** Maxo and Joseph Dantica flee violence and political unrest in Haiti, traveling to Miami.
- **2005:** Mira, daughter of Edwidge and Fedo, born.
- **2007:** Brother, I’m Dying published.

### 2010s

- **2010:** Earthquake of magnitude 7.0 hits Haiti, killing 300,000 people.

### ***A Brief Overview of Haiti’s History and Culture***

Located in the West Indies, Haiti (the French spelling of Ayiti, the native Taino name meaning “mountainous country”) shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic and is roughly the size of the state of Maryland. A revolution led by slaves gained Haiti’s independence from France in 1804, making it the world’s first independent black republic. Haiti’s official languages are French and Haitian Creole, and roughly 95% of the population is of African descent—almost all indigenous peoples were lost to disease and brutal labor practices at the hands of Spanish colonizers.

Despite influence from Spanish and French settlers, Haitian culture remains distinct and vibrant, reflecting many elements of West African traditions. Rara festival music, twoubadou guitar ballads, and merengue-style compas music exemplify traditional Haitian sounds. Haitian visual art includes intricate flag making to decorate places of worship, landscape painting, and sculptures that feature recycled and natural materials. Artwork from Haiti is bought and sold internationally and several major galleries in the United States and Europe have hosted exhibits of Haitian painting. Dance in Haiti is both a social and ritual activity—featured in Vodou ceremonies and carnival celebrations. Traditional quadrille or karabela dresses, worn by women on formal occasions such as weddings or religious holidays, are celebrated for their bright colors and full, flowing skirts. Haitian cuisine is based on Creole and French cooking styles. Beans and rice are staples of the Haitian diet and are usually flavored with coconut and hot peppers.

Haiti has given birth to several internationally celebrated authors such as Jean Price-Mars, whose works were translated from the French by Langston Hughes. The country was once home to abolitionist Frederick Douglass as well as to Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while living there. Today, Haitian culture continues to influence artists of all disciplines, including the pioneering choreography of Katherine Dunham and the watercolors of American painter Lois Mailou Jones. Though Haiti is often associated with political unrest and economic troubles, it is a country of great beauty and cultural richness, reflected in its landscape and its peoples.

### ***Jean-Bertrand Aristide***

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is a controversial political figure in Haiti’s history, and he appears often throughout *Brother, I’m Dying*. Aristide was an outspoken critic of “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc” Duvalier, and was Haiti’s first democratically appointed president. He was first elected in 1990 and served as Haiti’s President three different times: for eight months in 1991, from 1994 to 1996, and from 2001 to 2004. His presidential terms were abruptly ended by violent overthrows. A man with contentious policies, Aristide survived four assassination attempts, including one by the powerful Tonton Macoutes, which is referenced in *Brother, I’m Dying*. At the end of his final presidency in 2004, Aristide was forced into exile in South Africa, not returning to his home country of Haiti until 2011.

## CHARACTER LIST

**Andre Miracin Danticat:** Edwidge’s father, age 69 in 2004, called both Mira and Papa

**Rose:** Edwidge’s mother, lives with Edwidge’s father in Brooklyn, NY

**Fedo:** Edwidge’s husband, with whom she lives in Miami

**Bob:** Edwidge’s younger brother, he lived with Edwidge and Uncle Joseph in Haiti. In the US, he is a high school global studies teacher and father to Nadira

**Kelly:** Edwidge’s brother, born and raised in the US; musician and computer programmer

**Karl:** Edwidge’s youngest brother, broker, and father to Ezekiel and Zora. As an adult, he lives 2 blocks from his parents in Brooklyn

**Tante Grace:** Edwidge’s maternal aunt who lived with Mira and Rose before Bob and Edwidge came to the US to live with their parents

**Rev. Joseph Nosius Dantica:** Mira’s older brother by 12 years, rears Edwidge and Bob for 8 years while their parents live in New York City (the surname is spelled differently because of a mistake on Mira’s birth certificate, Joseph’s is the correct spelling)

**Tante Denise:** Joseph’s wife. Her brothers are George and Bosi, her sister is Leone

**Zi, Tina, and Ino:** Mira and Joseph’s sisters

**Franck:** Mira and Joseph’s brother

**Granpe Nozial and Gramne Lorvana:** Mira and Joseph’s parents who live with Tante Ino (Granpe was a guerrilla resistance fighter vs. an early US invasion of Haiti)

**Gramne Melina:** Denise’s mother and story teller

**Linoir:** Denise’s youngest brother who leaves daughter Liline with Joseph and Denise as he goes to the Dominican Republic

