

January 2020

Call and Response: Constructed Identity and Legible Experience in Danticat's Young Adult Novels

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Anastasia M. (2020) "Call and Response: Constructed Identity and Legible Experience in Danticat's Young Adult Novels," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 11. Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol2/iss2/11>

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When a Haitian storyteller calls “Krik?” loudly into a crowd, the response they want and that they often receive is the crowd’s unified voices saying “Kraak!” Two syllables loaded with cultural history carry a storyteller’s request to recount a tale and an audience’s enthusiastic permission to begin. More complex and intimate than speaker and listener, the relationship between the *krik kraak* teller and audience is one of community and mutual impact. The tale—often a folktale speaking to community history, wisdom, and needs—prompts reaction, and in turn the reaction—traditional response, commentary, and even redirection—shapes the tale as it is told to ensure a community story reflects the community itself. Call and response as a storytelling framework is traditional to several African, Caribbean diaspora, and Haitian cultures, originating in oral traditions, but bridging the gap into these same cultures’ written literatures. Notably among these is Haitian author Edwidge Danticat’s works, including her short story collection titled *Krik? Kraak!* that overtly plays with elements of Haitian folk(tale) call-and-response culture in translation—not simply Creole to English but oral to text—as well as her young adult novels.

Maggie Sale describes call-and-response literary patterns as invocations of a communal and participatory nature of art, suggesting a complex method of reading and interpretation (42) that both mirrors its oral counterpart and is echoed in Rosenblatt’s theories of the “complex, non-linear, self-correcting transaction between reader and text” (4). Following this notion that texts do not exist in cultural vacuums but rather reflect and produce cultural systems and understandings (this being the “call”) and that texts are interpreted and constructed through reader participation (this being the “response”), it is this pattern and complex transaction that I want to explore in Edwidge Danticat’s young adult novels. I will examine not only the call that Danticat makes with her constructions of young adulthood in *Behind the Mountains* and *Untwine*

but also what they reveal about some of the mechanizations of response, specifically critical reception.

In her exploration of Danticat's transliteration of traditional Haitian folklore and popular culture, Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo asserts that "[Danticat] reveals a large body of female experience that was ignored or silenced" (137), and that same centering of Black, Haitian (American), girl perspective and experience clearly continues in Danticat's young adult novels. As we examine Danticat's literary call of constructed young adulthood, we will also explore what the response and disparity of critical reception between the two books reveals about youth literature reviews both as extensions of dominant cultural perspective and arbiters of that perspective's assumptions about what young adulthood should be and do, particularly in the intersecting contexts of race, gender, and cultural origin.

Published in 2002 and set just two years prior, *Behind the Mountains* is the story of 13-year-old Céliane Esperance and her family's emigration from Haiti to the United States. Narrating through five months of journal entries, Céliane grapples with the absence of her father, who has been in New York for the past five years, and her ambivalence about leaving her home in the mountains for the US. But when long-awaited visas are rush approved due to political violence, the family is suddenly uprooted and reunited amidst the culture shock of New York City. As Céliane processes the waves of chaos and change by writing in and addressing her journal, readers are positioned to bear witness to Céliane struggles to understand her position and agency in the larger (and volatile) familial and political landscapes, connecting to autobiographical elements of Danticat's own child migrant experiences. *Untwine*, Danticat's second young adult novel published in 2015, captures similar volatility but turns it inward. Sixteen-year-old Giselle Boyer is nearly torn apart, first physically when a van crashes into her family's car and then

emotionally when her twin sister Isabelle succumbs to her injuries. Giselle, who has never before been without her sister, must suddenly navigate a jagged terrain of isolation, grief, broken family, and shattered identity. Also told in first person and intricately interwoven with Haitian twin lore and grief rituals, Giselle's narrative steers readers through different levels of consciousness and self-reconstruction as the fugue of loss steadily and painfully gives way to integration and acceptance.

