



## Crossing the Mangrove

*Maryse Condé, Richard Philcox (Translator)*

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In this beautifully crafted, Rashomon-like novel, Maryse Conde has written a gripping story imbued with all the nuances and traditions of Caribbean culture. Francis Sancher--a handsome outsider, loved by some and reviled by others--is found dead, face down in the mud on a path outside Riviere au Sel, a small village in Guadeloupe. None of the villagers are particularly surprised, since Sancher, a secretive and melancholy man, had often predicted an unnatural death for himself. As the villagers come to pay their respects they each--either in a speech to the mourners, or in an internal monologue--reveal another piece of the mystery behind Sancher's life and death. Like pieces of an elaborate puzzle, their memories interlock to create a rich and intriguing portrait of a man and a community. In the lush and vivid prose for which she has become famous, Conde has constructed a Guadeloupean wake for Francis Sancher. Retaining the full color and vibrance of Conde's homeland, Crossing the Mangrove pays homage to Guadeloupe in both subject and structure.

## Crossing the Mangrove Details

Date : Published February 1st 1995 by Anchor (first published 1989)

ISBN : 9780385476331

Author : Maryse Condé , Richard Philcox (Translator)

Format : Paperback 208 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, France, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review *Crossing the Mangrove* for online ebook

### Robin says

Francis Sancher was dead to begin with. Not dissimilar to Jacob Marley in the classic Charles Dickens tale, "A Christmas Carol", the mysterious central character of Maryse Conde's novel "Crossing the Mangrove" is introduced to the reader in the form of a corpse. It is only through the internal dialogs and reminiscences (of questionable veracity) by the citizens of Riviere au Sel at Sancher's wake that we learn who he might have been, and what might have led him to end up face down in the mud of this small hamlet on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe.

While at first it appears that the thrust of "Crossing the Mangrove" is to delve into the life and death of one Francis Sancher, who inevitably may or may not be exactly what he seems, what lies in fact at the heart of this novel is an examination of our own perceptions of the people around us, and the roles they play in our every day lives. Over the course of a night, one by one the characters unravel their own stories and speculate on the stories of their neighbors, each supposing over the role that they played in bringing Francis Sancher closer to the "bad end" they all said was eventually coming his way.

By far, aside from the cast of characters that make up the citizenry of Riviere au Sel (a group that could put our modern "Real" or "Desperate" housewives to shame), what shapes the tone and atmosphere of "Crossing the Mangrove" is the island of Guadeloupe itself. In her lush descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Caribbean, and deft use of metaphor, Conde reminds the reader that prejudices and perceptions, like the roots of the mangrove tree itself can cause a person to "be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud." It comes as no surprise that the author herself hails from Guadeloupe, and through seeing the island and its intrigues through her eyes, the reader too feels that they have become intimately familiar with this place where "death is nothing but a bridge between humans, a footbridge that brings them closer together on which the can meet halfway to whisper things they never dared talk about." If it sounds dark in Conde's Guadeloupe, it is. But ultimately, this journey of perception and introspection, of the clinging closeness of the climate, of the small town of Riviere au Sel and it's people as they react to the death of this interloper reveals something hopeful - that despite differences of race, of caste, of circumstance, the congregation as a whole is still greater than the sum of its disparate parts.

Originally published in 1995 as "Traversee de la Mangrove" in her native French tongue, this is not one of Conde's most popular novels. That honor goes to "Segu", a historical novel about the rise of Islam in 18th Century Africa. Honestly, given the choice, the plot of "Segu" sounds much more like the type of novel I would typically be drawn to. But having now experienced Conde's florid prose in the context of this psychological search for truth, camouflaged in the pretense of an atypical murder mystery, it's likely I would follow her anywhere, even if it meant traversing a mangrove swamp itself.

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### Matthew Canada says

The manner in which Conde wrote her novel really forces the reader to think about life and death. By starting her novel with the death of her main character, Francis Sancher, and then having each supporting character tell about their experiences with Sancher, it creates a type of mystery novel. However as the story progresses and the culprit of Sancher's death is still not apparent, what does become clear is how Conde wants the reader to focus more on the themes of the book rather than the actual mystery. She manages to do this while

still writing entertaining material that keeps the reader interested and curious. By the end of the book the reader is no longer worried about how Francis Sancher died, but whether or not their lives are following the same path that Conde's death-favoring character did. I love this book because of the deep thoughts that it provokes and the depth to which those thoughts can go if one opens up their mind enough. I would not recommend this book to younger people because of the themes, both because it is inappropriate and the themes might be lost on younger minds. This book might take a second reading to truly understand all of the themes, ideal and issues brought up, but I believe that the setting and the events Conde used created a fictional world that introduced the reader to her points at a steady pace while continuing to entertain.

