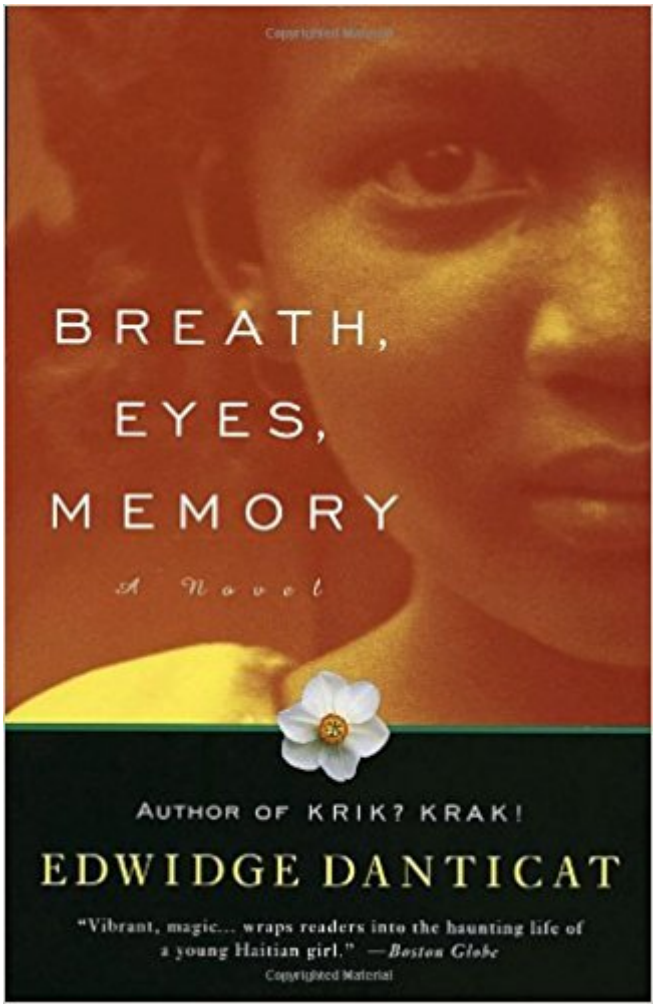
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Breath, Eyes, Memory (Oprah's Book Club)



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Synopsis

At an astonishingly young age, Edwidge Danticat has become one of our most celebrated new novelists, a writer who evokes the wonder, terror, and heartache of her native Haiti--and the enduring strength of Haiti's women--with a vibrant imagery and narrative grace that bear witness to her people's suffering and courage.Ã Â Ã Â At the age of twelve, Sophie Caco is sent from her impoverished village of Croix-des-Rosets 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 a novel that bears witness to the traditions, suffering, and wisdom of an entire people.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Oprah Book ClubÃ Â® 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

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 voudon 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. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book is about the daughter who grows up without mother in Haiti. She eventually joins her in America. We learn that the daughter was born out of rape. The whole story revolves around that, and both the mother and daughter can't escape from that rape.The reader will learn about some of the cultural norms and practices in Haiti, especially about women, and mother daughter relations. It's a beautIfully written book. Also you might be interested in the book if you have interest in Haiti, immigrant experience, and African-American writers.

...when I read the words of Edwige Danticat. I drift into another consciousness. It's very hard to believe this is a first novel. It's as beautiful as her other novels and poetry. What a treasure we have in this author's American words and Haitian soul.

Read this book for a college course. I thought it was going to be super boring. It was actually easy to read and easy to understand. Not full of metaphorical and analytical b.s. like everything else we read in that class.

The dominating theme of the story was that the main character's mother was brutally raped at a very young age, resulting in her birth, her existence. This rape affected her mother for the rest of her life, making it impossible to be happy even though she had a very nice boyfriend in New York. It also affected the main character, as she was raised for 12 years by a much-loved aunt, then sent to live with the damaged mother.The daughter's coming-of-age and emerging sexuality causes the

mother to go pretty much off the deep end, first submitted her to humiliating and disturbing "tests", and finally culminating in a (too graphic) act --that, by the way, seemed somewhat improbable. That improbability is why I dropped the rating to a three star. For me, it ruined the book. Some others in my book club did not agree, so don't let this deter you from reading it.

Edwidge Danticat begins her debut novel from the point-of-view of twelve-year-old Haitian Sophie. Sophie chronicles her perplexing discovery that she must go to America and later the happenings of her life with her mother, Martine, in New York. In the midst of telling about her life, Sophie also reveals family secrets that horrify and haunt her Grandmother, her aunt, her mother, and herself. Danticat explores the idea of heritage through these generations of women and the abuse and conflict they endure. SophieÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s strengths as a narrator are derived from her position as a product of and player in diaspora, adding intensity and distance to Breath, Eyes, Memory. While overall DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s vibrant, emotional prose and use of symbolism create a comprehensive picture of Haiti and its people, her style limits the depth and interaction of her characters. Part one of the novel is written with ignorance and innocence reflective of young children which is fitting as Sophie is not yet a teenager. In the early chapters, Sophie references her love and admiration of daffodils, a bright yellow and white flower brought to Haiti by European settlers. The ever-present image of a daffodil that is presented in SophieÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s poem is a bright and joyful one which contrasts the serious tone of DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s writing. As soon as Sophie is relocated to New York to live with her biological mother, Danticat fast-forwards six years later to eighteen-year-old SophieÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s new home where her ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“mother had a patch of land in the back where she started growing hibiscus. She had grown tired of daffodilsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (Danticat 65). Not only has Sophie aged and changed, but the tone is being altered as well; the reader can visualize the change from bright daffodils to darker, redder hibiscus. Beyond the difference in color between these two flowers, there is also the change in origin and background. Hibiscus is native to Haiti and to other tropical regions and is often used to cure ailments. MartineÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s love for a flower indigenous to her homeland could be the attempt to cure both her homesickness and her fears. However, the color of the flower seems to also spark memories and feelings in Martine which trigger anxiety. Again and again the reader is bombarded with images of this house colored in red. Red itself is a bold color, often conjuring images of bloody violence or of love, both of which are present in DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s writing. Red indicates robust passion, a theme that is vital to this novel. This ever-present color serves almost as the subtle life force for the four generations of women;

blood, after all, is red, and the same blood courses from Grandme IfÃƒÂ© to her great-granddaughter Brigitte flowing swiftly with the beliefs and memories of the past. In stark comparison to DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s crimson passion is the importance of chastity to this family. Sophie is subject to ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“testsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• from her mother to ensure she is still a virgin. Often, virginity and purity are associated with the color white, so it is interesting how Martine and Grandme IfÃƒÂ©ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“obsession with keeping [their daughters] pure and chasteÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (Danticat 154) is stained with SophieÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s defilement with a pestle and MartineÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s rape respectively. The act of stealing each girlÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s purity haunts this family, bleeding out onto the image of innocence the family tries to uphold. Issues with intimacy and sex, as well as an inability to continue deep relationships with men, are carried from mother to daughter in the Caco family. The main issue with DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s narrative is not its subject matter ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ she pulls from her own knowledge and background of a politically divided, militant Haitian nation ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ but its utter lack of emotional interaction between the characters. Even through the title, one can assume that not only is the reader going to be immersed in all angles of the action by accessing the sights and the sounds of the landscape but also through interaction with the memories of the people surrounding the protagonist. Sophie merely lays out all of the facts, including those about her motherÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s rape and resulting fear of intimacy, never explaining exactly who revealed the story to her. In a novel heavily reliant on the individual stories of each of the matriarchs in the family, DanticatÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s emotionally removed style sacrifices strengthening the bonds between her four generations of women.

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