As I mentioned above, call and response, particularly in a Haitian storytelling context, is not just about the give and take of reciprocity but rather the tangled cycle of mutual impact and change. The call shapes the response, the response reshapes the call, and on it goes until the two are so intertwined that which came first or what each might be without the other becomes indeterminable. The relationship between the library world, particularly youth librarianship, and that of children's and young adult literature is just as intertwined, the two reflecting and responding to each other at nearly every conceivable level and both intricately tied up with the dominant culture in which they are situated. Children's literature, for instance, is not only threaded through with cultural assumptions and constructions of childhood and young adulthood, but also helps to shape them. Like any social construction, childhood and young adulthood intersect with other social identities such as race or gender, and as Rose and Nodelman and Trites¹ told us early on, these constructions' presence in youth literature serve a socializing function within an adult domination paradigm. And though children's literature criticism has since explored other models for the social relationship between adults and non-adults as well as children's literature's relationship to children,² librarianship, despite delineating best practices for selecting, promoting, and advising readers on youth literature, nevertheless rarely critically engages with childhood as a social construction, resulting in investments in outdated but

persistent cultural notions of non-adult inadequacy³ and imperialistic functions of youth literature to highlight that inadequacy, the correctness of adult dominance, and the desirability of ascension and assimilation into adulthood. Similarly, youth service models and spaces in the library and youth librarians as mediators and reviewers of children's and young adult books are under-interrogated as extensions and producers of and socializers within these specific cultural ideas of childhood and young adulthood. Age appropriateness with regard to topic is a particularly good example of how library collections, readers advisory services, and reviews prioritize adult comfort about what children should know and when over actual children's knowledge, experiences, and agency to decide what they find appropriate.

This cultural construction of childhood typically represents an innocent ideal that tells us what children and childhood *should* be, based on cultural priorities, children's social position, and their difference from adults. Our rhetoric and construction of childhood is shaped by what Karen Sanchez-Eppler terms an "essentialism of childhood" (36) that accounts for the "glaring contradictions between any society's idea of childhood and the lived experience of actual children" (35). This essentialism of what childhood is (powerless) and what it does (contrast adulthood) serves to naturalize several culturally constructed power relationships—chief among them, children's lack of agency and dependence on adults—and to reinforce the dangerous association between childhood and innocence and the latter's connection to privilege. Specifically in a United States context, the ability to exist safely as a physically and culturally powerless child in a happy state of ignorance about the many unpleasantnesses of the world and the people in it requires no small amount of privilege—this child is almost certainly white, cisgender, nondisabled, neurotypical, and in the care of adults with wealth and social status. Innocence and its lack of knowledge or power are difficult to maintain as a marginalized child—

for a Black child, a child immigrant, a trans child, or a latch-key kid, ignorance and lack of agency is directly incompatible with survival. Nevertheless, a dominant and naturalized cultural lens on childhood that assumes the privilege of innocence effectively erases marginalized childhood both rhetorically and materially. Children's publishing is an example of the latter as year after year of annual statistics from the Cooperative Children's Books Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education have clearly shown.⁴

The construction of young adulthood, specifically the first-person young adult narrator, has an equally potent socializing impact and one equally tied to the adult power dynamic and therefore well-positioned to subvert it. Roberta Trites distinguishes young adult literature by "the issue of how [...] power is deployed during the course of the narrative" (2), and nowhere is this deployment so concise or concentrated as within what Michael Cadden calls the "top-down (vertical) power relationship" (146) of an adult-constructed first-person, young adult narrative voice. Cadden describes the young adult consciousness as "incomplete and insufficient" (146) and the subversion of young adult narrative authority as necessary to help young adult readers "recognize the limits of the young adult consciousness in the text" (146). By giving young adult readers the tools to undermine young adult narrators' authority, the texts also teach them to recognize how and where young adults and their perspectives are vulnerable. This recognition is key as adolescent readers are presumably not yet socially conditioned to automatically connect a narrator's youth to that narrator's lack of authority—part of adult socialization is learning the (reading) practices that maintain the adult-dominant power structure.