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## **Bjorn says**

It starts with a death; the mysterious stranger who came to the little Guadeloupan town years earlier is found dead, the entire town comes to his wake - his enemies, his mistresses, his friends - and all have their own image of him. It's not miles from Mahfouz's *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* in that way; the truth about a man nobody really knew is different for everyone. The question who killed him soon becomes so irrelevant that I find myself realising after I've put the book down that I forgot about looking for clues to his death, instead looking for clues to his life.

Of course, it's not about him, it's about the society he winds up in. Condé's sketch of Guadeloupe here won't win her any points with the tourist board, but it's beautifully complex, mixing the lingering effects of centuries of colonialism - both physical and mental, geographical and internal; the need to not be the one who gets dominated, whether on account of your skin or your gender, even if it means letting yourself be dominated in a manner of your own choosing. Etc. Condé switches POV and narration with every chapter, from the poetic to the harsh, and every time we see a new side of the supposed protagonist it seems to contradict the last one. She gives a multitude of voices to people who are (by others) supposed to be uniform, either in their *négritude* or their own disdain for it. One of those novels I find myself admiring more than I love it - it probably deserves a higher rating, but something about it frustrates me; I want to know more, I want to see more, I want those half-spoken things explored rather than swirled into a mystery that doesn't unpack itself. Maybe I should pick up *Segu*.

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## **Mohammed says**

Reading this book wasn't easy mentally, emotionally, Conde has written a powerful story and captured a lot of nuances and traditions of her Caribbean culture, the book is set in Guadeloupe.

I was impressed by how she used the village the book was set in to say many things about her country, culture. Very critical it was about social class, gender roles. Teenage girls taken out of school without their choice to get married and serve the family. She also captured the complex, bitter racial views that haven't changed much from colonial, slave days. I can't count the number of times characters were talking about how someone is black black and someone else is almost white like that explained everything about their identity, social class. This is not a nostalgic story about a creole culture and it is beautifully written but pretty depressing how this book is set in the 1980s and very little has changed among West Indians, blacks, East Indians and how they relate to each other in this culture.

I rate this book highly and the author's writing ability is very impressive and the only reason I didn't rate this

4 stars is because there was a flaw with narrative technique she used. Every chapter was POV of a different character who lived in that village . It made the story less focused and there wasn't enough of pages to develop the most interesting characters, their personal history.

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### **Gerara says**

"Crossing the Mangrove" by Maryse Conde was a great and easy read for me. I brought the book, started reading it, and didn't stop until I finished. Maryse Conde did a good job of incorporating different cultures and languages into the book. However, this made the book kind of difficult to follow along at first. The plot of the book was engaging and interesting, the characters had interesting backstories, and I liked trying to figure out the mystery behind the death of Francis Sancher, a man who people knew of, but didn't personally know.

The story takes place at the wake of Francis Sancher. The characters present at his wake speculate his death by telling stories of their encounters with him. Throughout each character's chapter, the reader can see how the people of Riviere au Sel knew nothing about this strange man who came to live in their village. They disliked him for impregnating two of the most known women in the village. They hated him for having a lot of money from other countries. They made up stories about him, but no one really knew the truth. Even though he was probably the most hated man in Riviere au Sel, there were some characters who appreciated him. For example, the woman he slept with whose husband had neglected her for so long. He showed her that she could still enjoy the touch of a man. Or the young boy who suffered from seizures and Francis Sancher befriended him and didn't judge him for his illness.

The presence of Francis Sancher in Riviere au Sel opened the eyes of the characters to start life anew and go for what they wanted, regardless of what others thought of their decisions. Through him, others were able to live and learn new things about themselves.

