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## *Brother, I'm Dying* Reading Guide

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# ***Brother, I'm Dying* Reading Guide**

## **Introduction**

When political unrest and death surround a family, how do they find peace? In *Brother, I'm Dying*, Edwidge Danticat explores this question in her memoir of two brothers and the families they raised. Through the course of their lives many issues of interest to peace readers are explored, from the devastating impact on individual lives of foreign intervention in Haiti and US immigration policy, to the strengthening bonds of family and their resistance to severance by death.

The political history of Haiti, as Danticat points out, has been marked by exploitation and suffering. For a long time Haitians have been left to fend for themselves in a realm of political dishevelment. In the course of her lifetime Haitians have dealt with changing leadership and upheaval on their own soil, and its disruption of their lives. Coming to terms with political chaos is a big part of what Haitians had to deal with from the early years of their independence onward. Danticat reveals that to find peace some people fled, as her parents did, while others found peace by devoting their lives to promote it, as her Uncle Joseph did. Overall, peace can be found in many ways and many places as Danticat shows from her and her family's own experience.

Danticat also details her own experiences of U.S. and Haitian immigration policies in *Brother, I'm Dying*. She shows some of the flaws in the U.S. domestic policy on immigration by telling the story of what happened firsthand in her own family, when her Uncle Joseph became caught in an uncaring bureaucracy enforcing the United States' fundamentally negative policies towards some classes of immigrants. In *Brother, I'm Dying* we follow Danticat's family throughout their troublesome immigration to America. Learning Danticat's story may motivate and empower her readers to work to make changes to these policies.

Throughout her memoir, Danticat details a history foreign intervention in Haiti, beginning with its struggle for independence from France in the early 19th century, violations of Haiti's sovereignty by both warring sides during World War I, a nineteen-year occupation by the United States military in the early 20th century, up through the deployment of foreign U.N. Peacekeepers on Haitian soil in the 21st century. Danticat suggests that these foreign military deployments, and violations, on Haitian soil arise from an ethnocentric savior complex on part of the foreign powers, which only serves to exacerbate the internal problems of Haiti. The consequences of these actions, whether they are in the form of preserving colonies, the business interests of the foreign power, or the peace, result in further debilitating the overall livelihood of Haitians as well as destabilizing the overall political situation of Haiti. Danticat shows the Haitian people as having been victims of these foreign interventions, introducing them as ultimately familiar and likeable people with similar hopes and aspirations to her readers who may only be familiar with the island nation through newspaper articles or televised reports of Haiti's instability; thus developing understanding and empathy in her readers.

As the title suggests, death is central to the family members' lives; and as it does with us all, the possibility of death and loss shapes their interactions with each other. Death is inevitable, yet difficult to accept. People understand that they are going to die, and that their loved ones are not going to be with them forever, but it is something that people desperately try to ignore until it happens. What does it mean to come to peace with death? Danticat explores this question in *Brother, I'm Dying*. She also looks at how people can move on after losing someone they love. In the course of the memoir Danticat not only does loses her father, but she also loses his brother, the uncle who raised her. Despite these staggering losses, Danticat aims to look at how people can live their lives with joy and with a purpose even with death all around. She does this by including her infant daughter Mira in the memoir. Mira poses as an innocent comparison of how beautiful life can be amid death and sorrow.

*Brother, I'm Dying* may not be a peace book in the sense that the answer to world peace was revealed, but it does unveil how peace with one's self can be obtained, even in times of turmoil and trial. It is a book about hope, suggesting that, even though death is the unavoidable, miracles occur every day if you know where to look.

## Discussion Questions

### Basic Concepts

1. Of all the stories Granme Melina told throughout the memoir, which one was your favorite? Why? What lesson did that story have to teach? How was that lesson played throughout the memoir?
2. What role does responsibility play throughout the memoir? How does it give purpose to lives of Danticat's father and Uncle Joseph? What does each man perceive his responsibility to be? How does that affect the choices they make?
3. How does the socio-political climate of Haiti affect the lives of the Danticat family? How does this contrast with the American socio-political climate in the memoir?

### Going Deeper

4. What is the importance of storytelling in the memoir? Is this in any way related to the fact that Danticat is telling the story of her life and those of her family? How are the stories that are told significant to the memoir in terms of theme?
5. What role does incorporating elements of Creole have in the chapter "One Papa Happy, One Papa Sad", as opposed to translating everything to English?
6. Why does Danticat open the memoir with the present rather than starting in the past? To what extent do you think chronology plays a role in this memoir?
7. In "Have You Enjoyed Your Life?" Bob asks the father if he has had a good life. What does his answer say about his character?

### Peace

8. In order to win the Dayton Literary Peace Prize, a work must promote an increasing understanding between and among people, may include issues of human rights while focusing on peace, have significant literary value, must appeal to a variety of audiences. Do you think that Danticat's memoir was rightly awarded the prize based on this criteria? What aspects of the criteria does the memoir exhibit or not?
9. When Uncle Joseph is buried, Danticat's father says "He shouldn't be here. If our country were ever given a chance and allowed to be a country like any other, none of us would live or die here." Even though the United States appears to be a more peaceful place than Haiti, why would he say that?
10. The chapter "Beating the Darkness" describes the turmoil of conflict between the Haitian police force, the UN officers, and the local gangs of Bel-Air. In what ways are the UN soldiers and Haitian police a mechanism for conflict reduction? Are they effective?
11. Danticat quotes her father in the chapter "Brother, I'm Dying" saying "Yes, he would have made a very good politician, but my brother was a better preacher." What are the similarities between these vocations? Consider how each of them are relevant to establishing peace.
12. Track the connection between the United States and Haiti throughout the memoir; also consider the fact that Danticat was partially brought up in each country by two different

father figures. What is the significance of these relationships and contrasts? How do they emphasize a need for peace among opposing entities? How do they present the possibility of greater understanding through embracing differences?

## Danticat on Haiti and Awards

Haiti is largely the topic of Danticat's works. Compiled here is a list of interviews held with Danticat. She discusses many points concerning Haitian culture and her life growing up there.

### [Stories of Haiti](#)

Edwidge Danticat speaks of Haitian culture and gives some insight to readers of the things that make Haiti such a remarkable country. Danticat shares the stories of impactful Haitians, and the effects they have had not only on the U.S., but on countries across the globe.

### [A Conversation with Edwidge Danticat](#)

Danticat gives readers an idea of what it was like to move from Haiti to the United States. She shares some of the events and ideas that inspired her books, *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Brother, I'm Dying*. She also highlights the importance of literature in overcoming trials and hardships.

### [Women to Watch](#)

In this short interview between Danticat and Tara Gilani of CBS4, Danticat is described as a "A writer you can trust. Edwidge Danticat has a style of extraordinary restraint and dignity." *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, describes the meaning of one of her novels, *Krik? Krak!* ...

### [The New Yorker](#)

Along with the books Danticat has published about Haiti, both fiction and nonfiction, she has penned several short stories. Throughout the last fifteen years, she has contributed many stories to *The New Yorker*. Among these, there are nonfiction articles about sculptors and nurses and personal accounts of Haitian life and culture.

## Notable Haitian Female Authors:

Edwidge Danticat is regarded as one of the most well-known female Haitian authors, and she is in good company. Below is a list of other distinguished women who tell both personal and fictional accounts of historical and contemporary Haiti.

- [Marie-Célie Agnant](#)
- [Marie Vieux Chauvet](#)
- [Marie-Thérèse Colimon-Hall](#)
- [Ida Faubert](#)
- [Michèle Montas](#)