



# My Notorious Life

*Kate Manning*

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## **My Notorious Life** Kate Manning

A brilliant rendering of a scandalous historical figure, Kate Manning's *My Notorious Life* is an ambitious, thrilling novel introducing Axie Muldoon, a fiery heroine for the ages. Axie's story begins on the streets of 1860s New York. The impoverished child of Irish immigrants, she grows up to become one of the wealthiest and most controversial women of her day.

In vivid prose, Axie recounts how she is forcibly separated from her mother and siblings, apprenticed to a doctor, and how she and her husband parlay the sale of a few bottles of 'Lunar Tablets for Female Complaint' into a thriving midwifery business. Flouting convention and defying the law in the name of women's reproductive rights, Axie rises from grim tenement rooms to the splendor of a mansion on Fifth Avenue, amassing wealth while learning over and over never to trust a man who says "trust me."

When her services attract outraged headlines, Axie finds herself on a collision course with a crusading official, Anthony Comstock, founder of the Society for the Suppression of Vice. It will take all of Axie's cunning and power to outwit him in the fight to preserve her freedom and everything she holds dear.

Inspired by the true history of an infamous female physician who was once called "the Wickedest Woman in New York," *My Notorious Life* is a mystery, a family saga, a love story, and an exquisitely detailed portrait of nineteenth-century America. Axie Muldoon's inimitable voice brings the past alive, and her story haunts and enlightens the present.

## **My Notorious Life Details**

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# From Reader Review My Notorious Life for online ebook

## Lynn says

Axie Muldoon is an New York Irish gutter snipe. She is taken from her destitute mother and shipped off on the Orphan Train to Chicago. She and her two younger siblings are separated and Axie vows to reunite them as their mother has since died. Axie works as a house maid for a midwife who also does a procedure to remove unwanted female obstructions (i.e.-abortions). She learns both trades and goes on to be very successful. The book is vibrant, charming, plucky, and is full of twists and turns and multiple story lines.

Axie marries, has a baby, reunites with family, becomes rich and uses her talents to help the suffering of worn out, poor, misfortunate women with no where else to turn. She also delivers hundreds of babies and saves many a woman from childbirth death. Due to the misplaced zeal of white "Christian" men (sound familiar) she is put out of business and jailed for her surgical crimes. I will let you discover what becomes of her for yourself. I found this read particularly salient given that a woman's right to chose and control her own fertility is being threatened 150 years since the above story (which is based on a real midwife). Scary times.

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## Martha says

I have to say this is one of those rare books that has it all: an amazing story, historic detail that is well integrated into the telling of it, a narrator you can't help but empathize with, and circumstances that raise some age old questions and debate about women's reproductive rights. Kate Manning is a clever author. As Axie Muldoon tells her story she drops some tantalizing hints about what is to come, sometimes only the slimmest of observations or a thought that promises a significant insight into future relationships or occurrences, but, like a clever gossip who keeps you hanging, enough to make you want to read on and find out where she is leading. She is a lively, intelligent woman who can't help but tell it the way she sees it and some of her descriptions of the people she meets and deals with (especially those she dislikes and often invoking animals) are about as funny as any I've ever heard before. I thought at first I would not be able to deal with the dialect, but as Axie ages and she is coached by various better educated people in her life and rises in society, the dialect becomes diluted and her narration smooths out, until Axie herself has only a charming hiccup of poor grammar. The change is subtle and believable. It also allows the story to flow.

I couldn't put this book down and wished for more as Axie's story ended.

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## Barb says

I was recently in Town Hall in New York City, a theater created for The League for Political Education in 1921. I saw a plaque showing Margaret Sanger's arrest from the stage where she was speaking about birth control. An advocate of woman's rights, she founded the American Birth Control League (now known as Planned Parenthood). With this heroine in mind, I was lucky to read Kate Manning's wonderful novel, based on a true turn of the century character of an earlier advocate for women's' reproductive rights and the desperate situations women found themselves in at the time. Set mostly in New York City, this novel seems well researched and carefully crafted. The characters (some historical figures included) are carefully developed and hold your interest regarding their fate.

This is a wonderful book, for women young and old, for those who enjoy historical fiction and those who lean a bit to the left. Religious conservatives would not approve. We've come a long way, but it is a shame that many of the arguments still exist over one hundred years later.

