



 **THE BIG
READ**
HOLLAND AREA

2016

Brother I'm Dying
By Edwidge Danticat

GROUP RESOURCES

“I knew from very, very early in my life that I wanted to tell stories.”

— Edwidge Danticat

The Big Read

The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American popular culture. Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America, a 2004 NEA report, identified a critical decline in reading for pleasure among American adults. The Big Read addresses this issue by bringing communities together to read, discuss, and celebrate books and writers from American and world literature. A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining The Big Read.

The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.

OUR PURPOSE

The Big Read Holland Area seeks to create and foster a culture where reading matters. We strive to bring our community together around one book and use this shared experience of reading, discussing, and exploring the themes of the book as a springboard to learn from and listen to each other.

OUR PARTNERS

The Big Read Holland Area is a collaborative effort among many partnering institutions and organizations including Hope College, Herrick District Library, Western Theological Seminary, Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, Howard Miller Library, cultureWorks, and the Holland Museum.

OUR PRACTICE

The Big Read Holland Area actively works to offer a wide variety of programming that will appeal to a diverse population. Events take place in a variety of spaces and locations. In addition, we actively collaborate with area middle/high schools, and the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District, engaging students in the larger conversations of our community. We also provide participating schools with a unique opportunity to interact with a world-renowned author. Our main events are planned to engage each book and its topics from a variety of perspectives, experiences, and angles, including not only lectures by engaging speakers, but also featuring film, food, music and art to explore and celebrate the topics under discussion.

This November, The Big Read Holland Area will focus on Edwidge Danticat's memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*, a National Book Award finalist in 2007. Through conversation, food, film, music, and art, our community will come together to explore this story of roots and family, life and death, hope and sorrow, countries of origin and countries of tomorrow.

Our program this year will feature a wide variety of events surrounding the many themes of this book including a keynote address delivered by Edwidge Danticat, presentations by leading Haitian educators and musicians, a local immigration lawyer, and award-winning children's author Annie Sibley O'Brien, a student exhibition of learning hosted by hundreds of area middle and high school students, and more than a dozen public book discussions.

OUR PAST

Our first year, we read *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Over 3,000 people participated in the 7 main events and the 38 public and private book discussions. In that first year 6 schools, and 8 teachers participated.

In 2015, we focused on Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. Over 7000 people attended 10 main events and took part in 49 public and private book discussions. We increased area school participation to 10 schools and 16 teachers. The project culminated in a visit from author Tim O'Brien, who delivered the keynote address to a standing-room-only community event.

Why Brother I'm Dying?

We are excited to read *Brother I'm Dying* as a community for a number of reasons. First of all, it is beautifully written memoir of an intriguing true story that we believe our participants will deeply enjoy. It is also a newer and lesser-known title, so it will be a fresh read for many readers. Many churches, organizations, and members of the community of Ottawa County have connections to Haiti through mission work, adoption, heritage, and plenty of other ways. The book serves as a rich celebration of Haitian culture and history, and we would love to share in the country's traditions and values as we immerse ourselves in Danticat's story. The memoir also addresses some timely issues, and will likely prompt important conversations about how we can interact with and embrace people of different cultures and backgrounds than our own.

About the Book

Brother, I'm Dying, is the true-life story of Edwidge Danticat's father, Mira, and his brother, Joseph. Born in the Haitian countryside, both brothers move to the big city of Port-au-Prince to work and raise families. Many years later, after Edwidge's father marries and begins a family, he decides to immigrate to the United States, while her Uncle Joseph—a community leader and pastor—chooses to remain in Haiti with his congregation. Edwidge, only two years old at the time of her father's departure, is left in the care of her Uncle Joseph and his wife, Tante Denise. Joseph and Edwidge develop a close relationship over the next several years. Edwidge spends most of her free time with her uncle, and after he suffers severe damage to his vocal chords, she acts as his interpreter.

Ten years later, Edwidge rejoins her parents in the U.S. and must adjust to an unfamiliar world in Brooklyn, where she struggles to balance her new life with memories of the vibrant home and beloved uncle she left behind in Haiti. Now grown and living in Miami, Edwidge faces the impending death of her father and the birth of her first child.

