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The Farming Of Bones

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Introduction: A Story Carved in Memory

Literature has the remarkable ability to preserve the voices of those who have been silenced by history. Few novels achieve this with the lyrical grace and unflinching honesty of Edwidge Danticat's **The Farming Of Bones** . Published in 1998, this historical novel transports readers to the often-overlooked borderlands of the Dominican Republic and Haiti during the brutal 1937 massacre of Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent ordered by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. Through the eyes of its protagonist, Amabelle Désir, the novel transforms a harrowing chapter of Caribbean history into an intimate meditation on love, loss, identity, and the resilience of the human spirit. For anyone seeking to understand the deep wounds of colonial legacy, the fragility of national identity, and the enduring power of memory, The Farming Of Bones is not merely a novel—it is an essential historical reckoning dressed in the garb of a deeply personal story.

The Historical Context Behind The Farming Of Bones

To fully appreciate the weight of **The Farming Of Bones**, one must first understand the real-world events that inspired it. In October 1937, Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered the systematic slaughter of Haitians and Dominican-born individuals of Haitian descent living near the border region. The massacre, euphemistically referred to as the Parsley Massacre, was fueled by long-standing racial tensions, economic anxieties, and Trujillo's desire to cement a distinct Dominican national identity that explicitly rejected its African and Haitian roots. Soldiers used a simple but terrifying test to identify their victims: they would hold up a sprig of parsley and ask the person to name it. The Spanish word for parsley is *perejil*. Those whose pronunciation betrayed a Haitian Creole accent were summarily executed.

Danticat's novel does not simply recount this atrocity as a historical footnote. Instead, she immerses readers in the lived reality of ordinary people whose lives were shattered by political violence. The title itself, The Farming Of Bones, alludes to the sugar cane fields where both Haitian laborers and Dominican workers toiled under brutal conditions. The "bones" in the title suggest the physical remains of those who died, but also the skeletal structure of a society built on exploitation and forced labor.

Plot Overview: A Love Story Against a Brutal Backdrop

At its heart, The Farming Of Bones follows the story of Amabelle Désir, a young Haitian woman who works as a maid for a wealthy Dominican family in the border town of Alegría. Amabelle is in love with Sebastien Onius, a Haitian cane worker whose father was killed years earlier by the same river that separates the two nations. Their relationship, tender and tentative, offers a rare haven of warmth in a world defined by harsh labor and social hierarchy.

The novel opens with a haunting prologue set in the present day, where an older Amabelle reflects on the events of 1937, establishing a tone of memory and loss that permeates the entire narrative. From there, the

story traces her journey from a semblance of ordinary life through the sudden eruption of terror as Trujillo's orders are carried out. When the massacres begin, Amabelle and Sebastien are separated. Amabelle embarks on a desperate flight toward the Haitian border, encountering other survivors, witnessing unspeakable horrors, and grappling with the question of what it means to bear witness when survival itself feels impossible.

Key Characters in The Farming Of Bones

- Amabelle Désir — The narrator and protagonist, a Haitian woman working as a maid who loses her parents at a young age. Her name, meaning "beloved" and "desire," contrasts sharply with the dehumanization she endures.
- Sebastien Onius — Amabelle's lover, a sugar cane worker whose dreams of a better life are violently extinguished. He represents the countless anonymous laborers who built the Dominican sugar industry with their lives.
- Kongo — Sebastien's father figure and a spiritual guide who carries the wisdom of African traditions. His presence connects the novel's themes of ancestral memory and cultural survival.
- Señora Valencia — The Dominican mistress of the house where Amabelle works. Her character embodies the complex, often paternalistic relationships between Haitian servants and Dominican elites.
- Father Romain — A Catholic priest who tries to help the refugees, symbolizing the conflicted role of religious institutions in the face of state violence.

Major Themes in The Farming Of Bones

Memory and Testimony

One of the most powerful themes in The Farming Of Bones is the role of memory as both a burden and a sacred duty. Amabelle's narrative is itself an act of testimony—a refusal to let the dead be forgotten. Throughout the novel, she repeats the phrase "I remember" as a kind of incantation, anchoring herself to the past even when the present is unbearable. Danticat suggests that survival is not enough; survivors must also bear witness so that history does not repeat itself.

