



# Unburnable

*Marie-Elena John*

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## **Unburnable** Marie-Elena John

In this riveting narrative of family, betrayal, vengeance, and murder, Lillian Baptiste is willed back to her island home of Dominica to finally settle her past. Haunted by scandal and secrets, Lillian left Dominica when she was fourteen after discovering she was the daughter of Iris, the half-crazy woman whose life was told of in *chanté mas* songs sung during Carnival: "Matilda Swinging" and "Bottle of Coke"; songs about the village on a mountaintop and bones and bodies: songs about flying masquerades and a man who dropped dead. Lillian knew the songs well. And now she knows these songs---and thus the history---belong to her. After twenty years away, Lillian returns to face the demons of her past, and with the help of Teddy, the man she refused to love, she will find a way to heal.

Set partly in contemporary Washington, D.C., and partly in post-World War II Dominica, *Unburnable* weaves together West Indian history, African culture, and American sensibilities. Richly textured and lushly rendered, *Unburnable* showcases a welcome and assured new voice.

## **Unburnable Details**

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Author : Marie-Elena John

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## From Reader Review Unburnable for online ebook

### Revae says

A great debut novel! There were a lot of descriptions and background in the beginning. For me, the plot didn't get going until about chapter 11. Since I have an undergraduate degree in history, I appreciated the historical connections and foundations in African tradition. The book touches on traditions carried to the Caribbean by African slaves and how hard they fought to maintain their culture. It made me think about as an African-American in the United States, the cultural traditions and connections to Africa since slavery have been lost. Marie-Elena used French Creole sporadically throughout the novel, just enough to help me understand culture. The storyline was engaging. Each chapter highlights a different generation, until everything comes together. Lillian is inspired to return to Dominica to prove that her grandmother was not a murdering Obeahwoman. There was a lot more to get out of this book than the historical connections, such as religion, racism, hereditary mental health issues, and the power of love. I'm interested to read whatever else Marie-Elena John writes, and I definitely recommend this book.

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### Iejones says

Marie-Elena John uses the Caribbean carnival as the stage where native custom, family history, and West African culture collide forever changing the celebration of carnival for the people of Roseau in Dominica. In the freshman novel Unburnable John uses the celebration of carnival and carnival songs to reveal a unique history of West Indians in general while spanning the three generations of one family.

This story weaves together the history of Africans, Caribs, and Americans. The three women of Unburnable African grandmother Matilda, African-Carib daughter Iris and African-Carib-American Lillian provide a window through which history, inheritance, revenge, murder and alienation is created.

Unburnable forces us to confront ourselves as part of a larger history, one of family, community, country and race. Sprinkled throughout the story is: a white Rastafarian woman, obeah practitioners, Catholic nuns and African American man. After all the questions have been answered, Lillian has to choose to embrace or reject her inheritance. What carnival song will they sing about her, to know what she decides to do you have to read - Unburnable

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### Mitch says

This is a difficult book to review. I feel certain that it's better than the average read, but what exactly to say about it afterwards?

Currently I am living on the island of Dominica, where the story takes place, and I was told that it would help me understand the culture of the people here. That set up a framework for reading it, of course.

The novel is structured so that the lives of three women are intertwined; those of a grandmother, a mother and a daughter. The latter is suffering from her traumatic childhood and she is trying to resolve those issues.

Since the content was too intense for me to take except in small doses, I found this type of structuring confusing.

The intensity came from the repeated acts of brutality that occasionally erupted from under the apparently

thin skin of civility which the characters exhibited toward one another. I found myself hoping again and again that Dominicans were not as depicted in the book; that events were exaggerated for effect.

I'm afraid it isn't so, however. I have heard accounts here that are close to the same...things that indicate a strong sense of superstition leading people to treat one another cruelly and shamefully in my view.

On the credit side, the author came out with some penetrating insights into human nature that I appreciated.

I think overall it did give me insights into the culture here, but I am not sure I am happy I've eaten this fruit.

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### **Eugenia O'Neal says**

Decades ago, in the 1940s, a woman by the name of Matilda was hung for murder on the lush, green island of Dominica. Her story became the stuff of chante mas songs, songs sung during the pre-Lenten Masquerade and known to everyone.

Now, her grand-daughter, born in Dominica but partially raised in the United States, is back to discover the real story behind Matilda's execution. Was Matilda really an Obeah woman with the power to heal as well as to kill? How did Matilda's daughter, Lillian's own mother, the beautiful Iris, lose her mind? To whom did the bones hidden in the forested mountains really belong?

Unburnable weaves together the lives of three women, Matilda, Iris and Lillian, into one amazing story of love, betrayal, murder, madness and loss, all against the background of the rich cultural history of Dominica. The vivid descriptions of the dresses, the costumes, the masquerades and the customs of the island make Unburnable a rich feast for the senses.

