



A Love Noire

By Erica Simone Turnipseed
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Introduction

With the wit of *Sex in the City* and the erotic sophistication of *Love Jones*, this wickedly frank debut novel portrays latter-day black life, the New York City dating game, and the insatiable quest for love.

Noire Demain, a Ph.D. candidate at New York University, is a 20-something bohemian with an appetite for intellectual stimulation and eclectic fashions. And she's looking for her own brand of social consciousness in a delectable black man's package. So, when she finds herself an "afro in a sea of perms" at Brown Betty Books, she's not happy about it. Her best girlfriend Jayna stands her up and leaves her to fend for herself in a room full of black urbanites with six figure salaries and summer homes on Martha's Vineyard. This is not Noire's idea of a good time.

But rising above the coiffed and coffee-colored faces is a particularly compelling example of black manhood -- Innocent Pokou, a velvety dark, tall, and gorgeous African from Côte d'Ivoire. Innocent is instantly attracted to Noire's energy and beauty. And he's available. An investment banker who belongs to an African elite of wealth and privilege, Innocent is cosmopolitan, ambitious, and intrigued with Noire. Noire's own desire-filled intrigue wins out over her disdain for the Buppie set and she surprises both she and Innocent by giving him her contact information. Before long, they're exchanging e-mails, meeting for drinks at chic places, and finding out that the attraction is indeed mutual.

They may be in love. They also may be totally wrong for each other. Their ideologies -- as well as their closest friends -- are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Their cultures are equally dissimilar. And with his family in Côte d'Ivoire pressuring him to find an "appropriate" wife, is Innocent willing to get serious with Noire?

Then, as they say, "stuff" happens. A Fourth of July weekend at a beach house with a mix of his friends and hers will lead to emotional fireworks and a bonfire of unexpected attractions. Add the return of a former lover and a journey -- actual and metaphorical -- for both Innocent and Noire, and suddenly bedroom promises seem made to be broken...unless these two extraordinary people can discover what matters most, what touches deepest, and what fulfills the needs of both heart and soul.

A Love Noire tolls the bell for the black urban professional. It presents clashing ideologies at every turn through the lives of Innocent, Noire and their friends and family. It is upon their collective stage that we confront diverse and incongruent black identities, romantic expectations, and social and financial aspirations. Their hearts entangled in a powerful love burdened by the weight of competing interests and fragile chosen identities, Innocent and Noire fight to sustain a relationship that successfully incorporates the best of both worlds.

A daring exploration of color and class within the black community through a no-holds-barred portrait of a relationship, *A Love Noire* is a refreshing, richly entertaining look at love today.

Questions for Discussion

- Noire observes that Innocent "knew a life that most Americans didn't experience and fewer realized exists in Africa. He made no apologies and felt no contradictions about who he was." Does Noire feel contradictions about who *she* is? If so, what are her conflicts about her identity?
- Contrast the parents of Noire with those of Innocent. How much do you feel that family influences a person's choice of a partner? Why did Noire choose Innocent? Why does Innocent choose Noire?
- Now look at Grand-mere Demain. What has been her influence in Noire's life, both positive and negative?
- Why is Noire affected by skin color and hairstyle? Do you feel that a light skin tone and so called "good hair" are still given preference in the African American community? If so, why? Do you see this changing in the next decade?
- Innocent thinks this about Noire: "She unnerved him, energized him, extended him into the rough territory beyond himself. But the minute he knew he had her he didn't know what to do with her." Discuss Innocent's character. Why does he not "know what to do with her"?
- Several characters raise provocative issues about being black and American and still celebrating the Fourth of July. What are the arguments? What is Innocent's viewpoint? What is Noire's?
- What do you make of Noire's sexual experimentation with Arikè? Do you feel it is believable in the context of the story? What about her relationship with Professor Fuentes, her NYU mentor? Is there a sexual element?
- Contrast these relationships with Noire's long-time friendship with Jayna. What forms the basis of their bond? At this stage in Noire's life, do you think she shares more in common with Jayna or Arikè?
- Innocent says to Noire, "Lasting relationships aren't built on love. There's compatibility, having similar goals and complementary dispositions, having the will to see it through..." Do you agree or disagree? Do you believe Innocent really thinks that, or is he just having second thoughts about Noire?
- What is the significance of Noire's name? What about Innocent's? Are their names symbolic? Ironic? Think about the book's

title. In what ways does it foretell the story?

11. Discuss the other young couples in the book: Arikè/Dennis and Marcus/Lydia. Why do their relationships seem to work? What about Jayna? Why does she have difficulty with a long-term relationship?

12. When Noire goes to Jayna for advice about her relationship with Innocent, they reminisce over the advice Noire's mother had given her when she was an undergraduate to wait a year before becoming physically intimate with a man. At the time, both she and Jayna balked at the suggestion as unrealistic and they still don't follow it now. How do you think physical intimacy affects the pacing and intensity of a relationship? Does it have unintended outcomes? What advice would you give Noire or Jayna as they pursue love?

13. What are the overarching lessons about love in this story? Who learns them? What kinds of love relationships -- romantic, familial -- do we witness and how do these relationships grow? How do the characters grow in their understanding of love?

14. What do you predict for Noire's future and for Innocent's?

About the Author: Erica Simone Turnipseed has a B.A. from Yale University and an M.A. from Columbia University, both in anthropology. She has been published in the anthology *Children of the Dream: Our Own Stories of Growing Up Black in America*. Erica is Director of Development at the Twenty-First Century Foundation, a national public foundation that promotes black philanthropy and supports African American community-empowerment organizations. She will donate a portion of the proceeds from *A Love Noire* to the foundation. Erica is a member of the board of directors for the Black Ivy Alumni League and the founder and co-chair of the "Five Years for the House Initiative," a fund-raising drive for the Afro-American Cultural Center at Yale. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.