



The Farming of Bones

Edwidge Danticat

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The Farming of Bones begins in 1937 in a village on the Dominican side of the river that separates the country from Haiti. Amabelle Desir, Haitian-born and a faithful maidservant to the Dominican family that took her in when she was orphaned, and her lover Sebastien, an itinerant sugarcane cutter, decide they will marry and return to Haiti at the end of the cane season. However, hostilities toward Haitian laborers find a vitriolic spokesman in the ultra-nationalist Generalissimo Trujillo who calls for an ethnic cleansing of his Spanish-speaking country. As rumors of Haitian persecution become fact, as anxiety turns to terror, Amabelle and Sebastien's dreams are leveled to the most basic human desire: to endure. Based on a little-known historical event, this extraordinarily moving novel memorializes the forgotten victims of nationalist madness and the deeply felt passion and grief of its survivors.

The Farming of Bones Details

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From Reader Review The Farming of Bones for online ebook

Jen Fordyce says

This one is keeping me awake at night. It is beautiful, even in anguish.

(later)

Ok, I finished. While I was waiting to get on an airplane at 9 a.m. I was waiting in line and reading and crying and handing the airline man my boarding pass and crying and finding a seat between these two nice ladies and crying. It was so sad...but also lovely.

Cheryl says

I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow.

It is not often one reads a story with death and loss as its theme and still find beauty in the melancholy. This harrowing story balances its sadness with love interludes. Sensuality appears through bursts of lyricism, spurts of softness within pointed language.

Haitian lovers, Annabelle and Sebastien, find their worlds intertwined as they both try to make it in a new land; one a cane worker, the other a housekeeper. They sneak off to lemon-grass scented days and nights, each some form of solace for the other who has been forced to abandon family. Friends remain loyal to each other in a world where they are misunderstood. Within their community nicknamed *Algeria*, Haitian transplants settle in the Dominican Republic and try to make a living as cane workers. Sugarcane is a major product, as it is used to make the sugar for the popular cafecitos and dulce de leche.

The cane life, travay tè pou zo, the farming of bones.

This novel highlights the Haitian-Dominican conflict, the Parsley Massacre of 1937 that is rarely visited. Coexisting on the island of Hispaniola, there are deeply woven cultural and social differences between the two regions that have caused longstanding pain. It is an interesting read, scary even, particularly during a time when it is not just the "third world" but the western world that is currently being divided by social differences. Try to decipher what caused this uproar and you'll be left stunned at the ignorance of people.

Sometimes, after loss, the survivor finds it difficult to live in the present, or perhaps go on as if he or she has forgotten his or her loved one. Sometimes the survivor finds it difficult to move on. The narrative flow is a reflection of this. Yet there remains a symbol hidden in some small act together, some routine to be remembered, and this becomes the silver lining for grief management. For Annabelle, it is the waterfall. I didn't care too much for *Claire of the Sea Light*, but I'm glad that Danticat won be back with the illuminating prose in this novel.

Sonia Allison says

Lynching atrocities massacres

"The slaughter is the only thing that is mine to pass on."

"We would have been beggars if we had not come here. "

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Two-point-five stars

This book really wants to be "literary" fiction, but it lacks the necessary warmth and depth. The characters are flat and underdeveloped, such that it's hard to feel sorrow for their suffering. The only way I could work up any kind of caring was to remind myself that these characters had real-life counterparts who did in fact suffer the atrocities inflicted by Trujillo.

The author seems to assume a lot of prior knowledge on the part of the reader about the events portrayed. The information provided is seriously inadequate. I'm still not really sure exactly what happened, except that Generalissimo Trujillo ordered the large-scale slaughter of Haitian immigrant workers in the Dominican Republic in 1937.

An easy enough read, and I wouldn't say it's terrible. Just oversimplified and unsatisfying.

Layla Strohl says

I bought this book from a guy on the street for a \$1. It had no cover and no description except for a handwritten inscription which read, "Ben, know I am your Amabelle and you my Sebastian. Here's to holding on tight in the middle of the night. I love you, Sarah".

