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Claire of the Sea Light (Danticat)

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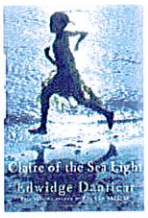

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Claire of the Sea Light

Edwidge Danticat, 2013
Knopf Doubleday
256 pp.
ISBN-13: 9780307271792

Summary

A stunning new work of fiction that brings us deep into the intertwined lives of a small seaside town where a little girl, the daughter of a fisherman, has gone missing.

Claire Limye Lanme—Claire of the Sea Light—is an enchanting child born into love and tragedy in Ville Rose, Haiti. Claire's mother died in childbirth, and on each of her birthdays Claire is taken by her father, Nozias, to visit her mother's grave. Nozias wonders if he should give away his young daughter to a local shopkeeper, who lost a child of her own, so that Claire can have a better life.

But on the night of Claire's seventh birthday, when at last he makes the wrenching decision to do so, she disappears. As Nozias and others look for her, painful secrets, haunting memories, and startling truths are unearthed among the community of men and women whose individual stories connect to Claire, to her parents, and to the town itself.

Told with piercing lyricism and the economy of a fable, *Claire of the Sea Light* is a tightly woven, breathtaking tapestry that explores what it means to be a parent, child, neighbor, lover, and friend, while revealing the mysterious bonds we share with the natural world and with one another. Embracing the magic and heartbreak of ordinary life, it is Edwidge Danticat's most spellbinding, astonishing book yet. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—1969
- Where—Port-au-Prince, Haiti

- Education—B.A., Barnard College; M.F.A., Brown University
- Awards—(*see below*)
- Currently—lives in New York City

Edwidge Danticat is a Haitian-American novelist and short-story writer. Born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, she was two years old when her father Andre immigrated to New York, to be followed two years later by her mother Rose. This left Danticat and her younger brother, also named Andre, to be raised by her aunt and uncle. Although her formal education in Haiti was in French, she spoke Kreyol at home.

Early years

While still in Haiti, Danticat began writing at 9 years old. At the age of 12, she moved to Brooklyn, New York, to join her parents in a heavily Haitian American neighborhood. As an immigrant teenager, Edwidge's disorientation in her new surroundings was a source of discomfort for her, and she turned to literature for solace.

Two years later she published her first writing in English, "A Haitian-American Christmas: Cremace and Creole Theatre," in *New Youth Connections*, a citywide magazine written by teenagers. She later wrote another story about her immigration experience for the same magazine, "A New World Full of Strangers". In the introduction to *Starting With I*, an anthology of stories from the magazine, Danticat wrote, "When I was done with the [immigration] piece, I felt that my story was unfinished, so I wrote a short story, which later became a book, my first novel: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*...Writing for *New Youth Connections* had given me a voice. My silence was destroyed completely, indefinitely."

After graduating from Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, New York, Danticat entered Barnard College in New York City. Initially she had intended on studying to become a nurse, but her love of writing won out and she received a BA in French literature in translation. In 1993, she earned a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from Brown University—her thesis, entitled "My turn in the fire—an abridged novel," was the basis for her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, which was published by Soho Press in 1994. Four years later it became an Oprah's Book Club selection.

Career

Since completing her MFA, Danticat has taught creative writing at the New York University and the University of Miami. She has also worked with filmmakers Patricia Benoit and Jonathan Demme, on projects on Haitian art and documentaries about Haïti. Her short stories have appeared in over 25 periodicals and have been anthologized several times. Her work has been translated into numerous other languages, including French, Korean, German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish.

Danticat is a strong advocate for issues affecting Haitians abroad and at home. In 2009, she lent her voice and words to Poto Mitan: Haitian Women Pillars of the Global Economy, a documentary about the impact of globalization on five women

from different generations.

Edwidge Danticat is married to Fedo Boyer. She has two daughters, Mira and Leila.

Books and Awards

- 1994 - *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (novel)—Granta's Best Young American Novelists; Super Flaiano Prize
- 1996 - *Krik? Krak!* (stories)
- 1998 - *The Farming of Bones* (novel)—American Book Award
- 2002 - *Behind the Mountains* (young adult novel)
- 2002 - *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (travel book)
- 2004 - *The Dew Breaker* (novel-in-stories) The Story Prize
- 2005 - *Anacaona: Golden Flower, Haiti, 1490* (young adult novel)
- 2007 - *Brother, I'm Dying* (memoir/social criticis) National Book Critics Circle Award; Dayton Literary Peace Prize
- 2010 - Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work (essay collection,) OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature
- 2011 - *Tent Life: Haiti* (essay contributor)
- 2011 - *Haiti Noir* (anthology editor)
- 2011 - *Best American Essays*, 2011 (anthology editor)
- 2013 - *Claire of the Sea Light* (novel)

(*From Wikipedia. Retrieved 9/15/13.*)

Book Reviews

The images in Edwidge Danticat's haunting new novel...have the hard precision and richly saturated colors of a woodblock print or folk art painting...[T]his book uses overlapping tales to create an elliptical but propulsive narrative...There is something fablelike about these tales; the reader is made acutely aware of the patterns of loss and redemption, cruelty and vengeance that thread their way through these characters' lives, and the roles that luck and choice play in shaping their fate... Writing with lyrical economy and precision, Ms. Danticat recounts her characters' stories in crystalline prose that underscores the parallels in their lives.
Michiko Kakutani - New York Times

At first, I resisted what appeared to be the fablelike delicacy of...*Claire of the Sea Light.* Was it going to be too precious? Would [Danticat's] lyricism camouflage or ennoble Haiti's life-or-death struggles? But it quickly became apparent that her hypnotic prose was perfectly suited to its setting, the tragic and yet magical seaside town of Ville Rose...In and out of bedrooms, graveyards, restaurants and bars, even the local radio station, Danticat creates rich and varied interior lives for her characters.
Deborah Sontag - New York Times Book Review

[I]n her rich new novel, *Claire of the Sea Light*, Danticat continues to speak in a captivating whisper. *Claire of the Sea Light* [is] a collection of episodes that build on one another, enriching our understanding of a small Haitian town and the complicated community of poor and wealthy, young and old, who call it home. From the first page to the last covers only a single day, but Danticat dips into the past to illuminate the recurring coincidence of life and death among these people.... The apparently disparate parts of the story knit together in surprising ways that seem utterly right.... One of Danticat's most entrancing talents is her ability to capture conflicted feelings with a kind of aching sympathy.... Danticat has perfected a style

of extraordinary restraint and dignity that can convey tremendous emotional impact. But in celebration of Claire, the life force of this novel, she delivers a kind of incantation that repels the rising tide of despair.... That's a tall order for a name—or a novel. But it's not beyond Danticat's power.

Ron Charles - Washington Post

Rising above the sea, Ville Rose is a place of immense beauty and overwhelming poverty, and where only the very few live comfortably . . . The imperative to do right by the next generation is at the center of Danticat's tale, set in the fictional town she sketched in Krik? Krak!, [which] here gets a fuller portrait.... The book shifts backward and forward over a decade but is not set at a moment of particular peril; the danger Danticat shows us is plentiful in the everyday: the sea that drowns a fisherman, the gangs that rule by bloodshed, the droit du seigneur that results in a maid bearing the child of one of the town's wealthy young men . . . Danticat's language is unadorned, but she uses it to forge intricate connections—the story stealthily gains in depth and cumulative power. The dexterity of Danticat's sympathy is an even match for her unflinching vision.

Laura Collins-Hughes - Boston Globe

In Danticat's luminous new novel, the search for [a] missing 7 year-old girl serves as a way of re-examining what we overlook and undervalue in life. Set on a single day, Danticat tells the story through a kaleidoscope of perspectives that illuminate life in the island nation where the roles of ex-pats, gangs, radio journalists and shopkeepers crisscross the landscape. In a voice tuned to the frequency of sorrow, with a calmness that neither apologizes nor inflames, [Danticat] lays out the terrible choice that many in Haiti have faced: Keep a child in deepest poverty or offer the child to someone with better prospects.... Danticat is a beautiful storyteller who doesn't shy from the brutalities...but she also applies a finely tuned sensibility to the beauty that surrounds the pain.... The search [for Claire] provides the vehicle to examine the lives of the perpetually unseen, the less-than, the lost. In the final chapter, we see the story through [Claire's] eyes with an unexpected burst of clarity that wows the reader. The day comes to an end in much the same place where it started. But the village—and readers—are changed. Danticat's determination to face both light and dark brings the story to life. But her skill as a writer makes the balancing act a pure pleasure to read.... A remarkably well-plotted combination of mystery and social critique.

Amy Driscoll - Miami Herald

Fiercely beautiful.... Ville Rose is a fictional place, but it's described here with the precision and detail of a work of literary.... The landscape of Ville Rose is as rich and varied as the Macondo of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.... Danticat is a prose stylist with great compassion and insight. And by shifting seamlessly in time and point of view, the sensational turns in her novel quickly lead us back to people who are struggling with concerns that are all too real. Danticat's characters are caught between the hurt

a poor country can inflict on its citizens, and the love those citizens feel for their birthplace.... *Claire of the Sea Light* brims with enchantments and surprises. Danticat finds a way, in the book's final pages, to convincingly bring her diverse cast of back to the Ville Rose seaside on the same fateful night at which the novel opens. That final feat of writing brilliance brings *Claire of the Sea Light* to a place few novels reach: an ending that is at once satisfying and full of mystery.... Impressive.
Hector Tobar - Los Angeles Times

Gorgeous, arresting, profoundly vivid.... Danticat once again tells a story that feels as mysterious and magical as a folk tale and as effective and devastating as a newsreel.... The book begins on the morning of [Claire's] birthday, before winding back to tell the story of every previous birthday, and who lived, and died, each year. For some time, Claire's father has considered giving her [away], and the heartbreaking question of Claire's fate adds to the novel's suspense, as both the past, and this single day, unfold.
Publishers Weekly

(*Starred review.*) A new offering from National Book Critics Circle Award-winning author Danticat is always cause for celebration. She has the ability to conjure up the rarified air of Haiti as she manages to pull tightly at one's heartstrings; this novel is no exception. Highly recommended. —*Susanne Wells, Indianapolis*
Library Journal

[M]otivations are never simple in Danticat's nuanced presentation. Her prose has the shimmering simplicity of a folk tale and the same matter-of-fact acceptance of life's cruelties and injustices. Yet, despite the unsparing depiction of a corrupt society in which the police are as brutal and criminal as gang members, there's tremendous warmth in Danticat's treatment of her characters, who are striving for human connection in a hard world. Both lyrical and cleareyed, a rare and welcome combination
Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

1. The opening chapter of *Claire of the Sea Light* moves backward chronologically through each of Claire's birthdays, ultimately returning to the present day of the narrative. How does this structure contribute to the book's sense of time overall, and to its weaving of past and present as more characters are introduced?