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### **Meya Hemphill says**

The mystery of the death of Francis Sancher takes place in the small village of Riviere au Sel. While there is no point of view from Sancher himself the reader can expect to learn about him through his interactions with the different characters in the novel. Along with telling Sancher's story and their relationship and/or encounter with him each character tells their own. Maryse Conde uses the literary technique "stream of consciousness" where the character's stories start from a memory and without much warning jump back to the present (the wake). Each story beautifully transitions into the next all connecting into one story. These stories that are told take place at Francis Sancher's wake where people from different paths of life—from the poorest to the richest find themselves. While the novel begins with his death, by the end of the novel it can be expected that there is more learned about the setting, the language, race, and more importantly culture of the village people. Francis Sancher is an example of how fear of what people do not know can create barriers. While some people were able to bond with Sancher through friendships, short encounters, or romantically others chose to listen to gossip circulating around town and did not try to get to know him face to face, but through word of mouth. Anyone who chooses to read this novel will have a hard time not picturing himself or herself being a part of this small-knit community. This novel proved to be challenging because of having to decipher from truth and opinion along with the bits of Creole throughout and deciding

the answer of Sancher's mysterious death it was a great read. As I continued reading it was hard stopping because of how Conde left somewhat of a cliffhanger after each character finished telling their story. I can't even explain how exciting it was to go on to the next! As a mystery fan I would recommend it to anyone else who is a fan of mysteries or anyone who is looking to learn about a different culture.

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### **Jackson Hamelund says**

This book wasn't that easy to interpret. It's not easy to follow, I got lost a couple times and had to reread what I just read. The writing style wasn't all that great either. The first page of each chapter was the best because the lines were spaced out but for the rest of the pages, the lines were so sh-mushed together. If you ever read this book, pay attention and good luck, it is a pretty good book for an English class!

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### **Tito Mazzetta says**

Crossing the Mangrove by Marse Conde, is a novel that dives deep into cultural values of Gadeloupe from the eyes of its inhabitants. The stories are brought from the death of a Francis Sanchez, who is a mysterious inhabitant of the island. The various islanders give insightful stories that present a real insight to the culture of Guadeloupe. Various themes are shown throughout the book. One in particular is theme of arranged marriage. Arranged marriages are described through various stories told by many citizens of the island. They make one think about the validity of arranged marriages and how they affect the women of that society. Many of the stories that are told revolve around the stories people had with the cryptic Francis. Conde was good at connecting the stories of the people at the funeral with their relationship with Francis. Many people had varying opinions of him. The different stories give the reader great insight into the Culture of Guadalupe. We see how greatly influenced the French culture is on the island's inhabitant and their society. The French inception into this Creole society is very apparent from the name Francis to the names of the street of "Riviere au Sel". The romantic escapades of Francis are very French in itself. He has various affairs with people on the island. There is even the talk of him being a homosexual. All in all, the various stories of Francis make the inhabitants realize how little they actually know about him. In the end it is up to the reader to judge for himself. The tone of the book is very authentic and it makes one feel like they are actually on the island. I would recommend this book for anyone that wants some cultural awareness into a place that not many people actually know about.

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### **Nancy Moore says**

Maryse Conde's novel Crossing the Mangrove is a murder mystery, set to the tune of traditions and culture of Guadeloupe. The story takes place in Riviere au Sel, a small Caribbean village, after the body of Francis Sancher is discovered. Sancher is a mysterious outsider of the community who is not well liked and even hated by some. The news of his death does not surprise many in the community. Not much is known of or about Francis Sancher, and that is ultimately what makes the community dislike and even fear him. The story of Francis is told through minds of each of the characters in the novel. It was well known that he liked to drink and spend time with women, even using these hobbies to cope with his problems. The unexpected death of Francis leads you through a mysterious journey to find out who Francis really was. With the help of a few friends, a few lovers and some enemies who tell his story and the story of how he changed their lives. We learn about each one of these characters as they relive their stories through memories and discussions

with others, as well as helping us learn more about Francis Sanchar. We learn that Francis even predicts his death, revealing that his father and grandfather died unexpectedly. At the end of this novel, we are at his wake, and we see a sort of shift from the characters who realize how much Francis changed their lives. I would recommend this novel for anyone interested in murder mysteries, especially one that leaves you wanting more.

This novel was interesting; it left me with a lot of questions still some unanswered. At first this novel was a little hard for me to follow, each new chapter jumped from character to character and I found myself very confused. After a few chapters I got used to the Creole and writing style of the author and the story started to flow.