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### **Gayla says**

I enjoyed the descriptions of Dominica and the historical/cultural background. Even though I knew about much of the history John covered in the novel, the way she wrote about it had me eager to go back and learn more. Especially the parts about Masquerade. Unfortunately, the American boyfriend's character was a bit bare and even embarrassing at times. I had to push to get through those parts of the book to move on to the meaty and captivating historical portions of the story.... which was also where John's writing was at its best.

Overall I'm really glad to have found a contemporary writer writing about Dominica, especially around the topic of women and their place within the culture. It helped to put some of my own family history into context (my maternal grandmother was a Dominican).

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### **Lyann says**

It was easy for me to identify with the plot of this novel as a young Dominican woman ;cudos to the author. However in my opinion if one did not grow up on this Island it would have carried as much substance to

them as it did for me. The attitudes of each character was what struck me the most, typical Dominican ignorant slurs, gossiping and stereotyping. This book brought up the issue of class on the Island, the whole aspect of branding based on the surname in which you carry. It reminded me of stories that my grandmother recites to me from her 80 year old memory on occasions not only that it carries our culture in a way that no other Dominican book has before touching on very sensitive subjects such as voodoo or "obeah" for this is very real to me growing up having my grandmother tell me about girls who were "spoilt" or families having what we call "maleh" due to their grandmother being a "soucouyant" or grandfather being an "obeahman" so the children are now paying for their sins. It portrayed the Dominican society for what it was back then, and most of that culture has been passed down in a more modern nature. It identified the Dominican woman and the perplexity of her style, her beauty and her demeanour, this for me was the heart of the book, the display of the Dominican woman.

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### **Naori says**

This book was like a cheap romance novel set in the Caribbean. Although there were some interesting sections regarding the tradition of voodoo in the Caribbean, it had little relevance to the plot and was completely ahistorical. Most of the novel was dedicated to developing the useless character of Teddy, the protagonist's love interest, and a senseless reiteration of male privilege. Overall, I was quite disappointed...

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### **Mocha Girl says**

Wow! I can hardly believe Unburnable is Marie-Elena John's debut because she wrote such a deep, suspenseful novel that had me guessing until the last page. I found it to be perfectly paced, very well written with colorful, smart characters that jumped off the page. I was both entertained and educated by this offering - a rare feat in today's literature.

The story centers on three generations of Dominican women, two of which are infamously captured in local folklore, legend, and indigenous songs. Matilda, a proud, majestic African woman rumored to dabble in Obeah was publicly tried and hanged for murder after she confessed in police custody. Iris, Matilda's daughter, was a beautiful prostitute known for her voracious sexual appetite, disreputable past and questionable mental health. Lillian, Iris's daughter, was raised by her stepmother after Iris's untimely death. Lillian eventually moves to the United States to live with an aunt in order to shield her from her foremother's legacy. We learn quickly that the proverbial fruit does not fall far from the tree. After years of self-suppression, Lillian's mental instability manifests to the point where she now has difficulty blocking the painful memories. Fueled by inner voices and haunting flashbacks, she decides to return back to Dominica to learn the truth surrounding her family. She engages Teddy, a renowned attorney, collegiate confidante (and soon to be lover), who is basking in the afterglow of a sensationalized legal case where he successfully disproves a self-confession against tumultuous odds. Lillian sensing her grandmother's innocence, asks Teddy to join her in Dominica to re-investigate Matilda's 1940's era confession to mass murder. What ensues is a loaded history of dark secrets, shocking scandal, and a cover-up that permeates all levels of class, religion and the biased politics of the day.

At the very core of the story, the author captures the essence of the African Diaspora. The complexities, struggles, and compromises surrounding the blending of races, cultures and faiths are evident in the trials and tribulations of all three women in both current and historical eras. There are even subtle observations and theories regarding African American and African Caribbean cultures which explain the mindsets of the key characters. Additionally, the author weaves a great deal of Dominican history throughout the novel, done

with such care that the lessons are not overbearing, but essential to understanding the motivation and principles of key characters that eventually lead to the mystery's resolution. I loved the transition between eras - the flashbacks to Matilda and Lillian's periods were smooth and blended evenly with the modern day episodes between Lillian and Teddy. This is a great debut and I am looking forward to this author's next body of work.

