

Irene Egerton's 'Light in the Basement' set in Winston-Salem

BY FELECIA P. McMILLAN
COMMUNITY CORRESPONDENT

Irene Egerton is a woman on a mission.

In less than two months, her first novel, "Light in the Basement," is scheduled to hit the streets. But before that happens, Egerton has to figure out a way to whittle it down from a daunting 1,000 pages.

Two weeks ago, Egerton, flanked by Patricia Bonner, a professor at N.C. Agricultural and Technical State University, held a first reading of the book.

"I really didn't want to write another book about poor black people. I know about the bankruptcy, and repossession, and I guess I just wanted to escape," said Egerton. "This novel deals with first-generation blacks whose parents were maids and butlers but made sure their children were educated. I wanted to focus on wealthy blacks with a heart, who are conscious of poor people."

Egerton owns Unique Upstairs Jazz Club in downtown

Winston-Salem. Members of the Literary Voices Book Club invited her to read from "Light in the Basement" on Aug. 21 at the home of Todd McIver.

Terri Gentry, Tracey Staples and Letisha Dixon founded Literary Voices last year. The club has 15 members.

A native of New York, Egerton has lived in North Carolina for 20 years. She is a mother of two. She received her undergraduate degree from High Point University and her master's degree from University of New Hampshire. With the help of Bonner, the book's editor, Egerton plans to release the novel later this fall.

Bonner has worked with Egerton for the last four years she has been writing. She has assisted Egerton with cutting to the core of the work.

"I have watched Irene grow as a writer, as she wrote, revised and I edited, and it has been a beautiful struggle," Bonner said. "She has one of the best stories I

have encountered. I love reading. This publication is relevant, old, traditional, and new."

The plot of the story revolves around six affluent African American characters who live and work in the Winston-Salem area. Egerton received the germ of her tale from a dream.

"When I was young, we had a lot of money, but if we were bad, my father would punish us by putting us in a dark basement for four to six hours," Egerton said. "I was 8 years old, and my sister and I would literally play patty-pat in the dark because we could see nothing."

Although the light switch in the basement was on the inside with the children, and rats scurried about their feet, neither of them would turn on the light because they were paralyzed by fear of their father.

"Many of us are trapped in basement marriages, basement careers and darkness surrounds us," Egerton said. "Until you flip the light switch inside yourself, you will remain entrapped."

The book is divided into three sections: "Finality," "Transition" and "Beginnings." These three divisions of the story reveal the underlying theme of the novel.

"Once you get fed up with the bondage you are in, you have to go through a transition. You may leave a dead end relationship, go back to school or find a new job, but you make new beginnings," Egerton said.

Having worked in the purchasing department of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. for 10 years, Egerton felt trapped in a maze. She began exploring other options.

She became obsessed with the writing of "Light in the Basement" four years ago. The germ of the story appeared to her in a dream, and periodically when she is at her computer, she says she can feel a group of people cheering her on as if the ancestors are encouraging her work.



Irene Egerton, second from right, talks about her new work, "Light in the Basement." The book is slated to hit stores this fall.

Photos by Felecia McMillan



Irene Egerton talks with members of Literary Voices Book Club about her new book.

Members of Literary Voices received 500-page excerpts from the book to read before the discussion. Many of them found it refreshing to read a story centered around a Southern setting.

"Most of the books we read tend to be set in a large urban city in the North," one reader said.

The reader enjoyed being able to identify such areas as Clemmons, Kimberly Park Projects, Advance, High Point, Brown Summit, Madison Park or Sherwood Forest.

The group held a lively debate about the depiction of fraternities and sororities in the book.

"The characters seem to be down on Greek organizations. Those who are in these organiza-

tions are college-educated professionals who would tend to be your reading public. Why alienate them with this perspective?" charged another reader.

Egerton had a ready reply.

"They will get upset, but a lot of the organizations I see, I cannot see what they are doing to help the black community become economically strong," she said. "We need to put a banking system in place."

The characters suggest various ways Greek organizations can serve the community. Some of the characters have ironic names such as Booker T. who is a militant Black Panther-type.

Many of the men in the group were pleased to see positive images of black males in the book.

Egerton also tackles long-standing issues like color consciousness in the black community. Dark-skinned characters are faced with challenges and problems that stem simply from skin color.

"I had this story to tell, and sometimes I cried as I wrote it. Some people will like it. Some will be angered by it. Some will be excited by it. It will make you laugh; it will make you cry. ... I wanted some strong black men who loved their black women. I also portrayed black women loving each other instead of being antagonistic."

Egerton wants her story to be heard, but she says she's not trying to write a perfect novel.

"Perfection is a farce," she said. "The facade soon starts

The gift of choice



ESTÉE LAUDER

Two Gifts in One

Double your Estée Lauder gift today.

1 YOUR FIRST GIFT

Get these 8 fabulous must-haves with any Estée Lauder purchase of \$20 or more. Worth \$55,

your gift includes:

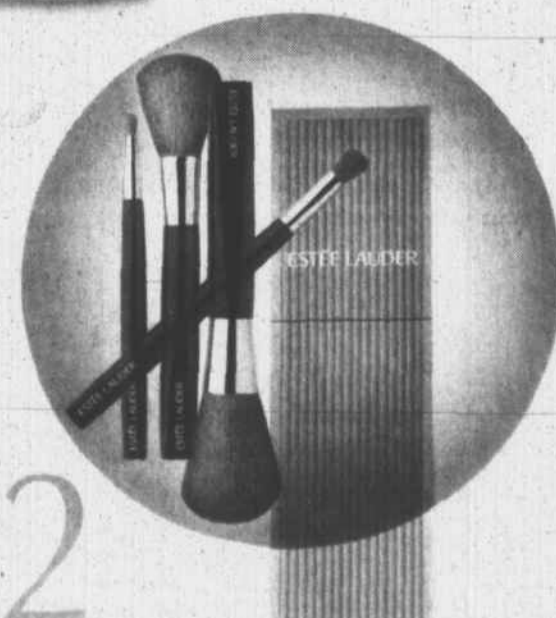
- Your choice of DayWear Creme or Lotion SPF 15
- 2 All-Day Lipsticks
- Two-in-One Eyeshadow Trio
- Blush All Day Natural CheekColor
- Soft Clean Milky Lotion Cleanser
- Estée Lauder pleasures and Lauder Pleasures For Men Vial Samples
- Mirror

Offer good while supplies last. Quantities limited. One set of gifts to a customer during gift time.



DayWear Protective Anti-Oxidant Lotion SPF 15

The moisturizer that helps neutralize the aging effects of smoke, pollution and UV rays.



2 YOUR SECOND GIFT

With any Estée Lauder purchase of \$50 or more, you'll receive this Deluxe Makeup Brush Collection in addition to your 8-piece gift.

ESTÉE LAUDER

Dillard's