2. What does it mean that Albert Vincent is both the town of Ville Rose's undertaker and its mayor? How are these dual roles reflected in his relationship with Claire Narcis, Nozias's wife and Claire's mother, when she works for him preparing bodies for burial?

3. That Claire visits her mother's grave on her birthdays brings poignantly to the fore the notion that life and death are intertwined. In what other ways does that happen in the book? Do ghosts—or chime—have a positive or negative influence over the living?

4. The sea both opens and closes the book, offering powerful images of its destructive and restorative force: the fisherman Caleb is drowned at the book's beginning when "a wall of water rise[s] from the depths of the ocean, a giant blue-green tongue" (3), and at the book's end, Max Junior is spat back from the sea that had "taken [him] this morning" (237). What roles does the sea play in the fates of all the characters in the book? What other myths, stories, and fables come to your mind by this book's evocation of water?

5. At one point in the story, Nozias recalls another watery scene, when he and wife Claire Narcis went night fishing, and Claire slipped into the moonlit water to observe a school of shimmering fish. It is from this moment that their daughter, and Danticat's book, get their name. How does this important memory shape your impression of Claire Narcis, including in what we learn about her by the book's conclusion?

6. The relationships between parents and children take many forms in the book's three main families. Claire and Nozias remain at the center, showing how both parent and child experience joy and fear, trust and wariness. How is this theme expanded upon by bonds between Max Sr. and Max Junior, Max. Junior and Pamaxime, Madame Gaelle and Rose, and even Odile and Henri? In each of these, who, if any, suffers more: parent or child?

7. Madame Gaelle's story ("The Frogs," 41) opens with a description of a sudden explosion of frogs that has plagued Ville Rose, which her husband Laurent explains "is surely a sign that something more terrible is going to happen" (44). The smell of the frogs' corpses at first nauseates the pregnant Gaelle, yet the act of putting a frog in her mouth seems to save her baby from risk. How does this miracle, along with the simultaneous death of Laurent, reflect the town's mythic culture and one woman's sense of her fate?

8. Much of the lyricism and power of *Claire of the Sea Light* derives from the descriptions of its Haitian setting: of the sea, the mountains, the flowers, the "sparkly feathers from angel wings" that Claire searches for after her waking dreams (236). Would the book work in any other place, either in the Caribbean or beyond? How might things change if so?

9. Although this is fiction, Danticat vividly evokes present-day Haitian culture and society, including its poverty (5), gangs, and restavèk children—the child-servitude that Nozias fears for Claire. How do these realities affect your reading of the book and the sense of authenticity of Claire's story? Of Bernard's?

10. The radio is a major form of communicating stories throughout the novel, and

the radio station is a place where confessions and revelations are spoken, but also where betrayals, and even murder, occur. Why do you think Danticat chose to set so many key scenes at the radio station? Louise George is the host of a radio show called Di Mwen, which translates to "Tell Me." Does honest speech come more naturally in this medium where the speaker's face is hidden? In what ways is Danticat's book in and of itself like a radio show?

11. *Claire of the Sea Light* is rich with secrets: of paternity, of sexual identity, of crimes, of lies that unfold in the course of the narrative. How do the multiple voices of the book help withhold the truth, yet also expose it at key moments? In what cases does not knowing the entire truth of a situation—such Nozias's plan to have a vasectomy, Max Junior's love for Bernard, and Albert Vincent's for Claire Narcis—hurt or protect the person keeping the secret, and the person from whom the truth is kept?

12. Danticat chooses to tell her story through multiple voices and points of view, which provides the reader with a kaleidoscopic view of the past. How does this also affect the book's presentation of memory, and of our ability to shape certain memories that may not be our own?

13. In the scene where Nozias leaves his goodbye letter for Claire with Madame Gaelle, both characters seem to hesitate in their willingness to participate in Nozias's decision to leave. How do their interactions in this moment reflect their unique understandings of their responsibilities, and also of death and the future? What makes Nozias turn to Gaëlle in particular, and what motivates Gaelle to take in a new daughter after she's lost her own? Is money the most important thing to have, in raising a child, in offering him or her security and love?

14. Although Claire Limye Lanme is the book's fulcrum, her point of view does not appear until the final chapter. Does it seem that Claire accepts her fate and her father's decision? How does placing those other stories before Claire's affect your feelings about her in the final scene? What do you imagine will happen to Claire in the future?

15. The choice Nozias faces—whether or not to leave his child in the care of another —is one that many real parents in Haiti struggle with today. Does this knowledge change your understanding of the book, or your sympathies with Nozias? What would you do if you were in Nozias's position?
(*Questions issued by publisher.*)

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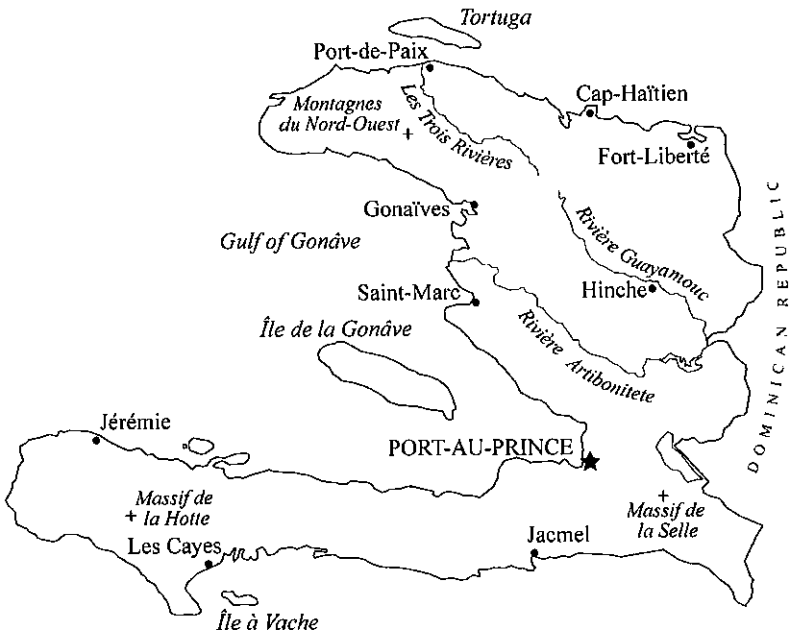
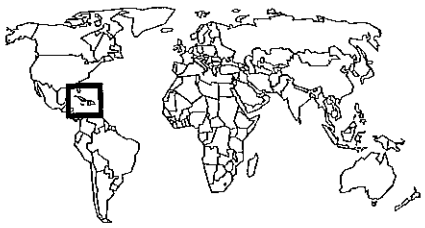
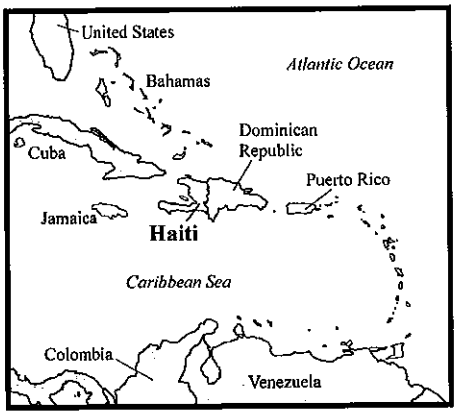
Republic of Haiti







Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.): 10,714
Area (sq. km.): 27,750

Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Haiti is about three times the size of Cyprus but is slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Maryland. It is comprised of two peninsulas split by the Gulf of Gonâve. The mountainous, nearly barren island of Gonâve, which belongs to Haiti, rests in the center of the gulf.

Haiti's portion of Hispaniola is significantly more mountainous than the rest of the island, with successive mountain chains running east to west on both peninsulas. The northern Massif du Nord is part of the island's backbone, which Dominicans call the Cordillera Central. The southern peninsula boasts the Massif de la Hotte and Massif de la Selle. The highest peak, Pic la Selle, is located in the Massif de la Selle and rises to 8,793 feet (2,680 meters). The mountains are punctuated by hills and valleys, where most people live and work. The four main plains include the Central, Northern, Artibonite, and Plaine du Cul-de-Sac (where the capital, Port-au-Prince, is located). Haiti is crossed by several large rivers, the longest of which is the Artibonite. Most of the tree cover that existed prior to European colonization has been removed due to farming and production of charcoal fuel for cooking.

Haiti's climate is warm and only mildly humid. Frost, snow, and ice do not form anywhere—even at the highest elevations. The average temperature in the mountains is 66°F (19°C), while at Port-au-Prince it is 81°F (27°C). Spring and autumn are rainy, whereas December through February and June through August are dry. July is the driest summer month. The hurricane season lasts from June to October.

History

Original Inhabitants and Colonization

The island of Hispaniola was originally inhabited by the Taíno and Arawak peoples. After Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492 and opened Spanish colonization on Hispaniola, the indigenous peoples were enslaved. Within a few decades, a million natives died from starvation, European diseases such as smallpox and measles, and hard labor in Spanish gold mines. In a belated effort to save the remaining Indians and to help their sugar plantations prosper, the Spanish settlers began importing African slaves by 1517. By 1560, few Indians remained. The 2,000 Spanish settlers controlled the island and some 30,000 African slaves. In 1697, Spain ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France, which soon enjoyed the coffee, sugar, and cotton riches of its new colony, Saint Domingue. France was given the entire island by 1795, although it did not fully control the eastern half.

Independence

The Haitian Slave Revolt began in 1791. Though slaves were granted their freedom by 1793, leaders such as Toussaint-L'Ouverture (a freed slave) continued to fight European powers for control of the island. L'Ouverture was eventually captured and subsequently died in a French prison, but his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines gained victory over

the French in 1803. Haiti declared its independence on 1 January 1804. French settlers who were not killed left the island. Dessalines became the emperor.

When Dessalines was killed in 1806, political chaos and rivalries led to a split: Henri Christophe eventually became King Henry I of northern Haiti, and Alexandre Petion ruled southern Haiti in a more republican style of government. Christophe committed suicide in 1820. In 1822, north and south were reunited under President Jean-Pierre Boyer, who finally established governance over the Dominican Republic; this era still perpetuates tensions between the two neighbors. France recognized Haitian independence in 1825 after Boyer agreed to pay roughly 100 million francs in reparation to former slaveholders over the next century, a sum that crippled Haiti's already weak economy. In 1844, the Dominican Republic declared its independence from Haiti, and Boyer was overthrown. Power changed hands repeatedly until the 20th century, which found Haiti near anarchy. Under the United States' Monroe Doctrine, which essentially sought to maintain U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere, U.S. troops invaded and occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934.

Instability

The following years did not bring stability to Haiti, as people revolted against the government and elites who controlled it. In 1957, François Duvalier, known as Papa Doc, won presidential elections despite charges of fraud. He killed his opponents and ruled with impunity, terrorizing the populace with his *Tontons Macoutes*, the secret police. Before he died in 1971, Duvalier designated his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier, "Baby Doc," as his successor. Riots in 1985 forced Jean-Claude Duvalier to flee Haiti in 1986.