Being a complete sucker for open declarations of love, I bought the book.

Farming for Bones is absolutely not at all the sappy love story I thought it would be. It is a beautifully written story that follows a group of Haitians through the genocide that took place during the Parsley Massacre in the late 1930's. Danticat's style, which is simple, clean and poetic, illustrates the chaos and fear of the characters without creating chaos on the page for the reader. It is as though, in order for Danticat to relay this story which is filled with fear, violence and death, she must maintain a calm, firm less emotional tone in her writing, as the events described need no additional touches for affect - they are grim and gruesome enough as is. The real tragedy is not just the mass genocide and torture that so many Haitians endured, but the emotional suffering and grief of the of the survivors to persevere, despite the many lost and missing family member and loved ones who never returned home.

Thanks to Ben for tossing his heartfelt gift in the trash (and thanks to Sarah for a great inscription). I don't think I would have ever found this on my own and that would have been a shame because this book is truly excellent!

Diane Brown says

Danticat's *Farming of Bones* follows the life of Annabelle, a Haitian orphan who is taken in by a Dominican family. It is set against the harrowing backdrop of the massacre of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic in 1937.

A great read that affirms, for me, the need for writers.

Writers who invoke through stories the memory and lives of those who otherwise may never have a voice. Those who fall by the wayside and whose names are not on any lists.

Through Annabelle's voice, Danticat tried to offer hope, a very difficult task, given the devastating impact of personal loss. Whilst one may recover a piece of land (for example) after a genocide, we find that the heart sometimes refuses to accept the realities forced on it by the actions of a mad man.

A great author and a great book.

Dusty Myers says

A diasporic novel in line with Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K* and McCarthy's *The Road*. Which is to say, it follows people trying to escape turmoil, in this case Amabelle and other Haitian workers as they try to escape the Dominican Republic during the "Parsley massacre" of 1937—called such due to the shibboleth used by the Dominican soldiers to determine a person's heritage. (They'd hold up a sprig of parsley and ask, "What is this?" and if you answered in the Haitian Creole, you died.)

All this shit I had to Wikipedia, but it's there, in the book. Like, the book is a great historical account of the five days or so that the massacre lasted, and for this I have to give it a lot of credit. It's peculiar that Danticat selects such a narrow scope for his novel; Amabelle's our narrator, and so we see only her immediate world throughout the book, and thus any figures such as the Generalissimo or the Dominican army are shadowy figures relegated to the novel's margins. But then again, such is the experience of massacres/disasters from a victim's viewpoint. Danticat's novel isn't so much about the massacre itself as it is about the massacre's effect on people like Amabelle—people who for a time lived on two sides of a border, forced one day to choose one or the other.

The novel opens with the birth of twins (Amabelle works in the Dominican Republic as a midwife), and a car accident that has killed a Haitian cane worker. It still remains unclear what this accident is doing in the novel. The way it's presented, it seem like what's to come is a novel about two different communities clashing over this event. But once the massacre comes, decreed from on high, there's little time or interest in arguing over justice for the dead man's family. And nothing ever comes of it.

A struggle to get through. Very little going on on the sentence level. POV in straightforward delivery. I wouldn't recommend the book.

Zanna says

"I know what will happen," he said. "You tell the story, and then it's retold as they wish, written in words you do not understand, in a language that is theirs, and not yours."

This is a story carried out of a genocide. It's fiction loaded down heavily with the kind of truth you wish you didn't have to believe - maybe that's why the lyrical sentences are so full of images of sinking, falling and opening, of spaces and flesh pressed, distorted, cut.

There is nuance here. Our Haitian Black woman narrator is impromptu midwife to the White Dominican woman she serves, and the twins she delivers gather subtle and stark signs of racism & sexism around them in shapes of compromised love, complicated grief... I wanted to know what became of the children, and I know Danticat was making me feel with Amabelle there, while she was struggling with survival and through the primacy of other loyalties.

