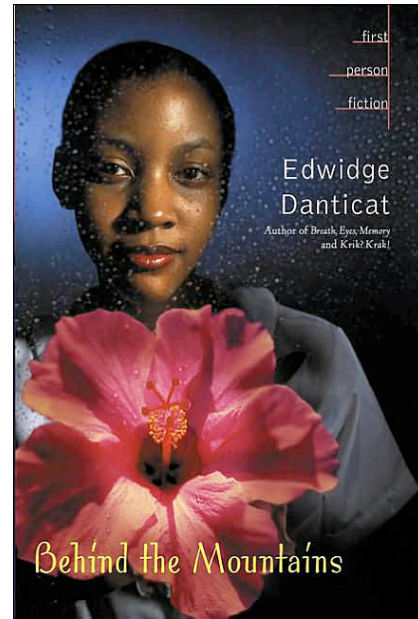


"Behind the mountains are more mountains"

Haitian proverb



Behind the Mountains

Edwidge Danticat
HarperCollins Children's Books 2002

Grade Levels

6-8

Curriculum Area

Language Arts • Social Studies • Art

National Language Arts Standards

NL-ENG.K-12.7 EVALUATING DATA

Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems.

They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources [e.g., print and non-print texts, and artifacts].

NL-ENG.K-12.8

DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

National Art Education Standards

NA-VA.4 UNDERSTAND THE VISUAL ARTS IN RELATION TO HISTORY AND CULTURES

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures.

Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry.

Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and

to artworks from various eras and cultures.

National Social Studies Standards

NSS-G.K-12.2 PLACES AND REGIONS

Students should understand how culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.

Objectives

To gain knowledge of literature, art and history of Haitian culture.

To explore life in Haiti during its transformation from military rule to democratic rule.

To learn how to relate literature to important social issues.

Overview

Celiane Espérance lives in the Haitian countryside with her mother, Manman, and her brother, Moy. All have been patiently waiting to join their father, who has been living and working in Brooklyn, New York, trying to raise money and establish paperwork for his family to leave Haiti. When Celiane receives a journal from her teacher for her excellent schoolwork, she decides to record her thoughts on the events that take place around her as her family prepares to move to America. Through her writing, the reader is introduced to her family and all of the places that they visit, including

Port-au-Prince during election time, where a bomb nearly kills Celiane and her mother. Their struggles in Haiti come to a close as they travel to meet her father in New York at Christmastime. Now their new struggles begin, as they have to become accustomed to American life.

Activity

Author's Background

Edwidge Danticat was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti January 19, 1969 at the height of the Duvalierist dictatorship in Haiti. When she was two years old, her father André emigrated from Haiti to New York, to be followed two years later by her mother Rose, leaving the young Danticat to be raised by her aunt and uncle. It was during these years that she was exposed to the Haitian practice of storytelling. A writer of considerable complexity and style, Danticat here adapts the straightforward, occasionally ingenuous voice of young diarist Celiane Esperance in the fall of 2000 as she waits with her mother and 19-year-old brother, Moy, in a remote village in Haiti for the opportunity to join her father in New York City. They have not seen him for five years: He had to leave to seek work when the family farm could no longer support them.

Their journey evolves in stages, each with its own challenges—hence the title, drawn from the Haitian proverb, "Behind the mountains are more mountains." Conditions in their village may be subsistence-level (with no power or telephone, their only way to communicate with Celiane's father is via a battery-powered cassette machine), but she manages to glean delight from unlikely sources, for instance, from the red glow of discarded cooking cinders ("like finding stars on the ground"). The occasional visit with her aunt in town involves pleasures and stresses in equal measure; the latter prevail after the bus in which they're traveling is hit by an election-protest pipe bomb. The disaster, as it turns out, has an up side, as it helps to speed their emigration application, and soon Celine must confront new fears: "What is the plane falls out of the sky? What if we hate New York?" The joy of reunion is indeed quickly supplanted by family tensions, and Celiane is flummoxed by such seemingly easy tasks as figuring out how to catch a bus home from school. We know she will cope, and eventually prosper. However, anyone who has ever been in her shoes—and that's everyone who has ever left home—will empathize, not just with Celiane but with brave voyagers everywhere.

