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## Danticat, Edwidge. *Brother, I am Dying*.

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**Edwidge Danticat**  
**Brother, I am Dying**  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007, 272 pp.

**Reviewed by Ian Bethel Bennett**

“*Mode soufle* where those who are most able to obliterate you are also the only ones offering some illusion of shelter and protection, a shred of hope—even if false—for possible restoration.”

Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*

Perhaps Edwidge Danticat's title is an indication of the pain embedded in the book and the experiences it recounts. But if the title reveals an idea of death and gloom, the narrative quickly dispels this notion. It is a eulogy that crosses the line and becomes a way of speaking about the life of a family and the huge impact that family has on the writer without the memoir ever becoming morbid or overly dark. The shawl of darkness, so often associated with death and Haiti, is dropped and a light that creates possibility through hope shines through (*lespwa fe vivre*). Danticat blends colors and flavors with feelings to speak of her personal loss in the most public way possible. The situation in Haiti is personal but also transcends the personal to show readers how hope may make a difference. And in the end, the power of forgiveness shines through.

The opening epigraph to my review is just one of the gems that Danticat leaves us with in her account of human suffering and determination, betrayal and faith—blind faith that knows no bounds that she captures in the Creole phrase *Nou led, Nou la*. For readers who have experienced loss in one form or another, Danticat's prose spurs painful recollections of loss and love. But along with sorrow, the book also provokes anger, particularly for those from the Caribbean who know well the plight of Haitians at home and in the United States. It stirs contempt, disdain, and loathing of a situation that is doomed to failure. *Brother, I am Dying* evokes anger at injustice and betrayal. However, it also demands that we throw off the cloak of poisonous stagnation inherent in anger by illuminating the embers of humanity that stubbornly rise out of every failed coup, every botched military occupation, each impotent political intervention that only encourages more murder and exploitation—as the words above illustrate.

*Brother, I am Dying* takes pages from history, eye witness accounts, documents, reports and policies and weaves these with first-hand experience that result in an artfully textured and highly nuanced rendering of Danticat's life in Haiti and the USA. Recounting the story of her family in Haiti and in the USA with such precision, Danticat leaves very little out, and yet no description seems overloaded. She recounts her parents' separate departures for the US and her life in Haiti with her brother, Bob, in the home of her paternal uncle, Joseph, and his wife. Danticat reveals the inner workings of her family life as Uncle Joseph adopts other children, opening his heart and home to them and to his community in Bel Air. The story line elucidates the hardships and disappointments of occupation and elections in Haiti through the tale of family and loss. Danticat leads the reader expertly down roads through Bel Air and New York, through the intricately connected lives of her father, Mira, and her uncle, Joseph, to her own life and the birth of her daughter. She also highlights the turmoil in Haiti around this period in their lives, as her uncle leaves chaos and certain death in Haiti only to be confronted with inhuman treatment and death in the US. This is also overbearingly public, as we realize the delicate nature of life. The public world of "human rights," administered without humanity, is strikingly revealed in a most private way to her reading audience.

Danticat orchestrates a masterful balance of documentary exactitude and memoir, involving the reader in a deeply private world of family, suffering and personal loss. Her account chronicles her love for, and the loss of, her uncle who meticulously recorded the events of his daily life, perhaps passing this on to her. However, this loss, and her recounting of it, is intertwined with another narrative of two brothers who love one another and are struggling to keep their families together. In this regard, this memoir is also about Danticat's love for her father and his impending death from lung disease. The relationship between Danticat's father and uncle is intense, though never actually written as such; the reader only witnesses these most personal exchanges through their interactions by phone and in letters. The respect and love Danticat holds for these men brings tears to our eyes as we recall our own families. Joseph Danticat is a man of tremendous honor and stature, a beacon to those floundering in the dark of self-doubt and aimlessness. His words, like those of the other characters involved, are filled with knowledge and lessons that life rarely offers us, even in our formal schooling. This humanity and love is indelibly inscribed on our mind's eye as we read. By the end, the reader cannot help but be affected by the weight of what has transpired and the process of sharing in such intimate family experiences.