If Danticat allows us to imagine that Amabelle's emotional ties are in tension across national and class boundaries, her focus is clearly on Amabelle's own reality and the lives of the sugar cane workers. This narrative belongs to a servant and worker class of Haitians; even though its sweep is broad and generous, class and national solidarities are at its core. Shared knowings and defiant, deep valuing of each other among Amabelle's people drive the cooperation that saves lives and the storytelling that saves memories.

Danticat teaches that memories are a mixed blessing. Most of them, in this book, are painful. But the sweet ones, just as necessary, are a saving grace...

Oh and as a love story, this is gorgeous.

Ana Ovejero says

'Misery won't touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of.'

This story tells the massacre of Haitians in Dominican Republic in 1937. These two countries are divided by a river, a borderline easy to cross by thousands of peasants looking for work harvesting the sugarcane. Here is where we find Amabelle, a young Haitian who works in the house of Señora Valencia since she was a child, becoming an orphan as her parents died trying to cross the river/border.

She loves Sebastian. She delivers Señora Valencia's babies. She talks with Papi, as he listens to the radio, trying to get news from Spain, involved in war. During the first part of the book, we get the daily life in the Dominican Republic, people's traditions and beliefs.

A car accident tells us that the situation of the Haitians is pretty unstable. Suddenly, danger arrives and the atmosphere changes completely, becoming the book a page-turner, the reader escaping alongside the narrator, feeling the edge of the machetes, the burning of whole villages.

The mention of vultures clouding the sky gives us the exact measure of the killing; survivors retelling what they have been witnesses of; the reader grasping the horror developing unstoppably.

The memories of the survivors become the collective history written in the wind, the dead kept alive by those who remember them, by those who went through hell and stand alive, a journey that has no end.

Ming says

An awesome and inspiring book. Danticat demonstrates how language can move a person and can describe the most horrific circumstances YET keep the reader from turning away. I could not and will not turn away from her stories or her writing. In her TED piece, someone described her writing as "healing by wounding." Yes!

Her writing is absolutely gorgeous...I finished yesterday, picked up two new books and could not read neither much because the lingering impact of Farming will not fade.

The only remedy is another Danticat book.

A favorite passage:

The cave is a grotto of wet moss, coral and chalk that looks like marble. At first you are afraid to step behind the waterfall as the water in all its strength pounds down on your shoulders. Still you tiptoe into the cave until all you see is luminous green fresco--the dark green of wet papaya leaves.... All you hear is water sliding off the ledge and crashing in a foamy white spray into the plunge pool below.

When the night comes, you don't know it inside the cramped slippery cave because the waterfall, Sebastien says, holds on to some memory of the sun that it will not surrender. On the inside of the cave, there is always light, day and night. You who know the cave's secret, for a time, you are also held captive in this prism, this curiosity of nature that makes you want to celebrate yourself in ways that you hope the cave will show you, that the emptiness in your bones will show you, or that the breath in your blood will show you, in ways that you hope your body knows better than yourself.

Samadrita says

As much as there's solace to be derived from bestowing much needed attention on non-white-male authored narratives which speak of the ones snubbed callously by literature, on no grounds can poor story-telling be excused. As if page after page of oblique but trite commentary on ethnic conflict, colonialism, slavery and racism lathered on to the bare bones of a plot was not enough, Danticat makes the task of finding redeeming aspects even harder with her stilted, cardboard cutout characters whose continuing plight at the hands of plantation owners, corrupt lawmakers and the military men fails to evoke any empathy. Top it all off with a toneless, drab narrative voice with sporadic stretches of brilliance and what you have is a beautifully-titled novel which never lives up to the promise it shows in the beginning and ends up becoming mere misery porn.

Savvy says

Sad, but stunningly beautiful, FARMING OF THE BONES is a powerfully written evocative account of the horror of the genocide committed in 1937 against poor Haitian cane workers and others by the Dominican

General Rafael Trujillo.

