

Walking into Marie-Elena's house is like entering another country. And it's not just because of the African art and furniture, the giant Turkish metal jugs, the antique pots or the deep terracotta wall. The energy feels different in there, and this can only be due to the presence of its owner, whose serene, boundless spirit imbues the very walls with more warmth than any colour could.

Marie-Elena's book, *Unburnable*, is set between her mother's homeland, Dominica, and her own erstwhile hometown, Washington D.C. It is the tale of Lillian, who fled her Caribbean birthplace after discovering the identity of her mother and returns twenty years later to face her past, make sense of it, and exorcise her inherited demons.

What's especially noticeable when listening to Marie-Elena is that she speaks of her characters as if they are friends whose stories she's telling. One would never imagine that they don't exist, aren't somewhere in the world living out their lives. And, in fact, they are: walking, talking and breathing inside their creator's head. They make their own decisions, and she observes and documents; at most she can sometimes, as she says, "Guide it in a direction".

What's more astonishing about Marie-Elena John is that she wasn't following a calling to write, answering a long-held, deep-rooted imperative; no, she made a determination. She had been living in Washington and working between there and Africa, but at some point decided that writing a book would fit more easily with her family life, having two small children at the time, than jumping on and off planes at a moment's notice. So she did it. She moved herself and her family back to Antigua, sat down, and waited for the muse. It came. She says that at first, "I just started writing about ... whatever people write about". But then, "As I was driving I had a thought process which I came to understand was what I would be writing. I was thinking in prose." The fact that she clearly discovered yet another thing which she could do, and be, illustrates her multi-faceted personality and talent. Four years later, *Unburnable* was born.

By some cosmic happenstance Marie-Elena and Chimamanda Adichie, renowned author of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* unknowingly each reviewed the other's book, Chimamanda saying of *Unburnable* that it's, "...wondrously intelligent...". They are now friends. They were both nominated for Hursten/Wright awards in the U.S. in 2007, and in Chimamanda's absence Marie-Elena gave her speech for her. In the summer of 2008 they finally met, spending some time co-teaching in Nigeria.

Marie-Elena first travelled to Africa almost on a whim, when an exchange program with Nigeria was offered on her New York City College undergraduate program. When she arrived, she found many things unexpectedly familiar. She says that she could, "See the faces of Antiguans," in the West African people, and discovered the roots of many of the traditions she had grown up with. She paints one example, about a masquerade (mas) character from Antigua's carnival known as John Bull: "The main thing is fear and you run, but you don't know why ... as opposed to seeing this in the context of 'this is a particular spirit'. We've managed to retain the form but we don't have the substance." Insights and experiences such as this led to an enduring interest in Africa and her eventual work with related organisations, first with development NGOs, then with human rights and pro-democracy movements, finally focussing on the denial of women's inheritance rights across the continent.

Next on the agenda are both another book, which is gradually evolving and is likely to include some aspect of Marie-Elena's experience with inheritance rights, and a screenplay of *Unburnable*, which she is writing in conjunction with L.A.-based producer Rudy Langlais.

marie-elena

john

