



The Dew Breaker

Edwidge Danticat

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We meet him late in life: a quiet man, a good father and husband, a fixture in his Brooklyn neighborhood, a landlord and barber with a terrifying scar across his face. As the book unfolds, moving seamlessly between Haiti in the 1960s and New York City today, we enter the lives of those around him, and learn that he has also kept a vital, dangerous secret. Edwidge Danticat's brilliant exploration of the "dew breaker"—or torturer—is an unforgettable story of love, remorse, and hope; of personal and political rebellions; and of the compromises we make to move beyond the most intimate brushes with history. It firmly establishes her as one of America's most essential writers.

The Dew Breaker Details

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From Reader Review The Dew Breaker for online ebook

Libby Chester says

There are three stories in ‘The Dew Breaker’ by Edwidge Danticat, that have Anne, her daughter, and husband as the central characters. ‘The Book of the Dead’ is the first story and here we learn that the father, the subject of his daughter, Ka’s sculpting talents, is not who she has always believed him to be, a man who spent a great many years in prison. The sculpture she creates represents her idea of who her father had been as a prisoner. When they are taking the sculpture to a renowned Haitian actress who lives in Florida, the father disappears. When he resurfaces, the sculpture is gone. He tells his daughter he is not worthy of the sculpture, and for the first time in her life, she learns who her father really is. He confesses that he had been the hunter, not the prey. He has nightmares about his time in Haiti.

“I imagine my father’s nightmares. Maybe he dreams of dipping his hands in the sand on a beach in his own country and finding that what he comes up with is a fistful of blood.”

The fourth story in the book is ‘The Book of Miracles.’ In this chapter (story), Anne and her family attend Christmas Eve Mass. It’s the one time of the year that her husband goes to church with her. Anne is devout and believes in miracles. She frequently shares stories of miracles with her family. She tells them about several miracles, a girl who cries crystal tears, and “a man who’d seen an image of the Madonna in a white rose petal.” The real story that she wants to tell her daughter is about her husband’s transformation, but she does not speak of it.

“He hadn’t been a famous “dew breaker,” or torturer, anyway, just one of hundreds who had done their jobs so well that their victims were never able to speak of them again.”

This seems like Anne’s attempt to reconcile her husband’s actions. He hadn’t been famous, so maybe it’s okay. While attending church, the family thinks they recognize Emmanuel Constant. His picture is posted on fliers stapled to lampposts along the street. The flier states his crimes - “Torture, rape, murder of 5,000 people.” The daughter is angry when she thinks it’s him and Anne is “proud of her righteous displeasure.” A little convoluted pride there, when Anne remembers her husband’s actions.

This book is like a puzzle and frequently, the stories seem disjointed, barely connected, except for the three chapters about Anne and her family. I found myself paying close attention, turning the puzzle pieces every which way, trying to jam them into my way of thinking, and sometimes becoming frustrated at my attempts to create connections. I did draw some conclusions. The main conclusion I drew was the redemptive value in ‘the dew breakers’ transformation. The last chapter titled ‘The Dew Breaker’ gives the reader his history in Haiti. It is graphic and horrific. I wondered if Danticat was trying to say that it is context more than choice that make people who they are.

This is not a book for people who like straightforward plots, and I have to admit, that sometimes, I also like straightforward books. But, I am not opposed to books that make me want to dig a little for the deeper meanings, and this is a book like that. Danticat’s names real people in her book, so I was constantly trying to figure out who this person was, and what was their significance in the historical context of Haiti. Emmanuel Constant is a real person who was also known as “Toto” or “the devil.” He was part of a military regime in the 1990’s that armed civilians and worked with the military to control Haiti. He was a paid informer to the CIA, so it seems that US hands are not clean of Haitian blood.

As background to her second chapter (story) ‘Seven,’ Danticat mentions “Abner Louima, a Haitian man who was arrested, then beaten and sodomized at a nearby police station.” This is a true event that occurred in 1997.

“While Louima’s hands were handcuffed behind his back, he was sexually assaulted with a broomstick” by a police officer. (1)

The second person named in ‘Seven’ is Patrick Dorismond. The wife in this story has come to live with her husband in New York. They separated right after their wedding and he has been working two jobs in New York, saving for her to come and live with him. While he is at work, she listens to a talk show on the radio and the callers are talking about Patrick Dorismond, who was an unarmed Haitian. He was shot and killed by a police officer, also a true event that occurred on March 16, 2000. (2)

“Lying back, she raised the sheet over her head and through it listened to the callers, each one angrier than the last.”