It is not only the suddenness of the transition poses difficulties for young Celiane Esperance. After so lengthy a separation, the family members need to become reacquainted with one another. The strain is particularly apparent between Celiane's father and her older brother Moy, who had assumed many of his father's responsibilities on their farm in Haiti and now at 19, is eager to assert himself as a man—a difficult enough task in one's home environment. In their new home, it is almost impossible. Culturally and linguistically uprooted, the entire family struggles to make sense of and to survive in their new environment. Celiane's voice is authentic and largely unsentimental. Her portrait of a young immigrant's experience should resonate with young readers, regardless of background.

Activity

Start developing a background on Haiti prior to reading the book. Using the websites sited in the *Internet Links*, research the following for background in order to introduce the book to young adults.

Information about Haiti

- Haiti is located in the Caribbean and is 10,714 square miles of coastal land and inland mountains. This island nation has a total population of 7.2 million.
- The capitol city of Haiti is Port-au-Prince.
- Spanish, French and African influences can be found in Haiti's social customs, religious observances, language and cuisine.
- Leading exports are coffee, sugar and bauxite.
- Leading import is food. While Haitians grow food, most is exported for market. Livestock, besides goats and chickens, do not thrive well in Haiti.

Therefore, most meats and dairy products are imported and/or reserved for the well to do. A lack of appropriate and available land for agricultural cultivation limits the amount and type of foods Haitians are able to farm.

- Poor nutritional health among Haitian children makes them 50 pounds lighter and 6 inches shorter – on average – than a child of the same age in the United States. Infant mortality is a major dilemma of 1000 live births, 71 Haitian babies will die before age one. The United States' infant mortality rate is 7:1000.

- Life expectancy for Haitian men is 52.8 years. Life expectancy for men in the United States is 73.4 years.
- Daily, average caloric intake for men and women in the United States is 3700; in Haiti this intake level is 1740. 56% of Haitians are undernourished.
- Most of the Haitian population eats one meal a day, generally consisting of rice and beans.

[Hunger in a Global Economy, Bread for the World Institute, 1998]

Activity

Discussion Points

Characters

Celiane seems to be very anxious when it comes to talking to or writing to her father while she is in Haiti. What causes this anxiety? How does it lessen once she arrives in New York? Celiane describes herself as more of a country person than a city person. In what ways does she seem to change while adjusting to staying in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and when she is in Brooklyn, New York?

Manman, Celiane's mother, must take care of her children while their father is away in New York. How has the strain of their Papa being away affected her? How do Manman's sickness and injury change her? In what ways does she expect Moy to be "the man of the house" and "her little boy" at the same time?

Moy has taken on the responsibilities that his father left behind and goes to school to be a tailor even though he wants to be an artist. Why do you think he remains in school to be a tailor when he loves art so much? How does Moy seem to change when he stays in the city - Port-au-Prince and Brooklyn? In what ways does Moy struggle to become a "man" in his parents' eyes?

Papa, Celiane's father, moved to New York to raise money for his family to move there. How do you think his being away for so long has affected each person in the family? In what ways must he now adjust to his family being together? How does Celiane's letter to him at the end of the story change him?

Tante Rose, Papa's sister, lives in Port-au-Prince and works as a nurse. In what ways does she help Celiane's family while they are in the city? Why is there such a struggle between Tante Rose and Manman?

Settings and Theme

One of the proverbs in the book is "Behind the mountains are more mountains", which means that once you overcome one problem, there will always be more waiting to be solved. How does this apply to this story? In what ways does family help in overcoming such obstacles?