A succession of military-led governments ruled Haiti until 1990, when Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the nation's first democratically elected president. Glee over his election was followed by impatience for reform and violence between Aristide's supporters and opponents. After just eight months, the military—led by General Raoul Cédras—led a coup d'état against Aristide, who subsequently made his way to the United States and set up a government in exile. His supporters in Haiti either went into hiding or were killed. The military dictatorship became increasingly brutal, and the international community decided to intervene with an embargo, though its effect was diminished by smuggling through the neighboring Dominican Republic.

A Return to Democracy

In September 1994, about 20,000 U.S. soldiers landed in Haiti to facilitate the removal from power of the Haitian military junta. A few weeks later, Aristide returned from exile to rule for nearly a decade. However, he was overthrown again in 2004. Though UN peacekeepers have been in the country since 2004 and a democratically elected government came to power in 2006, Haiti continues to struggle with violent clashes between government and opposition groups. High food prices sparked anti-government demonstrations in April 2008 that led to parliament's dismissal of the prime minister. Later that year, hurricanes and tropical storms left hundreds dead and thousands homeless. In 2009, more than one billion dollars of Haiti's foreign debt was canceled.

Current Challenges

The country's challenges continued in 2010, when a powerful earthquake struck Port-au-Prince, killing up to 300,000 people and destroying much of Haiti's infrastructure. International donors pledged billions of dollars to reconstruction, but the damage incurred from the earthquake remains an obstacle to Haitians as they try to return to their normal lives. In early 2012, the Haitian government announced it was partnering with the private sector to improve infrastructure, house those displaced by the earthquake, and fight disease. However, reconstruction efforts are hampered by government instability and insufficient aid. Haiti suffered fatalities and damages in 2012 from Tropical Storm Isaac (August) and Hurricane Sandy (October). Protests (some of them violent) in response to poor living conditions occur frequently in Haiti.

Recent Events and Trends

• **Cholera**: In July 2014, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon visited Haiti, where he said he would work to raise US$2.2 billion in aid to fight the spread of cholera there. A year before, a panel of independent UN experts concluded that it was very likely that Haiti's cholera epidemic, which killed thousands of people, was unintentionally caused by Nepalese UN peacekeepers. Ban did not acknowledge UN responsibility for the epidemic during his visit.

• **Aristide warrant:** In August 2014, a Haitian judge issued a warrant for former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide's arrest after Aristide failed to appear in court to face charges of corruption, embezzlement, and drug trafficking. Supporters of the former president set up barricades around Aristide's house to prevent his arrest and have clashed with UN troops stationed in Haiti. Aristide surprisingly returned to Haiti in 2011 after spending seven years in exile in South Africa, and he and his party remain popular among many.

• **Former president's death:** In October 2014, former president Jean-Claude Duvalier, known as "Baby Doc," died at the age of 63 of a heart attack.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Population: 9,996,731
Population Growth Rate: 1.08%
Urban Population: 56%

Haiti has a high birthrate, but emigration and poor health keep overall growth rates down. The majority of the population lives in poverty. Up to 300,000 people were killed in January 2010, when an earthquake struck the Port-au-Prince region. Most Haitians are descendants of African slaves who came to the island beginning in the 16th century. A small proportion of Haiti's people (5 percent) are of mixed heritage or white.

A large number of Haitians live in Florida, New York, and Montréal, and there are Haitian communities in other parts of Canada and the United States as well. Haitians have been living and working in the Dominican Republic since its foundation in 1844. Throughout the 1900s, the majority of the Haitians who traveled to the Dominican side of the island worked in the agricultural industry, specifically with

sugarcane. As sugarcane profits began to decline, increasing numbers of Haitians began to migrate to urban areas in the Dominican Republic; the government there has passed new laws in an attempt to regulate immigration and has carried out mass deportations of Haitian immigrants.

Language

According to the 1987 constitution, the official languages of Haiti are Haitian Creole (Kreyòl) and French. Kreyòl is the language of daily conversation. French is used in government and business. Only educated adults or secondary school students speak French, though with varying levels of fluency and accuracy. Knowledge of French has become a sign of social class in Haiti; those who speak French may shun those who do not. Kreyòl is a unique mixture of French, Taino, English, Spanish, and various African languages. It is similar to creole spoken on some other Caribbean islands, such as Guadeloupe and Martinique. Kreyòl is traditionally an oral language, though it had a written form as early as the 19th century. Use of written Kreyòl began to spread after the 1940s with the introduction of adult literacy programs. Because of the popularity of U.S. American television and films and because many Haitians have relatives in the United States, English is used more often than in the past.

Religion

The majority (80 percent) of Haitians are Catholic. While some people regularly participate in religious services, others only draw upon their Catholic identity in the case of marriages, funerals, or other rites of passage. Protestants claim 16 percent of the population. The largest denominations are Baptist, Pentecostal, and Seventh-day Adventist.

Perhaps as important as organized religion is *Vodou* (voodoo), which is practiced to some degree by about half of Haitians. It was given legal status equal to other religions in 2003. While official Catholicism opposes its practice, Vodou includes the worship of Catholic saints and other Catholic rituals. Vodou ceremonies and rituals, held in temples, usually are performed at night. Adherents believe that during the temple ceremonies, a Vodou god inhabits the body of a believer. Not all Vodou adherents practice the religion openly. Still, certain Vodou temples are the focus of annual pilgrimages.

General Attitudes

Haitians are warm, friendly, and generous. Their tradition for hospitality is clear in how they treat guests or go out of their way to help strangers find an address or something else they need. Haitians are proud of their culture and history. The stories of past Haitian heroes are not forgotten by today's youth. Some claim this is because the present offers no heroes, but others believe the past gives hope for the future.

Everyday life is hard for most people, so parents strive to send their children to school, though it is very expensive, trusting that an education will give the next generation a better life. No matter what society's conditions, Haitians celebrate life with joy, laughter, and dancing.

There is an extremely large income gap in Haiti. Rural and middle-class urban people have different perspectives on life, as their cultural practices and attitudes vary significantly. Urban elites consider themselves to be more European or cosmopolitan than people from the countryside. People living in rural areas value their traditions and slower pace of life.

Haitians' attitudes toward other countries usually vary according to social class. Haitians from lower classes often claim a historical connection to Africa, while upper-class Haitians may feel closer to France, Canada, or the United States. Haitians often migrate to other nations, including the Bahamas, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and France, with a few going to countries in Central and South America.

Feelings toward Haiti's closest neighbor, the Dominican Republic, vary according to occupation, class, and geography. Haitians from the upper classes may have business ties in the Dominican Republic, and those from the lower classes may take short-term trips to the Dominican Republic to buy and sell wares. Haitians living on the border often have friendly social and economic interactions with Dominicans. A growing number of Haitian students study at Dominican universities. After the earthquake in 2010, the Dominican government, as well as Dominican businesses and private citizens, contributed goods and money to reconstruction efforts in Haiti.

Personal Appearance

Whenever possible, people pay great attention to their public appearance. Urban Haitians prefer to wear Western-style clothing. Women may wear pants or colorful skirts. Some wear a headdress to match their outfits. Young people like to wear shorts. They also follow the latest North American fashion trends. Sandals are the most popular footwear. Government officials and businessmen wear suits and ties. Rural men wear T-shirts and shorts or pants when working. Rural women wear dresses and head scarves, but they rarely wear pants. Almost all Haitian women enjoy jewelry (though it is often unaffordable) and brightly colored clothing. Men may wear gold jewelry as a status symbol.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Personal greetings are very important to Haitians. When entering a room or joining a group, a person is expected to physically greet each individual. Haitians usually shake hands when meeting a new acquaintance. Everyone else, from relatives to friends and casual acquaintances, receives a kiss on each cheek. The most common verbal greeting is *Bonjou, kouman ou ye?* (Good day, how are you?). The response usually is *M pa pi mal, e ou menm?* (I am not worse, and yourself?). Haitians address superiors or persons of status by title (*Monsieur*, *Madame*, *Doctor*, etc.) and last name. Friends use first names or nicknames, which are usually related to a person's name, to address each other. An older person might be called "aunt" or "uncle" even if not related to the speaker.

Gestures

Haitians are an animated people who enjoy impromptu

gatherings wherever they may be—at the market, in the street, or at the movie theater. At such gatherings, people engage in loud conversation and laughter. Hand gestures usually accompany discussion or storytelling. If one is too busy to talk, one will greet a passerby by nodding the head up. To get someone's attention, Haitians often say "pssst." Clicking the tongue, called a *chipe*, is a sign of protest or disgust and considered impolite.

Visiting

Visiting is a national pastime. Friends, neighbors, and relatives are welcome in the home at any time of day until about 8 p.m. It is not necessary to call ahead. Visitors arriving during a meal may be asked to wait in another room until the family finishes eating. Close friends might be invited to share the meal, and they may accept or decline. It is also acceptable for guests to decline refreshments. Hosts typically offer fruit juice or soda.

In addition to impromptu visits, Haitians enjoy inviting friends over for an evening of socializing or for dinner. When a visit ends, hosts accompany guests to the door. Rather than leaving, however, Haitians frequently extend their visit for a while by standing and talking with their hosts. Special occasions also call for visits. Guests take gifts to hosts celebrating a communion, baptism, graduation, or wedding—occasions for which many organize elaborate parties.

Eating

Haitians eat three meals a day if they can afford it. People in rural areas may eat *cassave* (bread made from manioc) and coffee for breakfast, and they may not eat again until evening. The family gathers at the table for the main meal, which is usually at midday in cities. However, economic pressures and varied school and work schedules mean that families are increasingly eating at staggered times or separately. Diners take their portions from serving dishes on the table. If guests are present, they are given first opportunity to serve themselves. When no guests are present, family members often wait for the mother to begin eating before they eat. Usually, only the upper classes go to formal, enclosed restaurants on a regular basis. There are, however, a large number of small eateries where workers can go for a noontime meal, in case they do not have the opportunity to eat at home. Sunday dinner traditionally is reserved as a family meal.

LIFESTYLE

Family

Structure

Urban families might have three or four children, while rural families have ten or more. The basic unit of society is the extended family. Grandparents may act as parents in place of an absent or working mother or father. Relatives may also fill the role of godparent, which entails responsibility for a child if a parent dies.

Parents and Children

Children from cities may be sent to live with relatives in the countryside during summer vacations, and children from the countryside may be sent to live with relatives in cities to attend school. Adult children are expected to remain with their parents until marriage, and occasionally, married children live with one spouse's parents until they can afford a home of their own. Married couples usually live close to their families. This is especially true in the countryside, where the traditional *lakou* form of housing (a common courtyard surrounded by a family compound of small sleeping rooms) is prevalent.

