

EDWIDGE DANDICAT

By Claire LaFlore

Personal Reflection

I admire this young woman. She is great but yet reachable. She is familiar, like me I am French-Creole and come from a Caribbean background. She inspired me as a young, black woman writer. She is already making history, but most important she is the new leader of Haiti. Just like the other liberators of the islands, she too shares her strength, culture and wisdom with the world. She is not a great political leader, just a great writer. She embodies the essence of a people who have endured and are looking to come out triumphal once again.

Biography

Haiti is a colorful island that has overcome tragedy and occupation. Though Haiti has the "prestigious" title of being the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, its history and culture are rich. Out of its past comes rich folklore, wisdom and art. One of the most famous historical Haitian stories is of a native Queen named Anaconda. She was a strong figure who resisted the Spanish and ruled over her brothers. She introduced ballads, poetry and plays into the Taino Indian kingdoms.

Haitian story telling has transformed itself into dance and art. Told by the elders through colorful, mythical and vivid lessons. It is a means of coping with the social and physical environment. The practice of story-telling also developed because most of Haiti's population is illiterate. Nights can be dark and mysterious for children. They would hear an elder say "Krik!" and would respond "KraK!," and this would mean it is story time. I learned of these wonderful traditions when I picked up a novel written by a young Haitian woman, Edwidge Dandicat. The title was "Krik KraK!". This is a series of nine short stories - tales of horror and sadness sprinkled with the beauty of colorful folktales. The book helped to understand the state-sanctioned armies that would oppress and terrorize the common people. These common people would sometimes succumb to maltreatment and become instruments of oppression themselves. Through the power of spirit and imagination they overcame life's brutality.

Edwidge Dandicat was born in 1969 in Port-au-Prince. She came from a poor family. Her father immigrated to New York and took a job as a taxi driver. A couple of years later her mother joined her father in New York and worked in a textile factory. Edwidge along with her brother were left with an uncle in Haiti. At the age of twelve she was finally reunited with her family when she too immigrated to New York. This is when she wrote her first novel. She learned English by reading some of the most classic Black American novelists like James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Alice Walker and Langston Hughes. She was greatly influenced by their stories and started to recall the Haitian traditional practice of story telling. She would grow up silent because her accent was made fun of. She took comfort in the lessons she learned from stories. It was difficult but she found the strength and pride to speak out. From that moment on, she decided to never be ashamed of being Haitian.

Dandicat graduated at the age of twenty from Barnard College in New York with a degree in French literature. She then went on to obtain her Masters of Fine Arts from Brown University. For her thesis she wrote the novel "Breath, Eyes and

Memory". Her style of testimony through rich and vivid characters caught on with the public. She won awards for women book achievements. She won awards from Essence magazine and Seventeen magazine, and won the title of best book voted by the Oprah Winfrey book club. Since then she went on to write more novels, "Krik, Krak," "The Farming of Bones," "The Dew Breakers," "Anaconda," receiving many awards and her books becoming best sellers. She won Best Fiction Award of a Caribbean Writer, Woman of Achievement Award, Best Young American Novelist, and Jane Magazine notation of one of the "Fifteen Gutsiest Women of the Year." Her novels have become a way for the world to be introduced to Haitian mythology.

Edwidge Danticat always writes a vivid account of woman characters. Most of the characters are strong. They will have endured heartbreak, but never have allowed the pain to change their humanity. These characters always come through with a healthy and great capacity to be sympathetic and worthy of receiving and giving love. The characters always come through walking tall and proud, just as Haitian people do despite conflict and history. They are a unique people. They are greatly influenced by modern times yet have managed to keep ancient African culture and traditions. It does not sound like much until you read some present statistics. Chronic fighting and unrest has had a severe negative impact on women's ability to improve their lives both politically and economically. The reason that violence is committed against women is more political than gender based discrimination. According to a 1996 University of Berkeley studies, seven out of ten Haitian women are raped because of political involvement. Because these crimes are seen as political they are forgotten, as there has been years of political crimes and unrest. Haitian women have the highest maternal mortality rate in the western hemisphere, with 523 deaths per 100,000 births. The World Bank has attributed this to the prevalence of clandestine abortions. The abortions could also be a result of rape. Within Haitian society birthing girls is considered unlucky while birthing boys is preferred. The society is patriarchal and polygamous. Often men will find another wife in hopes of producing a son.

Haiti has the highest prevalence of HIV/AIDS in all of the Western Hemisphere; women account for a higher number of people living with HIV/AIDS than men. There are many reasons for the prevalence of HIV in Haitians, one due to extreme abject poverty that results in a flourishing sex trade industry. The discrimination does not end in Haiti. According to the Miami Herald, Haitian women seeking refugee status in the United States have been placed in detention facilities for longer periods of time than any other refugee. This is attributed to stereotypes that all Haitian people are HIV positive or have AIDS. These ills against women are familiar in many countries around the world.

Within the bleakness comes a light. Danticat embodies the essence of a people that have turned brutality into something beautiful, artistic and magical. Perhaps the spirit of the first native Queen Anaconda still presides and beholds the soul of Haitian culture and Edwidge Danticat.

Timeline

1492 : Columbus encounters indigenous Tainos and Arawaks in Haiti.

16th century: Africans brought to island to replace enslaved Indians. They help make Haiti rich and profitable.

1697: French take island and become chief importers of Africans.

1804: Haitian people resist and win independence.

1957 - 1970: Francois Duvalier's hostile dictatorship.
1969: Edwidge Danticat born.
1971: Duvalier succeeded by son Jean-Claude, or "Baby Doc" Duvalier. 1981: Danticat immigrates to New York.
1990: Jean-Bertrand Aristide elected president, year later is ousted in a coup.
1990/91: Danticat earns B.A. in French Literature from Barnard College.
1993: MFA in Creative Writing from Brown University.
1994: Military regime relinquishes power in the face of an imminent US invasion, US forces oversee a transition to a civilian government, Aristide returns.
1998: Danticat's novel "Breath, Eyes, Memory" featured as an Oprah Reading Club
2000: Aristide elected president for a second non-consecutive term.
2004: Aristide forced into exile. UN peacekeepers arrive to take over security duties from U.S. forces.