



## Charmed Particles

*Chrissy Kolaya*

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Set in a fictional prairie town in which the two overarching industries are a living history facility and a laboratory for experiments in high-energy particle physics, *Charmed Particles* tells the intertwined stories of two families.

Abhijat is a theoretical physicist from India now working at the National Accelerator Research Laboratory. His wife, Sarala, home with their young daughter, Meena, struggles to assimilate to their new American culture.

Meena's best friend at school is Lily, a precocious child prodigy whose father self-identifies as "the last great gentleman explorer" and whose mother, a local politician, becomes entangled in efforts to stop the National Accelerator Research Laboratory's plans to build a new superconducting supercollider.

The conflict over the collider fractures the community and creates deep divides within the families of the novel.

## Charmed Particles Details

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Author : Chrissy Kolaya

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## From Reader Review Charmed Particles for online ebook

### Angela Noel says

Charmed Particles: A Novel

How should we face the unknown? What creates a lasting legacy? Woven throughout Chrissy Kolaya's novel, explicitly or implicitly, these questions are on the minds of the beautifully drawn characters in CHARMED PARTICLES.

In a fictional Chicago suburb two industries exist in symbolic balance; the National Accelerator Research Laboratory with its cadre of scientists wrangling questions of subatomic particles and their role in the universe, and a Williamsburg, Virginia-like town, called Heritage Village. The known, and the unknown, the past and the future, collide with sufficient force to challenge relationships and invite insight into some of our deepest fears.

Two families appear to stand on different sides of a conflict over a proposition to increase the capability of the research laboratory. One one side of the debate is physicist, Abhijat. When the question over whether a superconducting supercollider should be built, he sees only the threat to his work and his legacy. His wife, Sarala, and emotionally adept daughter, Meena, struggle in their own ways to remain loyal to the relationships they value most, while transcending the patterns of the past, as emotions in the neighborhood heat up.

Rose, wife to self-described explorer Randolph, glories in the decision they made to raise their precocious daughter, Lily, in the town she grew up in. The unusual living arrangement, with Randolph often away on adventures, raises questions in the town where her burgeoning political ambitions cause her to take a stance against an expansion of the Lab.

The strong relationship between the two girls, Meena and Lily, loosely bonds the families together. As the girls seek to differentiate themselves from their peers, their parents, and even each other, they mirror the struggle the town faces. What always was, must not necessarily, always be.

Kolaya, a noted poet, offers lyrical prose with restrained detail. Rather than wax on about minutiae as some literary novels do, her descriptions paint vivid pictures in few words. She writes, "Since he'd begun his studies, his career, his greatest fear had been that he would be a failure. A B+ physicist." Here we understand not only what Abhijat fears, but also how he measures failure as markedly different from what the world would define as such.

I came to read CHARMED PARTICLES by accident, largely because Ms. Kolaya and I share a state and some affiliation with the LOFT Literary Center in Minneapolis. It deserves far greater attention. More accessible than FATES AND FURIES, and just as beautiful as ALL THE LIGHTS WE CANNOT SEE, CHARMED PARTICLES offers bestseller quality and the added bonus of feeling like a hidden gem.

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### Donna Trump says

Yet another of my amazing writer friends, this time fellow 2007-2008 Loft mentee Chrissy Kolaya, has a

book out this month: *Charmed Particles*. For Kolaya, it's a debut novel, and a novel novel it is, folks. In her own words, in response to a question posed by Kim Ukura of the Morris Sun Tribune, Kolaya says "The book is weird and difficult to explain concisely." Ukura sees through Kolaya's modesty and inveterate humor to suggest that *Charmed Particles* is a book about family, ambition and community. Agreed, and I would add one more thing: I think it's a book about curiosity.

The story in *Charmed Particles* comes to us through two families in the fictional town of Nicolet, Illinois, where a local employer is a laboratory conducting high-energy particle physics research. Physicist Abhijat Mital and his (mostly) stay-at-home wife Sarala were born and raised in India; their daughter Meena, is born and raised in Nicolet. The other family we meet and get to know are the Winchesters: Randolph, an Englishman who likes to think of himself as the "last great gentleman explorer;" his wife, Rose, a native Illinoisian with political aspirations and their daughter, Lily, who becomes Meena's best friend. The ultimate conflict in the story is whether or not the particle acceleration lab will be allowed to expand, literally under the feet, of Nicolet residents.