I visited Haiti in 1979 with a church group. We helped paint a church and visited an orphanage. It was such a beautiful country. I had no idea of its history of violence, nor was any apparent while I was there. There were lots of churches and many devoted to Christianity. We rode in tap taps, colorfully painted trucks, and visited a market, where many wooden bowls and vases were crafted. Meat hung out in the open air, with flies buzzing around. Many beggars approached us while we were at the market. I had thought about being a missionary in my early twenties, but this visit convinced me that that was not the life for me. I didn’t know it then (I was rather stupid), but I had nothing to offer these beautiful dignified people. They would have been my teachers.

I enjoyed Danticat’s writing, but this book is certainly not for everyone. Some characters in Danticat’s book are haunted all their lives by their experience of torture. It’s very sad the things that humans can do to other humans, the pain, the trauma and grief that can be caused. We certainly need ‘a miracle’ to bring us redemption. I wonder if Danticat is asking ‘if we can be transformed?’ after such experiences or ‘do we just bear witness?’ If we ‘bear witness’ will it help us to remember long enough not to repeat the cruelties of the past?

(1) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abner_Louima...

(2) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrick_Dorismond...

billyskye says

This is a terrific book. Don’t @ me.

The Dew Breaker reminds me of *The Things They Carried*, but centers on Haitian expats coping with haunting reverberations of the Duvalier regime instead of on American veterans living with memories of the war in Vietnam. The writing is lovely. The characters well-imagined and heartbreakingly real. The stories are loosely (but masterfully) connected. Together they flesh out a world that is much greater than the sum of its parts.

I picked this up under the mistaken impression that it was a work of scholarship on Haitian political history. I

guess it sort of is. Don't regret a thing.

Four stars. Definitely intend to dig deeper into Edwidge Danticat's collection.

Mandy says

This was a book about a man, some of the horrible things he did in his past, and how he has (tried(?)) to start anew. This book was written in a format where each chapter had it's own story about a different character(s). Each character tied into the main story/character. I usually really love this type of book, and for the most part I loved this one. However, I am not sure if I really felt that the overall story had closure. Maybe that was the point. (How can a story like this really have closure when so many people's lives were changed by this man?). 4 stars.

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Debra says

3.5 stars

Maybe this is the beginning of madness...

Forgive me for what I am saying.

Read it...quietly, quietly.

-Osip Mandelstam

The title of this book "Dew Breaker" "comes from a Creole phrase which refers to those who break the serenity of the grass in the morning dew. It is a Creole nickname for torturer." The "Dew Breakers" are a group of volunteers who tortured and killed thousands of civilians under the regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier in Haiti.

This book is a combination of short stories that move between Haiti and the United States. I did not really know about the novel being made up of short stories when I chose to read this book, so as I was reading, I thought "Wait, What? Who is this person?" It quickly became evident that this book is comprised of 9 sections/short stories where many of the characters in the sections have something in common with a character in another section.

The book begins with Ka, an artist who sculpts a sculpture of her father. As they are taking a road trip to

deliver the sculpture, she learns the truth about her father. She believed her father to be a quiet man who was once tortured in prison. He is now a father, husband, landlord and barber. But he has a dark secret - he is not the man she thinks he is. He was not a prisoner but a "hunter" and the prisoners were his "prey." A man who voluntarily tortured and killed people.

As the book goes on, we meet other characters who have ties to Haiti who in some way have a connection to each other. The chapters are : The Book of the Dead, Seven, Water Child, The Book of Miracles, Night Talkers, The Bridal Seamstress, Monkey Tails, The Funeral Singer, The Dew Breaker. The short stories are about coming characters traveling from Haiti to America. They tell tales of oppression, family, redemption and heartache. There is also resiliency to the tales. No matter what the characters have gone through, they try to keep going, to make a way for themselves. They show hope and a need to create new lives for themselves.

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Maxwell says

3.5 stars

The Dew Breaker is a story in nine parts. Each part could be read as its own short story, and I vacillate between liking and disliking this structure. Usually I'd enjoy something like this, but the stories are at times so loosely connected that it's hard to see the bigger picture. And yet, part of me likes the way the author drops information ever so carefully, that it makes a sort of puzzle out of the reading.