In most families, a child's main concerns are succeeding in school and completing household chores. In wealthier families, children may be responsible only for keeping their rooms clean; in poorer families, chores include cooking, laundry, and cleaning. Some families can afford to send only one child, usually the oldest, to school. Educated children are expected to better the social and financial status of the family, providing for parents or less fortunate siblings later in life. Other children are expected to help more around the house or with the family business, which could simply mean being a street vendor. In wealthy families, parents establish goals for their children to become doctors, lawyers, or entrepreneurs who will expand the family business. After retirement, parents often move in with one of their married children.

Gender Roles

In urban areas, the father, if present in the home, is head of the household and responsible for earning an income. Mothers are responsible for cooking, cleaning, and teaching their children religion and morality. Middle-class urban families may have a servant to cook and do other chores. Rural men work their fields, while women sell produce in the market and care for the household and children. Though men may earn the money and make decisions, it is often the women who manage the household's money. Single-mother households are very common, as men typically have children by more than one woman. In such households, mothers often rely on older children to help earn income and to care for younger children.

Domestic violence against women is fairly common, and some of Haiti's laws tend to discriminate against women. For example, wives who murder their unfaithful husbands face harsher punishment than husbands who murder their unfaithful wives. A growing number of women from all social classes hold jobs, own their own businesses, and participate in government, though less than 5 percent of national legislative seats are held by women.

Housing

Urban

Houses are built with whatever materials are available. In Port-au-Prince, cement buildings are common. In older, established neighborhoods of the capital, brightly painted two-storey wood and brick houses are prevalent. Middle-class families may have land dotted with tropical fruit trees, corn, or sugarcane. Primitive cinderblock houses are found in newer parts of the city. These houses often consist of just one nine-square-foot room with packed-earth flooring and a corrugated tin roof. Houses are built on top of each other, and

winding narrow footpaths snake down to the local market. A small minority of Haitians has access to electricity; access to running water is even less common.

Rural

Outside of the capital, the traditional *lakou* form of housing survives. The *lakou* is a compound built around a courtyard where the family eats, cooks, braids girls' hair, and takes bucket baths. Surrounding this courtyard is a ring of small sleeping rooms made of mud and rock, wood logs, banana leaves, or cement.

Earthquake Damage

During the earthquakes of 2010, over a million Haitians lost their homes. Most of these were cinderblock structures with insufficient flexibility and internal support. Hundreds of thousands of people still lack permanent housing. However, many old buildings in the so-called gingerbread style of housing (Victorian-era architecture with high ceilings, porches, narrow windows, and triangular roofs) suffered almost no damage, given the flexibility of wooden structures.

Dating and Marriage

Dating and Courtship

Although young Haitians socialize in groups, they do not usually begin dating until their late teens. Teenagers are increasingly entering into sexual relationships. Young people often develop friendships that later turn romantic with the children of their parents' friends. Others form such relationships with classmates or acquaintances. Group activities usually include participating in study groups, watching soccer games, celebrating birthdays, and attending school fairs.

Once adulthood is attained and education is completed, a young Haitian's focus is generally on marriage. Men usually initiate dates. When dating, the man will visit the woman at her home to become familiar with her parents and family members. Couples also go out to dance clubs, to movies, or to other social events.

Engagement

Once a couple has been dating for a few years, a proposal is expected. A man traditionally asked a woman's father for permission to marry her, but where there is little relationship between the woman and her biological father, a man may ask the mother or the mother's husband. Today, asking permission is less common, especially in urban areas.

Marriage in Society

Most parents do not greatly influence dating or marriage, but they expect their children to choose spouses from respectable families with a social status similar to their own. The minimum legal age for marriage is 15 for women and 18 for men. Early marriage is more common in rural areas than in urban areas. Couples often live together and have children as if married until they save enough money for the wedding and wedding reception.

Formal polygamy does not exist, but married men usually have many girlfriends and children out of wedlock. This is often attributed to the desire for a son to continue the family line. Women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands and are chastised if they are not. In rural areas, a man's partners acknowledge each other and may even cohabitate.

Divorce is rare but separation is common, especially after a couple's children are raised and have families of their own. Usually, children live with their mother after separation, but they may also move in with grandparents or other relatives.

Weddings

In rural areas, a couple will not officially marry until they can afford a big wedding. Weddings are usually paid for by the groom or his family, but the bride's family may also contribute money. Typically, urban couples have a church wedding followed by an evening reception where rice, beans, meat, salads, cake, champagne, and soft drinks are served. Receptions are usually held in private homes, where guests eat, dance, and socialize until late in the evening.

Life Cycle

Birth

Celebrations of births are joyful, but Haitians are careful not to be seen as boastful in a country where so many children die before the age of five. Motherhood is extremely valued. Women do not usually announce pregnancies until they begin to look pregnant out of a belief that doing so could bring bad luck on the baby. The gender of the child is not commonly announced before birth. Due to a preference for traditional practices, most births take place without formal medical assistance. Once the baby is born, the maternal grandmother traditionally comes to care for the baby and mother.

Names are given just after the baby is born, though consideration may be given to a name prior to birth. Deciding on a name is an important event. It is common for children to be named after respected family elders or ancestors. Firstborn sons are usually named after their fathers. Children carry their father's surname unless the father is unknown or denies paternity. In rural areas, a child's name reflects the circumstances of his or her birth. For example, a couple who has had difficulty becoming pregnant may name the child Jesula (Jesus is here), Dieula (God is here), or Dieufel (God created him) to show their gratitude. Children who survive their first years are given a nickname that everyone outside of official institutions will call them by.

Milestones

Baptism and First Communion are significant rituals. Children dress in nice clothes, and family, friends, and neighbors gather to celebrate with a large meal, including some meat if the family can afford it. Because people often live with their parents into their adult years, young people are not seen as adults until they have children of their own.

Death

Because of Haiti's low life expectancy, elders—especially those who reach the age of 50 or above—are revered. When a person dies, family and friends gather to reminisce and provide emotional support to the deceased's immediate family members. Given the respect for ancestors in Haitian culture, even poor families make an effort to have a proper funeral. A viewing of the body is followed by a religious ceremony. Funeral processions in rural areas include a single car and mourners dressed in black led by a marching band. Urban funeral processions consist of cars and fewer pedestrians. Burial is traditional, although cremation is becoming more common. Traditional cemeteries contain brightly colored

aboveground tombs. Food and other offerings—such as *kleren* (an alcoholic drink made from cane juice)—are often placed on the tombs. People sometimes pour *kleren* and rum onto the ground as offerings to ancestors. Families of the deceased have masses in their honor on the anniversary of their passing.

Diet

Most Haitians eat rice and beans every day, although a main meal, when affordable, usually also includes meat, salad, and a vegetable. Rice and corn are staple grains. Spicy foods are most popular. *Piman zwazo* (small, hot pimentos) and garlic are often added to dishes. Meat is marinated in sauces with ingredients such as sour orange juice, lemon juice, and hot peppers. Pork is the most commonly eaten meat, but Haitians also eat goat, chicken, guinea pig, and seafood (fish, shrimp, conch, and crab). Eggplant, yams, sweet potatoes, and a variety of fruits round out the diet.

For breakfast, one might eat the traditional urban fare of coffee, herring with plantains and avocados, corn with codfish, or liver with plantains. A lighter breakfast consists of jam on buttered bread and coffee. A favorite daytime snack might be bread and butter or pastries. Meat-filled pastries are also popular snacks. Haiti is especially known for its fresh-pressed juices made from passion fruit, oranges, *chadèk* (grapefruit), cherries, papaya, *zikak* (a small, pulpy fruit), and other fruits.

Recreation

Sports

The most popular sport is soccer. Streets are empty if an important regional or world match is being televised. Children—both boys and girls—begin to play soccer at an early age. Leagues are organized throughout the country. Adult soccer stars are extremely popular among people of all ages. Many Haitians of all classes cheer for soccer teams, with a special affinity for Brazil's and Argentina's teams due to their repeated successes in the World Cup.

Leisure

Most Haitians have access to radios, and people generally listen to music and news throughout the day. A growing number of middle-class families are able to afford televisions in their homes. Few people own DVD players, but they can watch videos at television stores. Haitian music videos are favored.

Children like to play games like patty-cake, marbles, *oscelet* (jacks generally made of cow or goat bones), jump rope, and various versions of *lago* (tag). Children often invent their own games as well. In rural areas, the tradition of *tirer conte* (storytelling) continues. Children gather around an adult who begins the storytelling with the greeting *Krik*, to which the audience responds *Krak*. Popular stories include tales of Booki and Timalice (famous Haitian fable characters), stories of old times, and *lougawou* (ghost) stories. Young adults in urban areas spend their time with friends at fairs, *bals* (concerts), parties, or nightclubs.

Important events such as baptism, communion, graduation, and weddings provide families and friends the opportunity to get together and enjoy each other's company. These events include much *banbach* (partying and having a good time), catching up with old friends, joke telling, drinking, eating, political discussion, and dancing. Haitians enjoy dancing and will often dance whenever they hear a catchy tune.

Men enjoy cockfights, usually held on Sunday afternoons. They also spend hours playing dominoes and card games such as kasino, a complex game involving counting. Recreation for lower-class women often occurs in the form of jokes and storytelling while washing clothes, gathering water, or selling at the market.

Vacation

Vacations are a luxury enjoyed by wealthy families. Though vacationers usually visit foreign countries, there is a growing interest in visiting other areas of Haiti.

The Arts

Music and dancing are integral to everyday life. For over one hundred years, Haitians have composed and performed classical music. Older still is the traditional music of the Haitian peasantry and lower classes. These include music performed in Vodou ceremonies, music played before Lent (called *rara*), and other music associated with a particular rhythm (*merengue*, etc). Contemporary music in Haiti includes *rap Kreyòl* (Haitian hip-hop), *rasin* (traditional music fused with rock, jazz, or reggae), *chanson française* (traditional French songs), or *konpa* (dance music). Urban residents enjoy a variety of North American music.

Haitian artists and sculptors are known for their unique images and striking colors. One popular art form is sculpture made from cut, pounded, and painted scrap metal. *Tap-taps*, brightly painted pickup trucks fitted with benches and covered tops, are both a means of transportation and traveling art. Many artists choose Haitian history or daily life for their subjects. Nature is also an important theme. Painted screens, papier-mâché art, wood carvings, basketwork, pottery, and painted wooden boxes are prominent crafts.

Oral literature is abundant and includes songs, proverbs, and riddles. Storytellers carefully craft their performance, acting out the story with their voices. There is also a vibrant tradition of Haitian literature, mostly written in French, although Kreyòl is now commonly used as well.

