
Erica Simone Turnipseed

A Love Noire

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Q: Your male protagonist is from Côte d'Ivoire. What influenced your choice of that background for him?

A: The decision really came from two factors: my choice of a name for him and the fact that I wanted him to be from a French-speaking West African country that had a variety of religious and cultural influences.

Q: You have interests in academia: Is your development of Noire's character representative of a certain "type" of black graduate student? Are you poking fun at some of her pretensions? If so, which? Do you see a wide contrast in ideologies and aspirations between African American students and African students?

A: Noire's character is a composite of intelligent, determined, and wonderfully quirky women, and though we find Noire in the academic setting, she has many sister-friends outside of that environment as well. However, I think that there's a certain intensity to the graduate school experience that makes Noire more strident in her beliefs about the mating games people play and their financial motives for pursuing particular professional paths. In terms of differences in ideology and aspirations between African American and African students (presumably within the U.S. graduate school context), it's more complex than ethnic and national identity. As with anything else, your cultural and ethnic outlook affects many things about what you believe. And of course being an expatriate in any environment is a big deal. So, among black academics I think you can find as many ideological similarities as there are differences. That's what is so fascinating; people's beliefs are impacted by ethnic and cultural assumptions as well as their familial and personal influences.

Q: As an African American woman, have you felt a clash between career goals and personal ones?

A: Certainly! There are only 24 hours in a day and sometimes the choices I make professionally can seem to have sub-optimal outcomes for my personal desires. It's always a negotiation. I think this is true for all women and becomes even more apparent as women make decisions about choosing a mate and having children. This society is not well-suited to supporting a woman's particular set of concerns around career and family. This is equally true about racial and ethnic concerns. So, as a black woman, I think that the clash can feel quite intense at times. Supportive loved ones, meditation, and prayer are big helpers!

Q: You refer to Richard Wright in this novel both directly and subtly (i.e., Innocent's firm Wright Richards). Was Wright an important influence on you and your writing? You also have Innocent and Noire compare book lists. Can you give us one of your own?

A: I think that Richard Wright greatly influenced the content of the modern novel because of his provocative honesty about the internal angst and external manifestations of racism in this country. I named Innocent's investment banking firm Wright Richards as a nod to that. My own book list is too extensive to recount here, but it encompasses writers who take us on a physical journey as well as a pursuit of personal truths. While I tend to prefer fiction from short stories to epic novels I also enjoy such lyrical autobiographical texts as Marita Golden's *Migrations of the Heart* and Maya Angelou's *Heart of a Woman*. I really appreciate stories that show resilience and possibility, and that embrace all aspects of our being—our intellectual, spiritual, culturally-grounded, funny, sexy selves.

Q: Have you been to Africa? Do you feel the journey is an important emotional and cultural pilgrimage for African Americans to make? In your novel, you also send Noire to New Orleans, to an historic Gullah area on South Carolina's Sea Islands, and to the Caribbean. Are these particular places you would also recommend African Americans visit to explore their heritage?

A: I've traveled to several countries in western and southern Africa, notably Nigeria for an undergraduate semester abroad and South Africa for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance. I have also been fortunate to travel to numerous places of interest throughout the African diaspora in Europe, the Caribbean, and North America: (South America is next!) I think that travel is unparalleled for experiencing the cultural richness of a people on a visceral level. For Africans throughout the diaspora, traveling to Africa is poignant because we are the offspring of our ancestors who suffered through the Middle Passage. In the book, Noire talks about black people being the "ultimate survivors." My own travel to former slave forts and plantations has made me feel the same way as Noire.

Q: Are there elements in this novel that you want to repeat and continue to explore in your writing? What will change in future novels?

A: I am fascinated with the many aspects of human motivation and our capacity for love, so I will continue to explore both in future novels. In my next novel in particular, I look even more closely at intergenerational family relationships—grandmothers, mothers, and daughters; mothers and sons; fathers and daughters—and how these relationships impact our professional choices, love lives, and what we have to give our spouses and children. It's all so rich!