Teen narrators, particularly within the genre of realism, are often revealed to be unreliable due to trauma or some kind of emotional upheaval, which not only means their authority over narrative events is compromised but they also don't have the capacity to recognize it has been

compromised. Danticat's Céliane in *Behind the Mountains* and Giselle in *Untwine* are undermined as narrators in just this way. With her family separated between Haiti and the US, Céliane endures the emotional strain of missing her father, striving to make him proud, and feeling guilty over her ambivalence toward the US all before she suffers the physical trauma and ongoing threat of violence incited by Haiti's political tensions. Similarly, Giselle deals with the upheaval of her parents' separation and impending divorce before the car accident, her sister's death, and the personal and legal aftermath of both. On the surface, each protagonist's emotional and physical trauma put them into states of grief and coping, out of which readers never see them since readers meet both protagonists when they are already in distress. Another signal that these young adult protagonists' understanding of their narratives is suspect is that they both blame themselves for things out of their control that have gone wrong: Céliane worries constantly that she has allowed her father to become a stranger in his absence, and Giselle wonders if her making the family late is to blame for the car crash that injures everyone and claims her twin sister's life.

But more than indicating to teen readers that a teen protagonist may not have full narrative control, these signals are also a socializing mechanism—interpretive training wheels, if you will—that situate teens to align with an adult-dominant culture that holds all non-adults as insufficient. Danticat starts here with her call, intentionally manipulating social constructions and reader expectations across cultural thresholds between (white) US and Haitian social positionings of young adults—not only to highlight a cultural gap between the two but also to highlight the marginalized lived experiences, specifically of migrant young adults, that bridge and even transform that gap. Pushing further into Céliane and Giselle's destabilization and unreliability, Danticat primes reader expectations, directing her US audience to no longer take

her protagonists' narration at face value and recognize them not as (or not solely as) traumatized narrators but as non-adult narrators; and in fact, Danticat offers critique of the girls' dependence on and power relationships with the adults in their lives as she directly links adult power to the cause of their emotional instability. When readers meet her in *Behind the Mountains*, Céliane's family has been split apart with her father having relocated to New York for the past five years due to financial pressures, and her mother and brother must take on more labor to ensure the family's survival until they are reunited. Suffering from anemia due to the strain, Céliane's mother Aline must travel to see her nurse aunt in the city, making them all vulnerable to the political violence that injures Céliane and Aline and prompts their hasty departure to New York. Likewise, Giselle's parents at the opening of *Untwine* are separated and planning to divorce. The accident the family is in and Giselle's resulting injuries, her inability to speak or move, and the devastating loss of her sister are also indirectly caused by trauma at the hands of adults as the teen driver who hits them is manipulated by abusive guardians. Adults even mix up the sisters, adding fuel to Giselle's crisis of identity as they insist that Giselle is her twin and go so far as to accidentally donate Isabelle's organs in Giselle's name.

Here we have Danticat's call in all its complexity—the first half of our call-and-response storytelling—textual constructions of young adulthood that directly reference the social power hierarchy between adults and young adults and that underpin the voices of two Haitian/Haitian American teen protagonists. Danticat has pushed into the US cultural imagination, first feeding into expectations of unreliability due to trauma, then further destabilizing the protagonists through their power relationships with adults, and eventually connecting Céliane and Giselle's subjection to adult power to their experiences of emotional and physical trauma. On the surface, Danticat appears to play into her US readers' expectations with regard to the unreliability of

young adults, but like any quality *krik krak* storyteller, she manages to manipulate those expectations into critical commentary on the very concept of naturalized adult power and the subjugated position of young adults in the dominant cultural framework.

This begs the question, of course, of how this provocative call shapes its response, and for the purposes of this essay, specifically the response from one particular interpretive community—US reviewers. First, however, some brief context of reviewers and reviewing as a practice:

- Reviewers for children’s and young adult books who are reviewing for a journal or magazine (as opposed to their own blog) are almost always book mediators—usually librarians and sometimes teachers writing primarily for other librarians and teachers who need information to make purchasing decisions.
- The reviews themselves can look different from journal to journal, but most follow a formula of plot summary, analysis, and recommendation—all in about 250 words.
- Some of the most popular trade review journals for youth literature include *Booklist*, *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books*, *Horn Book Magazine*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA) Magazine*.