Meanwhile, political unrest and violence in Port-au-Prince heighten due to government and gang disputes, and Edwidge fears for the safety of her Uncle Joseph and his family. Fleeing for their lives, Uncle Joseph and his son Maxo seek safety in America and come face to face with the complications of the U.S. immigration system. Over the next 72 hours, Danticat's world is forever changed as her father's condition worsens and her uncle's whereabouts are unknown.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Major Characters

Faidherbe “Fedo” Boyer

Husband of Edwidge and father to their daughter, Mira.

Edwidge Danticat

Author of *Brother, I'm Dying* and the eldest child of Mira and Rose Danticat.

André “Mira” Danticat

Edwidge's father and a dedicated family man, Mira works in a factory and drives a gypsy cab to sponsor the immigration of his wife and two eldest children.

Maxo Dantica

The son of Joseph and Denise, Maxo spends time in the United States for college but later returns to Haiti. Maxo joins his father in the attempt to flee Haiti after a surge of political violence in Port-au-Prince. ”

Bob, Karl, and Kelly Danticat

Edwidge's three younger brothers. Karl and Kelly were born in New York City while Bob, like Edwidge, was born in Port-au-Prince.

Joseph Dantica

Edwidge's uncle and Mira's brother, Joseph abandons political dreams to become a pastor, opening a church and school.

Tante Denise

Wife to Joseph, Denise is a stern but dedicated guardian of the many children in her care and is known as a skilled seamstress and the best cook in the Bel Air neighborhood.

Granmè Melina

Illness and old age bring Granmè Melina and her folktale traditions from her village in Léogâne to the home of her daughter, Tante Denise.

Marie Micheline

Abandoned by her father, Marie grows up as the adored role model of the younger members of the Danticat household and spends her life in Port-au-Prince working in various medical clinics.

Tante Zi

Doting and playful sister of Mira and Joseph, Tante Zi is a resident of Port-au-Prince and owner of a stationary stand. Tante Zi assists Maxo and Joseph when they are threatened by neighborhood violence.”

Excerpt From: The Big Read. “Brother, I’m Dying.” iBooks.

About the Author

Edwidge Danticat (b. 1969) was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where she lived with her aunt and uncle until she joined her parents in New York City at age 12. Her parents, Rose and Mira, left Haiti for work and safety in the United States when Danticat was a toddler. Growing up, Danticat was shy, and though teased in her Brooklyn high school for her accent and lack of English, she was proud of her heritage.

Danticat grew up in a rich storytelling tradition and loved writing and reading from an early age. Danticat published her first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. She had just graduated from Brown University with a master's degree in creative writing, after completing her undergraduate studies in French literature at Barnard College. Only one year later, Danticat's first collection of stories, *Krik? Krak!*, was short-listed for the National Book Award.

For several years, Danticat co-produced documentaries for Hollywood director Jonathan Demme and worked as an associate producer on the films *Courage and Pain* (1996) and *The Agronomist* (2003)—both about Haiti. During this period, Danticat began to think seriously about a career as an author, though her parents considered writing somewhat impractical. Having spent most of their lives under dictatorships, they also were concerned about Danticat writing openly of Haiti.



Edwidge Danticat. Photo by Jonathan Demme.

In addition to writing and making films, Danticat was a visiting professor of creative writing at New York University (1996-1997) and the University of Miami (2000-2008). Meanwhile, her writing career continued to evolve steadily alongside her other endeavors. Danticat has published numerous novels and several works of creative nonfiction, including her memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying*, which won the 2007 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography. In 2009, Danticat received a MacArthur Fellowship (nicknamed the “genius grant”) and her literary career took a new direction with a collection of essays on art and exile, *Create Dangerously: The*

Immigrant Artist at Work (2011). Part personal anecdote and part historical narrative, this book focuses on the creative work of individuals who bear “witness to violence, oppression, and poverty.

Danticat has often been called upon as an informal diplomat and advocate for Haiti. In 2000, she moved to Miami with her husband and their two daughters, only a 90-minute flight from Port-au-Prince.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. “Brother, I’m Dying.” iBooks.

