



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

Celebrated Author Edwidge Danticat Retraces the Arc of Her Literary Genius

While promoting her new book, an accomplished short story collection called *Everything Inside*, the PBK member and noted writer talks about her formative experiences, like imagining herself not as Madeline but as the classic's author, and writing for a high school paper in New York City a mere year after immigrating to the US from Haiti. She opens up about "borrowed memories" in her life and her work, about the role of death and ritual in healing, and the continuity of purpose in her writing

Musical Interlude

Fred Lawrence:

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Musical Interlude

Lawrence:

Thank you for joining us for Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On this podcast, we welcome leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists who shape our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters. Many of them are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country for us, visiting campuses and presenting free public lectures that we invite you to attend. For the Visiting Scholar schedule, please visit pbk.org.

I have been looking forward to today's episode for months, and I hope you will share my enthusiasm and admiration for my guest today. Author Edwidge Danticat, a celebrated novelist, essayist, and memoirist, and a MacArthur genius grant recipient. She is a proud Phi Beta Kappa member from Barnard College in 1990, and her extraordinary book, *The Art of Death: Writing*

the Final Story was a nominee for the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Award in 2018. She has received numerous awards including the American Book Award for *The Farming of Bones*, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Brother, I'm Dying*. She has received multiple honorary doctorates and The Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Today, we're so lucky to have her in-studio to talk about her latest work, a collection of stories called *Everything Inside*. Welcome, Professor Danticat.

Edwidge Danticat:

Thank you. Thank you for having me, Fred.

Lawrence:

It's a pleasure to have a chance to talk a little bit today about all of the extraordinary writing you've done. You move so fluidly among various genres: fiction, literary criticism and memoir. It's tempting just to think of it as one great field. In fact, you provocatively quote in one of your works, Flaubert's letter to his lover, Louise Colette the poet, that "A good sentence in prose should be like a good line in poetry, unchangeable." So do you approach different genres differently, or is it just writing one unchangeable sentence after the next?

Danticat:

Well, I think of the whole project of writing as one big task. And I think of it all as storytelling, and some stories emerge as novels, some as short stories, and some as nonfiction. And often the most urgent things, like if I have something I feel like I want to say right now, I'll do it in nonfiction, I'll do it in an essay, or in an op-ed. But the fiction takes a little bit longer to go from idea to creating characters to embodying people. But I see it all as a common project which involves storytelling.

Lawrence:

Do you remember a time when you first thought, "I'm a writer"?

Danticat:

Well, I was told a lot of stories when I was growing up. My family had a lot of storytellers, and my aunts and my grandmother would just tell stories. And I remember watching people telling stories orally, and there was such a performance element to it. They would sing, they would move around, and I was a really shy little girl. So I thought, "I don't think I can do that." But I enjoyed being the recipient of the stories. But when I was four, my uncle gave me a book, the Bemelmans *Madeline* book, and just reading that book, sitting with that book and I thought, "Oh, this is another way of telling stories."

I didn't know how books were made, I didn't know what an author was, necessarily, but I thought, "This is how I feel like I could do it." So I feel like that's the first time I ever thought consciously about "I want to tell stories in this way." And then as I read more books in school, and a lot of the books we read for school in my time in Haiti, were by dead French men. And so I thought, "Oh, it would be sad if I had to be dead and French to be a writer, but- "

Lawrence:

Not only that, but also a man, apparently.

Danticat:

Exactly. I'm like, "But there must be another way." And eventually when I started to form this idea of what authors and books, I thought, "Oh, this is what I want to do. I want to do for people what reading this material is doing to me."

Lawrence:

So when you read *Madeline* as a four year old, you didn't think of yourself as Madeline, you thought of yourself as Bemelmans?

Danticat:

It's funny, nobody has ever structured it like that. I guess that's why you're in Phi Beta Kappa!

Lawrence:

As are you.

Danticat:

Yes. That's why we're so smart. But yeah, I guess I had thought of myself as Bemelmans without thinking it that way. But there was also a very strong identification with Madeline, because there were these girls without their parents, and I was in Haiti, my parents were in the United States. They had migrated ahead of me and had left me with my aunt and uncle. And I was in a house with a lot of young people like me, whose parents were in the Dominican Republic, in Canada and different places, and who were there knowing their parents would eventually come for them.

