

the farming of bones

the farming of bones is a compelling novel that delves into the harrowing aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide through the lens of personal trauma and historical reckoning. Written by Canadian author Hana Maria Makela, the book explores themes of memory, identity, and the long shadows cast by violence and loss. This article provides an in-depth analysis of the novel's plot, characters, historical context, and literary significance, highlighting its contribution to contemporary discussions of human rights and reconciliation. Additionally, the farming of bones is examined through its narrative style and the symbolic meaning behind its title. Readers interested in historical fiction, postcolonial studies, and African history will find this examination particularly insightful. The following sections will guide the reader through the main aspects of the novel and its broader thematic concerns.

- Overview of the Farming of Bones
- Historical Context and Background
- Main Characters and Their Development
- Themes and Symbolism
- Narrative Style and Literary Techniques
- Reception and Impact

Overview of the Farming of Bones

The farming of bones is a historical novel that centers on Amabelle Desir, a Haitian expatriate working as a housekeeper in the Dominican Republic during the lead-up to and aftermath of the 1937 Parsley Massacre. The story recounts her experiences as she navigates the brutal ethnic cleansing ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo against Haitian communities. Through Amabelle's perspective, the novel reveals the horror, loss, and resilience of those affected by the massacre. The plot weaves personal memories with historical events, illustrating the devastating impact of political violence on individual lives and communities.

Plot Summary

The narrative unfolds with Amabelle's reflections on her childhood in Haiti and her relationship with her lover, Sebastien. As tensions rise between Haitians and Dominicans, Amabelle becomes increasingly aware of the dangers surrounding her. The story intensifies

as the massacre erupts, forcing her to confront trauma and loss head-on. The farming of bones traces her journey of survival, grief, and eventual confrontation with the past.

Significance of the Title

The title, *The Farming of Bones*, metaphorically captures the cyclical nature of violence and memory. It evokes the idea of cultivating pain and the lingering presence of death in the landscape of history. The phrase suggests how the past, especially one marked by atrocity, continues to shape identities and relationships long after the events themselves have passed.

Historical Context and Background

The farming of bones is deeply rooted in the historical realities of the 1937 Parsley Massacre, also known as El Corte. This atrocity involved the mass slaughter of tens of thousands of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic by the regime of Rafael Trujillo. Understanding this historical context is essential to fully grasp the novel's themes and its portrayal of ethnic violence.

The Parsley Massacre

The massacre derived its name from the linguistic test imposed by Dominican soldiers, who asked suspected Haitians to pronounce the Spanish word "perejil" (parsley). Inability to pronounce the word correctly often meant death. This brutal event was part of Trujillo's campaign to assert Dominican nationalism and erase Haitian presence from the border region.

Haitian-Dominican Relations

The novel also sheds light on the complex relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, marked by historical tensions, cultural differences, and political conflict. These dynamics provide a backdrop for the personal stories in the novel and highlight broader issues of race, identity, and power in the Caribbean.

Main Characters and Their Development

The Farming of Bones features richly drawn characters whose personal journeys reflect larger historical and cultural themes. The protagonist, Amabelle, serves as a conduit for exploring memory, trauma, and resilience.

Amabelle Desir

Amabelle is a Haitian woman whose identity and experiences form the core of the narrative. Through her eyes, readers witness the devastation of the massacre and the struggle to maintain dignity and humanity amidst chaos. Her character development encompasses themes of loss, love, and the search for justice.

Sebastien

Sebastien is Amabelle's lover and a figure representing both personal connection and the broader Haitian diaspora. His relationship with Amabelle provides emotional depth and highlights the cultural and social challenges faced by Haitians in the Dominican Republic.

Supporting Characters

The novel includes a range of supporting characters who contribute to the intricate portrayal of community life and the impact of political violence. These characters enrich the narrative and underscore the collective nature of trauma and survival.

Themes and Symbolism

The farming of bones explores multiple themes that resonate beyond its historical setting, engaging with universal questions of human rights, memory, and identity.

Memory and Trauma

Central to the novel is the exploration of how individuals and communities remember and process traumatic events. The farming of bones illustrates the persistence of memory and the ways in which trauma shapes identity and history.

Identity and Displacement

The novel addresses issues of identity, particularly in relation to ethnicity and nationality. Amabelle's displacement and her struggle to assert her identity in a hostile environment reflect broader themes of exile and belonging.

Violence and Resistance

The narrative portrays the brutality of the Parsley Massacre while also highlighting acts of resistance and survival. It examines the costs of violence and the resilience required to rebuild lives in its aftermath.

Symbolic Elements

Symbolism is woven throughout the novel, including the use of bones as a metaphor for death and memory, and the natural landscape as a witness to history. These symbols deepen the thematic complexity and emotional impact of the story.

Narrative Style and Literary Techniques

The farming of bones employs a distinctive narrative style that enhances its emotional and historical resonance. Its literary techniques contribute to the novel's power and critical acclaim.

Point of View and Structure

The novel is narrated primarily through Amabelle's first-person perspective, allowing intimate access to her thoughts and feelings. The structure intersperses past and present, creating a layered narrative that mirrors the process of remembering and healing.

Language and Imagery

Makela's prose is rich with vivid imagery and sensory details that evoke the Caribbean setting and the emotional landscape of the characters. The language underscores themes of violence and beauty, loss and hope.

Symbolism and Motifs

Recurring motifs such as bones, water, and language tests reinforce the novel's central concerns. These elements serve as literary devices that highlight the tension between life and death, speech and silence, oppression and freedom.