Through the voice of a young orphaned Haitian woman, Amabelle Desir, we follow the lives of desperate Haitian exiles working the Dominican cane fields in deplorable conditions with paltry wages and sparse living conditions.

Danticat is a master storyteller and her prose lifts and carries, even as the atrocities of what she is telling unfold on the page. She travels a very painful path with humbling grace. She allows the reader to witness grave injustices while keeping them safely wrapped in her beautiful and poignant prose.

Dreaming... remembering...and family are strong elements which serve to enrich the story and draw the reader in as the reality of the despair becomes readily apparent. Trujillo wants to 'whiten' his populace and thus begins the recounting of an unimaginable and shocking ethnic cleansing.

Towards the end of the novel, a man says "Famous men never truly die... It is only those nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke in the early morning air." ...on the island which Haiti and The Dominican Republic share. Through the eyes of the narrator, Amabelle working as a maid in the Dominican Republic, we see scores of Haitians cruelly massacred.

None of those killed is anyone famous, nearly all the slaughtered are poor Haitians working as cheap labor in the neighboring country, but Amabelle's story serves to refute those words spoken about the nameless and faceless of the earth.

In this book, they are remembered, and in her story they all have names and faces.

David Shin says

The Farming of Bones. By Edwidge Danticat. 310 pp. New York: Penguin Books. \$14.

Hope On the Edge of Death

Death, struggles, love, birth, misery, happiness—one word cannot capture the flurry of emotions and issues that Edwidge Danticat brings forth in one novel. Danticat's, *The Farming of Bones* is both compelling and surprisingly a fast read at the same time.

The book is mainly about the struggles of a young woman during the 1937 massacre. A Haitian woman living in the Republic, the protagonist Amabelle is living a love story, worthy of the big screens. She is serving a Dominican family, so far content with her life and her love Sebastian although her past was marked with the death of her parents. She is fairly content with her life, but hell comes to earth as the massacre begins. The story takes a few surprising twists, and not surprisingly, many Haitians die.

The setting is mainly situated in the Dominican-Republic, the year is 1937. The relations between Haitians and Dominicans in the borderlands are tense. With racial prejudice and accusations of Haitians stealing and dominating the Dominican Republic, Dominican President Rafael Trujillo initiates a campaign ordering the slaughter of what is estimated to be 20 to 30,000 Haitians. This became what is known as the notorious 1937 massacre, or the Parsley Massacre, with various novels such as *General Sun my Brother*, by Jacques Stephen Alexis influenced by this event. Danticat is known to have been influenced by Alexis, and so further reading of this type is directed toward Alexis. The book begins before the actual massacre, but the climax of the book

is situated and results from the 1937 massacre.

Danticat's novel does not go into much historical depth, and the reader is forced to research the history of the conflict between Haiti and Dominican-Republic, to get a better contextual understanding of the novel. Needless to say, that is one aspect of the novel that makes it such a fast, yet compelling read. With characters risen from the time period of the massacre, one gets a huge understanding of what actually might have occurred, something history cannot reveal. With historical facts and statistics, the personal aspects of the individuals themselves get lost. However, Danticat allows for the characters to breathe life, each with their own faults and worries, and this is ultimately the strength of Danticat's novel. Uniquely, Danticat tells the history through the character's of the book, making the past seem all too real.

What I found particularly appealing about this book, is not only its engaging read, but the many thematic elements that are brought forth. For one, the idea of hope in the midst of death. Since the beginning, Amabelle has had internal conflicts within herself. Particularly she has flashbacks of the past, dreams and memories that come to haunt her. Amongst the many themes that arise, I feel like the book was unveiling that the life we have now is very limited and fragile. Even with the best of circumstances, life can vanish—but there must be something we can hold onto. Without revealing too much of the plot, this idea becomes more pronounced as the story carries on. How does one choose to live in a world where everyone around them is brutally slaughtered? This question is not easily answered, and the title *The Farming of Bones* alludes to this slaughter, but there are many different interpretations of the title. Throughout the novel Danticat seems to be writing on the premise of hope. Amabelle sees hope, the possibly that some of the people she knew did not die. With that hope, Amabelle awaits in Haiti, after she flees from the Dominican-Republic, until the years waste away. This idea of hope speaks volumes, and the novel becomes relevant even now, when it is set in the 1930s.