Reviewing is not a world that undergoes regular scrutiny or critical engagement,⁵ internally or externally, and as such some inherent functions of reviews typically go unquestioned. One consequence in particular is that reviews put forth a single interpretation of a text, and more than this, they often posit a specific purpose or function of a narrative—one often in greater service to adult mediators than young adult readers—and we can see this at work in the reviews of Danticat’s novels.

Table 1: Review Analytical/Evaluative Statements for *Behind the Mountains*

<i>BEHIND THE MOUNTAINS</i>	
<i>Booklist</i>	<p>“The weaving together of fact and fiction is contrived... where the explanations of history and...politics seem wedged into Céliane’s diary.”</p> <p>“But...when Danticat sets aside the educational for the personal, her simple, lyrical writing tells a gripping homecoming story...”</p>
<i>School Library Journal</i>	“In this gem of a book, Danticat explores the modern immigrant experience through the eyes of one teen.”
<i>Publishers Weekly</i>	<p>“Oddly, however, Céliane's childlike hopefulness persists even after she and her mother are injured by a pipe bomb.”</p> <p>“...the presentation of some of the historical information seems clunky.”</p>
<i>Kirkus Reviews</i>	<p>“... Céliane writes of the violence in curiously disengaged tones...”</p> <p>“...when the narrative moves to New York, the upheaval this creates for the family is related from a distance...”</p> <p>“...so few children's novels of Haiti that this offering naturally begs comparison to...<i>A Taste of Salt</i>...”</p>

Source: See Appendix A

Table 2: Review Analytical/Evaluative Statements for *Untwine*

<i>UNTWINE</i>	
<i>Booklist</i>	<p>“...a soulful account of one girl’s grief...”</p> <p>“...explores what it means to be a twin and how to say good-bye without losing oneself.”</p>
<i>School Library Journal</i>	“...seems to move into the supernatural and mystical before yanking readers back into realism...”

	"...a journey through Giselle's past, a journey she must take before she can face the present—and the future without Isabelle."
<i>Publishers Weekly</i>	"...gracious and poetic language haunts as Giselle moves through "star-blinding pain," both physical and emotional..." "...at once heartbreaking and uplifting."
<i>Kirkus Reviews</i>	"...a lyrical, heart-wrenching novel for teens about love, friendship, and loss..." "Her emotional pain is raw...present[ed] unflinchingly."

Source: See Appendix B

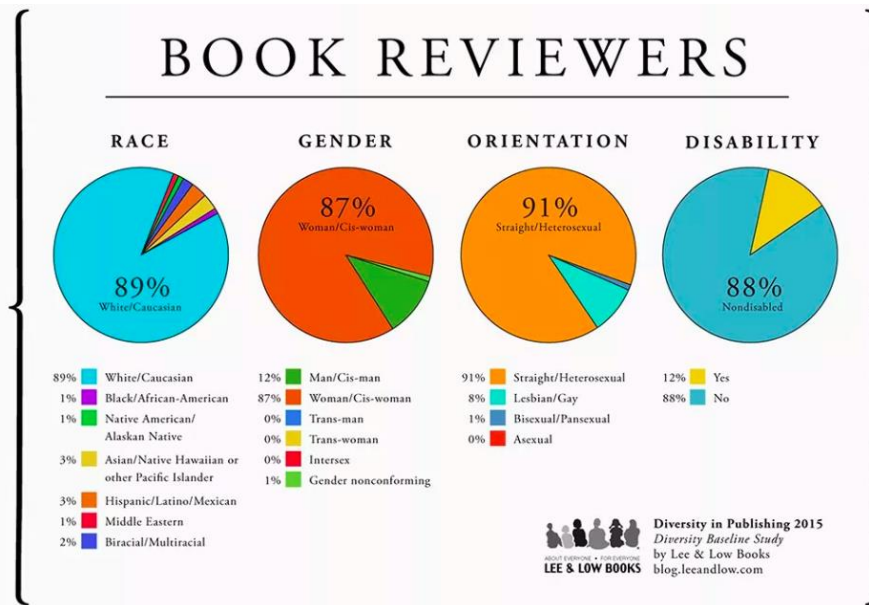
Having pulled together in the tables above some of the analytical statements from the review journals that the two books have in common, it is clear that, with the exception of SLJ, *Behind the Mountains* did not enjoy an overly warm reception, while thirteen years later *Untwine* was a smash hit. Overall, reviewers faulted *Behind the Mountains* for allegedly lacking what *Untwine* supposedly has in abundance—emotional pain. (For context, the full reviews are available in Appendices A and B.)