Timeline

- 1492:** Columbus lands on the modern-day island of Haiti, claiming it for Spain.
- 1697:** Spain cede the western part of Hispaniola (Haiti) to France.
- 1804:** Haiti wins its independence from France through a slave revolt led by Toussaint Louverture.
- 1915:** U.S. occupation of Haiti begins as an attempt to maintain political and economic stability after presidential assassination. Occupation lasts nearly 20 years.”
- 1920s:** Harlem Renaissance celebrates black culture and identity in Harlem and beyond.
- 1954:** “Papa Doc” François Duvalier declares himself “President for Life.”
- 1965:** U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 liberalizes immigration.
- 1969:** Edwidge Danticat is born in Port-au-Prince.
- 1971:** “Papa Doc” dies of natural causes and is replaced by his son, “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier.
- 1971:** Mira Danticat immigrates to the United States.
- 1973:** Rose Danticat joins her husband in New York City.
- 1981:** Edwidge Danticat moves to Brooklyn to live with her parents and three brothers.
- 1986:** “Baby Doc” Jean-Claude Duvalier's constitution is annulled and his rule is illegitimized.
Haitian immigration to the United States increases.
- 1988:** Lieutenant General Prosper Avril replaces interim military government as president.
- 1990:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Barnard College.
- 1990:** Jean-Bertrand Aristide elected president of Haiti.
- 1991:** Aristide flees Haiti after a coup led by Brigadier General Raoul Cedras.
- 1992:** U.S. Coast Guard rescues more than 40,000 Haitians at sea as they attempt to escape a worsening economy and political unrest.
- 1993:** Edwidge Danticat graduates from Brown University with an MFA in creative writing.
- 1994:** *Breath, Eyes, Memory* published.
- 1995:** Aristide restored as president, with support from U.S. troops.
- 2002:** Edwidge Danticat marries Faidherbe “Fedo” Boyer.
- 2002:** Aristide's government orchestrates attacks on civilian opposition using police and government supported gangs called “chimères.”
- 2004:** *The Dew Breaker* published.

2004: Armed rebellion leads to the forced resignation and exile of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to South Africa.

2004: The United Nations Security Council creates the UN Stability Mission in Haiti in June.

2004: Maxo and Joseph Dantica flee violence and political unrest in Haiti, traveling to Miami.

2005: Mira, daughter of Edwidge and Fedo, born.

2007: *Brother, I'm Dying* published.

2010: Earthquake of magnitude 7.0 hits Haiti, killing 300,000 people.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Haitian History and Culture

Located in the West Indies, Haiti (the French spelling of Ayiti, the native Taino name meaning “mountainous country”) shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic and is roughly the size of the state of Maryland. A revolution led by slaves gained Haiti's independence from France in 1804, making it the world's first independent black republic. Haiti's official languages are French and Haitian Creole, and roughly 95% of the population is of African descent—almost all indigenous peoples were lost to disease and brutal labor practices at the hands of the Spanish colonizers.

Despite influence from Spanish and French settlers, Haitian culture remains distinct and vibrant, reflecting many elements of West African traditions. Rara festival music, twoubadou guitar ballads and merengue-style compas music exemplify traditional Haitian sounds. Haitian visual art includes intricate flag making to decorate places of worship, landscape painting, and sculptures that feature recycled and natural materials. Artwork from Haiti is bought and sold internationally and several major galleries in the United States and Europe have hosted exhibits of Haitian painting. Dance in Haiti is both a social and ritual activity—featured in Vodou ceremonies and carnival celebrations. Traditional quadrille or karabela dresses, worn by women on formal occasions such as weddings or religious holidays, are celebrated for their bright colors and full, flowing skirts. Haitian cuisine is based on Creole and French cooking styles. Beans and rice are staples of the Haitian diet and are usually flavored with coconut and hot peppers.

Haiti has given birth to several internationally celebrated authors such as Jean Price-Mars, whose works were translated from the French by Langston Hughes. The country was once home to abolitionist Frederick Douglass as well as to Zora Neale Hurston, who wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* while living there. Today, Haitian culture continues to influence artists of all disciplines, including the pioneering choreography of Katherine Dunham and the watercolors of American painter Lois Mailou Jones. Though Haiti is often associated with political unrest and

economic troubles, it is a country of great beauty and cultural richness, reflected in its landscape and its peoples.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide is a controversial political figure in Haiti's history, and he appears often throughout *Brother, I'm Dying*. Aristide was an outspoken critic of "Papa Doc" and "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and was Haiti's first democratically appointed president. He was first elected in 1990 and served as Haiti's President three different times: for eight months in 1991, from 1994 to 1996, and from 2001 to 2004. His presidential terms were abruptly ended by violent overthrows. A man with contentious policies, Aristide survived four assassination attempts, including one by the powerful Tonton Macoutes, which is referenced in *Brother, I'm Dying*. At the end of his final presidency in 2004, Aristide was forced into exile in South Africa, not returning to his home country of Haiti until 2011.