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### **Roger DeBlanck says**

This novel was a struggle for me to finish. The story was interesting, but the writing style made this book a tremendous labor of frustration. The narrative follows several generations of a Caribbean family. The main character, Lillian Baptiste, leaves her native island of Dominica for the United States, and over twenty years later she returns to confront the secrets of her past. Her plight is contrasted against the background stories of her grandmother, Matilda, and her mother, Iris. The challenge of this book is not with the characters or the storyline, both of which have great potential. The difficulty arises from the heavy-handedness of the prose. The sentences are extremely clunky and evasive. They felt overwritten to the point of numbness. I found myself having to reread passages multiple times to gain their meaning. The chapters are rather short, which should invite for enjoyable reading and the steady development of the plot. Instead, the narrative reads like a series of dense essays that lack fluidity and cohesion. The emotion of the story fails to register due to the explanatory nature of the prose. I never become invested totally in the narrative. For sure, I missed a lot due to the elusiveness of the writing style.

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### **Rashida says**

I really like Mocha Girl's review. And I think that I would love the book that her review is describing. But, I DO think that her review is a true telling of what Unburnable is about. So, why doesn't this work for me? I think it has to do with execution. A good 3/4 of the novel is dedicated to the lead up to the great mystery and spends entirely too much on the blossoming of the relationship between the protagonist and the "love interest" (usefulness interest?). The meaty good stuff is saved for right before the end, and had the rest of the book been more like that, there would be significantly more stars here. There is a nagging question throughout. I wish John would have given more insight into the mental state of Lillian. Is she truly traumatized and mentally ill? Or is she completely sane and rational, but just responding to the situation in the only possible given her familial legacy and culture? To me, she seemed melodramatic, whiny, and a colossally bad decision maker. And I do not think that is what John intended. But the thing that burns about this novel, is that after you invest all that, make it through the less interesting beginning and middle, you begin to be rewarded with the really rich section towards the end. And then the end comes along. And just goes splat.

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### **Michael says**

I highly recommend joining a book club because it challenges you to read books outside your preferred genre and/or comfort zone. I would have never read Unburnable if it wasn't for my work book club. I am glad I read this book. It is an interesting story about three generations of women living or growing up on the island of Dominica. It is hard to believe that this was John's first novel. It is a wonderful exploration of the African Diaspora contrasting, celebrating and critiquing the differences between African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Africans. John tells the story of Matilda, Iris and Lillian and how the songs and legends told

about Lillian's mother and grandmother are not what they seem. Teddy, Lillian's lover, is a controversial figure. I initially hated him although it is apparent that his presence in the book is important. On the surface, his character represents the requisite love interest. However, it becomes clear that Teddy is the eyes and ears of the African-American (or American) reader. His ignorance and arrogance is a key plot point for the conclusion of the story. John uses her knowledge of Caribbean, African-American and African culture to educate the reader on the many traditions of the Diaspora. One criticism, the "romance" between Teddy and Lillian seems forced. Nothing is what it seems in this book until the very end, which made this novel a unexpected thriller to read. I highly recommend.

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### **Maria says**

The novel is compelling and original. Despite the ending which seems almost akin to an old-style deus ex machina, it defies such easy expectations and breaks away from the cliches of the Caribbean. It is a nice counterpoint to such writers as, who have covered the territory of Dominica, Rhys and Shand-Allfrey. John is Antiguan but writes the island as if she were a local.

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### **BookOfCinz says**

This year I decided to renew my library card and read more West Indian Literature, especially those written by women. This book was on my list to read for a long time so I decided to take this in my first library haul.

**Unburnable** details the life of three powerful Dominican women- Lillian, Matilda and Iris all linked by a powerful history that the granddaughter Lillian ran from but must now face. I think the plot and characters were in their own way, beautiful, strong, powerful, and conflicted. I absolutely loved the historical reference of Dominica and what it was like back in the 1940s. That for me really made me enjoy the novel a lot.

Two things I didn't necessarily like about the book:

1. It felt overwritten, it tried so hard to be deep and well meaningful that most of the prose felt force and overdone. I sometimes had to re-read paragraphs to fully understand what the Writer was trying to say. However, I cut some slack here because this is a debut novel.
2. The book could have used a few more pages to really dive into the three main characters. I felt they each had powerful stories to tell that would have resonated more with me had I gotten the opportunity to spend more time with them.

Overall, a decent West Indian novel. I do recommend adding this to your list of books to read.

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### **karen says**

there are some problems with this book.(besides a few distracting typos - and i usually don't mind, but these changed meanings too much to be acceptable) it's the same problems that books like *the eight* and *the ghost of hannah mendes* suffer from. all of these books split the narrative between a modern-day and a historical plot but the modern plot always suffers and devolves into a stock romance-type plot. it's a shame because the "other" plot is so compelling. but it was really good despite my gripes.

## Rebecca says

I really liked the beginning and set of up of the storyline. But by the end I was disapointed and exhausted. By the end I was didnt want to hear about the characters anymore.

However I enjoyed the Carribbean hsitory and culutre information. Exploitation and mutilation of women, not so much. It seemed as if this story has been created before. The theme of Obeah has been explored in a few books I have read, sometimes its overused nowadays.

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