Although that battle is hinted at, early on, it doesn't become central until well into the book. What occupies the reader until that time is a study of the two families and the growing friendship of the girls. Right from the start, the members of each family have unique relationships with curiosity, and, of course, the eventual lab/no lab showdown is also a disputation about intellectual curiosity vs. a community's desire for assurance of the status quo.

Randolph is described as a "polymath"--I had to exercise my own curiosity there and look that word up (it means a person of wide-ranging knowledge or learning); as an adventurer and explorer he travels to all corners of the earth and is subdued only by "the spell" of young, naive Rose's "bright and curious eyes." Rose shares his adventures until the birth of Lily, when all of her considerable intellectual curiosity is channeled into the gaping maw of Lily's frank genius. Abhijat's intellectual curiosity might be the most apparent, given his line of work in theoretical physics. Sarala's curiosity is piqued by American culture. Meena's intellect is no less than Lily's but is deepened by social skills her friend lacks.

The answer to the question of whether or not the physics lab will be allowed to expand won't be given away here, nor does Kolaya give it away early in the book. Rather, curiosity is made to do battle throughout. Randolph's pursuits are ethnocentric at best, racist at worst. Rose's curiosity bangs a U-ey at the first political challenge. Abhijat's search for the ultimate physics knowledge may be more of a search for fame. Sarala's yearning to belong is hijacked by a false, or at least outdated, version of American history.

It's the girls, Lily and Meena, we have to look to for any kind of real and fruitful intellectual curiosity, and they hand it to us in spades. I particularly love their self-selected 4th-grade research topic (eschewing pre-selected topics like "The Shrimp" and "Good Nutrition"): "the life and times of Lady Florence Baker, explorer of central Africa and co-discoverer, with her husband, of Lake Albert." The assignment, writes the ever tongue-in-cheek Kolaya,

...had been to produce a three-page report and a five-minute presentation, including one optional visual aid...Meena and Lily's report, "Lady Florence Baker: The Journey from Slavery to Exploration," weighed in at twenty pages, not including end notes, bibliography, and [a carefully prepared index]. This Lily and Meena presented to the blank stares and confusion of their classmates and teacher.

Even Lady Florence Baker is trying out this idea of intellectual slavery vs. curiosity. And although Lily and Meena are most likely to get it right, in my opinion, they are led astray by Kolaya's keenly described American educational system: one that doesn't quite know how to handle children of genius (and maybe

particularly children of color and of genius). Add that to the sometimes hysterical, sometimes poignant, clearly inevitable teenager-ization of Lily and Meena, and here Kolaya draws curiosity with some (in my opinion of Kolaya's opinion--not always easy to discern because of that unflagging irony of hers) regrettable shade, too.

I think Kolaya, her agent and Dzanc Books are to be commended for writing, championing and publishing, respectively, a book that breaks a few rules and gives the reader an opportunity for a thought-provoking, curiosity-stimulating read.

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### **Tom says**

This book takes a complex area of physics and weaves it into a charming story about the changing dynamics of community, the journey of self discovery, the awaking that occurs through life experience, maturity, and the acceptance of things beyond our control. The characters are engaging and endearing. This should be on your reading list this year.

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### **Debbie says**

I had a hard time engaging with the characters in this book. I think it will lead to a more interesting discussion due to the issues it raises about marriage, relationships, community, and growing up. The modern question rears its head...your family or your job? Good for reflection.

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### **Book Riot Community says**

Set in a small prairie town, *Charmed Particles* is the story of two families pulled in opposite directions. Abhijat is a theoretical physicist working at the town's particle accelerator lab. His wife, Sarala, is a stay at home mother to daughter Meena. Both are trying to find their places, one in America and the other in public school. Meena's best friend is Lily. Her father, Randolph, is a "gentleman explorer" while her mother, Rose, has made her mark in local politics. When a proposal comes forth to build a superconducting supercollider at the lab, the two families find themselves on opposite sides of a debate that threatens to fracture their small community. As a small town resident myself, the book totally hit home for me. Kolaya did a lot of research into real debates about the first supercolliders, and that research really grounds the story. But even more, this is a wonderful story of ambition and community, rooted in six well-drawn and wonderful main characters. This one is highly recommended. – Kim Ukura

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from The Best Books We Read In October: <http://bookriot.com/2015/11/02/riot-r...>

## **Kristin says**

Picked this up to pre-read as a possibility for one of the library's book groups since the author is local and would be available to participate.

I can't believe how quickly I was sucked in and plowed through the story which takes place during the 1970s and 1980s in Illinois where a proposed supercollider might be built. This sets up: us vs the, science vs town, scientists vs "normal" people, neighbor against neighbor, and family against family.