Identity and Belonging

The border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is not merely a geographical line; it is a psychological and cultural divide that determines who lives and who dies. The novel explores how national identity can be weaponized. Characters like Amabelle, who have spent their entire lives in the Dominican Republic, find themselves suddenly classified as alien and expendable. The question "What are you?" becomes a matter of life and death. Danticat challenges rigid definitions of identity, showing that belonging is often more about human connection than about passports or language.

Violence and the Body

The title The Farming Of Bones directly references the sugar cane fields, but it also evokes the physicality of violence. Danticat does not shy away from describing the brutality of the massacre—the machetes, the river filled with bodies, the survivors who carry physical and emotional scars for the rest of their lives. Yet she balances this harshness with moments of profound tenderness, reminding readers that even in the darkest times, love and humanity persist.

Class and Labor Exploitation

The novel is also a searing critique of the economic systems that made the massacre possible. Haitian laborers were essential to the Dominican sugar industry, yet they were treated as disposable. The sugar cane fields—the "farming of bones"—are a metaphor for how capitalism consumes human life for profit. Danticat gives voice to the voiceless laborers, honoring their dignity even in death.

Literary Style and Narrative Voice

Edwidge Danticat's prose in The Farming Of Bones is often described as lyrical and haunting, blending the cadence of Haitian Creole with the precision of literary English. Her sentences are measured, almost poetic, yet they carry an emotional weight that lingers long after the page is turned. The novel shifts between first-person narration in the present and retrospective passages, creating a sense of fragmented memory that mirrors the trauma experienced by the characters.

Danticat also employs symbolism with great skill. Water—the river that separates Haiti and the Dominican Republic—appears repeatedly as a symbol of both division and purification. The parsley test itself becomes a chilling symbol of how arbitrary markers of identity can be used to justify genocide. The bones in the title recur throughout the novel as reminders of what the earth refuses to absorb.

The Importance of The Farming Of Bones in Contemporary Literature

Since its publication, The Farming Of Bones has been recognized as a landmark work in Caribbean literature and in the canon of historical fiction about the African diaspora. It won the American Book Award and was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. More importantly, it has introduced countless readers to a chapter of history that is often ignored in mainstream education.

In recent years, as debates about immigration, national borders, and racial identity have intensified globally, the novel has taken on new urgency. The story of Amabelle and Sebastien resonates with modern readers who see parallels in the treatment of migrant workers, refugees, and stateless people around the world. The Farming Of Bones is not just a historical novel; it is a living document that speaks to ongoing struggles for justice and human dignity.

Comparison to Other Works by Edwidge Danticat

Readers of The Farming Of Bones will find echoes of Danticat's other works in its themes and style. Her earlier collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!*, also deals with Haitian history, family, and survival under oppressive regimes. Her later novel, *The Dew Breaker*, explores the legacy of violence through the lens of a former torturer from the Duvalier era. But The Farming Of Bones stands apart for its historical scope and its focus on a single, world-changing event.

What unites all of Danticat's work is her deep compassion for her characters and her belief in the power of storytelling to heal wounds that history has left open. She writes not as an outsider looking in, but as someone who carries the stories of her ancestors within her.

Why You Should Read The Farming Of Bones

If you are looking for a novel that combines beautiful prose with urgent historical reckoning, The Farming Of Bones is an essential read. It offers a window into a world that is often invisible to outsiders, while also speaking to universal truths about love, loss, and the human capacity for both cruelty and kindness. It is a book that will break your heart and, in the breaking, open your eyes.

Moreover, for students of history, literature, or social justice, the novel provides a rich case study in how to write about trauma without sensationalizing it. Danticat honors the dead without exploiting their suffering, and she offers readers a path toward understanding that is neither sentimental nor nihilistic.

Conclusion

In the end, The Farming Of Bones is a novel about the weight of history and the lightness of love. Edwidge Danticat has written a story that refuses to let us forget the 1937 massacre, but she has also written a story about the bonds that connect us across the divisions of language, nationality, and class. Amabelle Désir's journey from the sugar cane fields to the river and beyond is a testament to the endurance of the human spirit.

The bones may lie in the earth, but the story—like the stories Danticat tells—refuses to be buried. For readers willing to listen, The Farming Of Bones offers not just a history lesson, but a profound meditation on what it means to be human in a world that so often seeks to dehumanize. It is a novel that deserves to be read, remembered, and passed on.

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