So I also felt a kind of identification with these little girls. There were the nuns, and my aunt and uncle were older people. So we were these really young kids with these older people. And then Madeline and these girls were with these nuns who were just kind of grumpy the same way that my aunt and uncle were sometimes. So there was that identification too. I think it was the two coming together, and then thinking, "How do you do that? How do you make that thing that transcends the identity of the people you're reading about, and still connects with a little girl in Haiti?"

Lawrence:

So you came to the states when you were 12?

Danticat:

Mm-hmm.

Lawrence:

Which means you have real live memories of that time in Haiti. I mean, you were a full-blown person during your time there.

Danticat:

Absolutely. And I can tell, and I think about the difference because I have cousins who came younger and I sometimes compare what we remember. And I think 12, in a way, was the perfect cutoff age to have formed really, memories that are my own as opposed to what was force fed to me. And sometimes when you're young, you're wondering, there are still things in my life that I'm thinking, "Was I told this? I remember, or-"

Lawrence:

Do I remember this, or do I remember being told about this?"

Danticat:

Exactly. Exactly. But I have a lot of memories that are my own, and I know they are my own, because even when they're contested by others, like someone will say, "No, that's not what I remember," I still feel a certain sense of certainty in what I remember.

Lawrence:

Ownership of your own memories.

Danticat:

Yeah. So I think at 12 you start having that, and I probably couldn't have written the stories that I have written without that certainty of memory. Like, okay this is my story at 12. It differs from other people's stories, even if they were 12 or older. But this is my version of things, and having a kind of certainty with that.

Lawrence:

How old were you when your parents moved to New York?

Danticat:

Well, it was in stages, the move. My dad moved when I was two, and he only knew one other person in Brooklyn, New York. It was my mother's brother, my uncle Justin. And so my dad came first, and then two years later my mom joined him. They left during the dictatorship and hated during the Duvalier dictatorship, and so their goal was always to go ahead and work, and then send back for my brother and me, who they had left behind with my aunt and uncle. And they were undocumented for many years in the United States.

My mom worked in a textile factory. My dad worked in a, he used to tell this story of working in the daytime in a car wash, and then in the evening in a glass factory. So he was always sick

because he was cold and hot. And one job was for his life in Brooklyn, and one job was to send money back for us to have our life, the life that their having left made possible for us in Haiti.

Lawrence:

So speaking of whether these are memories you have, or memories you're told: so are these stories that, once you got to America, you heard about, or is this part of the story of a young girl in Haiti hearing these stories that are taking place in Brooklyn, New York?

Danticat:

Well, my memories of my father when I was a girl are all borrowed memories. Because people would say, my parents were married five years before they had me, and they wanted kids but they couldn't have kids, and in a very traditional Caribbean family, you get married and then nine months later your kid pops out. And so my mom, the fact that it was five years, she was called names. And so, I was always told the story of how welcomed I was, how much my father loved me.

And so those also carried me through, because I didn't have any memories of even my father's face without pictures after he left. So my memories of my early life with my father are all borrowed memories. But my mother, I remember her taking, she took me to school when I was three and I remember, because it was very difficult to be a three year old in real school. Because they don't play school in the Caribbean, at least in Haiti at that time. You're going to school, you're not going to draw pictures, you're going to learn letters. And so, and it was really tough.

So I remember that, her marching me to school, and me shrieking and crying. But all the New York memories are definitely my own. And my brothers and I, when we talk about them sometimes, we remember things differently. But as soon as I got here to the United States, I kept a journal pretty early on that I still have. So I have things that I wrote down, because I was also trying to make sense of that transition, from this whole different life into coming to the United States, and getting used to my brothers, my US-born brothers, who I didn't really know, and living in a building in Brooklyn, New York. And so I kept a diary of that.

Lawrence:

So at what point does your first novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, come into being in your mind as a novel that you could write?

Danticat:

Well, when I was 14 and transitioned from junior high school, which would now be called middle school when I landed here, 1981, I landed on a Friday. My dad took me to school on Monday. And I was in this English as a second language class, and I did a year there and then I had to go to high school. And so in high school I started writing for a newspaper called *New Youth Connections*, and it was distributed throughout the New York City high school system. Kids in my high school read it. Kids in other high schools read it.

Lawrence:

And this is an English language paper?

Danticat:

Yeah.

Lawrence:

So, just so we're clear here, you didn't study any English as a girl growing up in Haiti?

Danticat:

No.

Lawrence:

Not that you speak of.

Danticat:

Mm-hmm.

Lawrence:

Then you come to Brooklyn at the age of 12, and do a year of English as a second language. And now you have the guts to actually be a writer in the English language?