The two families featured are each outsiders in their own way. There is the physicist from India and his new bride. The other is a native of the town but returning years later to raise her daughter while her husband continues to explore the world. Both families have a precocious daughter who eventually find each other and become friends.

Strongly recommend.

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## **Rob Forteath says**

This book tells the stories of two families who are outsiders in a small town. The two daughters are exceptionally clever and curious; the two fathers are exceptionally passionate and successful. Sadly, the two mothers tend towards Marge Simpson: dutiful, vaguely unsatisfied, long-suffering, etc. -- one develops an ambition, the other an outside interest, but neither of these seem to matter all that much.

The parallel stories are skilfully told in a very straightforward manner that also manages to be somewhat lyrical. Characters are a little too perfect, situations are a little too pat, so it all eventually begins to seem like a fable. What is ostensibly a central theme of the book -- an investigation of whether ambition provides lasting meaning and satisfaction -- is handled in a perfunctory manner. Fortunately, the book does not depend on this because the growth of the characters provides sufficient interest. It is a coming-of-age novel not just for the two girls, but for their parents as well.

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## **Ellen says**

Technically finished on January 1st but I want it to count for 2015. Really liked this book and the super sweet ending really warmed my heart. I love immigration stories, and I really liked the short chapters made up of even shorter snippets which made the book very quick to read. I liked some of the quirks (like the index of the girls' 4th grade report) and wished there had been a few more. Overall I just really liked this story, set against the backdrop of the Midwest in the 70s and 80s, its characters, and how the whole thing wrapped up.

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## **Tina Bounds says**

3 1/2 stars

Centered around the 'National Accelerator Research Lab' in suburban Nicolet Illinois in the 70's. This is the

story of 2 families 1) the Mitels - Abhijat is a physicist at the lab, his wife Sarala who wants to fit into America (and does so by rejecting the Indian recipes her mother sent her here with in favor of American classics like green-bean casserole), and their brilliant daughter Meena. 2) the Winchesters - Randolph a worldly explorer, his wife Rose (who grew up in Nicolet, explored the world for a time with her husband but has returned home to raise their daughter), Lily.

Both families have their dysfunctionality. The family dramas about fitting in and what is home and growing up and womanhood all are happening in a community divided by the prospect of an even bigger Super Conductor.

The physics accurately reflects what was going on in the US and abroad during this period. I enjoyed the science and politics more than the family drama. But the author did an excellent job combining them and showing a snapshot of history.

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### **Alvin says**

Reminiscent of a Franzen story, but with a manageable amount of drama (which I greatly appreciated). There was tension and conflict but was always handled like things were eventually going to be okay. Refreshing.

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### **Elisa says**

interesting study of different personalities and learning to embrace change. pretty easy to read, maybe a little longer than it needed to be.

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### **Thomas Mcphee says**

This is a deceptively simple book, harrowing and heartwrenching, a book about love, expectation, masculinity, and the ways in which the world wrenches control out of our hands. This is a wonderful, elegant book. I will admit, however, that this could have been an absolutely exceptional book, except for the final 40 pages that allow the book to wrap too gently and resolves the character arcs somewhat arbitrarily. I still highly recommend this book to anyone interested in science, small rural communities, and experiences of "other-ness", I just only wish the final stretch didn't feel quite so disappointing.

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### **Enigmatic421 says**

*Chrissy Kolaya's Debut Novel, Charmed Particles Successfully Launches into a New Realm of Exotic Matter*

Do you like original adventures, gradual suspense, quirky characters, or a slight touch of wanderlust? If you answered yes to any of the above, then Chrissy Kolaya's debut novel Charmed Particles, might be the newest page-turner that you add to your bookshelf.

Nestled in the fictional, Midwestern prairie town of Nicolet, Illinois, the story centers thought-provoking narrative about family, ambition, and the immigrant experience around the conflict between innovative progress in particle physics and historical preservation. When scientific ambition clashes with small town community values, the deep rift within the town reveals the evolving nuances of the two young families caught in the middle.

