



Angel of Harlem

Kuwana Haulsey

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Inspired by the extraordinary events of Dr. May Chinn's life, *Angel of Harlem* is a deeply affecting story of love and transcendence. Weaving seamlessly scenes from the battlefields of the Civil War, during which her father escaped from slavery, to the Harlem living rooms and kitchen tables where May is sometimes forced to operate on her patients, this fascinating novel lays bare the heart of a woman who changed the face of medicine.

A gifted, beautiful young woman in the 1920s, May Edward Chinn dreams only of music. For years she accompanies the famed singer Paul Robeson. However, a racist professor ends her hopes of becoming a concert pianist. But from one dashed dream blooms another: May would become a doctor instead—the first black female physician in all of New York.

Giddy with the wonder of the Harlem Renaissance and fueled by firebrand friends like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, May doggedly pursues her ambitions while striving to overcome the pains of her past: the death of a fiancé, a lost child, and a distant father ravished by the legacy of slavery. With every grief she encounters, a resilient piece of herself locks into place. At times risking her life—attending to men stabbed in their homes and women left to die in filthy alleys—May struggles to carve out a place for herself within a medical world that still teaches that a “Negro” brain is not anatomically wired for higher thinking. Yet against the odds, she achieves her goal, starts her own practice, and becomes one of the first cancer specialists in the city.

Alive with the pulse of black unrest in 1920s New York, this beautifully textured novel moves with fearlessness and grace through a history that is by turns ugly and sublime. With *Angel of Harlem*, critically acclaimed author Kuwana Haulsey gives poetic voice to the story of a remarkable woman who had the courage to dream and live beyond her era's limitations.

From the Hardcover edition.

Angel of Harlem Details

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From Reader Review Angel of Harlem for online ebook

Ursula Shelton says

The book was okay; basically about Dr. Chin's life during the Harlem Renaissance. She lived a deprived life and her family structure was somewhat unstable, but she could always count on her mother. I had never heard of her prior to reading this book; I enjoyed the snap shots of history that were in the book. I was hoping that Dr. Chin was able to really experience the love and prosperity that she deserved. These things never really came about for her, she seem to have a sweet and caring disposition. Good to know that there were some people of African descent that were doctors. That's quite an accomplishment, even in this age. I gave the book two stars because it really didn't leave me wanting more, but just to simply finish. Sure, I would recommend it, but not highly. Thanks!

Alicia (PrettyBrownEyeReader) says

Dr. May Chinn is trailblazer that we haven't heard much about. This is a historical fiction novel based off her life. The author does a great job weaving history into the story. This was a book club pick and we had lots of discussion on the author's writing style and choice of story lines.

Sandie says

I've never read anything by Kuwana Haulsey before and truthfully, the reason I picked up the book off the library shelves is that the title was the same as one of my favorite songs by U2!!!

This book is a novel based upon the life of Dr. May Chinn, the first black woman doctor in NYC. I'm always a bit cautious reading a novel based on the life of a real person and I don't know enough about May Chinn to determine if the correlations are accurate.

However, Haulsey is a paints pictures with her words. You feel yourself there in the basement hiding with May Chinn's dad as a little boy slave. You find her in the speakeasys with the likes of Langston Hughes and others. You want to know her strong mother who worked so many jobs to get her daughter through school. Most importantly, you get a clear picture of the racial injustices of the 1920s.

I recommend this novel!

Sandy Mahoney

Mocha Girl says

If one believes that some people are truly destined for greatness regardless of their station in life, then Dr. May Edward Chinn is a perfect example. May is conceived as a "love child" of a married middle-aged former slave and an orphaned teenaged Indian maiden. The shame of their affair forces her parents to

relocate to Harlem only to meet unemployment, impoverished living conditions, and rampant racial discrimination. Despite her father's negativism, chauvinistic views, and emotional abandonment, it is her mother's tenacity and belief in education that propels young May to become proficient in her studies and master the piano. Her dreams of studying at Juilliard on a music scholarship are crushed by an unplanned teenaged pregnancy in which she unwillingly gives the child up for adoption. She eventually drops out of high school due to a lengthy bout of depression stemming from the adoption and deferred dreams.