In her journal, Celiane writes that she was afraid living in a different country and learning a different language would make her a different person. Is that true? Explain. If this were something that you had to do, how would it change you?

Proverbs are used many times in this story. Celiane says a proverb "makes a picture for you and you must discover for yourself how to interpret it". How would you interpret the proverbs below and why did you interpret them the way you did?

"Little yams make a big pile."

"The empty sack does not stand."

"Sweet syrup draws ants."

"Don't look down your nose at old rags. Remember, they fit you before."

How does Granpé Nozial's story about the man who brings the ice from the city to the mountain explain both when the family came back from Port-au-Prince and when they were leaving for New York?

At the end of the story, the family comes together to live in a wonderful new apartment. Do you think this is the end of their struggles in America? Explain what other "mountains" they might find behind the mountains they have just overcome.

[Source- *Reading and Writing Sourcebook*. "The Story of My Body". Robert Pavlik and Richard Ramsey. Wilmington, Massachusetts: Great Source-Houghton Mifflin Company. 2001. Pages 183-195.]

Resources

Books, Essays, Poems Written by Edwidge Danticat

Danticat, Edwidge. *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel*. New York: Crown Publishing. 2002.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Anacaona, Golden Flower, Haiti, 1490*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. 2005.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Behind the Mountains*. New York: Scholastic, Inc. 2002.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Random House. 1998.

Danticat, Edwidge, editor. *Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*. New York: Soho Press, Inc. 2001.

Danticat, Edwidge. *The Dew Breaker*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 2005.

Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. New York: Penguin Group. 1999.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak?* New York: Vintage Books. 1996.

Resources

"American Immigrants: Part I." Petersborough, New Hampshire: *Cobblestone Magazine*. December 1982.

"American Immigrants: Part II." Petersborough, New Hampshire: *Cobblestone Magazine*. January 1983.

Budhos, Marina. *Remix: Conversations With Immigrant Teenagers*. Holt, 1999.

Greenberg, Judith E. *New Comers to America: Stories of Today's Young Immigrants*. New York: Scholastic Library Publishing. 1996.

Maestro, Betsy. *Coming To America: The Story Of Immigration*. Scholastic, Inc., 1996.

Robert Pavlik and Richard Ramsey. *Reading and Writing Sourcebook*. "The Story of My Body". Wilmington, Massachusetts: Great Source-Houghton Mifflin Company. 2001.

Reiff, Tana. *Boat People*. Globe Fearon Publishers. 1999.

Sandler, Martin W. *Immigrants*. Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.

Westridge Young Writer's Workshop. *Kids Explore America's Hispanic Heritage*. John Muir Publications, 1992.

Internet Websites

Learn About Haiti and Haitian Arts, Archaeology, Literature, Music, and History

American Museum of Natural History-Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou
<http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/vodou/>

ArtMedia Haiti
<http://www.artmediahaiti.com/>

BBC News-January 2000-Appeal for Haitian boat people
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/587774.stm>

Discover: Arts and Crafts- A History of Haitian Art
<http://www.discoverhaiti.com/artsynop.htm>

Double Minority: The Haitians in America Lesson Plan
<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1989/1/89.01.08.x.html>

The Evolution of the Haitian Diaspora in the USA
<http://www.haitiusa.org/modern/evolution.php>

Haiti-Art, Music and Dance
<http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/art/art.htm>

Haiti's Coup 2004
<http://www.africaspeaks.com/haiti2004/>

Haiti-LANIC
<http://www.lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/haiti/>

HaitianArt.com Haitian and Caribbean Art
<http://www.haitianart.com/>

Haitians-History and Culture
<http://www.culturalorientation.net/haiti/hintro.html>

Haitian Proverbs
<http://haitianproverbs.com/>

Haitian Proverbs, Riddles, Jokes and Folktales
<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43a/index-fb.html>

The Haitian Revolution PBS Online
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h326.html>

The New Americans for Educators/PBS-Contributions of Immigrants
http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/foreducators_lesson_plan_05.html