Abhijat, a theoretical physicist from India, is working at the lab in Nicolet. His ambitious nature has led him to America, and the cutting-edge research which is happening at the National Accelerator Research Laboratory. His wife Sarala, arrives in America shortly after their arranged marriage in India. Her struggle to assimilate to the American way of life is highlighted as she tries to keep Abhijat happy. Just like the early American settlers, who struggle to define the character of the New World, Sarala must learn to craft a new identity for herself. As she lives the quintessential story of immigration, Sarala eventually stops wearing her brightly colored Saris and cooking Indian cuisine. Their daughter Meena grows up to be a sociable girl, whose popularity at school earns her a spot on the cheerleading squad. Although Meena is a bright girl who excels at her school, her friendly and outgoing personality cause her to resist the idea of following in the footsteps of her overachieving and inattentive father, who is often preoccupied with work.

Randolph, a professional adventurer, is a native of Nicolet, and delights in traveling to faraway and remote regions of the world. Learning to live like the natives of these obscure lands and acquiring treasured mementos for his daughter is his life's devotion. He's constantly in search of an untouched territory. His young wife, Rose, his companion on many expeditions until her unexpected pregnancy forces her to stay in Nicolet, becomes devoted to and proud of their unorthodox marriage arrangement. Their daughter Lily is an extremely bright girl, socially awkward. Since Lily has a hard time making friends, she is happy to have Meena as her best friend. Although they may seem like social opposites, they share a unique bond. During Randolph's extended absence due to his exploration agenda, Rose decides to run for town mayor. Sizing up her opponent as an older gentleman, who is out of touch with the newer generation, she can almost taste victory as she envisions an easy win.

All is pleasant and sunny in the town which participates in staged, costumed reenactments of the Revolutionary War just for fun, until a new particle accelerator for the lab is proposed. The Superconducting Super Collider, used for high-energy particle physics is seen by the physicists as the only chance to prove the theories they have devoted their lives to, but the local community questions the safety of the large machine whose tunnels will be built under houses and schools. Citing risks of radiation, the tone of the community's protesting becomes frenzied. Conversely, armed with enhanced knowledge about the collider and touting its harmlessness, the scientists try to quell the fear of the protesters, motivated solely by their trepidation of the perceived ruin of their careers in the face of a denied proposal.

The suspense comes to a head when everyone must pick sides. As his wife, Sarala must side with Abhijat, even though most of her friends in the community are against his view. Rose, who is running for mayor, must decide to run against whatever platform her opponent chooses, even if that means running the risk of opposing the views of Abhijat and Sarala, the parents of her daughter's best friend.

The beauty of this story is found in the intertwining of complex science, historical American tradition, and the constant striving for the idiosyncratic idea of community which fashions our everyday realities. As the perspective for each side of the argument is presented without partiality shown to either, Kolaya never seems to make clear which side she supports. This novel steers clear of an agenda. Many of the chapters are headlined with quotes, which act as clues on a treasure map, inviting readers to embark on a search for the essence of the story. What may be significance is the placement of an Indian family within a Midwestern prairie town, or an explorer in search of an untouched land. The public opposition to the particle accelerator is expected, however, there may be significance in the fact that the scientists are unable to relate to the protesting townspeople using laymen's terms. Perhaps this shows that the risks associated with progress are not always obvious, and that these progressive scientists are unable to connect with their humanity. In whatever way we choose to read this story, it will undoubtedly leave us with the question of which side would you choose? Scientific logic, or fear of the unknown. This deceptively complex question lies at the heart of this story. Any way you choose to answer this question, and align yourself, will be the genesis of an identifiable connection to either Abhijat's or Randolph's family.

While many of the characters are drawn on opposite ends of the spectrum, which is expected given the nature of the subject, their quirks and eccentricities make them all somewhat relatable. Beyond the main focus of the divide over the proposed particle accelerator, are the endearing stories of friendship and love which elegantly accent the story. What was most enjoyable was the personal endearments of the characters as they evolved, becoming more complex and intriguing, and as a result, unpredictable. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this finely crafted work which sits on the fringes of the frontier as one of the first of its kind.

With an ambitious first novel, Kolaya has written intelligent characters with depth and interwoven them into a complex tale. Surprisingly engaging and thought-provoking, I would absolutely recommend this charming read as your newest escape. I look forward to more inspired novels from Kolaya in the hopes of expanding this original and enlightening frontier of literary thought.

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### **Radhika says**

The lives of Abhijat Mittal his wife Sarala and their daughter Meena draws parallel with the lives of Rose, Randolph and their very intelligent daughter Lily. The author has spun such a wonderful tale that not only it tells us the story but makes us wonder the differences among humans even if they are our family and how with acceptance and love everything works out in the end

Abhijat is a theoretical physician who is excited to work at the premier physics lab at Nicolette Illinois. His work is the bane of his life and everything revolves around it. He wants to become well known. His wife Sarala is complacent and is a little awed of his intelligence and lets him realize his dreams without much fuss. Their daughter Meena is an intelligent curious girl who has a mind of her own

Rose and Malcolm are wanderers and Rose had left the same town when she met Randolph to wander the

world with him. When she has her daughter Lily, she wants to settle down back in Nicolette with her to give her a stable life, but is ok if Randolph travels and visits them once in a while. She tells her daughter that her parents have the greatest love story though they live away from each other .