At first the book may seem too simple with its literary style and or content—not much symbolism, metaphors, etc. But simply put, that is Danticat's style, and as you continue to read, the style does the book enormous justice. And although the historical aspect of this novel is not particularly concrete or solid, the issues that are revealed made this read something I do not regret in the least.

By David Shin

Lucinda says

This is a book about suffering, surviving. Living through events so much bigger than us that they swallow us whole. Coming out the other side, there is nothing left that is recognizable and no symbol, marker, or sign powerful enough to represent what has been lost. Where are the traces of loss, can something or someone who was really such a big part of our lives just disappear so entirely? No two ways about it, this is a raw harrowing tale of survival.

I didn't know much about the relations between Haiti and the Dominican republic, other than that it was less than friendly. Two very different colonial histories sharing one small island. This novel tells something of the fallout of these divergent colonial paths in the form of the Parsley Massacre, where Haitians living and working in the Dominican were slaughtered by the Dominican army and swarms of suddenly hostile former neighbors. It is said that Haitians' inability to correctly pronounce the word 'parsley' in Spanish was a means to separate them out for death by machete. A cruelty that is bone-chilling to say the least.

Danticat tells the story of this event through the eyes of a servant girl Amabelle, who is living a somewhat

fortunate life in a small village near the border with Haiti. She is aware of the injustices and suffering that her compatriots who work in the cane fields suffer, but pushes this to the back of her mind, because her personal relations with her employers are more or less decent. All of this is turned upside down when a personal tragedy is quickly followed by a wave of public violence, and Amabelle finds herself struggling to find a way to survive.

While I found the writing a bit clumsy in parts Danticat is certainly effective in evoking the disorientation and utter incomprehension that one must experience in the face of this kind of mass violence. And her attempts to show how difficult it is for a person to come to grips with what comes after this type of trauma is hauntingly moving.

Jon says

3 ½ stars. To give context to the story, I'm going to start this review with a brief history lesson: located in the Caribbean, the Hispaniola island is basically split in half, with the former French colony of Haiti on one side of the island and the former Spanish colony of the Dominican Republic on the other. During the 30's, Rafael Trujillo came into power in the Dominican Republic, and, like so many other demagogues both before and after him, decided to demonize and scapegoat some of his country's citizens (in this case, Haitian immigrants). From a speech he gave in 1937:

“For some months, I have traveled and traversed the border in every sense of the word. I have seen, investigated, and inquired about the needs of the population. To the Dominicans who were complaining of the depredations by Haitians living among them, thefts of cattle, provisions, fruits, etc., and were thus prevented from enjoying in peace the products of their labor, I have responded, 'I will fix this.' And we have already begun to remedy the situation. Three hundred Haitians are now dead in Bánica. This remedy will continue.”

From October 2, 1937 to October 8, 1937, government troops attempted to purge the country of Haitians in what became known as the Parsley Massacre. According to reports, Dominican soldiers would hold up a sprig of parsley and ask their captives what it was. How they pronounced the Spanish word for parsley (perejil) determined whether they would live or die. Spanish speaking, native Dominicans would be able to pronounce the Spanish trill in the word, but French and Creole speaking Haitian immigrants would not be able to (and would be killed). Estimates vary on how many Haitians were slaughtered, with some estimates being as high as 20,000.