Fate intercedes and through several well-timed networking opportunities along with a little name-dropping (and/or perhaps coincidence), she applies, is accepted, and enrolls at Columbia to study music only to be harassed by a racist professor. However, when one door closes, a window opens and through a series of what could be considered "divine" interventions, she changes her major to science and the rest is history. She eventually becomes the first African American female doctor in New York City and a renowned medical pioneer - however, her road to success is an arduous journey filled with racism, colorism, sexism (even from African American men), financial burdens, and familial strains which the author construes with great sentiment. There are wonderful episodes in which she falls in love, tours with Paul Robeson, dines with Zora Neale Hurston, and parties with famous Renaissance-era Harlemites like Jean Toomer, Fats Waller, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.

Hausley's writing and overall biographical presentation is superb! Compassion and respect exude in her the depiction of Dr. Chinn, the woman; and the utmost humility is conveyed in the stories of her personal and academic trials and tribulations. Albeit, I found the pacing a bit slow at times, I quickly realized that this is not a story that should be rushed. It is history and Haulsey took her time to create an authentic early 20th century setting, complete with social attitudes, and wonderful descriptions of New York City's sites, sounds, language, and particularly Harlem's colorful clientele. The author left me in awe of Dr. Chinn and wanting to know more about her and the fate of other characters in the book. A job well done!

Tara Chevrestt says

May Edward Chinn was not only the first black female physician in Harlem, but the very first black female intern to work in Harlem Hospital and the first black female to graduate from New York University Medical School. And she accomplished all that in the tremulous 1920s when race riots were breaking out all over the country and hostilities ran high. Did I mention she was the first woman in New York to ride around in the ambulance? That was "man's work" back then.

Unfortunately, only a quarter of the novel really addresses her medical life and accomplishments. The first part is about her dad (an awful man) and his surviving the Civil War. The second part is a young May and the tensions between her and her father and between her mother and father. Why they stayed with him and bore his ill treatment all those years is beyond me. I never figured it out and a lot of the book (too much) focuses on May's relationship or lack of one with him.

As she goes thru medical school, there are few romances turned sour, a brief singing career, a lot of famous friends that are musicians and poets, and my favorite part of all: her meeting with the Black Flying Eagle, a famous pilot. I really would've liked more about her medical education and less about her friends. They didn't interest me. Her trials in medical school and how she overcame discrimination and placed third out of 303 people... that interests me.

Thus, it fails to hit the four star mark for me, but I do recommend it. Except for cowering around her father

(even at age 26 or so.. never understood that), she was a remarkable woman and it makes a remarkable read.

Sarah says

I'm so intrigued. This story of a real woman with remarkable endurance is really interesting. Based during the early 1900s, this book tells the story of a girl who grew up in Harlem with dreams that should've been beyond her reach, as a black girl. I'm amazed at what she accomplished in life, fascinated by her friendships with other famous people we know (WEB Dubois, Langston Hughes, etc) and really interested in knowing how different her life was in New York (still oppressed obviously, given the time period) versus if she had grown up in the south (the life she lived, while tough, would never have happened). She and her mother, who was her #1 support, were amazing.

Rowena says

"Sometimes Harlem would just do that, you understand. It would open up and reveal itself in a rigorous display of scents, various and commanding, floating its sounds around and above you, where they swirled generously, like autumn colours. In a while, you couldn't tell what was what, really, or where the sensations came from." - Kuwana Haulsey, *Angel of Harlem*

This is one of the most beautifully-written books I've ever read. Inspired by true events, it's the story of Dr. May Edward Chinn, the first black woman physician in Harlem (in the 1920s). While reading the story, it's natural to be amazed by how tenacious people can be, especially marginalized women. Recently I've been thinking a lot about hearing about the first person to do something, to gain some sort of achievement. Even now there are always firsts but it's not until I read this book that I thought more deeply about what being the first black female doctor in Harlem entailed. Not only is she black, she's also a woman, so the question that entered my mind was this: How do marginalized people, women in particular, continue on despite society telling them from all angles that they are not supposed to be there?

The story begins with May's struggles with education, and the barriers she faces from both black and white communities, and from her own father, who doesn't understand why women need to be educated. He brings up the age-old discussion about how educated women won't find men:

"Don't no man want to marry someone got more education than them. Even those college-educated boys don't want that. Can't have two men trying to run the same house."

I think of the genius this woman had, genius that wasn't nurtured because the world she lived in did not make any room for her. This is a lady who became a doctor and yet was initially in a music program that she was forced out of due to racism:

"The music soothed me. In fact, it flooded me. Music became my joy, my spirit, the bulk and the width of my memories. The notes became integral to me in a breathing way, a way that only my mother's presence had ever occupied my soul."