**Maxo:** son of Joseph and Denise, father of Nick

**Man Jou:** Denise’s cousin with whom Uncle Joseph stays with her for two days when he is fleeing Haiti for his life

**Anne and Ferma:** hide Uncle Joseph as he escapes from the “dreads”

**Guillermo Hernandez:** Joseph’s friend and father of Marie Micheline, who Joseph and Denise take in and adopt

**Marie:** takes care of Joseph’s documents when he goes to US for throat surgery, mother of Ruth (father was Jean Pradel who denies he is the father). Marie marries Pressoir Marol who abuses her and separates her from her family until Uncle Joseph rescues her. Also mother to Pouchin, Marc, and Ronald

**Bel Air:** hilltop neighborhood in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where Joseph and Denise own a home

**Jean-Bertrand Aristide:** Haiti’s twice-elected and twice-deposed president, who Joseph supports

**Daniel Fignole:** leader of the Laborers and Peasants Party, which Joseph supports

**Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier:** president of Haiti, 1957-1971, known primarily for his brutality

**Tonton Macoutes:** uniformed thugs organized by Duvalier, “Bogeymen”

**Jean-Claude Duvalier (“Baby Doc”):** son of Francios Duvalier, inherited the presidency from his father at age 19 (in 1971) and remained president until he was overthrown in 1986

**Ira Kurzban:** lawyer known for representing Haitian immigrants

**John Pratt:** lawyer who assists Ira Kurzban in representing Joseph

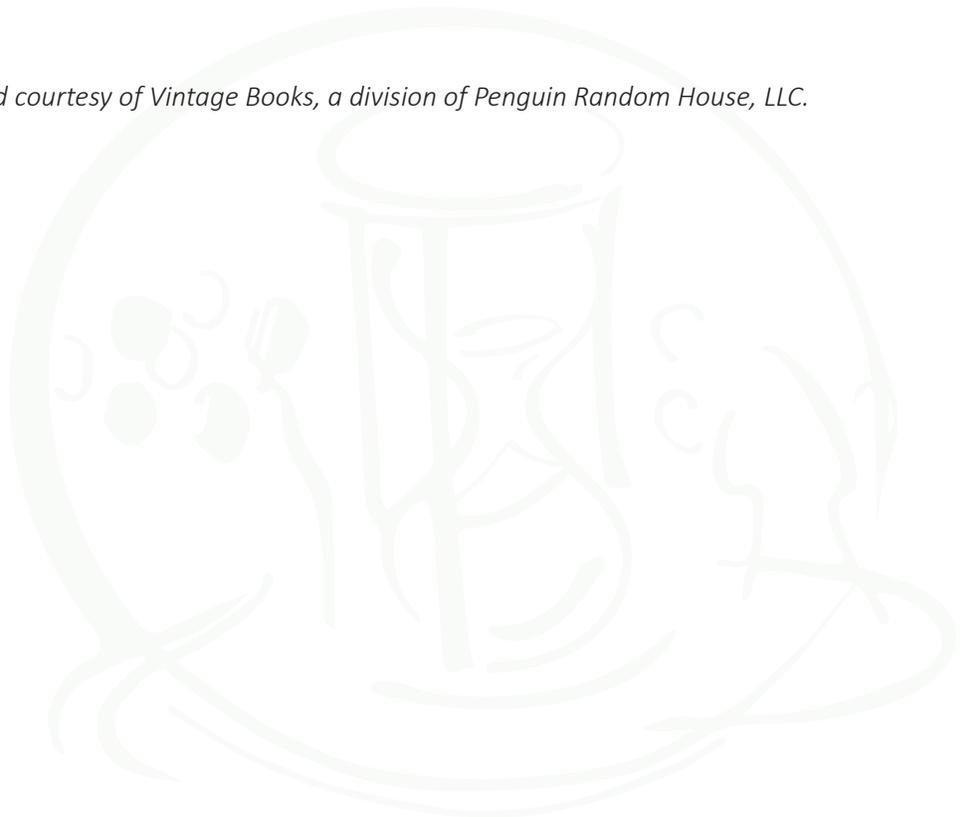
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Danticat tells us that she has constructed the story from the “borrowed recollections of family members....What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time.” Discuss what this work of reconstruction and reordering means for the structure of the story she presents, as well as for her own understanding of what happened to the two brothers.
2. Consider the scene in which Danticat sees the results of her pregnancy test. How do her fears for her father affect her first thoughts of her child? She says to herself, “My father is dying and I’m pregnant.” How does this knowledge change her sense of time? How does it affect her understanding of the course of her family’s history?
3. As a child, Danticat was disturbed at how little her father said in the letters he sent to the family in Haiti. He later told her, “I was no writer....What I wanted to tell you and your brother was too big for any piece of paper and a small envelope.” Why, as a child, did she “used to dream of smuggling him words”?
4. How does young Edwidge retain her loyalties to her parents, even though they are absent from her life for so many years? Is there evidence that she feels hurt or rejected by their decision to leave for the States? How does she feel when they come back to visit Haiti with two new children?
5. Haiti’s history is briefly sketched on in the chapter entitled “Brother, I’m Dying” and elsewhere. While many readers will know that Haiti was a slave colony, why is the fact of the American invasion and nineteen-year occupation less well known? Danticat’s paternal grandfather, Granpè Nozial, fought with the guerrilla resistance against the Americans. How does the family’s engagement with Haiti’s political history affect Joseph’s unwillingness to emigrate to the U.S.? Why does he refuse to leave Haiti, or even to remove himself from the dangers of Bel Air?
6. If so few words are passed between Danticat’s parents and their two children in Haiti, how is emotion transmitted? Is there a sense, in the book, that Danticat is emotionally reticent even after her reunion with her parents? Why is she reluctant to tell her parents the news about her pregnancy? Why is it important that her father gave her a typewriter as a welcoming present?
7. Danticat found a scrap of paper on which she had written, soon after coming to Brooklyn, “My father’s cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads. It’s called a gypsy cab.” What does this suggest about how she understood, or thought about, her father’s work and her family’s status in America? What does it reveal about a young girl’s interest in the power of words?
8. *Brother, I’m Dying* is Danticat’s first major work of nonfiction. What resemblances does it bear, if any, to her works of fiction in terms of style, voice, content, etc.?
9. Danticat says of her story, “I am writing this only because they can’t.” As a girl, Edwidge was often literally her uncle’s voice, because after his tracheotomy she could read his lips and tell others what he was saying. Why is it important that she also speak for her father and her uncle in writing this memoir?
10. Consider the relationship between the two brothers, Mira and Joseph. There is a significant difference in age, and Mira has been away from his brother for decades, by the end of the story. Despite this, they remain close. What assumptions about kinship and family ties are displayed in their love for each other? Are these bonds similar to, or stronger than, ties you would see between American-born brothers?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED...