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### **Eric Fisher says**

Maryse Conde's *Crossing the Mangrove* is a real look into culture and diversity. What begins with a mysterious death of a man little knew much about, Francis Sanchar, quickly turns into a collection of separate dialogue by the rest of the characters in the town. The story begins with Mademoiselle Timothee's account of finding Francis Sanchar face down in a path through the jungle on the outskirts of the small village of Riviere au Sel. Different accounts begin to piece together a cloudy picture of this man who appeared almost from nowhere. Some in the village barely knew the man and their opinions of him were painted in the obscure secondhand gossip of others, while people like Moise and Mira grew close to Sanchar and offer a much more intimate side. The true greatness of this book lies in Conde's ability to use the stories and tales of Francis Sanchar by all of the characters in this book to really paint a picture of the diversity of and culture in Guadalupe. Every character in this book offered something different: different background, education, profession, some came from money, others came from poverty, and all had a sense timidity and fear change different paths that lay ahead of them. Reading this piece was like seeing the world differently through the eyes of these variances in culture; the talk and thought varied with education level, while the beliefs and customs varied with race and tradition. By the end of the book, the tragic death of Sanchar brought about change for some and security for others. Those close to Sanchar would seek out change and their fear of the unknown seemed to leave them, almost like Francis Sanchar had helped strip it away and build them up. His death for others, meant that things would return to normal in Riviere au Sel, which is what many truly feared would not happen by his presence there. *Crossing the Mangrove* is full of mystery and culture and it truly does paint a bigger picture of the time and atmosphere of 3rd world island life. I would definitely recommend for anyone high school level or beyond.

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### **Katherine Schroeder says**

"*Crossing the Mangrove*" by Maryse Conde follows the many stories about Francis Sanchar given by many natives of Riviere au Sel, a small village in Guadeloupe. In the first chapter we find out Sanchar is dead; he was found lying face down in the mud by Mademoiselle Leocadie Timothee. Many people from Riviere au Sel come to pay their respects to Sanchar, whether or not they love him or hate him. Some stories are shared in speeches, and others are internal stories shared only to the reader.

Francis Sanchar is likely the most well known person in town, but he is definitely not everyone's favorite person. When Sanchar comes in to town no one is quite sure where he came from or who he is, but everyone is intrigued by him. Sanchar, being a handsome man, finds his way into the hearts of a few women. The first one we hear about is the relationship between him and Mira. Mira is a beautiful young woman, who is

rejected by many; she spends most of her days in the Gully, where she meets Sancher. The two "make love" to each other before even exchanging names. Mira becomes infatuated with the thought of being with Sancher, and she continues to wait for him by the Gully; he never shows up again. She decides to find him and move in with him, outraging her family. Before too long, we find out she is pregnant. Sancher shares to another woman, Mama Sonson, "I haven't come here to plant children and watch them walk on this earth. I've come to put an end, yes, an end to a race that's cursed" (p. 66). When hearing this, we wonder why Sancher is so bitter, and what all he has seen. Later on we find out Mira is not the only girl he gets pregnant. Another girl named Vilma finds out she is pregnant and when Sancher finds out he simply cries.

One story I found to be bitter sweet was the story of Sonny. Sonny clearly had mental issues, and his parents were not loving and doting parents. Sancher felt sorry for the boy and took a liking to him, telling him he was a "marvelous musician" and that he had a great imagination (p. 91). Sonny began to grow close to Sancher, until one day Sancher betrayed him. Sancher tried to explain, but Sonny never saw him again. At the wake, Sonny grieved the loss, showing he still cared for his old pal. Sancher definitely shook up the town of Riviere au Sel. He left many different impressions, and changed the lives of many. He gave many "the courage to discard the old" (p. 208). But at the end of the story many still wondered who exactly was this mysterious man and how did he die?

I would recommend this book to an audience of 16 and older. Most would enjoy this book; Conde does an amazing job at keeping the reader connected with the characters, culture, beauty and soul of Riviere au Sel.

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## **Dan says**

The genre of crossing the Mangrove can be slightly confusing, because it is often categorized as a mystery novel. It is true that there is a mystery at the heart of the novel, but the novel is actually a portrait of life in Guadeloupe.

When Francis Sancher is found dead in a small village, the people of Riviere au Sel come out of the woodwork to attend his wake. Yes, it does seem that Sancher was murdered, but finding the culprit is difficult because of the intricate web woven between Sancher and the survivors. Francis was rich, sullen, and handsome, and somewhat of a womanizer so all of the components for a suspenseful murder mystery are there.

The amazing part of Conde's work is that I stopped caring who or what killed Francis Sancher early into the book. I was drawn into the regrets and raw emotions of the people who loved and hated Sancher before he died. Through his friends the reader is given a picture of a sad man with a mysterious past, but through his enemies the reader can see man who took advantage of weaknesses in others.

