Introduction: Many intertwining themes are brought to life as the author, Edwidge Danticat builds her story of a young Haitian woman’s coming to terms with her country, her mother, and her own identity.

1. The book begins with a dedication: “To the brave women of Haiti, grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, daughters, and friends, on this shore, and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall.” Do you think she has woven this message into this book? If so, in what ways?

2. The book title is evocative and, "Breath, Eyes, Memory," draws an explicit connection between the physical and the remembered. What is the role of memory in the novel, and how is it experienced? Consider Martine's memory of rape and Sophie’s memory of testing. How are memories triggered, and how can they be forgotten, if at all?

3. Edwidge Danticat has said that in Haiti, "Everything is a story. Everything is a metaphor or a proverb." How does the character of grandmother personify this tendency? How do some of the proverbs and tales she tells Sophie relate to the events and themes of the novel?

4. As a young girl, Sophie’s mother, Martine had a favorite color it was daffodil yellow; in middle age, she is obsessed with the color red. What significance and associations do these colors have for her? In what way does the change from yellow to red symbolize the change in Martine’s own character? Does Danticat use color symbolically elsewhere in the story?

5. Martine once hoped to be a doctor; later, she transfers her ambitions to Sophie. "If you make something of yourself in life," she says to her daughter, "we will all succeed. You can raise our heads." (p. 44) Why does Sophie consciously reject her mother's ideal of high achievement? Why does she choose to become a secretary rather than, for instance, a doctor?
Breath, Eyes, Memory

Discussion Guide continued . . .

6. Breath, Eyes, Memory is primarily a story of the relationships between women: mothers, daughters, grandmothers, sisters. But there are two significant male characters in the novel, Joseph and Marc. Does Danticat depict Joseph and Marc as full, rounded-out characters, or do we see them only through Sophie’s slanted point of view? How does Sophie express her ambivalent feelings about both of them? Why is she so angry with Marc after her mother’s death? Do you feel that her anger is justified? Is it possible that Sophie’s aloofness from both these men stems from her upbringing in an almost exclusively female world, where “men were as mysterious to me as white people?” (p. 67)

7. Violence and fear are important elements of this story. How does Danticat highlight the family’s personal sense of violence with carefully chosen incidents of random violence in Haitian society? From the way Danticat describes rural Haiti, does violence seem an intrinsic element of the culture or does it instead seem something imposed from outside?

8. Sophie’s husband Joseph, is incredibly gentle and kind. What does this suggest about the larger interactions of men and women throughout the novel? Are men the enemy, and if so, how? What is Joseph’s place as a gentle man in a world of masculine violence? How is the violence committed by men to women reinforced and reiterated in the violence done by women to other women?

9. In the graveyard, Atie reminds Sophie to walk straight, since she is in the presence of family. Grandme Ife plans carefully for her death, which she thinks of as a “journey.” (p. 195) How do Haitian attitudes toward death and the dead, as illustrated in this novel, compare with American ones? How does each culture attempt to foster a sense of wholeness, of continuity, between the generations?
10. The Haitian goddess Erzulie is both a goddess of love and the Virgin Mary. What does this tell you about the Haitian culture and its ideas of love and religion? How does this differ from American and European culture?

11. Martine’s rape by an unknown man, possibly a Macoute, is the defining event in her life, bringing with it overpowering feelings of fear and self-loathing which she passes on to her daughter, Sophie. It is suggested by Sophie’s therapist that Martine undergo an exorcism. How does Sophie in her own way succeed in “exorcising” the evil events of the past? “It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire” (p. 203), she says; how does she achieve this?

12. When a new baby is born in Haiti, says Grandme Ife, “if it is a boy, the lantern will be put outside the shack,” but if it is a girl “only the mother will be left in the darkness to hold her child. There will be no lamps, no candles, no more light.” (p. 146) How does this ritual, with its sense of sorrow rather than celebration, color Martine’s feelings for Sophie, and Sophie’s for Brigitte?

13. What is the significance of Martine’s ”Marassas” story in the context of the relationship between Martine and Sophie? Why does Martine tell the story to Sophie as if she is “testing” her? Why is the theme of likeness, of identification between mother and daughter, so important to Martine? Why does Sophie resist it?
14. Tante Atie says to Sophie, "Your mother and I, when we were children we had no control over anything. Not even this body" (p. 20). How does this knowledge help Sophie shape her life? In what ways does Sophie take control of her own life as her mother and aunt never were able to?

15. At the end of the novel, Sophie comes to terms with her mother. Is it because she identifies with her mother or because she comes to feel independent of her? Or both? Do you sense that she has fully forgiven Martine for the hurt she has caused her?

16. At the end of the story, Grandme Ife asks her, "Ou Libere? Are you free, my daughter?" She also tells her, "Now you will know how to answer." How do you think Sophie would answer? How would you answer?

17. Do you know about your family history? What are some of your favorite stories? Would you be interested in researching more about it? Where would you start?

*Note:* these questions were adapted from the book’s discussion questions and from those provided by Oprah Book club online guide: [http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/About-Breath-Eyes-Memory-by-Edwidge-Danticat/3](http://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/About-Breath-Eyes-Memory-by-Edwidge-Danticat/3)