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## **Carol - Reading Writing and Riesling says**

My View:

How to begin – this book is extraordinary and exquisite and I loved every word on every page! This book has much to offer- it is a historical feminist work of fiction “based partly on the life and death of Ann Trow Lohman (1811-79) also known as Madame Restell who practiced midwifery in New York for almost forty year” (Author’s note). It is a love story, it is a story of overcoming adversity where the heroine actually wins, and it is a story of courage, devotion, family and humanity at work. The early years of Madame X’s life echo of life of so many women at the time; fighting to survive, fighting to feed their families, each day a hardship, each day a battle against poverty, hunger, disease and child birth death. For many women pregnancy was a real health threat, so many died in childbirth or shortly after.

But enough of the feminist ideology and analysis – that could go on and on and this is a book review not an essay on feminism but I do hope this book becomes part of high school and university curriculum – and has so much to offer to men and women.

I loved the well developed characters in this book- Madame X/Axie/Ann is a powerful and heroic young woman. She is feisty, says her mind, she is intelligent, she is a mother, a daughter, a wife and she is a business woman, she is a health worker. She speaks with attitude, honesty and she has an authentic voice. I love her frailties, they make her credible – she is plagued by jealousy, she has a quick temper, she speaks her mind. She has self doubts, she rises to her husband’s baits and taunts – she is manipulated by his words and takes risks she might not have taken by herself. She grows.

The minor characters are also quite likable and fallible – all seeking to be loved and cherished and seeking the right to determine their own future, to rise above poverty. Charlie is a likable rogue and is quite enlightened for the times. Greta is vulnerable, loyal and demonstrates we are all just one mistake or bad judgement away from despair.

Manning paints from an incredibly rich palette of colours – her settings, the clothes, the buildings, the language of the time, her characters, all come alive on the page. When you read this novel you do not merely observe; you walk this life side by side with Madame X.

The plot is fast paced and exciting. This historical work of fiction also provides intrigue, romance and mystery. This book has something for everyone. I cannot recommend this book more highly. This is one of the best reads of 2013.

Thank you GoodReads, First Reads and Bloomsbury for the opportunity to read this impressive book.

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## **Heather Fineisen says**

If you read one book this year, make it this one. Women's reproductive rights. Immigration and the Orphan Train. Characters you won't forget. Well written. Well researched. And a darn good yarn.

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### **Donna says**

I loved, loved, loved the writing in this book. It was so warm, creative and vivid. The characters and the surroundings sprang forth from the pages in splendid color. I even found myself laughing out loud. The main character was portrayed in such depth, from her dreams to her fears, from her wants to her needs. She whined a lot though, but with good reason. And I loved Charlie. He was perfect for Axie.

The story was uniquely creative, as well. Even though this story takes place in the mid 1800's, the topic is as controversial today as it was back then. The author painted a heart breaking picture of the life of women during that time. It seemed like such a sad plight. Their load seemed weary and heavy to bear, with the added weight of the stigma of abortion, a lack of medical care for women, unwanted pregnancies and no contraception.

The author shed light on the plight of these women. The nature of some of these problems seemed to transcend class. But when it came to proper medical attention, it seemed worse if you were poor.

Overall, this was thought provoking. Not in determining what side I am on, but simply that there are two sides and reasons for both, which always seem to result in heated arguments, even today.

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### **Tania says**

new York City was the roofless and only domicile of thirty-five thousand children. in our hideous number we scraps was cast outdoors or lost by our parents, we was orphans and half orphans and runaways, the miserable offspring of irish and germans, italians and Russians, servants and slaves, Magdalenes and miscreants, all the unwashed poor huddled slubs who landed yearning and unlucky on the Battery with nothing to own but our muscles and teeth, the hunger of our bellies.

3.5 stars. This was an easy-reading, interesting story inspired by a real midwife who became one of the most controversial figures in Victorian New York City.

I especially loved the first half of the book, it reminded me of Angela's ashes and Gangs of New York. My heart broke for Axie, Dutch and little Joe having to beg for scraps of food, being taken from their mom and then being split up from each other, and handed out like parcels.

The second half of the book was very thought-provoking, as I've never thought about life without contraceptives. Imagine a life where you have to give up your children because you can't feed them, just to find yourself pregnant a few months down the line. So even if you are a pro-lifer it's very difficult to condemn Axie, and her patients for making the decisions they did.

I really enjoyed Axie's character, she felt very real. A true survivor, with no regard for society's expectations, she is also extremely human with loads of trust issues and an insatiable greed for money (security).

My only issues with My Notorious Life was that I thought the second half could have been a bit shorter. I

also had problems with \*'s being used for the swearwords, for example c\*\*p. I found myself spending a lot of time deciphering these expletives.