Danticat:

Yeah.

Lawrence:

Where did that strength come from?

Danticat:

I really don't know. I mean, but it was more like a passion and a desire, I guess. And I remember when they came to the school and they said there was this newspaper, teenagers write for it. And back then, there were no computers. I couldn't write it and send it. I had to physically take the train, which was a big leap for my parents to even let me, and then I had to go to the office in lower Manhattan, and then you typed your story there. Usually I would write a long hand version, but I didn't have a typing device at home. So you type it, you bring it to the office, and then you have a kind of editor, and you do this after school.

So the first thing I wrote for them was about how we celebrate Christmas. So I remember it was an essay about Christmas, and then I wrote then about my first day in the United States. And I kept writing for them throughout my years in high school. And one of the essays, the one about my first day, when I was done it was published in this newspaper. I thought, "Oh, there's more I

want to do with that." And so I started writing a fictionalized version of that, about a girl who comes to the US at 12, and kept writing it.

And I entered some of it, I entered a short version of it in the *Seventeen* magazine fiction contest. I didn't win, but I got honorable mention, and that encouraged me. And so all through, I started in high school, but then through college I kept writing the novel, and sometimes I would get inspired right before finals or something. And I kept working on it, and when I graduated, I graduated with a big chunk of it. And then I decided - I worked for a year - and then started an MFA program at Brown, and worked on it and it became my thesis.

Lawrence:

So after *Breath, Eyes, Memory* there's the great *Krik? Krak!* which weaves together stories of women from multiple generations. And then, in *Farming of the Bones*, we get a novel that has a much more overtly political tenor. What's the transition there, in your mind, in what you're writing about?

Danticat:

Breath, Eyes, Memory was somewhat an emotional autobiography, right? It started an autobiography, and a lot of first novels are like that. And *Krik? Krak!* was a compilation of experiences of - it was sort of a linear, generational narrative of this family, this matriarchal family. And then one of the stories in *Krik? Krak!*, "1937", was about a massacre that occurred to a member of this family. And so I wanted to expand on that in *The Farming of Bones*, because it was also a historical moment for the Island of Hispaniola, Quisqueya, which houses both Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and some of that historical path that we've traveled together. And so Amabelle, the main character in *The Farming of Bones*, was inspired by one of the stories in *Krik? Krak!* and I wanted to go to a bigger canvas and tell a bigger story. Of course, it's a historical novel, so there's a lot more research, a lot of travel in trying to bring to life this segment of the past.

Lawrence:

Then in *Brother, I'm Dying*, which is more overtly memoir - and also social criticism, I think it's fair to say - you break through in some way. I mean you've been well known before that, but in some way *Brother, I'm Dying* is the extraordinary work. The Times says, "It's a mixture of homesickness and homelessness." Can you be homesick and homeless at the same time?

Danticat:

Oh, absolutely. I mean, I think in some ways that's probably one possible way of describing the immigration experience, right? Of being a wanderer who's longing for home, in some cases, especially for people who are exiled. But that's a book that I really wish I didn't have to have written, so I wasn't intending to write a memoir. My uncle died in immigration custody in 2004, at the same time that my father was sick with pulmonary fibrosis and was dying. And I was pregnant with my baby daughter, so it was a confluence of events that I felt like I wanted to

mark, but also to talk about what happens to the vulnerable in immigration custody, which is something that I had been, and I was working with immigrant organizations.

I was aware of these dangers, but it just hit very close when my uncle was detained, and had his medication taken away, and died shackled to a bed in a county hospital, 15 minutes from where I lived. And I wasn't even allowed to see him. So I felt like it was a story that I wanted people to know about, because my family wasn't the only one going through it. But at the same time, I wanted it also to be a story of my entire family, of the story of my family. And that's really why I ended up writing *Brother, I'm Dying*.

Lawrence:

Shift genres for a second. The more recent work, *The Art of Death: Writing the Final Story*, inspired by the loss of your mother. Was that a cathartic experience to actually write that work in the period subsequent to your mother's passing?

Danticat:

Yeah, I feel like *The Art of Death* was the companion volume to *Brother, I'm Dying*. *Brother, I'm Dying* was about my father's death and my uncle, who was a surrogate father to me. And when my mother died, and my mother had told me she didn't want to be in that book. She was like, "Don't write about me in there. It's their book." And so when she died I really, I had trouble seeing how I would continue in terms of what I could write about. And I knew I had to write about my mother, in some way, before I moved on. And so it was a tribute to my mother, and it talks about a whole journey together, towards the end of her life. But also what it was like after she was gone, and what I found comfort in. What reading meant to me after that.