So what happens when we look at the call and response together—how do the two inform each other or more to the point, what does each reveal about the other? I would argue that both of these novels are equally suffused with pain, emotional upheaval, and family trauma even if the details differ. The construction of the protagonists' unreliability makes that clear. But on the interpretive end among these reviewing readers, the pain—the Black Haitian teen girl pain—in one book is more legible than in the other, and legible pain yields praise. And it is not simply praised—in each review, the pain, grief, suffering, and survival are presented as the central facet of *Untwine*'s narrative. Readers unfamiliar with the book might easily assume that the wrenching

of hearts and vivid emotional display are the main purpose of the narrative. Alternatively for *Behind the Mountains*, Céliane's lack of legible pain, described in the reviews as "curiously disengaged" and "oddly hopeful," becomes the central facet. When looking at the role of storytelling in Danticat's fiction, N'Zengou-Tayo tells us that "stories allow some narrative distance and help...to present with detachment very traumatic experiences" (134). What we can infer is that what N'Zengou-Tayo identifies as an intentional and distinctly Haitian function of story is not only missed by a dominant cultural lens of interpretation but actually dismissed as an incongruity in *Behind the Mountains*, resulting in the reasonable notion that a young girl surrounded by the frightening confusion of political violence might cope through research and journaling rather than emotional spiral being deemed poor contrivance.

Given that call-and-response storytelling encourages participation and improvisation, it naturally resists a mimetic reproduction of a single authoritative version of a narrative, and in fact it resists the notion of an authoritative version at all. So what do such singular interpretive responses from reviewers reveal to us? A few facts that we already know: publishing, librarianship, and book reviewing (as it is populated by librarians) in the US are historically and currently overwhelmingly white fields.

Fig. 1: Book Reviewer Demographics.



“Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results.” Lee & Low Books. Web. 26 Jan 2016. Image reprinted with permission from LEE & LOW BOOKS.

Consequently and despite some individual reviewers of color, book reviews are not only immersed systematically in whiteness but their practices and content are also rarely interrogated as products of normalized whiteness. Whiteness as a lens, or the “white gaze” if you like, relies on Black pain to humanize Black people, but said pain must be legible to whiteness or it will fail to conjure white empathy. In his discussion of the racist disparity in media coverage of gun violence, David J. Leonard explains that “as Black bodies are defined as legible through a set of signifiers—aggressive, violent, threatening, intimidating—Black innocence is illegible within the dominant imagination” (102). We could use the same framework to describe the disparity in response and reception to Danticat’s novels: as realistic Black teen narratives are defined as legible through a set of signifiers—traumatic, emotionally raw, self-effacing, uplifting—the remaining spectrum of Black young adulthood and coping is illegible within the dominant imagination. More than illegible, it is disconcerting. A politically situated young adult who uses knowledge practices to cope with the complexities of violence and even offer political critique of

the American Dream not only wields far more capability than permitted by the notions of inadequacy central to the concept of an adult-dominant paradigm but also denies the white gaze's expectation of Black pain as spectacle—a denial that is uncomfortable and unacceptable for most of the reviews. Further, this also reveals that reviewing as a cultural practice is not neutral and requires more critical interrogation of its naturalized dominant ideological assumptions, though that is beyond my scope here.