Holidays

Haiti's national holidays include New Year's, which is also Independence Day; National Heroes Day (2 Jan.); Constitution Day (29 Mar.); Labor and Agriculture Day (1 May); Easter; Flag Day (18 May); Fête Dieu, which marks the institution of the sacrament, or communion (first Thursday in June); All Saints' Day (1 Nov.); Day of the Dead, or Fèt Gede (2 Nov.); Battle of Vertiers Day (18 Nov.); and Christmas. Freedom from the Duvalier dictatorship is celebrated on 7 February. Haiti also celebrates Catholic holidays, such as *Kanaval* (Carnival), held before Catholic Lent; Good Friday (the Friday before Easter); Ascension Thursday, celebrated 40 days after Easter; and the Feast of the Assumption (15 Aug.).

New Year's

On 1 January, Haitian people traditionally visit their parents and friends to wish them well in the new year. Almost every

household eats *joumou*, a soup made from a squash broth with carrots, potatoes, cabbage, pasta, and meat, which is traditionally understood to be the food of the French colonists who were driven out of Haiti.

Patriotic Holidays

Haitians celebrate several patriotic holidays. *Jour du Drapeau* (Flag Day) is commemorated with a parade held in front of the palace; students from various schools participate. Dessalines Day (17 Oct.) honors the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessaline, the man who led Haitians out of slavery and became the nation's first president. Battle of Vertiers Day, celebrated on 18 November, is the anniversary of one of the most important battles in Haiti's fight for freedom.

Kanaval

Kanaval (the Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday) is a festive time of dancing and parades. People prepare for the holiday for weeks in advance, beginning just after New Year's. On the holiday itself, people awaiting the main parade dance to music they play on their own portable stereos. The parade includes dancers dressed in traditional clothing, *raras* (musical bands on foot), *chaloska* (people dressed as monsters), and *chars* (floats from which popular music groups entertain the crowd). The partying continues all night and into the early-morning hours for two or three days. Stores are open only in the morning on these days.

Rara

Rara, another holiday closely linked to Lent, contains a mixture of African and Haitian voodoo traditions. It is usually celebrated in rural areas but occurs also in Port-au-Prince. Every Sunday during Lent, and occasionally on weeknights, a number of *rara* bands take to the streets, playing music on Haitian-made instruments and collecting people into a crowd, who follows them as they go. The instruments include the *banbou* (a bamboo pipe), *tambou* (a hand drum with a wooden base, topped with leather), *lanbi* (a conch shell horn), and *graj* (a grater that is rubbed with a metal stick).

Other Holidays

Fèt Gede (2 Nov.) honors the dead, who are highly venerated in Haitian culture. On this day, offerings such as coffee and *kleren* (an alcoholic beverage made from sugarcane) may be brought to the *Bawon Samdi* (the first man buried in a cemetery) or *Gran Brijit* (the first woman buried in a cemetery). Each village or town has a holiday for the local patron saint, celebrated with a morning mass, daytime festival, and evening ball. Some of these festivals are very large, such as the Fête de Notre Dame.

SOCIETY

Government

Head of State: Pres. Michel Martelly
Head of Government: PM Laurent Lamothe
Capital: Port-au-Prince

Structure

The Republic of Haiti is divided into 10 departments, but the central government has control over most political affairs. The president is head of state and is elected by popular vote for a five-year term. The president cannot serve consecutive terms. The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president and confirmed by the bicameral National Assembly. The National Assembly's upper house is the 30-seat Senate and the lower house is the 99-seat Chamber of Deputies. Members of both houses are elected through a majoritarian system. Senators serve six-year terms and deputies serve four-year terms. There have been efforts toward constitutional reform to ensure that more women are represented in politics on the national level, but these reforms have not yet resulted in concrete changes.

Political Landscape

Several parties field candidates in national elections and gain representation in the National Assembly. Perhaps the biggest challenge facing Haiti's government is rebuilding the country in the aftermath of the devastating 2010 earthquake. Lack of transparency in using foreign aid is also an important related issue. Despite chronic political instability and weak institutions on a national level, Haitians enjoy a relatively strong democratic tradition on the local level.

Government and the People

Citizens of Haiti do not generally enjoy free speech, press, or assembly. An ineffective police force and judiciary, in addition to the government's heavy-handedness, contribute to this situation. Corruption is a major problem in Haiti. Haiti's political instability has made it difficult for the government to provide basic services to citizens, including repairing damaged infrastructure and addressing public health concerns. Many have protested against the government for failing to control the high cost of living. The voting age is 18, and voter turnout has been low since the end of the military junta rule, in part because election fraud is common.

Economy

GDP (PPP) in billions: $13.42
GDP (PPP) per capita: $1,300

Haiti's economy is based on agriculture, which employs about one-third of the workforce. Large farms are rare, so production quantities are small. The most important cash crops include coffee, cacao, and sugar. However, little is actually exported, and international aid is necessary to develop future agricultural potential. Around 80 percent of all Haitians live in poverty. Real wages have not risen in a generation. Industrial activity is minimal, geared mostly for domestic needs (cement, sugar refining, etc.). A few industries make toys and clothing for export.

The economy experienced a severe setback when the 2010 earthquake struck Port-au-Prince. Corruption, high unemployment, political instability, and inefficient state enterprises are additional barriers to development. The government is pressured to privatize some state companies, but the process is slow and unpopular. Haiti's currency is the *gourde* (HTG).

Transportation and Communications

Internet Users (per 100 people): 11

Cellular Phone Subscriptions (per 100 people): 69
Paved Roads: 18%

For short distances, most Haitians travel by foot. In cities, they may also ride buses, taxis, or colorful *tap-taps*, which travel fixed routes but not on a fixed schedule. Intercity transportation is made by bus, boat, or plane. Few people own private cars.

Most people use cellular phones; landlines are increasingly hard to find. The postal system is generally reliable but not protected against theft. In the past, people often posted messages on certain radio stations or sent a written message via truck drivers, who would drop the messages at a store on their way where recipients could retrieve them. Haiti has two daily newspapers, about two hundred radio stations, and several television stations. A minority of the population uses the internet.

Education

Adult Literacy: 49%
Mean Years of Schooling: 4.9

Structure

Only a small fraction of schools are public, with private institutions making up roughly 80 percent of all schools. Private schools include Catholic schools, *écoles nationales* (national schools, which are funded by foreign countries), and international schools. Most urban dwellers send their children to private schools, even though tuition can be a burden.

Haiti's school system is patterned after the French model, with kindergarten, six years of primary school, and seven years of secondary school. It is common for students from poorer families to end their education after primary school and begin working. Children usually enter primary school at age six, and at the completion of their last year, they take a national exam called *Examen de Certificat*. Passing the exam allows students to move on to secondary school, while failing means they must repeat the last year of primary school until they pass the exam. Students also must pass exams at the end of the third, sixth, and seventh years of secondary school. The education system often does not adequately prepare students to pass these difficult exams.

Access

In some schools, known as *lekòl bòlèt*, or lottery schools, students are said to have as much chance of graduating as they do of winning the lottery. In general, schools lack qualified teachers and necessary materials, and the school year is often interrupted by political unrest. In Port-au-Prince especially, daily schooling is sometimes interrupted by street demonstrations focused on elections. Because these events can be violent, parents tend to keep children home whenever a protest is announced or anticipated. Education is highly valued but unaffordable to most. Even in public schools, parents are responsible for enrollment fees, books, uniforms, and school supplies.

School Life

School curriculum consists of math, grammar, history, and geography classes. Courses such as literature and foreign languages, and occasionally extracurricular activities such as sewing, are introduced at later levels. Learning by memorization is common. Students in higher levels of primary school and secondary school spend their afternoons studying and completing homework assignments. Most only study until sunset because of numerous power outages and the prohibitive expense of generators. Parents are generally involved in their children's study habits; involvement decreases as students age. Cheating may result in expulsion, possible rejection from other schools, and severe reprimands at home.

Higher Education

Students who complete secondary school may pursue higher education at a university or other institution. Wealthier students are more likely to attend universities in foreign countries, while middle-class ones usually attend universities in Haiti. The country's main university is the State University of Haiti. The majority of less-wealthy students often search for employment immediately after secondary school. A growing number of vocational schools, which have no entrance exams and are less expensive than universities, provide career-specific skills to students who can afford tuition.

Health

Many Haitians live in one-room houses with outhouses and no running water. The earthquake of 2010 destroyed many buildings and forced many Haitians to live in tents. Such living conditions foster the spread of diseases such as malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS. In 2010, a mass outbreak of cholera afflicted the country, killing more than seven thousand people in a year and a half, and cholera rates have remained high since then. These diseases, combined with malnutrition and the lack of health care, lead to numerous deaths—life expectancy rates are low and infant mortality rates are high. Hospitals provide minimal assistance to new mothers and infants, and a large number of women give birth at home without medical assistance. Infants do not usually receive vaccinations; most children receive vaccinations in school.

Haiti's national health system is unable to meet the needs of most people due to the lack of funds, staff, modern equipment, and sometimes even basic supplies. The majority of hospitals are concentrated in the capital. A small number of clinics and hospitals service rural areas but are not accessible to everyone they are intended to serve. There is no reliable ambulance system in Haiti. Sick people must be able to afford both the trip to receive the treatment and the care itself, which is often lacking in quality.

There is no public health care in Haiti; most have to pay their medical expenses out of pocket, if they can afford to do so. Since the 2010 earthquake, there has been a visible presence of foreign medical aid; however, aid organizations can often only treat the most urgent cases.

Traditional beliefs strongly influence the way that many Haitians view their health, especially in poor and rural areas. When confronted with a condition, some might try plant- or food-based remedies or traditional remedies prepared by a family member or friend. If money is available, one might try to purchase products at a pharmacy to relieve symptoms.

Illnesses are often characterized as "sent" sicknesses, magically placed on a person by a traditional religious practitioner. If an illness is understood to be mysterious in origin, one may visit a *doktè fèy* (a healer who mainly relies on herbal remedies), an *oungan* (a male Vodou priest), or a *manbo* (a female Vodou priest). Payments are usually made in cash, but some patients exchange cattle or land for services. Usually there is at least one such traditional healer in each area.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of the Republic of Haiti, 2311 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 332-4090; web site www.haiti.org.

Country and Development Data

Capital	Port-au-Prince
Population	9,996,731 (rank=87)
Area (sq. mi.)	10,714 (rank=143)
Area (sq. km.)	27,750
Human Development Index	168 of 187 countries
Gender Inequality Index	132 of 148 countries
GDP (PPP) per capita	$1,300
Adult Literacy	53% (male); 45% (female)
Infant Mortality	49 per 1,000 births
Life Expectancy	61 (male); 64 (female)
Currency	Gourde

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Claire of the Sea Light (2013)

Edwidge Danticat (Author)

In this novel by National Book Award finalist Edwidge Danticat, author of *The Dewbreaker*, the author tells the story of young Claire Limye Lanme. Claire, whose name means "Claire of the Sea Light" in Creole, lives in the poverty-stricken village of Ville Rose. Her mother died in childbirth, and her father, Nozias, feels compelled to find a new mother to care for his only child. When Claire's seventh birthday approaches, her father makes plans to take her on their annual trek to see her mother's grave, but discovers that Claire has gone missing. As he searches frantically for his daughter, readers see glimpses back in time to each of Claire's past birthdays, and understand more about the father-daughter dynamic and the desperation that Nozias feels to care for his family properly. Meanwhile, others from around the village struggle as well, including Bernard, an aspiring news reporter who is trapped in the village's violent culture, and Gaelle, a prospective mother for Claire who contends with her own grief.

