



“...I only had a vague idea of wanting to major in journalism because I’d always been told that I could write.”

**Unburnable, named Best debut fiction, Black Issues Book Review**

It started with a review submitted to a previous issue of WHERE by J.C. Hillhouse, one of the most credible literary voices in the OECS today. J.C. was keen on the read! Then Island WHERE’s editor stumbled upon a copy at the home of a friend; A matter of days later, Providence would place Marie-Elena some three degrees away: a close, close sister, has a sister-in-law who knew Marie-Elena. What followed was a phone call and a series of emails via Blackberry from the mentioned Nigeria trip, until the author flew to Saint Lucia to shoot the cover.

Much has been written about Marie-Elena John and Unburnable. Island WHERE’s editor will say that in a long time, an historical/fiction mini-epic has not left her suspended in the way Unburnable has. There is the fluidity of narrative between the then and the now; how it treats with history and folkways! Then there is a plot so unpredictable, so clever, that it contradicts the fact that this is a first novel. On top of that, Unburnable is set in Dominica and written by an Antiguan who is obviously a product of the coubouillon of island colonization.

So that the average 25 and up island person finds an affinity in the ‘read’, whether with the protagonist, any one of her supporting characters or even the issues of class, race, Diaspora, religion, history or gender.

Barbara Jacobs Small shares from her conversations with the award-winning literary luminary...

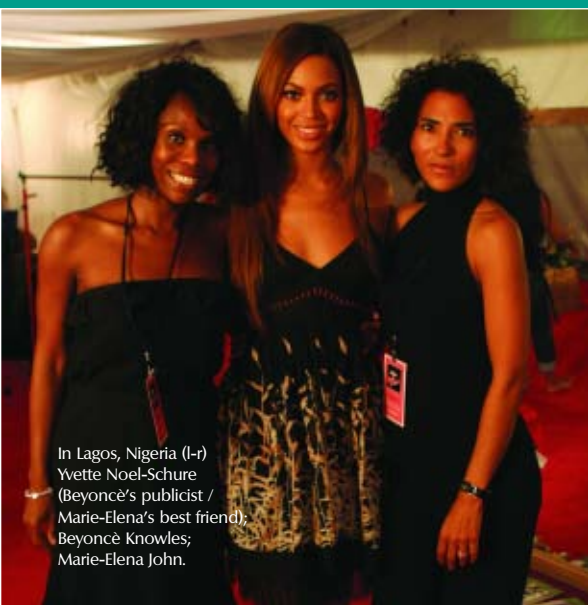


» UNBURNABLE: MARIE-ELENA JOHN »

without the fear that comes with living in the U.S., without the stresses, I've come to have a renewed appreciation for the small island which once seemed too small!

IW: Your mother is Dominican, you father is Antigua. From that vantage, what are you values in the context of regionalism?

M.E: I do feel like I belong to both islands... and often I identify myself as Caribbean as opposed to Antigua. Of course it's inevitable that we retain pride in our individual islands, but I remember the first time my mother explained Federation to me – since then I've always felt that it was perhaps just a bit early for it to have happened then in terms of people's consciousness, but that given the size of our tiny, tiny nation-states, we will have no choice but to make it work eventually – otherwise how could an island with a population of 60,000 (eg Antigua) have any real say in what goes on at the international level – which of course, affects us locally. Case in point at this time is Antigua's struggle with the U.S. over internet gaming.



In Lagos, Nigeria (l-r)  
Yvette Noel-Schure  
(Beyoncé's publicist /  
Marie-Elena's best friend);  
Beyoncé Knowles;  
Marie-Elena John.

I read a great book, Drum Blair, a memoir by Michael Manley's daughter Rachael. And it was very little about Michael and more about her grandparents, Norman and Edna – her observations on what was going on during that Federation period were very interesting and reinforced my sense that it was an idea whose time had not yet come. One of my favourite songs is David Rudder's Rally Round the West Indies, not only for the cricket sentiments but for the bigger message about us, "tiny theatres of conflict and confusion."

IW: How does one grow up in Antigua and then become an African Development Specialist?