Her foray into music was very important because she came of age during the Harlem Renaissance era. She becomes Paul Robeson's accompanist and meets a lot of the Harlem Literati. I adore how Haulsey got Zora

Neale Hurston's and Langston Hughes' voices down so well on paper. It was interesting reading of a doctor who was in the Harlem Literati group, particularly because the Harlem Renaissance is often seen as a very masculine era, and the women in it were, until recently, not acknowledged as often as the men (see Cheryl T. Hall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*). Hurston was an important voice in this book as a black female member of the Harlem Literati who also had her own struggles in education. Back then any woman who wanted to do something that was deemed "white" or "male" had a struggle on her hands, and tenacity was a must. So with her musical background, being accompanist for Robeson, and hanging out with the Harlem elite, how did she ever become a doctor?

"The only way a Negro woman had ever gotten inside Harlem Hospital was if she'd been shot, stabbed, beaten or poisoned. I think one or two may have been cleaners, but even those jobs were reserved for the Irish and German women who trekked over from Riverside and farther north up in the Bronx. I was the first. The only."

Discussion between Zora and May: **"First of all, I belong everywhere I am. That's obvious. Otherwise, I wouldn't be there. I figure it this way--I didn't get into Barnard by accident. That being the case, I'm not gonna let anybody play me close. Especially not when the bottom line is that all they want to be is me anyway. They wish they had my nerve. They won't admit it. Not in so many words. But a cat is still a cat, whether it's got long hair or short."**

One dimension to the story that was helpful to me in understanding human nature was the story of May's father, a man who had escaped from slavery. If you think about the era this story was taking place in, and realize that in the 1920s the memory of slavery was very fresh, then you realize slavery was the memory her father carried. It can't have been easy for him to dream, therefore how could he see more for his daughter? His relationship with his daughter reminded me of that of James Baldwin and his stepfather, and how Baldwin was able to understand his step-father a bit better after he considered his life history and the society he was a part of.

My review doesn't do the book enough justice. This is an amazing book written by an extremely talented writer. I'm so glad to have read it and I hope you will too.

Liebes Buch says

In "Der Engel von Harlem" lässt die Autorin Kuwana Haulsey May Chinn ihre Lebensgeschichte erzählen. May Chinn war 1926 die erste schwarze Ärztin in New York. Ursprünglich hatte sie Musik studieren wollen. Da man ihr in diesem Fachbereich aber ankündigte, sie als Farbige durchfallen zu lassen, wechselte sie in den wissenschaftlichen Bereich, deren Professoren offener waren und ihr Talent gerne ausbilden wollten. Haulsey holt ein bisschen bei der Familiengeschichte aus, um den Kontrast zur Zeit der Sklaverei herzustellen. So kann der Leser den schweren Kampf und das Leid der Menschen besser nachvollziehen. Fantastisch gelungen sind der Autorin auch die Schilderungen der Rassenunruhen in den Städten und des Einsatzes der Schwarzen im 1. Weltkrieg. May Chinn versorgte nicht nur die Armen in Harlem, sondern wurde auch Krebsspezialistin. In den 70ern setzte sie sich zur Ruhe, konnte sich aber nicht einmal eine Wohnung leisten. Als das bekannt wurde, ermöglichten die New Yorker ihr durch Spenden den Verbleib in ihrer Sozialwohnung. Sowas gibt es nur in Amerika! Kuwana Haulsey wurden für ihre Bücher einige Preise

verliehen. Ich empfand den Schreibstil als solide, das Buch liest sich praktisch von allein. Sehr spannend! May Chinn kannte übrigens auch Paul Robeson! Ich war sehr überrascht! Ich las die deutsche Ausgabe von Urachhaus.

Julie says

Dr. May Chinn was obviously an extraordinary woman who led a remarkable life and accomplished great things over tremendous obstacles, but this book essentially turns her story into high-end chick-lit. It's still very readable but could have been much more in the hands of a less breathless author.

Iejones says

I LOVED this book. Haulsey breathes life into an historical period and personality whose career changed the face of medicine in America in general and New York in particular. May Edward Chinn was the first African American female doctor in the state of New York city. Through this fictional account of her life, Haulsey takes literacy license informed through history and speculation on the life of Chinn. The result is an incredible work of fiction. The words melt of the page into the reader's being -- her opening lines - "It took seventy-three yeards for my father to die. He held on, cloaked beneath a broad quilt of memories, peering out of his window onto the wide basin of winter below. Memory had creased his face with fresh gullies and markers that ran east, toward the river..." This is a must read -- especially since Chinn struggled with identity and place.