The Farming of Bones is set during the Parsley Massacre and while this attempt to document the events that occurred is commendable, the book is not completely successful. The book is narrated by Amabelle Desir, a Haitian servant in an upper-class Dominican household and this first person narration is one of the weaknesses of the book. Frankly, Amabelle's life and the events that occur around her in the first half of the book are mundane. Her Dominican employers treat her fairly and the class differences almost play out as a Dominican version of Downton Abbey. While there are a few established, well off Haitians, most of the Haitians in Amabelle's orbit are either domestic servants or laborers in the cane fields. While poor, these Haitians do not experience overt prejudice nor are they subjected to brutal treatment. Beyond a few references to rumors and a few snatches of Trujillo's speeches, there is little evidence of the societal tensions that would suddenly explode in an orgy of violence and genocide. I would have liked more explanation and foreshadowing in these early sections of the novel. By limiting events to only Amabelle's perceptions and interactions a broader understanding of why things spiraled out of control so quickly is lost. The transition from domesticity to terror is too abrupt.

Once the Parsley Massacre begins, the novel swiftly becomes a testament to man's inhumanity to man as Amabelle and several others attempt to flee to the border and stumble across the death and destruction left in the wake of the genocidal purge. This section is tense and heartbreaking at times.

While symbolism abounds in the book, Danticat's prose style is clear and accessible. Her characterizations are good and Amabelle, in particular, comes across as a fully realized, three-dimensional person. The novel reduces a genocidal event to the experiences of a single person and while that may create a sense of intimacy and immediacy, it loses the deeper understanding that a broader view could have given.

Still, the book is worth reading if only as a reminder of the power of demagoguery. It shows the effect that pandering to the fears, prejudices, and base instincts of a population can have. Know this: whenever someone stands in front of a microphone and attempts to cast some of those around us as "The Other", they're participating in an ugly tradition that stretches back through Rwanda, Auschwitz, the cane fields of the Dominican Republic, and beyond.

Hafeez Lakhani says

"He opens his mouth a few more times and moans.

'If you let yourself,' he says finally, 'you can see it before your eyes, a boy carrying his dead father from the road, wobbling, swaying, stumbling under the weight. The boy with the wind in his ears and pieces of the tin roofs that opened the father's throat blowing around him. The boy trying not to drop the father, not crying or screaming like you'd think, but praying that more of the father's blood will stay in the father's throat and not go into the muddy floor, going no one knows where. If you let yourself, you can see it before your eyes.'

"..All monuments of this great size are built with human blood.."

Shannon says

I picked up this book at a vendor table while at the 2013 Harlem Book Fair . I had never heard of the author and the cover wasn't particularly attractive but, after reading the back, I checked the price. I figured for \$3, it was worth it. It was.

I enjoyed this book from the beginning, but about half way through "the slaughter" begins and the book really takes off. Killings are described in graphic detail, but the story is written in a way that it's not too much.

All the characters find themselves faced with the most challenging decisions of their lives. How long would you wait for the love of your life to return if he or she went missing? What would it take for you to betray someone to whom you've always been loyal? How much could you take before your faith wavered?

The last several chapters came together nicely and the conflicts of all the characters come to some sort of resolution. The end of the story truly felt like the end of the story. But it left me wanting more from Danticat. And when I finished my second book by her I knew I loved this author :-)

Historical fiction books always make me go and do research to learn the facts about the actual event. The Haitian genocide on which the actual historical event that was central to the story.

Joslyn Allen says

Edwidge Danticat writes with sophistication beyond her years and wmediumith an ethereal beauty. It is unbelievable to me that someone can produce works of such maturity and grace as "Breath, Eyes, Memory" and "the farming of bones" before the age of 30.

In "the farming of bones" Danticat takes her readers to the other side of her native island of Hispaniola, laying bare the oppression and desperation of Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic of the 1930s. Here she explores the trials of a servant class, the violence implicit to the work of migrant cane harvesters, and the pervasive trauma of refugees. Peopled by characters whose voices are all but snuffed out, this novel eloquently captures the human need for a voice.