Regardless, the stories are beautifully written and tragically told. You get an on-the-ground look at life in Haiti as well as the lives of Haitian immigrants. All of this frames the story of one man—the dew breaker—who we come to know by the end as a tortured and incomprehensible figure.

Diane S ? says

"Aline had never imagined that people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives. Maybe there were hundred, even thousands, of people like this, men and women chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others."

Although this quote appears later in the book, it sums up succinctly what these linking stories encompass. People who were tortured by the Dew Breaker, or family members were, people who think they see him and even the people who live with him. None are without inner scars that have had a profound effect on their lives. Going from New York city today, or back to Haiti in the 1960's, all these stories are powerfully told. The first story starts with the Dew Breaker in the states and the last story ends with the Dew Breaker, and what exactly he did in Haiti. The stories come together like the joined pieces of a puzzle and give a glimpse of the current and in some cases past lives of these people.

Love and hope, remorse and the compromises many have to make to find and go on living a life after they have lost so much. Touching and profound, will be reading more from Danticat.

Kathleen says

Winner of The Story Prize, Pen/Faulkner Award Finalist, a Washington Post Book World Notable Book, a San Francisco Chronicle, Chicago Tribune, and Detroit Free Press Best Book of the Year and National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, **THE DEW BREAKER** by Edwidge Danticat has a beautiful cover.

"With characteristic lyricism and grace, Danticat proves the painful legacy of a time when sons turned against their fathers, children were orphaned, and communities were torn apart." -The Philadelphia Inquirer

"Ms. Danticat's most persuasive, organic performance yet...Each tale in **THE DEW BREAKER** could stand on its own as a beautifully made story, but they come together like jigsaw-puzzle pieces to create a picture of this man's terrible history and his and his victim's afterlife." -The New York Times

Because **THE DEW BREAKER** was BOTM for our book club I requested this book through interlibrary loans and immediately started reading it. The nine short stories are like windows giving me glimpses of life in Haiti during the 1960s and the Haitian communities and people in New York City in the early 2000s. It 'opened my eyes' to the unrest, uncertainties, horrors and tortures that took place in Haiti.

This quote from the back cover of the book sums it up for me, "Edwidge Danticat's brilliant exploration of the "dew breaker"-or torturer-is an unforgettable story of love, remorse, and hope; of personal and political rebellions; and of the compromises we make to move beyond the most intimate brushes with history."

3.5***

Brian Sweany says

Much like Tim O'Brien's **THE THINGS THEY CARRIED**, this book lingers in that nebulous hinterland between short story and novel where few writers have the gumption or the ability to tread. Each chapter is a self-contained story, with divergent and seemingly random settings--Haiti in the dictatorial 1960s, Manhattan in the 1970s, Brooklyn and Queens in the 21st century. And yet slowly, irrevocably, the reader is drawn into the shared love, the shared remorse, the shared history, the shared hope, the shared rebellions--both personal and political--that circle round this unassuming man...this husband...this father...this friend...this torturer...this dew breaker.

I have a confession to make. Three-quarters of the way into the book I thought I was going to write about a 3-star review. But **THE DEW BREAKER** is a book that rewards patience, one whose ultimate purity is not realized until the very last sentence, when that "pendulum between regret and forgiveness" swings one last time. Given what's going on even as we speak in the island nation of Haiti, **THE DEW BREAKER**'s timeliness is nearly as haunting as Ms. Danticat's prose. Maybe this isn't a book for everyone...but it should be.

For those of you who find yourself tripping over some of the Creole dialect in print, try the audio edition of **THE DEW BREAKER**. The narrator, Robin Miles, is an extraordinary talent.

AC says

An outstanding collection of 9 short stories, with characters and events intertwined (like Sherwood Anderson's "Winesburg, Ohio"), and revolving around the Tonton Macoute in Haiti and in the Haitian diaspora. Despite its grim backdrop, Danticat writes beautifully and with great sensitivity and with human understanding. Highly recommended!

Mark says

We are introduced to a Haitian man, living in Brooklyn. He emigrated here, over thirty years ago. He is a good father and a good husband. He also has a very dark past, which involved, working as a prison guard, in his homeland. Rumors of atrocities abound...

We are then shown separate stories, of the lives of other Haitians, as they deal with the struggles of life and each of them has some connection, with the "Dew Breaker", (or torturer).