Community Rating ★★★★★

eBook

0385349688	E-Book
9780385349680	E-Book

Hardcover

030727179X	Trade Cloth
1611739292	Trade Cloth
9780307271792	Trade Cloth
9781611739299	Trade Cloth

Audio

9781470366193	CD MP3
1470366193	CD MP3

MAIN CHARACTERS :	Claire, 7-Year-Old, Daughter (of Nozias), Missing Person, Nozias, Father (of Claire), Widow(er), Bernard, Gang Member, Journalist, Gaelle, Woman
SUB GENRE :	Child-in-Peril, Ethnic
SETTING(S) :	Ville Rose, Haiti
SUBJECT :	Haitians, Missing persons, Grief, Death, Father-daughter relations, Mother-daughter relations, Poverty
TIME PERIOD :	Indeterminate AD

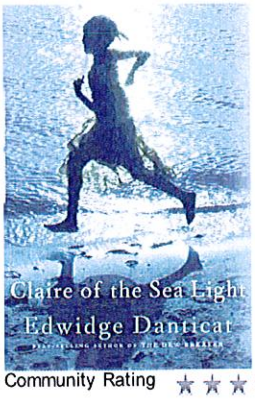
RECOMMENDED SIMILAR TITLES

And the Mountains Echoed - Khaled Hosseini
Benediction - Kent Haruf
Caramelo - Sandra Cisneros
Dissident Gardens - Jonathan Lethem
Enon - Paul Harding
Island Beneath the Sea - Isabel Allende; Margaret Sayers Peden
Long Man - Amy Greene
My New American Life - Francine Prose
The Roving Tree - Elsie AugustaveSee Now Then - Jamaica Kincaid
Someone - Alice McDermott
The Sun and Other Stars - Brigid PasulkaThe Twelve Tribes of Hattie - Ayana Mathis
A Wedding in Haiti - Julia Alvarez

Gale Document Number: GALE|M1300203850

Gale Database: *What Do I Read Next?*, 2014

Read-a-Likes



Community Rating ★★★★★

Audio

1470366193 CD MP3
9781470366193 CD MP3

eBook

0385349688 E-Book
9780385349680 E-Book

Hardcover

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1611739292 Trade Cloth
9780307271792 Trade Cloth
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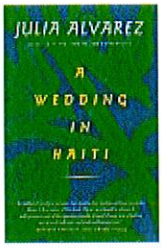
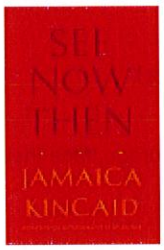
Claire of the Sea Light (2013)



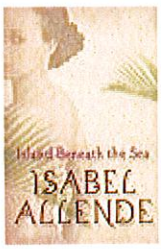
A Wedding in Haiti (2012)

In this memoir, Julia Alvarez tells the story of how her life changed when she and her husband met a



See Now Then (2012) AWARD WINNER

Jamaica Kincaid explores marriage and family in the follow-up to her popular novel Mr. Potter . A New



Island Beneath the Sea (2009)

Island Beneath the Sea is an emotional historical novel by Isabel Allende. Sold into slavery at a young

Someone (McDermott, Alice) (2013)

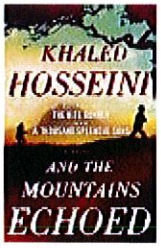
National Book Award-winning author Alice McDermott examines the ordinary and extraordinary events of

Caramelo (2002) AWARD WINNER

Each year the Reyeses, a large Mexican-American family, travel from Chicago to Mexico City to visit their

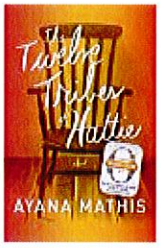
Dissident Gardens (2013)

Rose Zimmer is an extreme leftist member of the American Communist Party living in Depression-era Brooklyn.



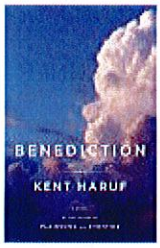
And the Mountains Echoed (2013)

In this book, author Khaled Hosseini examines the relationships that exist within a multicultural, multigenerational



The Twelve Tribes of Hattie (2012)

Debut author Ayana Mathis centers this novel of the Great Migration on the life of one strong, determined

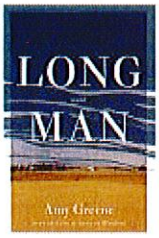


Benediction (Haruf, Kent) (2013)

The community and families of Holt, Colorado, face their most difficult times, but form bonds that sustain

My New American Life (2011)

My New American Life is a humorous novel from Francine Prose. After visiting New York City on a tourist



Long Man (Greene, Amy) (2014)

Yuneetah's days are numbered. The East Tennessee community is about to be submerged by the waters of

Tinkers (2009)

null

The New York Times

August 30, 2013

Island Magic

By DEBORAH SONTAG

CLAIRE OF THE SEA LIGHT

By Edwidge Danticat

238 pp. Alfred A. Knopf. $25.95.

At first, I resisted what appeared to be the fablelike delicacy of Edwidge Danticat's new novel, "Claire of the Sea Light." Was it going to be too precious? Would her lyricism camouflage or ennoble Haiti's life-or-death struggles? But it quickly became apparent that her hypnotic prose was perfectly suited to its setting, the tragic and yet magical seaside town of Ville Rose.

Danticat, who now lives in Miami, was born in Port-au-Prince in 1969 but left Haiti as a child, following her parents to New York. Over the years, she has become the bard of the Haitian diaspora, her concerns shuttling between and straddling two very different worlds. This book, though, is firmly planted in her homeland, in a fictional community whose comings and goings are less closely connected to any earthly immigrant destination than they are to the great beyond.

Although billed as a novel, "Claire of the Sea Light" functions in much the same way as the stories in Danticat's powerful 2004 collection "The Dew Breaker," its chapters gradually fitting together into a jigsaw puzzle of entwined lives. The title character is a 7-year-old girl whose mother died giving birth to her, "so her birthday was also a day of death," a day to visit the cemetery every year. Claire goes missing in the first chapter and stays missing until the very last pages, as a portrait of Ville Rose's sometimes beautiful, sometimes brutal reality is painted and a collision of fates inches closer.

Claire vanishes on the evening of her birthday, just when her fisherman father, Nozias, who is perpetually contemplating an exodus in search of a better job, appears poised to give her away to one of the town's residents. Madame Gaëlle, the proprietor of the local fabric sh talking to him about this plan in the aftermath of her own dau

in a car accident.

The day of Claire's disappearance had begun with "a freak wave" that killed another of the town's fishermen. Death — natural, accidental, criminal — is such a constant in Ville Rose that it makes perfect sense that the undertaker, resplendent in his elegant beige suits, with his "sad but gorgeous" eyes, should also serve as mayor. There is humor here alongside grief.

Danticat's work, lightly peppered with Creole, studded with observations familiar to those who know Haiti, opens itself to a broader readership through her deft intertwining of the specific and the universal. In "Claire of the Sea Light," for example, there is a flashback to the fabric vendor's pregnancy, a time when, moody and frightened and intermittently self-loathing, she forces herself to swallow a dead frog. Over time, such fantastical particulars serve to enrich her image as a woman assailed by love, loss and loneliness. Elsewhere, in a heartbreaking scene, she considers sleeping with the man who, years before, killed her daughter in that traffic accident: "She wondered whether their coming together in this way — to love rather than kill — might resolve everything at last. Might her looking down at his sorrowful face, and his being in her sorrowful bed, help them both take back that moment on the road?"

In and out of bedrooms, graveyards, restaurants and bars, even the local radio station, Danticat creates rich and varied interior lives for her characters. The one voice that didn't ring entirely true belonged to the child, Claire. Yet this proved only a slight disappointment because it quickly became clear that Ville Rose, rather than Claire, is the novel's true protagonist.

Since "The Dew Breaker" appeared, Edwidge Danticat has written a family memoir ("Brother, I'm Dying") and a young adult novel, and edited several anthologies, including the wonderful "Haiti Noir." "Claire of the Sea Light" represents her return to adult fiction after a hiatus of far too many years.

Deborah Sontag, an investigative reporter for The Times, was a 2011 Pulitzer Prize finalist for her coverage of the Haitian earthquake.

The Art Of Not Belonging

Dwyer Murphy interviews Edwidge Danticat

September 3, 2013

The MacArthur Award winner on immigration reform, returning to Haiti in her new book, and why Wikipedia is still "micro-categorizing women writers."

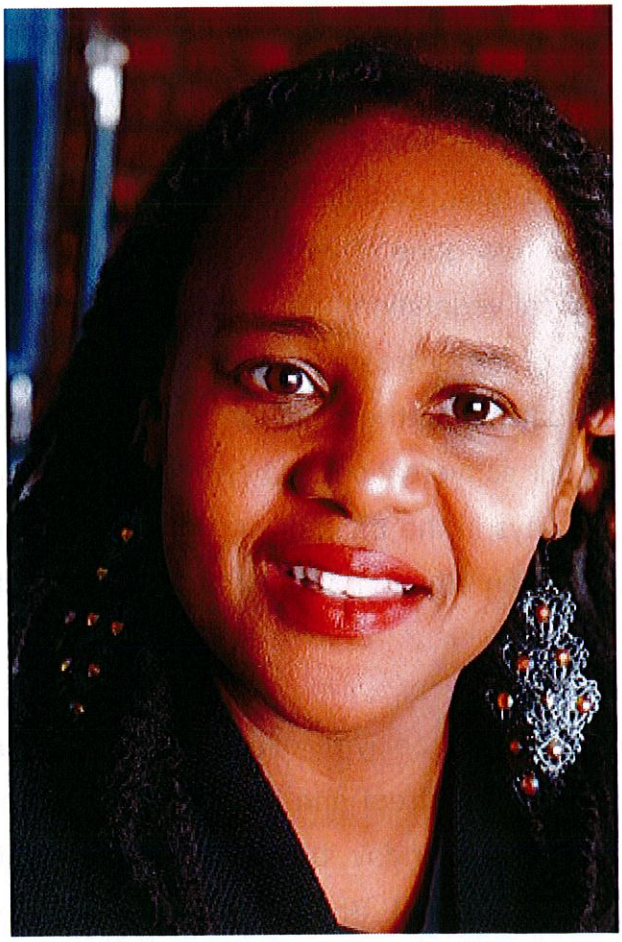


Image courtesy of Jonathan Demme

Almost a decade has passed since Edwidge Danticat's last work of book-length fiction, *The Dew Breaker*. In the meantime, she's written a memoir (*Brother, I'm Dying*—National Book Critics Circle Award winner, National Book Award nominee), received a MacArthur "genius" grant, edited the *Best American Essays* and *Haiti Noir* collections, delivered a Toni Morrison Lectures series that was turned into a celebrated book (*Create Dangerously*), and, in successive years, received honorary degrees from Smith and Yale. She's been so busy it's

almost easy to forget what a homecoming her new book is. After the long wait, *Claire of the Sea Light* has just been released by Knopf.