M.E: By the end first year at City College in New York, I had a sense of how small the world

I grew up in was, and how much else was out there to experience. I heard about an exchange program to Nigeria that City College was about to launch, and I applied. It was as simple as that, the thought: "that would be an interesting thing to do." I didn't have any burning desire to see the African Continent in particular. But once there, I felt totally at home in many ways: people looked like Antiguan, behaved in a familiar way. I felt a strong cultural connection – I could see the origins of many of the things we do. It seemed to me that there had been a big gap in my understanding of myself as an Antiguan and as a Black person, and that seeing the origins of some of our physical, cultural, and spiritual manifestations had begun to close that gap. Not just seeing them, but understanding the original meaning.

Let me give an example. While I was in West Africa, I saw a "masquerade" – which is in fact a facet of many African religions, masquerades being representations of various spirits. The people who are representing these spirits wear masks, often have horns, and are covered with various types of fibers, cloth, or dried banana leaves, and come out during various festivals and also in times of social crisis. I was standing there in Togo, I think it was, and was looking at an Antiguan "John Bull" or a Dominican Bande Mauvais (other islands call it by different names).

go to Lagos, Nigeria, as Advisor on Africa to the team accompanying Beyoncé Knowles for her first concert there. I was in a bus, going from the airport to the hotel, a drive of nearly an hour. It was a big bus, and about 30 Americans: musicians, dancers, stylists, makeup and hair people, road managers, production people. Few if any had exposure to Africa. We came to a place where the traffic was fairly slow, and the child-beggars came running alongside the bus holding out their hands for money. The children were tiny, and as the traffic picked up, they kept running faster and faster; one little boy who seemed to be about four or less would not give up. I was sitting at the front of the bus, and when I turned around, I saw that every woman on the bus was crying. They then began panicking, thinking that the kids would get run over. I tried to calm them down by explaining that the children had been running in traffic from the time they could walk, but, in truth, these children do get hurt.

IW: You just returned to Caribbean based domesticity (home) from a Nigeria trip on which you accompanied Beyoncé and her publicist. What is it like moving from one world into the next like that?

M.E: The "Beyoncé trip," short as it was, had all the elements of my typical work trips to Africa,

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IW: From your experience, is there a huge divide between the Caribbean dispossessed and the African dis-possessed?

M.E: Enormous difference. In the Caribbean, without taking away from the fact that we are indeed a developing region, we don't have the level of extreme poverty you will find in Africa. In the past, one could argue that in the rural areas, Africans may not have had the trappings of materialism, but were self-sufficient in food and had basic needs met. However, for complex reasons, this is no longer the case. And it's not just how poverty manifests itself to the eye: when you look at health and social indicators like life expectancy, infant mortality rates, prevalence of disease, access to potable water, literacy rates and so forth, the Caribbean is in a much better place than Africa.

I can give you a very graphic experience of the striking difference between the two dispossessed: I recently had the opportunity to

in that I was expected to know the "lay of the land" and the African context, and to put that knowledge to use.

IW: It is touching that the needs of family was as important to you, even as you were scaling the heights of achievement and recognition for your work in Africa. What is the family background that has so grounded you to prioritize in favour of the home-front today?

M.E: I hasten to insist that I'm definitely not a traditionalist in terms of a woman's role. My mother always worked outside of the home, so I don't think it's my family background that led me to "prioritize the homefront," – although her example is definitely the incredible one of total sacrifice for her four children.

I spent all my 20's insisting and believing that I'd never get married, as I saw no benefit to me, as a woman, from the institution (I thought it had lots of advantages for men!) and I saw my career as the way I'd define myself and my life. After I

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met my husband, though, I changed my mind about marriage. Before I had children, I imagined that I would have whatever career I chose, work the requisite long hours, do the requisite travel to wherever, and that I'd have good childcare to help with the children. However, once my son was born, it just seemed like the most illogical thing — you make a baby and then leave your infant/toddler/child all day long with someone who is essentially a stranger, and end up seeing him an hour or two before bedtime and on weekends???

Remember this was in the D.C., with long commutes and expectations of long hours.