"Taking turns, they exchanged tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring the words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell. One could hear it in the fervor of the declarations, the obscenities shouted when something could not be remembered fast enough, when a stutter allowed another speaker to race into his own account without the stutterer having completed his."

These voiceless immigrants, too, face prejudice and exclusion that is frighteningly familiar to today's political rhetoric.

"'I pushed my son out of my body here, in this country,' one woman said in a mix of Alegrian Kreyol and Spanish, the tangled language of those who aways stuttered as they spoke, caught as they were on the narrow ridge between two nearly native tongues. 'My mother too pushed me out of her body here. Not me, not my son, not one of us has ever seen the other side of the border. Still they won't put our birth papers in our palms so my son can have knowledge placed into his head by a proper educator in a proper school.'"

But "the farming of bones" isn't just a story of political turmoil and class struggle. It is a love story full of a passion that brings heat to the cheeks of the reader, not out of modesty or embarrassment, but out of empathy because of how exquisitely Danticat writes. The protagonist Amabelle feels an intense, once in a lifetime chemistry with her lover; "For some, passion is the gift of a ring in a church ceremony, the bearing of children as shared property. For me it was just a smile I couldn't help, tugging at the sides of my face." Her connection to Sebastian cuts to her core:

"I'm afraid to be shy, distant, and cold. I am afraid I cease to exist when he's not there. I'm like one of those sea stones that sucks its colors inside and loses its translucence once it's taken out into the sun, out of the froth of the waves. When he's not there, I'm afraid I know no one and no one knows me."

This work is a braid of timeless romance and (unfortunately) timeless struggle. It is, like her earlier work, a gift to breath, eyes, and memory. Danticat is a force to be reckoned with and hopefully one who continues to write for many years to come.

More at chronicbibliophilia.wordpress.com

Ensiform says

In 1937, Amabelle, an orphaned Haitian woman working in the Dominican Republic, dreams of returning to Haiti with her lover Sebastien, a sugarcane cutter (the scar-inflicting “bones” of the title). Instead, they are both caught up in the racist anti-immigrant furor stirred up Trujillo, and the killing, which will be later known as the Parsley Massacre, or El Corte, begins. Amabelle flees, separated from Sebastien, and tries to forge a new life that is nothing like the one she dreamed of.

This is a deep and powerful novel. The characters are fully realized, the prose not complex, but dreamlike and richly evocative. The story is tragic, and important to tell (20,000 Haitians died in this massacre, though it is rarely remembered outside of Haiti), but the haunting message of the book is that “misery won’t touch you gentle. It always leaves its thumbprints on you; sometimes it leaves them for others to see, sometimes for nobody but you to know of.” Decades after the event, Amabelle cannot find closure; this is the tragedy of the survivor.

Jean says

3.5 stars. This one was a reread from my early Peace Corps days. At that point, I was acquainting myself with Dominican history, and was less preoccupied with Danticat's writing: a pity, since this is a beautifully rendered story.

What worked for me: the dreamy quality of the novel, particularly the dream sequences themselves. I loved the motif of seeking refuge and remembrance in dreams, complicated by the bitter truth that they often bring the horrors of wakefulness to life in a bizarre, enhanced reality.

I also liked the framing of the story with the birth of twins (one dark, one light...it's a bit heavy handed but she makes her point) in a novel about two nations that share an island and an involved history. Danticat invests great care in the symbols she uses throughout the book.

What didn't quite work for me: the same thing? Beyond the dream sequences, the novel itself had a sort of surreal quality; even before the Parsley Massacre, Amabelle is living in a suspended, benumbed state, which is translated beautifully in Danticat's eerie, often lovely, prose. But in several instances it kept me from fully inhabiting the plot and understanding the characters. Reading this book felt like being submerged in water (another of Danticat's mesmerizing motifs); I strained to really experience the full weight of what was happening. Again, I imagine this was quite intentional, and is actually a brilliant and proficiently executed technique. I can appreciate it, and even recognize that her words have worked their intended magic on me, but I didn't fully enjoy it.