At the book's center is its title character, Claire Limyè Lanmè, a young girl whose father is trying to give her away, so that she can be raised as another's daughter. This tragedy, born of an act of love, radiates out and we come to meet the local citizenry through their respective tales. As the stories progress, the individuals begin to recede slightly, allowing the town itself, Ville Rose, to come to the fore. Danticat has always portrayed Haiti with a careful lushness, but in *Claire of the Sea Light* she seems to have a new fervor. It is her first novel since the 2010 earthquake, which destroyed so much of the country. (Danticat spoke to *Guernica* on the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, discussing the devastation it wrought). The stories are set in a near, undefined past, but there's a distinct sense that most of what Danticat is describing is now gone. There are no omens or soothsayers, and the richness of the place—the tropical vegetation, the precise placement of shops and homes, the Biblical presence and span of family trees—is often a source of joy. But it's difficult not to imagine a grieving Danticat cataloging these as the losses she and other Haitians have suffered. As she explained in our conversation, "When I'm writing anything set in Haiti now, whether fiction or nonfiction, always in the back of my mind is how people, including some of my own family members, have been affected not just by history and by the present but also by the earthquake."

I met with Danticat on the campus of Brooklyn College. She arrived with a stranger in tow, someone who'd recognized her on the street and had been telling her stories about his family. It was a sunny afternoon and a Friday, but I'd have to be cynical not to believe that this sort of thing happens often to Danticat. She has an exceedingly warm, inviting manner. We found a bench beside a turtle pond and spoke about the delicate job of mining family history for fiction, translating her characters's Creole, Wikipedia's struggle to categorize her, and the tricky ending to her new novel. There's a slight lilt to Danticat's voice, and she often seemed amused at the things that hadn't quite been said.

—*Dwyer Murphy for* Guernica

Guernica: We get a host of characters and voices in this book, but there seems to be a special affection reserved for Claire, the title character. How did you first find her?

Edwidge Danticat: Claire came like a vision, really. It was the year after *The Dew Breaker* came out. This was a painful time for me. My father was dying from pulmonary fibrosis. My uncle Joseph had just died in the custody of the Department of Homeland Security while seeking asylum in the U.S. My oldest daughter Mira was born soon after that. I started writing a memoir about all these deaths and a birth, a book called *Brother, I'm Dying*. And right about that time I saw a documentary about orphans in Haiti. Or rather, not quite about orphans. It was about kids who have parents, but their parents bring them to an orphanage so they can have a better life. One of the aid workers in the documentary said that the parents do this because these people are not that attached to their kids.

You're told you don't belong to American literature or you're told you don't belong to Haitian literature. Maybe there's a place on the hyphen.

My own parents left Haiti to work in New York while I stayed behind. I didn't grow up in an orphanage, but I grew up in my uncle's house with a lot of kids like me, whose parents were abroad, working. So after I saw this program, a new character came to me, almost the way someone appears in a dream. Claire Limyè Lanmè. Claire of the Sea Light, a child that a beloved parent would rather rip his heart out of his chest than to leave, but has no other choice but to try to give her to someone else to raise because he does not have the means to do it himself.

Guernica: The story began to fill in around Claire?

Edwidge Danticat: I started writing about Claire and her father, and then it became too about the town where they live and how some of the town people are linked in some way, large or small, to this little girl. The story is told from different points of view. At first you get the story from her father, then from the woman to whom she's being given, then from Claire herself. I broke those stories up, as the three pillars of the book, and I always knew that

Claire's story would come last. Because one of the pressing questions of the book is where is this girl going. Even I wasn't sure for a long time. My editor, Robin Desser, was asking me until the last moment what would happen to Claire. Is she alive? Is she going to stay with her father? Will she go with the woman he wants to give her to? I have written many different endings. The last thing I did, just before the galleys went through, was decide what happens to Claire.

Guernica: You're coming back to this fictional town, Ville Rose, where you've set stories in the past. Did you have any tricks for getting yourself oriented in the old space? Maps? Telephone directories?

Edwidge Danticat: No maps or telephone directories. Ville Rose itself is a hybrid of a town, a mix of several coastal towns I have been to or have spent time in while in Haiti. For a long time, I just had fifty pages of material that I had already written and kept reading over and over again to keep re-immersing myself in the town. But the best moment in writing any book is when you just can't wait to get back to the writing, when you can't wait to re-enter that fictional place, when your fictional town feels even more real than the town where you actually live.

Guernica: When you're writing in English about characters that live in Haiti and speak Haitian Creole, how are their stories coming to you?

Edwidge Danticat: All of it basically comes to me in Creole, with mental SimulTrans.

Guernica: Like your work at the UN?

Edwidge Danticat: Yes, except it's implanted in my brain. It's just automatic. Part of it has to do with the bilingualism/trilingualism of my life. The characters are speaking Creole in my mind. I can hear just what they're saying, and I'm the translator. Some things I leave in Creole, for readers who are bilingual and who may have another interpretation. The term "dew breaker," for example was "choukèt laroze." That could be translated as "dew shaker" or "dew smasher." But "dew breaker" is much more poetic, so that's how I translated it. It all happens quickly. I feel like I'm there watching or listening to the characters. I remember an early review of *Claire* that called it "a love letter to her homeland." And for a tiny split

second, I was surprised while reading this, because to me that implied that I wasn't there in my "homeland"—in Haiti. I thought "What? I'm not?" When I'm writing, it feels like I'm very much there.

Guernica: Would these be very different stories if you didn't translate? If you took them down in Creole?

I don't see any reason to keep micro-categorizing women writers, setting them more and more apart, except to marginalize them … Soon I might be [categorized by Wikipedia] in "Haitian novelists under five feet five tall."

Edwidge Danticat: Oh, definitely. I had that experience with *Krik? Krak!* I made some of the stories into radio plays in Creole and they become totally different. More alive in some way. More immediate. In the epigraph to *Drown*, Junot Diaz uses a quote from a Cuban poet, Gustavo Pérez Firmat—"The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you." This is the dilemma of the immigrant writer. If I'd lived in Haiti my whole life, I'd be writing these things in Creole. But these stories I am writing now are coming through me as a person who, though I travel to Haiti often, has lived in the U.S. for more than three decades now.

Often when you're an immigrant writing in English, people think it's primarily a commercial choice. But for many of us, it's a choice that rises out of the circumstances of our lives. These are the tools I have at my disposal, based on my experiences. It's a constant debate, not just in my community but in other communities as well. Where do you belong? You're kind of one of us, but you now write in a different language. You're told you don't belong to American literature or you're told you don't belong to Haitian literature. Maybe there's a place on the hyphen, as Julia Alvarez so brilliantly wrote in one of her essays. That middle generation, the people whose parents brought them to other countries as small children, or

even people who were born to immigrant parents, maybe they can have their own literature too.

Guernica: Jonathan Lee recently interviewed your agent, Nicole Aragi, for *Guernica*, and she was talking about the insanity of a recent controversy on Wikipedia, in which you and other authors were moved out of the "American novelists" category, onto other lists. You were put in the "Haitian Women Novelists" category, I think. So apparently Wikipedia editors are part of that crowd that's fretting over how to categorize you.

Edwidge Danticat: Isn't that something? The funniest reaction to all of this came from someone who was shocked that, with a name like Edwidge, I am even a woman. But I agree with Nicole that the whole thing is pretty outrageous. And also, what's the point? I don't see any reason to keep micro categorizing women writers, setting them more and more apart, except to marginalize them. I'm happy that someone brought it out in the light before the categories could keep getting more and more narrow. Soon I might be [categorized by Wikipedia] in "Haitian novelists under five feet five tall."

Guernica: Talking about how these categories are used to marginalize women in the writing industry, it still seems to be the case that the literary press skews white and male, and that books by women are reviewed less often. Have you noticed any particular slant to the attention your work gets?

Edwidge Danticat: There is definitely some imbalance. Sometimes you'll see a formidable book come out by an extraordinary woman writer go nearly unnoticed. Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, for example, was mostly reviewed in the big publications after she won the National Book Award. You also wish that there were more parity to the press that the book is getting. Last year when Jamaica Kincaid's book, *See Now Then* came out, the press was so one-toned. It wouldn't have been that way for a male writer. It's not a matter of whether the reviews are good or bad, it's about being taken seriously, both as a woman writer and as a writer of color. Also, it worries me when people point to a couple of women writers or writers of color who get some attention—and I am sometimes pulled into that category—to prove that others are getting a fair shot. It's like those people who keep saying that racism no longer exists in this country because Barack Obama is President of the United States.

My own personal barometer is this: Am I telling a nuanced and complex story? Am I telling my version of the truth, which I know may not be somebody else's.

Guernica: You've talked about a certain pressure you feel from the Haitian community, which sometimes takes offence at the way you're portraying Haiti. How do you deal with those encounters?

Edwidge Danticat: For better or worse, we all have a tendency to over generalize our individual experiences. After I've published something, I'll meet someone who says, "I'm Haitian, and I don't know this, so it must not be true." Even if we're talking about a work of fiction. I understand very well the desire to protect and defend Haiti. I've gotten very angry myself reading many things about Haiti. So my own personal barometer is this: Am I telling a nuanced and complex story? Am I telling my version of the truth, which I know may not be somebody else's. We're not a monolithic group; no group is. Also, it's important to keep in mind the genre in which we are writing. Fiction is full of invented stories about exceptional people in exceptional situations. Those situations are not always cheery or celebratory. Also fiction is not journalism or sociology or anthropology. Every story is singular. The way we get depth is by putting a bunch of singular stories together to tell larger more complex and sometimes even contradictory stories. This is why I love editing and why it's been such a pleasure to edit both *Haiti Noir* and *Haiti Noir 2*, which will be published next January. In those books for example, you have eighteen writers's versions of Haiti. You get sadness. You get joy. You get lyricism. You get darkness. You get light. And yes you get the danger too. But what you don't get is, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie put it in her great TED talk, a single story.

Guernica: Many of your stories seem to arise out of painful episodes in your family's history. Do you find some catharsis in turning them into fiction? Does your family, once they've read them?