Instead, I will conclude by focusing in the opposite direction to look at what these responses reveal about the text's call—what an interpretation so focused on emotional and physical trauma might reveal about the textual constructions that use that trauma to undermine the protagonists' narrative authority. Call and response storytelling encourages us to look for how the call, how the story shifts depending on the response; how multiple, communal interpretations can be folded into and available in one narrative. By resisting the definitive, singular interpretation offered by the reviews for each book and instead considering it as a response that impacts each of the texts' calls, we can find other available interpretations. The same constructions of young adulthood intersecting with gender and race that signal to readers an unstable narrative authority leave an interpretive gap in which readers can also see the narrative and cultural role of family as both the destabilizing and (re)stabilizing factor for both protagonists. This shifts focus from critique of the teens' power relationships with adults to the traumatic impacts of cultural dislocation as a Haitian immigrant for Céliane and the domestic violence that contrasts Giselle's own Haitian American familial support, reshaping a call's critique of an adult-dominated power structure and supposed socialization scheme and expanding it to questions of identity and agency in the intersectional context of colonialism and cultural oppression—a trajectory that children's literature criticism itself is also following.

Danticat is not only a master at interweaving Haitian cultural elements into literary patterns but also of the Haitian folklore art of the *krik* and *krak* exchange of call-and-response storytelling, wielding what Sale calls a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and stories or (story versions) (42-43) and in which the implied author participates just as much as the reader. As N’Zengou-Tayo concludes about Danticat’s intentions and impact, “[f]or many Haitians who grew up abroad, traditional culture has been a way of shaping fragile identities that are challenged by the dominant culture(s) in their host country” (137), claiming agency and resisting erasure into harmful paradigms. As the rich complexity of marginalized narratives continues to flourish within children’s and young adult literature, offering dynamic multiplicitous literary calls that validate marginalized identities while shattering oppressive cultural lenses, let us hope our reviewing structures and the fields of publishing and librarianship that feed them can make the necessary shifts to receive these narratives, respond to them, and resist flattening them.

Notes

¹ See Rose, *The Case Against Peter Pan*; Nodelman, “The Other;” and Trites, *Disturbing the Universe*.

² See Gubar, “On Not Defining,” and Flynn’s forum on children’s agency.

³ Cultural, developmental, and even publishers’ market-driven notions of child and teen reading needs, behavior, and what is age appropriate dominate library policy with regard to collection development and programs such as story times and summer reading as well as children and teen rooms (and the rules governing them). This is not to say that individual youth librarians do not offer push back and work to shape library spaces and services to children and teens as non-monolithic, unique user groups; only that these excellent folks are not yet the majority nor the solution to librarianship’s systemic investment in the conflation of childhood with inadequacy.

⁴ The Cooperative Children's Books Center at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education provides annual statistics on children's books by and about people of color and First/Native Nations published in the United States. See <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

⁵ The role and function of reviews in the publishing world and particularly in the work of diversifying children's literature is steadily gaining traction in professional spaces and discussions, although review journals' and editors' critical self-reflections tend to occur (or most visibly occur) in apologies for offensive or discriminatory reviews.

Appendix A: Sample Reviews for *Behind the Mountains*

Behind the Mountains

Booklist:

Gr. 5-9. In a new First Person Fiction series about coming to America, acclaimed adult author Danticat tells the story of a contemporary Haitian American family through the diary entries of a young teen. Céliane Esperance loves her home in the Haitian mountains, but she hasn't seen Papa since he left for New York five years ago, and she misses him all the time. Long-awaited visas come through, and Céliane, her mother, and her older brother join Papa in Brooklyn, but it isn't the blissful reunion she dreamed about. The weaving together of fact and fiction is contrived (instructive is the term used in the general series introduction), especially in the first half of the book, set in Haiti, where the explanations of history and recent presidential politics seem wedged into Céliane's diary. But the short journal entries make for a readable, immediate narrative, and when Danticat sets aside the educational for the personal, her simple, lyrical writing tells a gripping homecoming story of tension, disappointment, anger, and hope. Her essay "My Personal Journey," about her own coming to Brooklyn at age 12 in 1981, is a moving final commentary. -- Hazel Rochman (Reviewed October 1, 2002)

School Library Journal:

Gr 5 Up –As the best student in the class, Céliane is given a "sweet little book" in which she decides to keep a journal. Her entries date from October 2000 to March 2001, and chronicle the family's departure from their homeland of Haiti to join her father, who had immigrated to New York City five years earlier. In graceful prose, Danticat seamlessly weaves together all that such a decision involves: the difficulties of rural life on the island and a longing for an absent parent combined with a fondness for her tiny mountain village with "the rainbows during sun

showers...the smell of pinewood burning, the golden-brown sap dripping into the fire"; and the excitement and violence of Port-au-Prince where Céliane and her mother are injured in bombings before the elections. When Céliane, her mother, and her 19-year-old brother are finally approved to enter the U.S., the teen knows everything will be all right as soon as she sees her father, but there are the unavoidable frictions among family members, fueled not only by the separation and adjustment to a new country, but also by the natural maturing process that the children undergo. In this gem of a book, Danticat explores the modern immigrant experience through the eyes of one teen. --Diane S. Marton (Reviewed October 1, 2002)

Publishers Weekly:

Launching the First Person Fiction series of immigrant coming-of-age stories, Danticat's (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for adults) debut novel for young people follows Céliane's journey from her mountain village in Haiti to join her father in Brooklyn. The narrative opens in October 2000 and unfolds as a journal, in which 13-year-old Céliane recounts events in a charming, innocent voice ("I must go soon, sweet little book, to prepare for Manman's return from the market"). Daily activities (e.g., preparing for market, listening to cassettes her father sends) give way to mounting political tensions as the presidential election approaches. Oddly, however, Céliane's childlike hopefulness persists even after she and her mother are injured by a pipe bomb ("Dear, sweet little book, if I could hold onto you so tightly that you are now here with me, why couldn't I have done the same for Manman?"). In December, Céliane, her mother and brother rejoin her father, who left five years before due to economic pressures. Through Céliane's spare if somewhat simplistic narration, the author captures the color and texture of Haitian life as well as the heroine's adjustment to New York. While readers may want to hear more about her experiences in Brooklyn, they will appreciate the truthfulness of the family's struggle to

reconnect (even if the presentation of some of the historical information seems clunky). Danticat details her own departure from Haiti as an afterword. Ages 11-15. (Oct.) FYI: Ana Veciana-Suarez's more political *Flight to Freedom*, which provides an anti-Castro take on a girl's family's move from Cuba to Miami, is also being released this month as part of the same series. --Staff (Reviewed October 28, 2002)

Kirkus Reviews:

A 13-year-old Haitian girl describes, over the course of five months, her life in Haiti and then in New York as she, her mother, and her brother join her father, who left Haiti years before. Céliane loves her life in the mountain village of Beau Jour; she is near her grandparents, the mountains agree with her, and she is the recent recipient of a journal from her teacher—because she is such a good writer. The only hole in her life is that left by her father, who sends a cassette tape addressing each family member in turn, but from whom she feels increasingly estranged by time and distance. When the bus she and her mother are riding in gets blown up in pre-election violence—the year is 2000, and Jean-Bertrand Aristide is running for re-election—the effort to reunite with her father moves into high gear. Her Tante Rose, a nurse, pulls some diplomatic strings, and suddenly they are all together in New York. This is Danticat's (*After the Dance*, p. 782, etc.) first novel for children, and it shares with others that have gone before it a tendency to write down to the audience. The diary entries are by and large flat; Céliane writes of the violence in curiously disengaged tones, considering that she and her mother are victims. Likewise, when the narrative moves to New York, the upheaval this creates for the family is related from a distance, despite the supposed current nature of the diary: "It wasn't anything [Papa] said, just the way his face looked, tightly drawn and strained. Perhaps we, especially me, were going to be more of a burden to him than he had first thought." It is unfortunate that there

are so few children's novels of Haiti that this offering naturally begs comparison to Frances Temple's electrifying *A Taste of Salt* (1992). This, alas, is a pale successor. (Fiction. 9-14)

(Reviewed September 15, 2002)

Appendix B: Sample Reviews for *Untwine*

Untwine

Booklist:

Grades 8-11 Can 15 minutes really mean the difference between life and death? This is a question that keeps rolling around 16-year-old Giselle's concussed head after a terrible car accident puts her entire family in the hospital and claims the life of her twin sister—an accident that might have been avoided if Giselle hadn't been running late. Moving through Giselle's consciousness, lucid dreams, confusion, and pain, Danticat (*Claire of the Sea Light*, 2013), in her first novel for teens, writes a soulful account of one girl's grief. The narrative is one of reflection rather than action, as readers come to a rounded understanding of both girls through Giselle's episodic remembrances. There's a lot quietly packed into this novel—Giselle's Haitian heritage, her parents' imminent separation, the complications and thrills of first love, music, and art—yet most interesting is Danticat's rendering of identical twins as unique individuals. This is a poignant story for thoughtful teens that explores what it means to be a twin and how to say good-bye without losing oneself. -- Smith, Julia (Reviewed 08-01-2015)

School Library Journal:

/* Starred Review */ Gr 7 Up — Identical twins Isabelle and Giselle were born with their fingers entwined and the doctors had to separate them, digit by digit. Now at 16, their parents are separated and considering divorce and the twins are developing their own interests and friends. As the unhappy family is running late to Isabelle's school orchestra concert, the two are once again holding hands when the red minivan hits their SUV. For several days after the accident, the doctors and Aunt Leslie think Giselle is the twin who died and call her Isabelle, and Giselle, trapped in a coma, cannot tell them who she is. Unable to wake up or move, Giselle travels

through her memory of friends, family, and mostly of Isabelle as she decides whether to let go of her twin and return to life or to stay in her vegetative state. Waking up, though, only leads to physical pain and grief as she struggles to recover from the accident and her sister's death.

Haitian-born Danticat, better known for her adult books, shines in this young adult novel that at times seems to move into the supernatural and mystical before yanking readers back into realism.

A bit mystery, a bit romance, even a touch of humor, the strong writing leads readers on a journey through Giselle's past, a journey she must take before she can face the present—and the future without Isabelle. VERDICT Well-crafted characters and strong writing make this a book to recommend, especially for fans of Gayle Forman's *If I Stay* (Dutton, 2009) --Janet Hilbun

(Reviewed July 1, 2015)

Publishers Weekly:

/ Starred Review */* Giselle, an art lover, and Isabelle, a budding composer, are 16-year-old Haitian-American twins living in Miami. After the SUV carrying the girls and their recently separated parents is hit, Giselle's world unravels. Danticat (*Krik? Krak!*) vividly represents the path from shock to healing as Giselle and her parents grapple with Isabelle's death. When the police start questioning the circumstances of the accident, friends Jean Michel and Tina help Giselle uncover startling details about the driver, a subplot that propels the novel forward with the suggestion that Isabelle's death was not in vain. Danticat's gracious and poetic language haunts as Giselle moves through "star-blinding pain," both physical and emotional, discovering the inner world of her sister and reconciling the guilt she feels at being the surviving twin. With a dynamic family of uncles, aunts, grandparents, and family friends, Giselle creates a bridge for herself, moving from twinned to "untwinned" and to a place where the best of her sister lives on

in her. Danticat's final scenes are at once heartbreaking and uplifting. Ages 12–up. --Staff
(Reviewed June 8, 2015)

Kirkus Reviews:

Tragedy strikes twin sisters Giselle and Isabelle, and their world is changed forever. Sixteen-year-old Giselle Boyer wakes up in a hospital room unable to speak or move. She recalls an accident while en route to Isabelle's school orchestra concert. Was the accident her fault? And where are her parents, and where is Isabelle? Alternating between periods of awareness and unconsciousness, Giselle begins to piece together what happened to her family. She also conjures memories: of Isabelle, high-spirited, artistic, and brilliant; of their childhood and unbreakable bond; of their parents' troubled marriage; and of blissful summers past spent in their family's native Haiti. As she ponders, Giselle wonders who she is and who she will be without her twin. National Book Award nominee and American Book Award winner Danticat delivers a lyrical, heart-wrenching novel for teens about love (familial and romantic), friendship, and loss that traverses multiple worlds between life and death, between twins, and between the past and the present. In a lyrical, often wistful first-person narration, Giselle seeks to uncover the forces behind the event that altered her life and the lives of everyone she loves. Her emotional pain is raw, and Danticat presents both it and the lingering physical injuries she and her parents struggle with unflinchingly. An honest, endearing exploration of family, grief, and perseverance. (Fiction. 13-18) (Reviewed June 15, 2015)

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