



The Farming of Bones

Edwidge Danticat

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Amabelle Desir belongs to herself, or so she responds to the wealthy Spanish family that adopts her shortly after she watches her parents drown. Such is Amabelle's measured tone in the face of disaster. As the narrator of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*, Amabelle seldom betrays through her words the full horrors of her life. Yet her tale of love, loss, holocaust, and rebirth is both moving and triumphant.

Set in the Dominican Republic under the tense, anti-Haitian climate established by General Rafael Trujillo, the story describes the so-called farming of bones—the backbreaking labor of cutting sugar cane, the means by which many Haitians supported their families back home. The sound of cutting cane, Amabelle explains, is like dry chicken bones. It's an apt metaphor for a job that robs its workers of a spiritual and emotional existence. In this grim climate, Amabelle, a servant, and Sebastian, a cane cutter, find and lose each other.

While Trujillo escalates his 1937 campaign to purge the Dominican Republic of Haitian emigrants, Sebastian and Amabelle are separated as they hastily flee the country. Amabelle's tale of struggle, slaughter, and loss is always grounded in her determination to escape the Republic and find Sebastian. Her voice, like the river to which she loses so much, moves with its own cadence, trickling over tense moments or flooding us with the gruesome carnage as thousands of Haitians are massacred by Trujillo's troops.

The heroine Amabelle is carefully and painfully wrought, and Danticat effectively shows us two sides of her character. One voice reveals a public, heroic Amabelle—a woman working capably as a servant or struggling bravely through the mountains to escape Trujillo's army. A different text font, speaking from Amabelle's interior life, reveals a woman suffering from nightmares, trying to find a place in Haiti that she no longer remembers, and learning to face the loss of her beloved.

The readers never forget that Amabelle's story is not solely her own. Her experiences, though tragic, are overshadowed by the suffering of others who did not escape. Her parents are a constant presence in her narrative, as are Sebastian, his sister, Mimi, and fellow refugees from the Dominican Republic.

The Massacre River—where so many Haitians died, where Amabelle loses her parents, where Don Ignacio finds her, and where she cleanses her spirit and finds new life—itself becomes a dramatic character in the story. It is there that Amabelle is floating on her back at the story's close, “looking for the dawn.”

Danticat manages, in this potentially horrific tale, to give a life and a voice to the many who suffered at the hands of Trujillo. Despite its subject, the story is not always painful for Amabelle does not allow us to suffer too much. Through her voice, we discover the dignity to struggle, to cope, and to move on, making her story, ultimately, a triumphant one. Danticat has created a new kind of heroine—one who journeys to the river and back, and through her “living death,” finds a way to survive. As Amabelle muses, “life can be a strange gift.”

LISA I. S. ARCHIBALD (September / October 1998)

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