The reader leaves the book without feeling overly sad, which is an incredible feat considering the devastating topic of Haiti's mounting social violence and such a tragic family tale. The extreme pain and loss pull the reader into the narrative reminding him how important familial relationships are; that relationships are a part of our selves, though often fraught with conflict and more often neglected—particularly in a North American context—and that they demand daily nourishment. It is the profundity of human relationships, of fraternal love and honor of elders that remains after the last page is turned.

That language can so utterly fail in a system stacked against Haitian asylum seekers is one of the more ghastly aspects of the narrative, particularly because it occurs in the context of entering that prides itself on its entrenched constitutional rights for all. The sentiments of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* come to mind—all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others. The revolution that sought to bring about equality has resulted in another systemic failure—embedded in the truth about the UN peace keeping mission in Haiti where soldiers kill, rape, pillage and effectively alter the balance of life. Horrifically, Joseph Danticat's experience in the land of the free—where he is incarcerated in Krome Avenue Detention Center, despite a valid passport, US visa and family members eager to house him is as devastating as his final experience in Haiti. Ultimately, he dies in Jackson Memorial Hospital in the Home of the Brave; an eighty-one-year-old man is shackled in order to preserve the public good. Language has failed. How else can this be explained? Is it the schism between a largely Hispanic and Haitian underclass that allows such miscarriages of human justice? Human rights have obviously been decoupled from their human context.

The narrative is rich with potent images that naturally overwhelm the reader's sensibilities. The images of totally misdirected betrayal and hatred leave us grieving for a nation in turmoil and a people denied possibility by "politics" and mockery or mock-democracy. Danticat renders such a full description of Haiti and of life in exile that we are left hopeful despite the United Nations' repeated failure and the US's racist, xenophobic reactions to Haitian suffering—for which they are in small part responsible.

While the novel clearly illuminates the deeply dysfunctional interventions of international AID policies, it also highlights the thinly disguised racist underbelly of some US policies. However, it stops short of openly administering scathing criticism at the institutions and persons behind these policies. Rather, it provides empowering food for thought which leaves the reader actively re-evaluating earlier ideas of justice and the potential of assistance from agencies such as the United Nations.

The beauty of the sentiment that fills this work is incomparable. Danticat could have reduced the narrative easily to an angry tirade against an inhuman system. But readers are left with a work of literary superiority that is not lofty or pretentious. One sign that a writer has succeeded in reaching their reading audience is when the material, though emotionally charged, still reaches through to us. There is a simple and undeniable reverence for elders and life that is passed from writer to reader. Not only does the audience read about the intricacies of life in Haiti, New York and Miami (though the focus is undeniably on Haiti), the awful turn of events for Joseph Danticat and his family, the ups and downs of separation and re-acquaintance for Danticat and her family; they feel them. The writer draws the reader into the horrors as the characters experience them.

While some readers may be painfully aware of the plight of the Haitian people, this memoir, or as Danticat refers to it *Nous-moir* or *Us-moir*, cements the true nature of their

suffering in the reader's conscience. The sorrow and pain, horror and discomfort, joy and hope make the book a must read. It brings to mind the works of Jacques Stéphen Alexis' *General Sun* and Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* in their Haitianness and their critique of the nightmare of international intervention that perpetuates dictatorship. This is an astounding non-fictional work of art that lures the reader into dreaming of the possibility of a future without such atrocity. This is a deftly balanced account that sheds light on the politics of the United States and Haiti, the real costs of the UN Peace keeping mission in Haiti, and the impact of all the interventions over the past century on a people set adrift by international AID projects and impenetrable, seemingly irreversible, corruption.

One element that catapults the book into a sphere of its own, away from many other diasporic renderings of home and exile, is the dismantling of the shroud of the American dream and the possibility and equality heralded therein. Danticat achieves this in an absolute way by exposing the horrific functioning of an immigration system that has been encouraged to act practically unilaterally and disproportionately in the wake of recent events of 9/11. Human rights and individual freedoms are the realm of the few rather than the right of the many. This book, in its simple and personal way, belies the profound fraud of a great deal of what people see as positive efforts to protect America's borders. Yet, *Brother, I am Dying* simultaneously marks the beginning of possibility with the birth of a new generation of Haitians in the America.