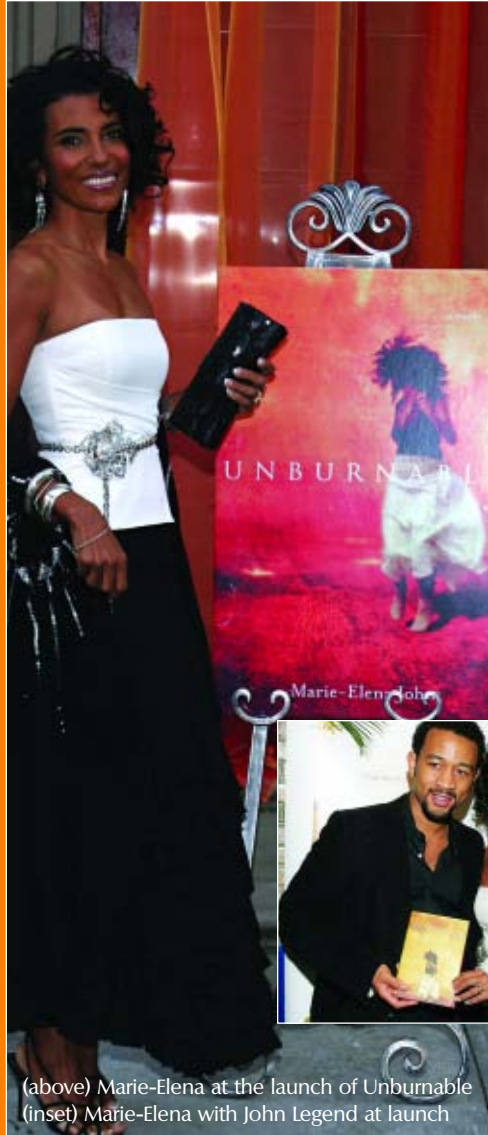
**IW:** How would you say that you are representing the following by your achievements and contributions?

- a) The Government and people of Antigua ?
- b) The indigenous people of the Caribbean?
- c) The Caribbean in general?

**M.E:** Prior to writing *Unburnable*, I kept a very low profile in general. Now, though, I've been forced to take on another role, that of promoting *Unburnable*, and by extension, myself. This doesn't come easy for me ("self-promotion" — what an ugly concept!) but what has helped me to get over that is the way I think of it: not "selling myself or my book" but "selling a good Antiguan/ Caribbean product." The concept was first planted by a Dominican friend, Yvonne Armour, who works for the Caribbean Tourism Organization in Barbados. After she gave me the idea, and put me in touch with CTO officials in New York, I spoke with other tourism experts, including Shirleen Nibbs and Lorraine Headley, the former and current Directors-General of tourism in Antigua, as well as David Fernandez and Derede Samuel-Whitlock, former and current heads of our tourism office in New York. All gave valuable advice and opened doors for me in my quest to present *Unburnable* as a high-quality Antiguan/ Caribbean product by an Antiguan/ Caribbean national. I've run Antigua and Barbuda promotions at some of my events, especially the larger ones, and received sponsorship from the Tourism Office and the Government on several occasions. Also, my agent and I have had a meeting with CTO marketing and PR officials in New York about various partnership possibilities with U.S. bookstores for Caribbean promotions, which are currently being explored.

One of the things of which I'm really aware is how small we are in size, as an island, and also as a region; and how much we now depend on tourism for our livelihood. So having a tourism focus when I promote *Unburnable* serves to expose Antigua and the Caribbean as a tourism destination to large groups of people who may not have even heard about us.

The indigenous people of the Caribbean? Joanne Hillhouse, an Antiguan author and



(above) Marie-Elena at the launch of *Unburnable*  
(inset) Marie-Elena with John Legend at launch

journalist, wrote that I was even-handed in my treatment of the various cultural groups represented in *Unburnable*, presenting both negative and positive sides — except the Caribs, who she thought were portrayed more sympathetically than the other groups. Maybe that's a reflection of one of my preoccupations, which is that the indigenous people of the Caribbean (and in fact, of the entire Americas) got such a raw deal — practical extermination, in the case of the populations in the islands, driven off their land and into poverty, occupying the last rung on the socio-economic ladder in other places — but yet we don't think about them and their situation in any depth.

One of the big indicators for me that *Unburnable* is doing well in fact has nothing to do with sales — it is the fact that, six months into its publication, a number of college professors are already using it as a text for their literature courses. The first one to do so was Grenadian Professor Merle Collins, who teaches at University of Maryland. One of the things which drew her to *Unburnable*, she told me, is that it includes the Caribbean experience as part of the Caribbean experience, which is rare, she said, in Caribbean books.