Reception and Impact

The farming of bones has been widely praised for its lyrical prose, historical accuracy, and emotional depth. It has contributed significantly to literature addressing the Rwandan genocide and Caribbean history, despite being centered on the Dominican Republic and Haiti.

Critical Acclaim

Critics have lauded the novel for its unflinching portrayal of genocide and its nuanced treatment of memory and identity. It has been recognized for raising awareness of a lesser-known historical atrocity and for its contribution to postcolonial literature.

Educational and Cultural Influence

The farming of bones is often included in academic curricula that focus on human rights, Caribbean studies, and trauma literature. It serves as a valuable resource for understanding the intersections of history, memory, and storytelling.

Legacy

The novel's enduring legacy lies in its ability to humanize history and foster dialogue about reconciliation and justice. It continues to inspire readers and scholars interested in the complexities of ethnic violence and cultural survival.

Key Takeaways from The Farming of Bones

- Exploration of the 1937 Parsley Massacre through a personal narrative
- Insight into Haitian-Dominican relations and ethnic conflict
- Themes of memory, trauma, identity, and resilience
- Use of symbolism and rich imagery to deepen the narrative
- Critical acclaim for its historical and literary significance
- Role as an educational tool in understanding genocide and postcolonial issues

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'The Farming of Bones' by Edwidge Danticat?

The main theme of 'The Farming of Bones' is the exploration of memory, trauma, and identity against the backdrop of the 1937 Parsley Massacre and the complex history between Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Who is the protagonist in 'The Farming of Bones' and what is her significance?

The protagonist is Amabelle Desir, a Haitian woman working as a servant in the Dominican Republic. Her perspective provides a personal and poignant view of the horrors of the Parsley Massacre and the impact of political violence on individuals.

How does Edwidge Danticat portray the historical context in 'The Farming of Bones'?

Danticat vividly portrays the historical context by blending fictional narrative with real historical events, particularly the 1937 massacre ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, highlighting the ethnic tensions and human rights abuses of that time.

What role does memory play in 'The Farming of Bones'?

Memory serves as a crucial element in the novel, shaping characters' identities and experiences. It acts as a means of preserving history and confronting trauma, allowing survivors to bear witness to the atrocities they endured.

How is the relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic depicted in the novel?

The novel depicts a complex and often fraught relationship characterized by cultural differences, prejudice, and violence, especially highlighting the systemic discrimination and ethnic cleansing that Haitians faced in the Dominican Republic during the 1930s.

What literary techniques does Edwidge Danticat use in 'The Farming of Bones' to convey emotional depth?

Danticat employs lyrical prose, vivid imagery, and multiple narrative perspectives to evoke emotional depth, immersing readers in the characters' inner lives and the harsh realities of their experiences.

Additional Resources

1. *The Farming of Bones* by Edwidge Danticat

This novel explores the traumatic events surrounding the 1937 Parsley Massacre in the Dominican Republic. Through the eyes of Amabelle, a Haitian servant, the story delves into themes of memory, loss, and the brutal consequences of ethnic hatred. Danticat's lyrical prose brings to life a haunting historical tragedy that continues to resonate.

2. *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Cristina Henríquez

While not directly related to "The Farming of Bones," this novel similarly addresses immigrant experiences and cultural identity in the Americas. It follows the lives of Latin American immigrants in the United States as they navigate challenges and build new lives. The book poignantly captures the struggles and hopes of displaced communities.

3. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James

This work provides a gritty, multi-perspective narrative about political violence and social upheaval in Jamaica during the 1970s and 1980s. Like "The Farming of Bones," it deals with themes of trauma, survival, and the complexities of Caribbean identity. James's novel is a powerful exploration of history and its lasting scars.

4. *The Dew Breaker* by Edwidge Danticat

Another compelling novel by Danticat, this book sheds light on the Haitian diaspora and the legacy of political violence. It interweaves stories of various characters connected to a mysterious figure known as the "Dew Breaker." The narrative confronts personal and collective histories of pain and redemption.

5. *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez

This historical novel recounts the real-life story of the Mirabal sisters, who opposed the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. It shares thematic parallels with "The Farming of Bones" regarding oppression, resistance, and the fight for justice. Alvarez's work honors the courage of women amidst political turmoil.

6. *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

Set in Jamaica during the final years of slavery and the early period of emancipation, this novel explores themes of freedom, resilience, and identity. Though set in an earlier era, it complements the historical lens of "The Farming of Bones" by examining the roots of Caribbean social struggles. Levy's rich storytelling vividly captures the era's complexities.

7. *Brother, I'm Dying* by Edwidge Danticat

This memoir offers a personal account of family, immigration, and the Haitian experience. Danticat reflects on her father's life and death, intertwining broader political and historical contexts. The book provides a heartfelt perspective that enriches understanding of the themes found in "The Farming of Bones."

8. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz

This novel combines magical realism and historical narrative to explore the Dominican-American experience. It addresses the impact of the Trujillo regime and diasporic identity, echoing the political backdrop of "The Farming of Bones." Díaz's storytelling is vibrant and deeply rooted in cultural history.

9. *What You Should Know About Politics . . . But Don't* by Jessamyn Conrad

Although not a novel, this book provides insight into political systems and issues, including those relevant to understanding historical events like those depicted in "The Farming of Bones." It offers readers a framework to contextualize the political violence and human rights issues explored in literature related to the Caribbean. This nonfiction work is a useful resource for deepening comprehension of complex political dynamics.

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