Excerpt From: The Big Read. "Brother, I'm Dying." iBooks.

Selected Works

by Edwidge Danticat

Claire of the Sea Light, 2013

Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work, 2011

The Dew Breaker, 2004

Behind the Mountains, 2002

The Farming of Bones, 1998

Krik? Krak!, 1995

Breath, Eyes, Memory, 1994

Online Resources

"Immigration, Xenophobia, and Racism" -Apoorvaa Joshi, Asia Society

<http://asiasociety.org/education/immigration-xenophobia-and-racism>

An article that provides lists of online resources about immigration and similar topics, including facts and statistics, and how to incorporate an informed discussion of these issues in the classroom.

“All Immigrants are Artists” - Doug McLean, The Atlantic

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/08/all-immigrants-are-artists/279087/>

An interview with Danticat that discusses the artistry and creativity that comes from starting a new life in another country and culture, inspired by a passage from Patricia Engel’s *It’s Not Love, It’s Just Paris*. Below is an excerpt from the article:

“...And that’s another thing this passage hints on: that first-generation immigrants often model artistic behavior for their children. They don’t necessarily realize it, like the father who says the immigrant life is art in its greatest form. But I realize now I saw artistic qualities in my parents’ choices—in their creativity, their steadfastness, the very fact that we were in this country from another place. They’re like the artist mentors people have in any discipline—by studying, by observing, by reading, you’ve had this model in the form of someone’s life. My mother could not have found time for creative pursuits with four children and a factory job. But she modeled the discipline and resourcefulness and self-sacrifice that are constant inspirations in my own life’s work. The things she did, the choices she made, made the artist’s life possible for me. I didn’t know it, but she taught me that being an artist makes sense.

While it’s natural for the children of immigrants to want to be artists, it is natural for the parents to feel threatened by artistic vocations. As a parent myself, I completely understand that impulse. When you’ve given so much, when you’ve sacrificed everything to make this huge transition, you want to see your child have an easier life as a result. You want to spare them the anguish of worrying always about survival, especially after all the sacrifices you’ve made. The first generation feels they created a path, they sacrificed, they made the way—and now their children should have stability and peace of mind. This, of course, is not the emphasis of being an artist.

And so, for children of immigrants, the creative path is fraught with added risk: There’s so much more at stake if you fail. There’s a feeling that—as the character in the passage feels—if you fail, you’re not only failing yourself, but your family, your parents who have gone through so much to give you this opportunity. It’s not just your own failure at stake—artistic failure can mean the failure of your family’s entire enterprise.

My father died of pulmonary fibrosis in 2005, after a very long illness. On his deathbed, he wrestled very much with the idea that his life ultimately meant nothing. He’d ask me questions like, “What have I contributed to the world?” And the conclusion he came to was: *well, you guys—my children. You are my contribution.* I think the fact that my brothers and I had some success in life helped him come more readily to this conclusion. My father always wanted me to be a doctor. As he was dying, if I had become neither doctor nor writer, I fear he might have felt like his life meant nothing. That weight was on my back, this feeling that success—however it’s defined—was somehow crucial.

The worst feeling that immigrant parents can have is, “Maybe we shouldn’t have come here. Maybe we should have stayed.” Often, their feeling about their decision to leave home is bound up in the fates and careers of their children. If they *do* succeed, though, this wonderful thing can happen: When they speak to the culture about the journey a particular family went through, and it validates the parents’ decision publicly. I found that, as my father was dying, this counted for him somehow—the fact that other people, through things I had written, knew how much he sacrificed to raise me and my brothers. This success ultimately convinced him that he made the right choice. It validates the decision he made all those many years ago.”