Maybe this book will help bring them more into the Caribbean discourse.

**IW:** Were you prepared for the success of this your first novel?

**M.E:** I'm not one of these people who work through flashes of brilliance, much as I envy them,

so I plod along slowly with a long-term plan and have faith that hard work pays off. I never doubted that, once having made the commitment to "write a book," I would write a book (it took four years from the decision, to the day it was on the shelves — many people in the meantime had stopped asking me how it was coming, thinking that I was delusional!). I did have confidence that I'd be able to write something good.

**IW:** Share some unexpected but gratifying moments since the launch of this novel?

**M.E:** When I'm at large book events like the Harlem Book Fair or the Delta Convention, and people come up to say that they've already read *Unburnable* and share some of their feelings about it. One time in particular, a woman rounded the corner and actually screamed, "Unburnable!" — she'd seen it at her daughter's house, read a few lines of the first page, and intended to buy it for herself. Her daughter had recently called her to tell her that she finished it and it ranked among her best reads of life. So we had a great time; she called her daughter from her cell phone and we talked and took pictures.

**IW:** What do you see yourself continuing — your development work in the African continent when the kids are older? Or your writing?

**M.E:** I'm hoping to combine the two. In particular, I want to return to working and advocating on the issue of women's inheritance rights in Africa — the fact that according to traditional law in Africa, women cannot inherit. The problems that stem from this are huge, especially in the context of HIV/AIDS, now that so many young women are becoming widowed, and so many young girls become heads of households when their parents die. Without being able to inherit — especially land — these women and their children and siblings suffer extreme poverty.

**IW:** Who are the writers that you admire?

**M.E:** Toni Morrison (for *Song of Solomon*, which I think is one of my all-time favourites); Jhumpa Lahiri (for *Interpreter of Maladies*); Aminatta Forna (for *The Devil who Danced on Water and Ancestor Stones*), Edwidge Danticat (for *Breath, Eyes, Memory*).

**IW:** Who is the brave and wonderfully secure man to whom you are wife and life partner?

**M.E:** Brave indeed! (laugh) — on both our parts, I think, to marry individuals who are our polar opposites! So opposites do attract... Will Smith is as easy-going and as even-keeled as I am... What shall I say... not-so-calm.

We had the obvious cultural difference: Caribbean and African-American. He has a

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traditional way of looking at gender roles, coming from an African-American military family where his mom didn't work outside of the home; while my home situation was rather matriarchal, with my father happy to leave the big decisions up to my mother (even though she always said, "your father is the head of this household"). He Baptist, me Catholic. He businessman, me, non-profit worker (*he is CEO of Heritage Security, which has just begun to expand from Antigua to other islands, focusing on home and business security systems, Rapid Response Services, CCTV systems, and so on*). But as they say, love conquers all. I think the essence of him is that he is one of the most good-hearted people I've ever met, and his calmness of spirit is something I admire and learn from every day. Also I must add, he is extremely F-I-N-E.

**IW:** And the kids. Gush for us in the way that kids reduce their mothers to just a bunch of boasting housewives?

**M.E:** I couldn't have asked for more than those two healthy and happy and intelligent children – opposites in many respects. Elyse is a social butterfly who's ready to make a new friend at any given moment – I'm always amazed when I watch her hold court with grownups she's just met – I can't pull a conversation out of thin air like she can! Trey is a bit more internal reserved (like me, I think) and chooses a limited number of people with whom he maintains tight friendships. He reads and retains everything, and if I need to know some obscure fact, he's the go-to guy. Now that they're not babies anymore – Trey is 11 and Elyse is 10 – the big thrill is watching them transform into "tweens."

**IW:** What are you reading these days?

**M.E:** Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie's "Half of a Yellow Sun," a haunting account of the Biafran war through the experiences of twin sisters and their loves; with the houseboy of one sister also playing a big role in the story. A few years ago she won the Commonwealth Prize for fiction with *Purple Hibiscus* – she's one of the world's most brilliant young writers, I think.

**IW:** What do you think is *Island Where* magazine?

**M.E:** A magazine that's trying to give a voice to intelligent people who are striving and achieving; that's celebrating Caribbean-ness; that has a different approach to beauty and wellness – that rejects the idea of the airbrushed 18-year old as the standard. ♦