11. When Danticat describes the death of her cousin, Marie-Micheline, or her uncle's list of the bodies he has seen on the street, or when she recounts the story of the men laughing as they kick around a human head, or the threat of the gangs to decapitate her uncle Joseph, or the looting and burning of his home and his church, what is your response as a reader? How does this violence resonate against the warmth and love that are so clearly expressed by the feeling of Danticat's extended family members for each other?
12. How does Danticat convey a sense of the richness of Haitian culture? What are the people like? What are their folk tales like? How does their use of both Creole and French affect their approach to language and speech? How does she make us feel the effects of the violence and poverty that the Haitians endure?
13. Danticat's description of what happens to her uncle in U.S. custody is reconstructed from documents. How does Danticat control her emotion while presenting these events? How, in general, would you describe her writing style as she narrates these often devastating events?
14. Danticat relates her Granmè Melina's story about the girl who wanted the old woman to bring her father back from the land of the dead: what is the effect of her decision to end the book with this story? How does the story reflect on the book as a whole, and on the act of writing?
15. As one reviewer put it, "If there's such a thing as a warmhearted tragedy, *Brother, I'm Dying* is a stunning example" (Yvonne Zipp, *The Christian Science Monitor*). Do you agree? If so, what elements in the writing and the story contribute to this effect?

*Brother, I'm Dying* discussion questions provided courtesy of Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC.



## TALKING POINTS

### **Discussion Starters for *Brother, I'm Dying***

The following is a list of quotes and significant sections from Edwidge Danticat's memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*. They may be good jumping points for discussions that may start with prompts such as "what did you think of this passage?"

**Pg. 15:** "My father is dying and I'm pregnant."

**Pg. 20:** "Have you enjoyed your life?" A good quote for each of us to ask along our paths

**Pg. 23:** Mira's letters are a significant ritual in Edwidge's childhood: consider the importance of communication

**Pg. 26:** Edwidge explains her purpose for writing this book: her uncle and father are not able to share their own stories

**Pg. 34:** Joseph's life of redemption through his church and his desire to help others redeem themselves as well

**Pg. 36:** Joseph is shown hospitality by a peasant woman as he travels to see the doctors concerning his throat

**Pg. 41:** The book title is revealed in context

**Pg. 49:** Donated clothes put Mira out of sewing business ("Kennedys" clothing)

**Pg. 57:** Edwidge's mother leaves raising issues of split families trying to support one another

**Pg. 60-61, 73:** We are all dying, starting from the moment we're born

**Pg. 70:** Joseph and Denise take in Liline, further extending their family

**Pg. 62-75:** When Joseph loses his voice he feels separated and depressed because of this new physical limitation

**Pg. 86:** Joseph saves Marie and baby Ruth from abusive husband and Marie tells Joseph, "You gave birth tonight—to me."