But life has a way of interfering even with the best of plans and this story of ambition, family , , compassion, forgiveness and realization of what is ultimately important for one's life since we are but a small minuscule part of this universe living a flash of the moment in the grand scheme of the universe

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## **Bill Wolfe says**

For more reviews of literary fiction by women, see my blog, [www.readherlikeanopenbook.com](http://www.readherlikeanopenbook.com).

Chrissy Kolaya's debut novel is set in a small town just beyond the edge of the Chicago suburbs during the 1980s and concerns the intersecting lives of two families.

Abhijat Mital is a theoretical physicist from India who works at the National Accelerator Research Laboratory in Nicolet, Illinois. He is a workaholic obsessed with making a breakthrough that will lead to the Nobel Prize in Physics and a legacy that will mean all his work was worthwhile. His wife Sarala is devoted to Abhijat and to becoming an ideal American housewife and mother to their daughter, Meena.

Randolph and Rose Winchester live in the same neighborhood, Eagle's Crest, a recently built subdivision near Abhijat's lab. Randolph is a travel and adventure journalist and photographer who is gone much of the time, while Rose concentrates on raising their precocious daughter, Lily. Rose is not just comfortable with her unorthodox marriage, but proud of it. She and Lily appear to manage quite well during Randolph's long absences, which are punctuated by his fascinating letters.

The two daughters, both brilliant and driven by their ambitious, eccentric parents, become friends and thereby begin to draw the two very different sets of parents together.

So we have two self-absorbed husbands, either physically or emotionally absent, contrasted with two wives who are left to their own devices and eventually set off on journeys of self-discovery. Sarala comes out of her role as the dutiful Indian wife to become a successful Mary Kay saleswoman, while Rose decides to run for mayor of Nicolet. She grew up in Nicolet when it was just a farm town and believes she is the right person to guide it into a future full of economic and social challenges.

These charming particles begin to collide when the U.S. Department of Energy announces that it is considering building a Superconducting Super Collider at the Nicolet lab or another location. For Abhijat, this represents a chance to make his dreams come true. For Rose, stopping the construction of the incomprehensible and seemingly dangerous SSC becomes the centerpiece of her campaign. The two families suddenly find themselves on opposite sides of a very contentious dispute.

Suspicions run high among the residents, most of whom do not seem to understand (or perhaps even to want to understand) what the SSC does. Rumors run rampant about radiation, potential explosions, and the fact that the SSC will run in a loop under their houses and the town itself.

To Kolaya's credit, she handles this divisive issue with sensitivity, presenting both sides in an evenhanded and compassionate manner. The physicists are not presented solely as socially inept eggheads, nor are the

people of Nicolet depicted as simply ignorant, paranoid, and opposed to scientific progress. These are three-dimensional people whom we recognize, and all of them are sympathetic.

The other thread of Charmed Particles is the coming of age story involving Meena and Lily. We watch as the two gifted students thrive while leaving their peers far behind. But, as with the calm, perfect exurban town of the early portion of the book, change is inevitable. Kolaya explores the intellectual, social, and emotional lives of the girls, which exist completely apart from the lives of their otherwise attentive parents. Kolaya reminds us that so much of parents' lives remains a mystery to their children, as do the children's lives to the parents, usually because children are determined to maintain a secret life.

The opposing forces in the various plot lines come together seamlessly in the last third of the book. But the characters and events never seem stereotypical or obvious; there is more to everyone than meets the eye in Charmed Particles, and that is one of its main pleasures. The battle over the lab brings out the best and worst in people but also serves to move lives forward in unexpected but necessary ways. It is the catalyst for changes of a different type than those involved could have foreseen at the start. No one is left unaffected.

Kolaya also deserves kudos for the quality of her writing. Her prose is smooth and fluid, and the narrative voice she has created is as satisfying as floating downstream on a sunny day. You will find yourself halfway through the book before you look up to see what time it is.

This is a novel that deserves a wider audience. Kolaya has written a story with the perfect blend of ideas and people, and readers will find themselves thinking about all of them when they close the book.

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