McLean, Doug. "All Immigrants Are Artists." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 27 Aug. 2013. Web.

Discussion Questions

1. Danticat tells us that she has constructed the story from the “borrowed recollections of family members....What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time.” Discuss what this work of reconstruction and reordering means for the structure of the story she presents, as well as for her own understanding of what happened to the two brothers.
2. Consider the scene in which Danticat sees the results of her pregnancy test. How do her fears for her father affect her first thoughts of her child? She says to herself, “My father is dying and I’m pregnant.” How does this knowledge change her sense of time? How does it affect her understanding of the course of her family’s history?
3. As a child, Danticat was disturbed at how little her father said in the letters he sent to the family in Haiti. He later told her, “I was no writer....What I wanted to tell you and your “brother was too big for any piece of paper and a small envelope.” Why, as a child, did she “used to dream of smuggling him words”?
4. How does young Edwidge retain her loyalties to her parents, even though they are absent from her life for so many years? Is there evidence that she feels hurt or rejected by their decision to leave for the States? How does she feel when they come back to visit Haiti with two new children?
5. Haiti’s history is briefly sketched on in the chapter entitled “Brother, I’m Dying” and elsewhere. While many readers will know that Haiti was a slave colony, why is the fact of the American invasion and nineteen-year occupation less well known? Danticat’s paternal grandfather, Granpè Nozial, fought with the guerrilla resistance against the Americans. How does the family’s

engagement with Haiti's political history affect Joseph's unwillingness to emigrate to the U.S.? Why does he refuse to leave Haiti, or even to remove himself from the dangers of Bel Air?

6. If so few words are passed between Danticat's parents and their two children in Haiti, how is emotion transmitted? Is there a sense, in the book, that Danticat is emotionally reticent even after her reunion with her parents? Why is she reluctant to tell her parents the news about her pregnancy? Why is it important that her father gave her a typewriter as a welcoming present?

7. Danticat found a scrap of paper on which she had written, soon after coming to Brooklyn, "My father's cab is named for wanderers, drifters, nomads. It's called a gypsy cab." What does this suggest about how she understood, or thought about, her father's work and her family's status in America? What does it reveal about a young girl's interest in the power of words?

8. *Brother, I'm Dying* is Danticat's first major work of nonfiction. What resemblances does it bear, if any, to her works of fiction in terms of style, voice, content, etc.?

9. Danticat says of her story, "I am writing this only because they can't." As a girl, Edwidge was often literally her uncle's voice, because after his tracheotomy she could read his lips and tell others what he was saying. Why is it important that she also speak for her father and her uncle in writing this memoir?

10. Consider the relationship between the two brothers, Mira and Joseph. There is a significant difference in age, and Mira has been away from his brother for decades, by the end of the story. Despite this, they remain close. What assumptions about kinship and family ties are displayed in their love for each other? Are these bonds similar to, or stronger than, ties you would see between American-born brothers?

11. When Danticat describes the death of her cousin, Marie-Micheline, or her uncle's list of the bodies he has seen on the street, or when she recounts the story of the men laughing as they kick around a human head, or the threat of the "gangs to decapitate her uncle Joseph, or the looting and burning of his home and his church, what is your response as a reader? How does this violence resonate against the warmth and love that are so clearly expressed by the feeling of Danticat's extended family members for each other?

12. How does Danticat convey a sense of the richness of Haitian culture? What are the people like? What are their folk tales like? How does their use of both Creole and French affect their approach to language and speech? How does she make us feel the effects of the violence and poverty that the Haitians endure?

13. Danticat's description of what happens to her uncle in U.S. custody is reconstructed from documents. How does Danticat control her emotion while presenting these events? How, in general, would you describe her writing style as she narrates these often devastating events?

14. Danticat relates her Granmè Melina's story about the girl who wanted the old woman to bring her father back from "the land of the dead: what is the effect of her decision to end the book with this story? How does the story reflect on the book as a whole, and on the act of writing?

15. As one reviewer put it, "If there's such a thing as a warmhearted tragedy, *Brother, I'm Dying* is a stunning example" (Yvonne Zipp, *The Christian Science Monitor*). Do you agree? If so, what elements in the writing and the story contribute to this effect?

**Discussion questions provided courtesy of Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC.*