This was my first novel, by this author and I was quite impressed. Her haunting prose, is beautiful but also tough and unflinching. It may not always be an easy or smooth read but it will make an indelible impression.

"And for the rest of the night we raise our glasses, broken and unbroken alike, to the terrible days behind us and the uncertain ones ahead."

Odai Al-Saeed says

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Ali says

I loved this book. It reminds me of 'Go Down Moses' in its blurring of the lines between novel and linked short stories. It also blurs the victim/victimizer lines in smart, complicated ways. Read it. Teach it. It's great.

?Laura says

Ratings (1 to 5)

Writing: 4

Plot: 3

Characters: 4

Emotional impact: 4

Overall rating: 3.75

Irene says

These are interconnected stories which revolve around a former Haitian torturer now living a quiet life in the United States, his former identity known only to his wife. The characterizations were fantastic. The experiences of Haitians living through a brutal dictatorship and its aftermath in exile was powerfully conveyed.

♥ Sandi ♡ says

3 stars

Finished this book earlier in the month. I held off reviewing it because the story was so disjointed for me. I tried to go back and reread a bit of it, then tried to read each vignette separately, but neither really worked for me. I clearly did not like this book as much as others did. I just felt that each story meandered along, with a couple sentences relating back to the general premise of the book. This book was hard for me to pick back up and complete.

Story line is a man with a deep dark disturbing secret. Relates to his past in Haiti, but story now takes place in New York. The best I can assume was that his horrific past was contrasted with his present and the people who were presently in his life.

FreeFormLady says

I would like to give it 4 stars for Danticat's beautiful writing style. However, short stories just fall short for me.

Olivia says

The Dew Breaker is a book organized into 9 sections (chapters), which are all perfectly able to stand alone as short stories. Each chapter features different characters and different points of view, and seem random at first, but by the end you realize they're all interlocking and related in some way.

The novel is about an unnamed prison guard/torturer who was part of the Tonton Macoutes, the voluntary militia under Jean-Claude Duvalier's reign in Haiti. The book is just as much about his life and redemption as it is about those whose lives he's affected. One chapter is told from the point of view of his own daughter, while one is told from the point of view of the son of a couple he'd shot. If you try to understand everything at first, you'll probably drive yourself crazy, so I recommend just sitting back and enjoying each chapter as its own story until you get to the point where it all starts to come together.

Out of all the chapters, my personal favorite was Water Child. Arguably, it has the least to contribute to the overall plot, but I really enjoyed the character Nadine and all her emotional intricacies. When I read the last

page of the chapter, I burst out into tears. Nadine seems to be aloof and difficult to manage, but the truth is, she's just a very hurt woman who fell in love with the wrong guy. And that's all I'll say about that.

The unnamed prison guard (I'll just call him Uncle Gunnysack from now on) was a really difficult character for me. I spent a good half-hour or more once I finished the book, just lying on my bed and trying to pin him down. If you look at him in his youth (the last chapter), it's hard to imagine he'll become the sort of man he does (in the first chapter). I kept thinking about who he was to his daughter, and how he acted in old age, then wondering how he could even be related to the man he'd been before. Uncle Gunnysack narrates a good portion of the last chapter, and just reading that much makes me sick. He seems to have no morals, no conscience... Although the last chapter does help to explain his odd behavior in the beginning. It's strange, to see how guilty he is, when at the time, he had no qualms about all the terrible things he was doing. And I guess a lot of it's left up to the reader, which can be frustrating at times.

Despite my trouble with this book, I have to admit that it's now one of my favorites. I love the short story format. I love it. As an aspiring writer, I feel a bit intimidated by it, though. I don't think I could ever write a book like this, with so many different characters who are so well-formed and fleshed out that each and every one of them is real. Some of the symbolism is a little heavy-handed at times (there is a character who is a mother figure in the valley where she lives in Haiti, and she also happens to be a midwife), but I have literally no other complaint about this book. It was such an enjoyable read, and there was never a dull moment!

I would highly recommend this book to just about everyone. The plot(s) was engaging, the characters realistic, and when everything comes together in the end, it just sort of blows your mind. It blew mine, at least.

Savvy says

Agony and Atonement...

The Dew Breaker is my first taste of the gift of storytelling by Edwidge Danticat.....but it won't be my last!

As the novel opens, revealing shocking secrets of the past, it's clear that the reader will not be disappointed.