Edwidge Danticat: I get some catharsis from it, yes, but I don't think my family always feels like what I'm doing is cathartic for them. Even with the fiction, they feel exposed. With the first book, you learn all your lessons. It was difficult for my parents at first. When people at their church started reading my first book, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, it was uncomfortable for my parents because people immediately assumed that I was writing about myself and about them. After that book came out, my mother told me, "You know, people are going to think you're not a good girl." My parents also spent most of their adult lives under a dictatorship. To them being out there in the world talking about things was not safe. But as we all got older, there was a transition. They became happy that I was also telling people good things about Haiti. They saw it as a kind of service to the country and all was forgiven.

Guernica: In an essay in the collection *Create Dangerously*, you describe returning home to Haiti with the body of your cousin, Marius, and your aunt asking you not to write about it. Do you usually comply with those requests?

Edwidge Danticat: Sometimes family members will ask to be kept out of certain things that I'm writing, and I try to respect that. I'd much rather have relatives than a book. With my aunt, when I ended up writing about that incident we came to a kind of compromise. I changed the names. If it would have totally wrecked my relationship with my aunt, I would have used it in fiction, maybe, but I wouldn't have written about it in an essay. This is something I had to balance carefully when I was writing the memoir. I've written essays where I mention things that I thought were very benign and those were the things that upset some family members. And sometimes the things you're expecting to upset them don't. When I was done with the memoir, I emailed the manuscript to my brothers and told them I'd take out anything they objected to. One of them said, "We don't like the way so much of it is about you." Even though it was more about my dad and uncle, I could see why he would think that. We'd all gone through these terrible things together and I was the only one telling the public story.

Guernica: Did you change things based on your brothers' notes?

Edwidge Danticat: I did adjust some things. But one of the greatest compliments I ever got came from my youngest brother when he read the finished book. He said, "It's all there. Just like it happened."

Guernica: You're a mother of young children now. Will your kids be off-limits, like with the White House Press Corps?

Edwidge Danticat: I think you mean the Little Haiti Press Corps. [*Chuckles.*] Some people get annoyed at women writers who even mention their children. Or there are all these theories about how many you can have, etc. I mention my children, first, because people often ask about the motherhood/writing balance thing and I also mention them because I can't tell you how much it meant to me when I was starting out to read about Toni Morrison and her two sons. It was very comforting to me that she was a mother of two and working full time and writing novels too. It made many things seem within my reach. So I'm not going be putting my children on full blast all the time, but every once in a while they are called to participate in the family project that are these books. My oldest happens to be on the cover of *Claire of the Sea Light*. She's very proud of it. She won't know what a remainder table is though because now I feel like I'll have to buy every leftover copy of the book I ever see.

I'd like to be cremated, so that I can rest in many places. A little in Haiti. A little here.

Guernica: And you'll be okay with her reading it, too?

Edwidge Danticat: I can't wait for both my daughters to be old enough to read all my books. I loved it every time I saw my parents acting like more than just my parents. And I'm looking forward to that with my daughters too. I am looking forward to having them discover me as someone completely other than their mother.

Guernica: Do you consider *Claire of the Sea Light* a novel, or a story collection?

Edwidge Danticat: I think of it as something in between. A kind of hybrid. Notice, we didn't write "A Novel" on the cover. I don't want people to think I'm trying to pass this off as something it's not. Many wonderful works of fiction have been written this way. Jean

Toomer's *Cane* is one of my favorites. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, among others.

Guernica: This is the first book of fiction you've published since the earthquake—has your writing about Haiti changed since then?

Edwidge Danticat: The landscape has changed so much, the physical spaces. There is this split between the Haiti of before the earthquake and the Haiti of after the earthquake. So when I'm writing anything set in Haiti now, whether fiction or nonfiction, always in the back of my mind is how people, including some of my own family members, have been affected not just by history and by the present but also by the earthquake.

Guernica: *Claire of the Sea Light* is set pre-earthquake, but certain passages about the town and the country feel elegiac.

Edwidge Danticat: I started working on half the book before the earthquake and half of it after the earthquake. But at some point in the writing, even before the earthquake happened, this place I was writing about became a town on the verge of disaster. For a while, I had the year in the book explicitly. 2009. But eventually I took that out. I didn't want it to be some big revelation, a dramatic ta-da moment of the year before the earthquake.

Guernica: One of the aphorisms that Claire repeats seems particularly evocative of this seaside town: "Salt is life." Is that something you heard growing up in Haiti or something you invented for the story?

Edwidge Danticat: I might have heard it. But salt is a powerful symbol in Haiti, as elsewhere. Salt of the earth, for example is an American phrase isn't it? In Haiti, myth and legend has it that if you are turned into a zombie, if someone gives you a taste of salt, then you can come back to life. And in the life of the fishermen, there are so many little things about salt that I wanted to incorporate. The salt in the air. The crackling of salt in the fire. There's all this damage, this peeling of the fishing boats from the sea salt. But there is also healing from it, sea baths that are supposed to heal all kinds of aches and wounds.

Guernica: This might be a bit forward for our first meeting, but do you know where you're

going to be buried? Your characters often have very definite ideas about that. It occurred to me that it might be a personal preoccupation of yours.

Edwidge Danticat: It's always been something of an obsession of mine but has become more so since my eighty-one-year-old uncle died here in the United States, after never wanting to leave Haiti, except for short periods of time. When my uncle died, his body could not be returned to Haiti so he was buried in Queens, New York. He was always so sure that he was going to be buried in our family mausoleum in Port-au-Prince. He had also taken this very strong stand against leaving Haiti permanently. Someone has to stay, he always said. And he ended up being buried in Queens next to my father, who had been the one who left. Ultimately, we don't always get a say, but I'd like to be cremated, so that I can rest in many places. A little in Haiti. A little here.

Guernica: Gang violence seems to increasingly crop up in your work. It creates an important plot point in *Claire of the Sea Light*. Is it something you've set out to explore?

Edwidge Danticat: I wrote about gang violence in *Brother, I'm Dying* because it is in part what drove my uncle to leave Haiti and the neighborhood he had been living in for fifty years and to request asylum in the United States, something that led to his death. A group from the United Nations force, which is still in Haiti now, had basically invaded my uncle's house and occupied the roof and had shot at people from my uncle's roof, and when they retreated some of the people from the neighborhood wanted to kill my uncle because they thought he had willingly participated in the operation.

Living in a poor area, you are easily criminalized. The UN people might have just as easily killed my uncle too, the way they had killed innocent people who become their collateral damage in other operations in other poor neighborhoods in Port-au-Prince. But I wanted to write about the gang violence in both the memoir and in this book because even with all that had happened I couldn't totally demonize the young people who ended up joining the gangs, because some of them I had known since they were young. Many have since been killed in later operations like the one that happened from the top of my uncle's roof that day, but they were not ghosts but people to me. My uncle had hired some of them who had been deported from the United States as English tutors or computer teachers for some of the kids in the school he had in the neighborhood. Some of these same young men who had

threatened my uncle's life had been at my aunt's funeral not long before that. Some of their parents were parishioners in my uncle's church. I would see them during different visits. I can't tell you what they were doing elsewhere, but my uncle knew them as neighbors and tried to co-exist with them because—and maybe this was because he was a minister—he never stopped believing in redemption. He believed that no matter what people were calling these guys, there was goodness in them. So this part of it, the more intimate and less sensational part of gang life, from my limited exposure and from a bit of my uncle's perspective, is something I wanted to try explore in fiction, after writing about it in the memoir.

Sometimes fiction allows you to explore these types of complicated spaces more deeply. I didn't want to redeem the face of violence, but it is important for me to show that it is not always coming from one side. In *Claire*, Tiye and his people, for example, are not the only gangsters in the book. A lot of other seemingly good people also have a lot of blood on their hands.

Guernica: Since your uncle died seeking asylum, in the custody of Homeland Security, you've been very vocal about immigration reform and about asylum detention in particular. Are you feeling frustrated that President Obama, of whom you were an early supporter, hasn't been able to make more progress on these issues?

Edwidge Danticat: Yes, the fact that immigration reform has been so stalled is rather disappointing. On the one hand, you have the stalled reform and on the other hand all this draconian "show me your papers" legislation cropping up all over the country and some deplorable things happening in detention centers, where asylum seekers are still being treated deplorably and many of them are still dying the same way my uncle did. Last February, according to a group I am involved with called Americans for Immigrant Justice, several of their now clients, women who were seeking asylum, were taken into custody in Texas and placed in something called the icebox. They were put in cells with more than twenty-five people, cells with no chairs or beds, just a toilet. The lights were kept on twenty-four hours a day and the temperature was kept really low. It seems like in some quarters they want to make life so miserable for immigrants and asylum seekers that they will "self-deport" or think twice about coming to this country before whatever version of immigrant reform passes.

Guernica: Do you wish that other writers were as willing to get involved in politics?

Edwidge Danticat: Albert Camus in his December 1957 lecture "*L'artiste et son temps*," which was translated as "Create Dangerously" says, "The writers of today know this. If they speak up, they are criticized and attacked. If they become modest and keep silent, they are vociferously blamed for their silence." I think everyone should just do what they're comfortable doing. I wouldn't want to diminish the fact that writing itself, whatever it is, can be a way of being involved. And I would never want to presume to tell others what to do.

Guernica: Relative to other "literary" writers, your books enjoy quite a bit of popular success. Do you attribute it to anything in particular?

Edwidge Danticat: Oprah! Everything changed when Oprah chose *Breath, Eyes, Memory* for her book club in the spring of 1998. I had published two books when she picked my first and that fall when I went on tour for my third—*The Farming of Bones*—I could already see the difference in terms of a wider interest in my work. She introduced my work to people who might have never read me and a lot of those readers are still with me today.

Guernica: Are you working on something new now, while *Claire of the Sea Light* is launching?

Edwidge Danticat: The best advice I ever got as a writer was from my first editor at Soho Press, Laura Hruska. Rest her soul. This was when *Breath, Eyes, Memory* was in galleys. We had just gotten a paperback deal with Vintage, thanks to two wonderful editors there, Dawn Davis and Robin Desser, my current editor at Knopf. I was working as an assistant at Jonathan Demme's film production company then, Clinica Estetico, which was just down the street from Soho Press. Laura came over and sat next to me in my little cubicle, and looked me straight in the eye and said, "Edwidge, you're now going to have to start thinking about a writing career."

Frankly, I hadn't been fully thinking that way. I thought I'd write a couple of books then go on to do something else. Maybe work on films, which I have also been lucky enough to do. So Laura Hruska told me that I needed to start on something new right away, before the book came out, so that whether it got a really good or a really bad or an indifferent reception, at

least I'd have another writing project already in the works to return to. I've always tried to follow that advice. So right now, I'm about a hundred pages into my new book. I will have that to return to once Claire has begun to make her way into the world.