



**In Darkness**

Written by Nick Lake  
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This novel tells the story of Haiti – both past and present – by weaving together two historical eras through the life of a 15-year-old Haitian boy, Shorty, and that of Haiti’s great liberator, Toussaint L’Ouverture. They become joined spiritually while Shorty waits to be rescued from the goudougoudou, a creole word for earthquake, on January 12, 2010.

Shorty recounts events from the past six years of his young life and his longing to find his twin sister, Marguerite, who was snatched up by a rival gang in Cité Soleil, described as one of the poorest, most violent slums in the world. Twins are imbued with the power of the Marassa who are twin lwa or gods in the vodou pantheon. Meanwhile, Shorty remains trapped inside the collapsed l’Hôpital du Canape-Vert in Port-au-Prince where he was recovering from gunshot wounds – that is, until his world came tumbling down upon him. He describes his hospital room as so dark amid the fallen walls and human remains that his only hope for hanging onto life is to hang onto consciousness. He does this by engaging his mind in the recollection of the events of his life.

Shorty’s story tells the reader about the deep and despairing poverty that drives mothers to abandon their babies, that causes young men to seek protection through involvement with gangs, and leads to the toppling of Haiti’s internal security after the final days of Aristide’s presidency. Shorty reflects on his acquaintance with one of the most notorious gang leaders in the Cité, Dread Wilmè, revered by pro-Aristide supporters, including Shorty’s manman, until killed by the UN Peacekeeper. He recalls the day when Wilmè saved his life from the “peacekeepers” who randomly shot at anyone who could be a gangster or bandi.

After Shorty’s father is killed by armed thugs and his sister kidnapped, he adopts the lifestyle of two neighborhood bandi – Biggie and Tintin. The characterization of Biggie and Tintin appear to be based on two other real life characters, Bily and the Haitian Tupac, who are featured in the documentary, *The Ghosts of Cité Soleil* (2007), a controversial film by Asger Leth. Toussaint L’Ouverture, becomes a metaphor for Haiti’s rise and demise. He represents Haiti’s history and evolution out of slavery. For Shorty, Biggie, and Tintin, Toussaint is not just a hero, but one whose life is cut short when he is captured and imprisoned in the dark cell where he ultimately dies. Toussaint’s story is told along with Shorty’s. Both are trapped in darkness. However, both merge together spiritually and emerge into an uncertain future for Haiti.

Nick Lake provides an excellent realistic depiction of life in Haiti for a young man, Shorty, who must beat the odds to survive not only the street life of Cité Soleil and

grinding poverty but also the worst natural disaster in Haiti's history. Lake tells the story as though he had been an observer of Shorty's life. We know, though, that Shorty is not a real person and the story is fictional; however, what Lake knows is that there are young men like Shorty everywhere in the Cité with his life experiences and struggles. Lake accurately describes Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dread Wilmé, but takes creative license in their depiction in the story. Still, Lake maintains authenticity for both historical characters.

One area of questionable authenticity is Lake's use of French and Haitian Creole. He interjects creole words such as anyen, which means both "anything" and "nothing," but it is unclear why he uses this and other insignificant words so often. Creole words like manman, meaning "mama," can be understood in the text and such words help to add authenticity to the language. For the average young adult reader, it would be beneficial to include a glossary and pronunciation key for the Creole words. Another area of questionable authenticity is the inclusion of French in everyday language and in vodou chants. Although French is one of Haiti's official languages, it is rarely spoken in everyday contexts and never spoken in vodou chants. At times Lake will mix up Creole and French in the same sentence or chant. However, language authenticity is present in Lake's use of colorful street language often heard by young men who live as gangsters on the street. Thus, the language in the book could be problematic for authenticity purposes.

I offer this critique as one who began traveling to Haiti in 2003 to provide professional development to Haitian teachers and investigate human rights abuses as a volunteer with AUHMOUD, a legal organization that advised those in the poorest sectors of the Haitian society. I have made multiple visits to Cité Soleil, both as a human rights volunteer and during the initial research for my dissertation.

*In Darkness* is riveting and an excellent read for young adults of many backgrounds and interests. It may be a challenge for some readers to access if they do not know who Toussaint L'Ouverture is and why his story is relevant to Shorty's story. *Open the Door to Liberty* (Anne Rockwell, 2009) is a biography of Toussaint's life for children that might be useful. A brief introduction in the story could help give young readers the background knowledge they might need to understand the significance of the two characters, the historical periods in which they lived, and a brief explanation about the organization of the book.

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