

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



---

## Military, love, death and duty

### Whittier ASPECT alumnae publishes first book

**By: Apollonia Galvan**

**Posted: 10/22/09**

"If you want to do something, do it. But be ready to persevere and develop thick skin." These words do not only give sound advice but also offer insight into the remarkable person who stated them. That person is M.H.A. Menondji.

Menondji hosted a reading and book signing of her debut novel *Beyond the Hills: An Officer and a Lady* on Saturday, Oct. 17 at Whittier's own Little Old Bookshop, located on Greenleaf Avenue. Quite an accomplishment for a young woman for whom English is a third language. M.H.A. Menondji was born in Cotonou, Benin, a small country off the west coast of Africa.

As a daughter of former political refugees, Menondji spent several years between the African countries of Benin and Cote d'Ivoire and eventually settled in France. At the youthful age of 17, Menondji enrolled in the University of Orleans School of Law in France. Many of her professors encouraged her to join the French Navy for two years as an officer, an opportunity that would aid and fortify her International Relations degree. But fate intervened as it usually does and she decided to go to Paris instead. Soon after, she graduated from the University of La Sorbonne and attained her degree in International Law.

Although she did not participate in military service, her interest in the military never faded as she passionately began to write the beginning of what would be her 388 page novel in French. The French work was entitled *Au-Dela des Collines*, which she later translated into the English version *Beyond the Hills*.

In an effort to further her study of humanitarian law, Menondji decided to migrate to the United States in 1999. Her interest in learning the English language prompted her to attend Whittier College a year later as an international ASPECT student, where she worked three on-campus jobs and endured brutal culture shock. "I had to learn on my own. I had no mother, no brother, no family with me; even now, I am not fully integrated," Menondji said. Her experience at Whittier College was worthwhile because of the constant support from her professors. She felt her professors were "great and an excellent support system" as they pushed her to continue her studies at the college.

By 2004, Menondji graduated with her B.A. in Political Science with an emphasis on Human Rights and was later inducted into Pi Sigma Alpha, the National Political Science Honor Society. During her post-college years, she decided to translate her original French work into English.

Her first novel *Beyond the Hills*, she explained, took 14 years to write due to her extensive research on the military. *Beyond the Hills*, a military fiction drama, is set during the Iran-Contras scandal as it depicts the story of three individuals whose lives become intertwined by love, death and a sense of duty that rises within the tense political climate of the 1980s. Menondji explained that the novel delves into the powerful themes of perseverance and patriotism, issues that are tested. Like the characters, Menondji also faced some adversity when first attempting to publish the book as agents and publishers felt that it was impossible to market commercially. Never letting this interrupt her stride, Menondji bravely decided to publish her book independently, a task she has accomplished successfully.

Although she never strived to be a writer, Menondji has credited writing, which was once a hobby, as her "keeper of sanity." For her, writing was a platform of escape as it allowed her "to get out of the self-pitying stage" and go through life as a foreign student, alone with no family nearby.

With influence from prolific French writers such as Emile Zola and Victor Hugo, she feels that writing has shown her that it is "okay to step outside of your cultural boundaries." She hopes that her book offers the important message of being oneself. "It is okay to borrow another cultural identity when writing, but you have to remember to return back to your own after." In the future, Menondji hopes to start writing an Afro centric work that chronicles the lives of what she defines as "jet-set Africans" or wealthy Africans.

---

© Copyright 2009 Quaker Campus