The Dew Breaker's title comes from a Creole phrase referring to 'Tontons Macoutes' (Haitian volunteer torturers) during the regime of the Duvaliers in Haiti. They would often come in the early dawn to take their victims away...thus they broke the serenity of the grass in the morning dew. These 'Macoutes' tortured and killed thousands of civilians, many for trivial incidences.

Beautifully written, the chapters overlap and wind back around each other as the novel slowly reveals the ghosts of the past within the culture's stories of miracles and spiritual beliefs.

Now, living in New York, trying to erase a past that shadows him continually, we meet a good father and husband with a horrible scar on his face and an agonizing secret embedded deeply in his soul...and now...finally it must be unmasked!

Jenny Shank says

<http://www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn...>

Haitian lives, Haitian scars

BOOK INFORMATION

The Dew Breaker

Our Rating A

Author: Edwidge Danticat

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By Jenny Shank, Special To The News

March 12, 2004

Despite her youth, Edwidge Danticat has always written with the gravity and insight of a wise old seer. Still, she could not have foreseen that civil unrest would break out in her native Haiti again, just before the publication of her new novel, *The Dew Breaker*, making the timeliness of its subject matter acute.

The Dew Breaker examines the violence, corruption, and political instability of an earlier period in Haitian history. Although much of the book is set in present New York City, the narrative of *The Dew Breaker* spirals around the events of the 1960s and '70s in Haiti when the dictator Francois Duvalier sustained a personal police force to torture his adversaries, called "dew breakers" because they came to claim their victims in the early morning hours when dew still beaded the vegetation.

This description of its setting makes *The Dew Breaker* sound as though it is a political polemic veiled as fiction, but this is not the case. Danticat's rare gift is her ability to set her novels and stories amid fraught times in which the actions of the government cause upheaval in the lives of regular people, without ever once losing focus on her characters. She leaves the preaching to the preachers, such as the dynamic minister who figures in the denouement of *The Dew Breaker*.

This book, like her others, never wavers in placing its attention on individual lives, and as she moves from one character to another you feel she is holding their faces up to you, each of them locking the reader with a gaze too intense to shirk.

The face at the center of *The Dew Breaker* bears a terrible mark, which Ka Bienaimé describes as the "blunt, ropelike scar that runs from my father's right cheek down to the corner of his mouth." Ka, a young sculptor, grew up believing that the scar was the result of an injury her father sustained while he was unjustly imprisoned in Haiti.

When Ka creates an idealistic mahogany sculpture of her father, he destroys it and finally admits that he "was the hunter, he was not the prey," someone unworthy of a sculpture. He had been working as a torturer in a prison in the 1960s, and the scar was the result of an attack by his final victim.

The rest of the novel unfolds in chapter-long snapshots of the lives of people who this dew breaker affected. Many of them have immigrated to New York; some of them are haunted by the illusion that they see their

former torturer everywhere they go, and some actually see him.

One such victim is Michel, whose parents were killed by the dew breaker when he was a young boy. His aunt Estina raised him in rural Haiti and he later moved to New York. When he is a young man, he recognizes the barber from whom he rents an apartment as being the man who killed his parents, and he goes on a pilgrimage to visit Estina in her village and ask what he should do about this.

Danticat's descriptions of this visit are frequently lovely: "His aunt was leaning forward with both hands holding up her face, her white hair braided like a crown of gardenias around her head."

Estina dies before Michel can extract from her the crucial answer to his question, and he is left, like the other characters in this book, to ponder alone the implications of what was done in the past for what must be done in the present. The portrait of Michel, like those of others in *The Dew Breaker* suggests that everyone's experience of pain is so individual that each person must come to his own conclusion about how to best lead his life in its wake.

Although *The Dew Breaker* is a somber book, it is not without hope. The characters in it may never be able to shake their memories from their terrible experiences, but they all have been resilient enough to craft new lives for themselves that bear little resemblance to the old ones.

This is a survivors' tale. As Danticat writes about the dew breaker's wife, she lives daily with full knowledge of her husband's past but cannot dwell on it because "She was too busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, or who she wanted to become."

It is easy to see from this accomplished novel that as long as the people of Haiti are cursed to live in interesting times, Edwidge Danticat will be there to bear witness.

Jenny Shank's short stories have appeared in *CutBank*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and other magazines, and one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.