Crease says

With the very first line of this novel, maybe the best to begin a book that I've ever read, Kuwana Haulsey grabbed me and didn't let go.

I'm ashamed to admit that I had never heard the name May Edward Chinn prior to coming across Angel of Harlem. The first female doctor of Negro decent in New York City, May Chinn occupies two distinct places in Black History. In addition to her medical accomplishments, which included becoming the preeminent early cancer detection specialist in New York and one of the most sought-after in the country, she also accompanied the incomparable Paul Robeson during the days leading up to the Harlem Renaissance. An accomplished pianist, her first love was music. However, after being mocked and given a failing grade by a music professor who believed "her people" were incapable of grasping the nuances of classical music, she switched her major to science, eventually going on to medical school, and becoming the first African-American female graduate of Bellevue Medical College in New York.

Consistent with books written on various other personalities from the same period, the amount of idiocy she faced, born purely of the desperation of White Americans to maintain the status quo, is astounding and sad. Having diagnosed a dying man with syphilis of the brain, Dr. Chinn was admonished and told her diagnosis couldn't be correct because "the negro brain simply isn't large enough to have sufficient blood flow to carry the disease."

Angel of Harlem is a novelization of May Chinn's life, which of course means that Mrs Haulsey takes

creative license in telling her beautiful story. Maybe it's because of this that she's able to so deftly weave the story of Dr. Chinn's family, immediate and extended, into the book. The impact of her parents on her was immense; though nothing alike, both her mother and father awed her, each at different times in her life and each in their own way.

I'm not sure if my eyes watered more during the incredible lows or highs of May Chinn's life...Kuwana Haulsey is some storyteller.

Patricia says

I just picked up this book in Barnes and Noble randomly for five bucks... it looks like its worth way more than the price... all I know so far is that it's about the first black female physician of Harlem who became that after a flourishing career as a pianist is cut short by a racist professor...and I'm sure there's more. This is coming out of my favorite time period in American history and in American literature - the Harlem Renaissance - and according to the book's jacket she was friends with my favorite poet - Mr. Hughes!! The fact that school starts in a few days will not stop me from reading this book!

Becky says

Wow. I picked this book up at my library sale knowing nothing about it. I am so glad I did.

A novel based on the life of Dr. May Chinn, the first black female doctor in Harlem. This is the story of a truly amazing woman. It reads beautifully - as if you are experiencing life with her. Sadly, I knew nothing about May Chinn. She is certainly a woman whose life needs to be remembered.

Nancy says

I love historical fiction because it gives you a "may have been" glimpse into the lives of those who really lived. May Edwards Chin was an African American DOCTOR- in the early 1920's. The fact that she got into medical school and had her own practice when most women didn't even have jobs is amazing- and that she did it during the time when southern blacks were not even allowed to go into most public places and northern blacks were treated with contempt and outright bigotry and hatred makes this even more interesting. As the daughter of a former slave, she had a mother who believed in education and spent her life earning the monies needed for music lessons, private school and then college. As you see what life was like in Harlem, NY during the life of people such as WEB DuBois and Langston Hughes it makes you wonder how they did the things they did. Well worth reading and certainly I feel expanded from having spent time with this woman, her friends and her struggles...

Christine says

I chose to read this book after Rowena Monde posted some text from it on Twitter. The limited words she shared compelled me to read it because the writing was so lush. The haunting imagery Kuwana Haulsey's use

of language projects is solid through the first section of the book. Then she shifts gears to tell a story driven by both grit and loss.

The book is a fictive retelling of the life of May Edward Chinn, one of the first female, African American doctors in Harlem. It centers Chinn, but includes a cast of others with whom some readers may have more knowledge: Countee Cullen, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston Including these people in the book provides a more familiar context perhaps for Chinn's life to grow in a reader's mind. Without them, she still soars.

The family relationships Haulsey develops are beautiful, though sometimes painful or haunting. Courage and demons drive the goals of Chinn's parents. The talent and determination of their daughter grows up out of those roots.

It's hard for me to say too much about this book without spoiling it. Any lover of lush writing, historical fiction, inspiring human stories is sure to enjoy it.

Some of my favorite lines:

Memory had creased his face with fresh gullies and markers that ran east, toward the river. When memory escaped him, he searched it out, skating his eyes along the sagging white rooftops outside until he found what he was looking for.

She sighed so soft and, for once, I knew that her memories of my father had nothing whatsoever to do with me.

I had no watch, but I could feel the time drop off just the same. So used to the night, I knew how the silence of 2:45 AM differed from the silence of 3:30 AM.