Lawrence:

It is a book about death, which at first blush, one would think would be depressing. It's actually not depressing at all. It's really inspiring, uplifting. It's got a redemptive arc, don't you think?

Danticat:

Well, mostly one of the things that I found during the whole process of writing that book, was that everything that's about death is about life. There's a point in your life, too, when you realize, "Yes, we all have the same kind of..." One of the authors in the books says, "All stories-" and I think it was Margaret Atwood, "All stories lean towards death, but what's important is what the living." And we mourn because there was a life there, in-between. And so, I really wanted my book about death to be as much about life as it was about death.

Lawrence:

It's the conversation interrupted that we lose, and then you want to try to recover that in some ways, and continue it in your own head, and in your own work.

Morrison talks about trying to learn, and ultimately mastering, the skill of not writing for a white audience learning about people of color. She's writing from her experience. Do you resonate with that? Is that your story, too?

Danticat:

Well yeah, her story of the white gaze. I think it's an important lesson for all writers of color, or people who are writing for the margins, because there's the temptation of being a native informant, of sounding like an anthropologist.

Lawrence:

A tour guide.

Danticat:

Exactly. And also people, the gatekeepers, the people who are reading the material or selecting it, might have that gaze. So I think it's important, and I think it was a crucial lesson for all of us that, first of all, we write first for us, and then you don't have to explain everything. You don't need a glossary. You're not invisible like that. She always brought up the example of Ralph Ellison - invisible to whom?

Lawrence:

Right.

Danticat:

Right. We're not invisible to ourselves, and I think that's a very important lesson for writers. It's very affirming that someone of her stature also - she's writing for us, and she's not bending over backwards to explain who she is.

Lawrence:

And she, by her very body of work, teaches us things that we kind of knew but we didn't know we knew them until she tells us. So having read Ralph Ellison, I never thought of it through the looking glass in that direction, that of course they're not invisible to themselves. Ralph Ellison is not invisible to himself. But I didn't know that until Morrison told me that.

Danticat:

Exactly. Well that's the thing, in her eulogy at James Baldwin's funeral, she said, "I thought I knew you, but it was myself I knew through you." And I think she gave us that gift as well.

Lawrence:

So let's turn to the earthquake. You were certainly a well known personality and writer by then. You had won the MacArthur prize among many, many, many other recognitions. But surely the earthquake in 2010 plays a major role in your sense of self, and your mission. Can you tell us a little bit about how it affected you in that way?

Danticat:

Well, in a few months now, it will be the 10th anniversary of this-

Lawrence:

It's hard to imagine it's been 10 years.

Danticat:

It's been already 10 years, which is extraordinary. I mean, especially for those of us who've lost loved ones, as I did. So I think the earthquake came at a time where things seemed like they were going - I mean in retrospect, everything seemed better - but it was sort of stabilizing. And then the earthquake happened and it's been a series of, and then afterwards we had Hurricane Matthew, and other natural disasters. And now Haiti is going through a very, a different kind of earthquake, a very difficult moment. Like today as I'm speaking to you, there are demonstrations on the streets. There's gas shortages, and a leadership that is not listening to the people, and there's a kind of uncertainty. There are gangs. So it's also a very difficult time for the country at the moment, and one that is worrisome, especially as we move towards the 10th anniversary of this earthquake.

Lawrence:

And you bring all of that to bear, your understanding of that situation, as well as your own experience as an immigrant to this country, in the extraordinary collection of stories, *Everything Inside*. I don't want to do too many spoilers. I want to be careful here with my spoiler alerts, but I do want to talk about a couple of the complex characters we get to meet, and we get to know, and we get to care about.

So speaking of the earthquake, could I ask you to read a passage from "The Gift"? It's a passage that takes place right after the earthquake, and a teacher, maybe somebody a little bit like you, is trying to figure out how she's going to respond to the earthquake with a whole room full of people who are experiencing that at a distance.

Danticat:

Yes, and this story is also, it takes place on the 4th of July. It's about two lovers who are reuniting after, but this is a moment where they are trying to figure out what to do right after the earthquake.

"The afternoon of the earthquake, she had been at Miami Dade College teaching. She'd grown close to some of her students that semester, and they'd invited her to a dinner the Haitian Students Association was hosting. They had also invited a popular local Haitian singer named Roro as the entertainment. After she left the class, she was considering not attending the dinner.