**Pg. 102:** Tante Zi hugs Edwidge and Bob, both of whom have tuberculosis

**Pg. 114:** Karl's hug, "the best welcome I'd ever had in my life." How do we welcome immigrants? How do we recognize family?

**Pg. 131:** "Science is God's way of shielding miracles."

**Pg. 140:** Joseph declines to move to the US—"Someone has to stay behind to receive the letters and greet family members when they come back." He feels he has too much to do in Haiti.

**Pg. 159:** Mira calls Edwidge Joseph's daughter

**Pg. 161:** Edwidge wants to hear about her life from both fathers

**Pg. 212:** Krome Detention Center for refugees seeking asylum is reminiscent of slavery and prison

**Pg. 213:** The shame of being a prisoner, seeking asylum, "I've known no greater shame in my life."

**Pg. 215:** Joseph explains why he asks for temporary asylum, but note that he's telling the truth

**Pg. 233:** "I think he's faking"

**Pg. 236:** Joseph is taken to a hospital amidst medical trauma, shackled

**Pg. 241:** Each time a star falls from the sky, someone dies

**Pg. 248:** The mortician treats Joseph's dead body with more respect than the immigration center, medics or hospital did when he was alive.

## TALKING POINTS CONTINUED...

**Pg. 251:** Joseph is buried in Queens, NY—“He shouldn’t be here.”

**Pg. 251:** “I’ll see you soon.” Mira speaking to Joseph, after Joseph’s death

**Pg. 255:** Baby Mira is born and meets her grandfather

**Pg. 263:** For more than a year, Edwidge doesn’t eat with her dad, but carried food up to him. Finally, Edwidge and her dad “share a meal” (bite). Then, three days after she returns home from her month-long visit with him, he dies.

**Pg. 267:** When alive, you are alive; when dead you are dead. It is okay to accept this.

**Pg. 268:** Edwidge wishes she “had some guarantees about the afterlife” because she hopes the two brothers are together (she is honest in her uncertainty)

## THE AUTHOR & HER OTHER WORKS

***“I knew from very, very early in my life that I wanted to tell stories.” —Edwidge Danticat***

In addition to *Brother, I’m Dying*, Edwidge Danticat has written several novels, young adult fiction, a collection of short stories, a children’s book, and several essays for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, among many other publications. Danticat’s writing—whether fiction or nonfiction—is united by its dedication to Haitian peoples and culture, drawing heavily on her own experience as an American immigrant from Haiti. At age 25, Danticat wrote her first book, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which chronicles four generations of Haitian women struggling to understand each other in the context of one violent act. Danticat’s second book *Krik? Krak!* was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award. A series of stories focused on the difficulty of everyday life under a dictatorship, *Krik? Krak!* reflects the Haitian tradition of passing stories down orally from one generation to the next. Her third novel, *The Dew Breaker*, explores the lives of Haitian dissidents who suffered under a torturer transformed into a quiet man living in New York City with his wife and children. After publishing *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat became a key figure in the national and international literary scene, representing Haiti and the immigrant journey. Danticat’s latest work of nonfiction, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, examines the challenges of creating art after exile. A combination of memoir and essays, *Create Dangerously* wrestles with the complex responsibilities of artists who represent countries burdened by trauma and great loss. In 2013, she published her first work of fiction in nearly ten years, *Claire of the Sea Light*, which was named a *New York Times Book Review* and *Washington Post* Notable Book of the Year.

### **Additional Reading & Listening**

- National Public Radio discusses Edwidge Danticat’s novel, *Claire of the Sea Light*.
- Wild River Review interviews Edwidge Danticat about Haitian folklore and the importance of telling and retelling stories from one’s homeland.
- The Rumpus discusses Edwidge Danticat’s writing life and her many publications.
- The Atlantic discusses Edwidge Danticat’s belief that “all immigrants are artists.”
- The New York Times interviews Edwidge Danticat, discussing what she likes to read and why.

### **Selected Articles by Edwidge Danticat**

- “A Year and a Day,” *The New Yorker*, 2011
- “Crabs—Praying for Food in Haiti,” *The New Yorker*, 2008
- “New York Was Our City on the Hill,” *The New York Times*, 2004

### **Selected Works by Edwidge Danticat**

- *Claire of the Sea Light*, 2013
- *The Dew Breaker*, 2004
- *The Farming of Bones*, 1998
- *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 1994
- *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, 2011
- *Behind the Mountains*, 2002
- *Krik? Krak!*, 1995