talkingwith Soledad O'Brien

BY LAUREN R. HARRISON
lauren.harrison@newsday.com

The CNN anchor writes about her Long Island childhood

You've seen her perfect smile and pristine makeup on CNN. You've heard her pensive questions. But anchor and special correspondent Soledad O'Brien had a less-than-perfect trajectory to the cable news channel, where she has won acclaim for the documentary series "Black in America" and "Latino in America."

In **"The Next Big Story: My Journey Through the Land of Possibilities"** (Celebra, $24.95), the Smithtown native delves into personal experiences — overcoming racism as one of six children born to an Afro-Cuban mother and white Australian father, dropping out and returning to Harvard, and parenting four children — to reveal how they impacted her work as a journalist.

Reading about her experiences covering Hurricane Katrina, the Southeast Asian tsunami or the Haiti earthquake, readers encounter a life lesson that O'Brien, 44, says she learned on Long Island: "Bad things happen until good people get in the way."

When and why did you decide to write the book?
When I started covering topics of race and diversity and ethnicity. A lot of times people would ask me about my perspective. The answer to that question is quite complicated. It involved how you grew up, and where you grew up and how your perspective on race and diversity was formed, especially since I had a parent who's black and a parent who's white. And so to me, the answer had to come in book form, because it wasn't a question that could be answered in a sentence.

When you were a child, a photographer once asked you if you were black. How did experiences like this impact you?
What I liked about the book was being able to talk about both sides of the coin. Smithtown is a beautiful town. It's a great town. You constantly feel like you're an insider, but then there were times when people completely remind you that you're not: You're an outsider, and you don't belong here. And they would remind you in very cold and cruel ways. I think the insider-outsider perspective is actually very helpful as a journalist.

You write about a meeting in which Jesse Jackson, lamenting the dearth of black reporters on CNN, told you, "You don't count." You discuss blogs that say you're not black enough to cover "Black in America." How do you deal with such statements?
I thought a lot of what people were saying was very interesting. What is black enough? What does that mean? I want to know, and I don't mean that facetiously. I think that's a really good jumping-off point for a conversation. I think my biggest failing in my conversation with Jesse Jackson was [that] I didn't push him. I didn't dig. [Jackson] basically said later he thought I was Latino and apologized that he had hurt my feelings.

Having covered natural disasters, you write that "pictures of bodies face down in water or rolling by in trucks pop into my head when I'm on the treadmill." How do you separate from stories like these?
For me, the goal has been to not forget them, because the minute you do that you become a bad reporter. The key is to channel what you're seeing and feeling and the devastation into thoughtful reporting. I process things a lot, and writing the book helped, too.

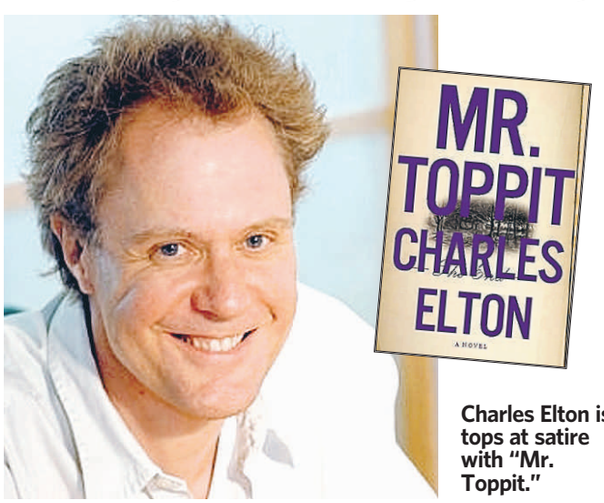
O'Brien deals with racism in her memoir.

PHOTO BY ANDREW ECCLES

Page-turner parody of posthumous fame

MR. TOPPIT, by Charles Elton. Other Press, 400 pp., $15.95 paper.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday



Charles Elton is tops at satire with "Mr. Toppit."

'Mr. Toppit," the debut novel of British literary agent and television producer Charles Elton, arrives in the United States after a run on the U.K. bestseller list last year. A cultural satire encompassing a Harry Potter-esque literary empire, a "Royal Tenenbaums"-style dysfunctional family and an Oprah-type media figure, the book is both funny and sad.

The narrator is Luke Hayman, whose father, Arthur Hayman, wrote a series of children's books called "The Hayseed Chronicles." The main character is a boy named Luke, a fact which has given the real Luke a stone in his shoe for most of his life. (The setup recalls a memoir published by Christopher Milne, son of A.A., about the misery of being the model for Christopher Robin.) Missing from the "Hayseed" oeuvre is any character modeled on Luke's sister, Rachel, causing her an equal and opposite woe. As her gay best friend, Claude, puts it, "Rachel has drug dealers the way other people have accountants or dentists."

The "Hayseed" books are little known in 1981, when Arthur is killed by a cement truck while crossing a London street. (The author's mother was killed in the same way when he was working on the novel.) As Arthur lies in extremis, an obese and very weird American tourist named Laurie Clow kneels by his side and shares his last moments. She attaches herself to the bereaved Hayman family — Luke is 13 and Rachel 17 at this point — and becomes a somewhat unwelcome participant in the funeral activities. When she eventually returns to California, Laurie reads from the "Chronicles" on her local radio show. In a slow domino effect, they emerge from obscurity and become a gigantic international publishing phenomenon, with merch galore — a board game, PlayStation game, Royal Doulton cereal bowl set, eggcups, figurines and clothing. Laurie rides this wave to media stardom.

The second part of "Mr. Toppit" skips ahead five years and moves to Los Angeles, where Luke goes to live at Laurie's compound the summer before college. There he runs into many familiar types: dopey stoner boy, evangelist slut, coked-up teen actor, dominatrix German personal assistant. The California portion of the novel feels slow and a bit less original than the U.K. section, and leaves behind for too long a pair of favorite characters: Luke's brittle, vodka-swilling mother and endearing, manic-depressive Rachel.

But the denouement reunites the Haymans at their country estate, where no amount of security can stop "Hayseed" fans from trespassing, spray-painting graffiti and picnicking in the surrounding forest, which they believe is the Darkwood of the books. "And out of the Darkwood Mr. Toppit comes, and he comes not for you, or for me, but for all of us" is the most famous and hotly debated line of the "Chronicles." Here, Mr. Toppit seems incarnate in the wave of chaos and darkness that sweeps up the characters at the end of the book. One way or another, I hated to see them go.