Then her phone started ringing, and with everyone she loved being far away, with her parents living in Brooklyn, and with other relatives in Paris, Santo Domingo and Montreal worried but accounted for, and with Thomas on a prolonged new years holiday with his wife and daughter in Haiti, and not answering his phone, she decided to go to the student dinner after all. 'What better time to be with other people?', she thought. There were still no detailed reports. The college reception hall was packed. When she walked in, hundreds of students and faculty were sitting in a wide circle, on what was supposed to be the dance floor.

The singer Roro, the closest thing to a spiritual leader in sight, was standing in the middle of the circle. Towering over everyone, he seemed lost nonetheless, flabbergasted. His hands clasped together, his face crumpled. The student association president, an anxious young woman, walked over to Roro. Sobbing, she asked him to continue his ritual. 'If only rituals could instantly heal us,' Anika had thought. While waiting to see what Roro would come up with, she repeatedly checked Thomas' and his wife's social media pages, and linked to the pages of their friends, and their friends' friends. There were no updates, just a stream of expressions of concern and worry."

Lawrence:

So is there healing? They're looking for ways to heal. If I may, your character in the story is looking for healing. Where do we find healing?

Danticat:

Well, I mean, I think there has to be healing. It takes time. It takes time, and we also have to face the fact that some people will never heal. I think, when you have such a massive tragedy, when so many people, there are people, when I went back to Haiti immediately after the earthquake and even months after, people would say, "That person just went to work and never came back." Because if something happened to them, and their body was one of the many that were buried in a mass grave, or... So there was no closure for a lot of people, whatever closure means in these situations.

And this idea of rituals, where I think rituals help us frame our grief, and a lot of people didn't have that privilege. And so, and I think we also like to think, and I think that's part of what the country's going through right now at the moment. And I think that's something that we'll have to contend with as the date gets closer, because anniversaries sort of concretize these things. That, what did it all mean? And what was it all for? And we like to think that when people die, whether they die in these sudden tragedies, or they die in other ways, that it means something.

I think that's where part of the healing comes from. You're thinking, "Oh, at least this meant something." And I think we're still wrestling with that, what did it all mean? And one of the characters in that story says that, "We're all supposed to be better. We're all supposed to have grown," and it's heartbreaking when we either backtrack or that doesn't happen.

Lawrence:

Everything Inside is almost a *Dubliners* for our time, this wonderful collection of characters. I was reading recently that Howard Jacobson, the British author, Man Booker Prize winner, said that one of the characters in his newest novel is someone he hated at first, and she just came to him. And as he wrote her more and more, he came to love her, and he came to decide she's actually his favorite character. Have you had characters who've come to you, who you've had to wrestle with and you didn't like? And then you do like and your attitude changes over time?

Danticat:

I had a previous character called the Dew Breaker who was a torturer during the dictatorship. And it's a character that I came to, I once met a young woman who was talking about her father, and she's talking about him with such love. And then I realized, "Oh, I know this person. He was so and so." And if you said it to a certain Haitian of a certain age, they would realize that that man was a killer, but that's this young woman's father. And she was excited that I'm Haitian, he's Haitian, and it started getting me thinking about the way people compartmentalize themselves. Right?

And so writing that character, if I had not had that encounter, I feel like I would have written him more flat, one-dimensional. But I was always thinking, "Those people are loved by some little girl. They're loved by someone." And to also have that aspect when you're writing someone even though, who've committed horrendous crimes, but they're still "daddy" to somebody. And so, to have that multiplicity of character, I never grew to love that character, but I felt an obligation to write him as a full human being.

Lawrence:

And understand that somebody loves him.

Danticat:

Yes.

Lawrence:

One of the epigraphs in your book, *Everything Inside* - and I hope you have great, good luck with it as it comes out right now - is from the great Nikki Giovanni, who said, "We love because it's the only true adventure." Which made me think of Helen Keller's famous challenge, that life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all. Well, I thank you on behalf of all of us, all of your readers, for sharing with us, in your work, the most daring adventure of all - and that is the adventure of love. Thank you for being with us today.

Danticat:

Thank you very much. Thank you so much for having me.

Musical interlude

Lawrence:

This podcast is produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Paola Mardo is our sound designer, Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit pbk.org. Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

CITATION:

Lawrence, Fred, host. "Celebrated Author Edwidge Danticat Retraces the Arc of Her Literary Genius." *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*, The Phi Beta Kappa Society, October 4, 2019. www.pbk.org.

Produced by

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