So, even though this book may not be quite the page-turner in the sense you would expect, be prepared to enjoy seeing life through the eyes of the suspects. The villagers will draw you in with their stories of failed hopes and you'll be given a new insight into the society and socioeconomic structure of the Guadeloupe. If you enjoy works like *Cold Sassy Tree* or *Spoon River Anthology*, you'll like the way Conde creates a story by giving the reader a complete picture of small town life.

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## **Chris Sprayberry says**

Crossing The Mangrove is a unique book that will draw the reader in and fascinates with the unique way the story is doled out to the reader. Instead of a traditional method of storytelling through a main character or a narrator, Maryse Condé starts off the book with the dead body of the main character being stumbled upon. Francis Sancher, we find out, became the focus of a small town in Guadeloupe. The story is told by using a method that paints a picture of Sancher through the eyes of different people of the village. With each person's view of Sancher, the reader also gets a look in to the daily life of that individual and Condé uses this time to further develop each character.

One of the best parts of this atypical method is that every character doesn't share exactly the same opinion of Francis. Whereas one person may love him and come to live in his home, another may actively engage him in a physical fight. It is through the conflicted aspects that an even clearer portrait of who Sancher really was begins to materialize. A more complete idea of the character is put in the reader's mind than could ever really be described through a narrator or even making the reader privy to the inner thoughts of Sancher.

Apart from how the story is told, is of course how good the story itself is. It is truly engrossing and I think most people will finish the book in just a few sittings. The transitions between the accounts of the different characters are always related and don't seem awkward. The way Condé relates the story to the reader paints a picture of not only each individual villager, but also each landscape and house. As a kicker, after learning a little bit about Condé, I found out that she had actually been in Guadeloupe. This brought a whole new level of appreciation for how concise her descriptions in the story were.

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## **Lewis H. says**

2. Crossing the Mangrove by Maryse Conde is a very well written novel that exposed a feel of Caribbean culture and the life of Francisco Alvares-Sanchez. From the start I was drawn into a mystery tale when the star of this book was found dead on a trail, in the jungles of Guadeloupe, village of Riviere au Sel, among the mangrove. It was at the dusk of day that Mademoiselle Timothee while out for an evening walk, at the last moment, took a different path from her normal. She stumbled over Francis Sancher's dead body. This was the start of the mystery over cause of death and who might have done it. Each character had a part of describing their relationship/connection they had to the decease. While this was going on, Francis Sancher, the deceased, was dropping hints as to a pending death and in some manner even displaying a personal destructive attitude toward life, mainly his. Occasionally, I would retain my real identity which is more than a name but who you are inside. It is like a safety blanket, never wanting to reveal all of me for fear I may be perceive different.

This book addresses two things. First, fear of taking that step of faith by retaining your real identity. Secondly, the discovery of how we (humans) creates our own views, assessments, and opinions without having all the facts.

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## **Star Hicks says**

"The people of Riviere au Sel hate strangers. They hate them so much they'll say anything about them."(pg.175).If your desire is to know about different cultures, how they live, believe, and achieve; you

will want to read Conde's "Crossing the Mangrove". Through her created character Francis Sancher, we learn much about Conde's very own homeland.

A stranger that travels to River au Sel leaves feelings of love and hate, after he is found dead lying in a mud path. At his funeral questions are raised as to who he really is, and how different people came to know him. Many different pieces of the puzzle are attempted to come together, but it is realized that they knew nothing of the man who had died amongst them, yet had such a powerful impact on their lives.

There's Dinah who gives a glimpse of the arranged marriages that are done in the Guadeloupe culture.

Moise- Francis Sancher's middle class best friend, until they have a falling out over stolen money. Sylvester Ramasaran who was not only rich, but wanted Francis thrown into jail for the alleged rape of his daughter Mira who was now pregnant, after going against the rules of the land, having premarital sex with this stranger Francis Sancher, whom she came to love.

Dodose Pelagie remembers Francis' kind love towards her son Sonny. Carmelien whose character tells us about the due rain of Guadeloupe, and whom had come to hate this unknown man, because of the crime he committed against his love Mira, and his sister Vilma. This novel ends with the question still remaining of who killed Francis Sancher, and just exactly who was this strange man that left such an impact on the people of River au Sel, and why did he choose to die among them.

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