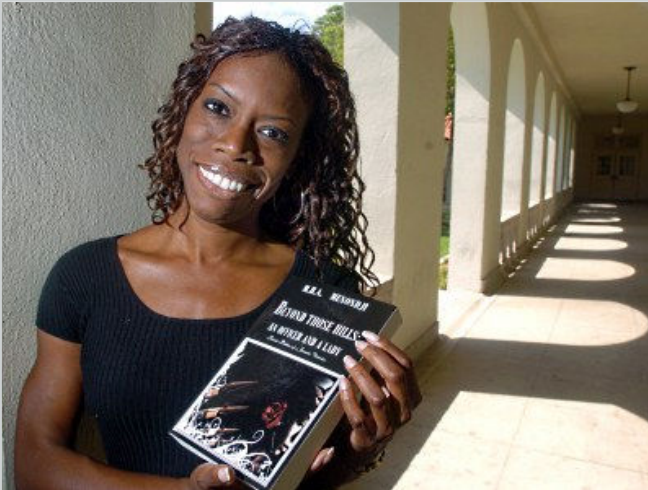


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Whittier College grad publishes first novel

By Matt Draper, Correspondent

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Author M.H.A. Menondji shows her novel while at Whittier College. Menondji, who graduated from Whittier College with a major in Political Science in 2004, began writing her novel in the 1990's. (SGVN/Staff photo by Keith Durlinger)

From Benin to Paris to Whittier, M.H.A. Menondji, 33, has traveled across the world to write her book.

Menondji released her debut novel, "Beyond Those Hills: An Officer and a Lady" in May. The fictional novel, originally written in French, focuses on the struggles of a female U.S. Navy officer in the 1980s.

The storyline was completed in 1999, but Menondji decided to refine her novel by researching the military further after coming to the U.S. in 2000. The story was translated into English and completed in 2006.

Menondji has long been fascinated with the military, tracing her interests back to pretending to be a soldier with her four brothers in Benin, a small African nation.

"I was more interested in G.I. Joe than I was in Barbie," Menondji said.

Agents, publishers and fellow African writers were skeptical of her topic, wondering why she did not choose to write about her own culture.

With a focus on a lead character far different from herself, Menondji hopes her novel can show that "you can borrow someone else's cultural identity without losing your own," Menondji said.

"She has this ability to perceive others and write someone else's story who is living in another culture and living another life," said Deborah Norden, associate professor of political science at Whittier College.

Menondji studied at the University of Orleans in France and later had the option of joining the French Navy or going to the University of La Sorbonne.

"The choice was either be stuck on a ship or go to Paris," Menondji said.

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She chose Paris.

Menondji later moved to Whittier, where she enrolled in the Kaplan Aspect English school and graduated from Whittier College.

"When she came in I knew that whatever she set her heart to she was going to accomplish," said Judith Naimi Yazdi, academic director of Kaplan.

"She's a very talented and intelligent young woman ... she's a hard worker who is very creative and independent," said longtime friend and supporter Mark Scott.

Menondji also has a passion for refugees, stemming from her family leaving Benin in the 1970s due to a political takeover. She plans to write a story about the plight of African refugees and one day open a refugee shelter in Benin.

"Beyond Those Hills" is currently available at Amazon.com

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