All in all I'm glad I met Axie and was introduced to this aspect of Victorian life.

The Story: Axie Muldoon, the headstrong daughter of Irish immigrants, forced to beg for pennies as a child on the brutal streets of New York City, grows up to become the most successful - and controversial - midwife of her time. When she is taken in by a Manhattan doctor Axie learns the craft that she will live by - and later fight for. She rises from the gutter to the glitter of Fifth Avenue high society, and discovers that the right way is not always the way of the church or the law. As Axie's reputation grows she finds herself on a collision course with the crusading official who would be the righteous instrument of her downfall. It will take all of her power to outwit him and save both herself and those she loves from ruin.

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## **Barb says**

Historical Fiction is my favorite genre and I love reading books set in the 1800s. I was excited to read this story based on the life of Ann Trow Lohman, known as Madame Restell who practiced as a female physician in New York City for forty years.

The author thoughtfully illustrates the way women's lives were bound by their fertility before birth control was legal. She gives the protagonist, Axie/Annie Muldoon personal experiences that guide her path in life to becoming a midwife and healer to women. She convincingly details the early years of Axie's life and her experiences riding the Orphan Train. The first part of the novel was well written and engaging, the narrator's voice was believable, the characters were well developed and the disappointment and hardships were realistic.

Unfortunately the remainder of the novel isn't written with the same attention to detail and the story becomes flat and lags. The narrator begins to repeat herself, she's jealous and can't trust her husband but doesn't offer us many details as to why she feels this way. She also begins to fixate on the loss of her sister and brother which she mentions repeatedly with little if any progression in that story line either.

Events in the second half of the book felt manufactured and contrived in order to give us the ending we already know will happen, as it's revealed in the first chapter. I found it a challenge to continue reading this book and repeatedly wished the ending had been written with the same attention to detail as the beginning.

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## **Megan Brain says**

My Notorious Life By Madame X by Kate Manning is my favorite book of the year so far. Based loosely on the story of a midwife who lived in the late 1800's it demonstrates some of the issues faced by women at the time and some of society's opinions on "Women's business." The book starts off by introducing Axie Muldoon, the main character and her siblings, while they are out scavenging for food they meet a man who offers to help them. They accept his offer of food and are happy with his kindness and generosity, it is only later that Axie will look back on this moment as being a major turning point in her life. The children take this man back home to their mother who is severely ill and has lost the use of one arm after an incident at work. When the man sees the state of their living conditions he offers to take Mrs Muldoon to the hospital to see a

doctor and tells her he will organize for the children to be taken to lovely homes in the country to be cared for while she gets better. After dropping her off he takes all the children to an orphanage, this is the start of a very different life for Azie who is used to caring for her siblings and family. After a series of events Axie meets a Doctor and his wife who is a midwife, they offer to let her move in to their home and give her work helping the maid with her daily duties. After awhile of Axie working and living in this house she is asked to help with sorting the medical equipment and medicine, which is how she is introduced to the world of midwifery and medicine. Soon she is helping the doctors wife with delivering babies and tending to patients, it is during this time she learns the art she will later practice, it is this art that made Axie a wealthy and powerful woman and it is also this that destroys her and her reputation in the end. This is a gripping and powerful story that is very well written, I highly recommend reading *My Notorious Life* to anyone looking for a great read. The historical parts of the story are accurately depicted and told in such a way you feel like you are there in the 1880's. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

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### **Amelia Gremelspacher says**

The narrator of this book is a plucky girl from the tenements who refuses to allow her status to determine her whole life. I must be getting cranky, because honestly the plot line made me sigh at first. Lately it seems that a number of women in literature have beaten the odds in old New York. I even checked the publishing date to make sure I haven't read it. Nonetheless, I was quickly engaged in the story of Ann/Axey. Her character is as ready to criticize her own behavior as she is to complain about other people. The author uses a quirky way to portray this character that sets her aside from other heroines in the historical fiction genre. I also appreciate the self deprecating wit and sense of humor.

The book takes place during the Civil War and encompasses several of the prominent social movements of that time. She and her siblings had been taken off the streets in the great Orphan Train movement in which children were sent to live in Midwest homes to a greater or lesser good. The Civil War and its furor raged outside the city, but the draft riots engulfed the streets. Women were just on the cusp of some small independence, and Ann takes advantage of this small chink in prospects.

Based on the true story of an infamous midwife, this book addresses the very difficult issues of birth and contraception that have yet to be resolved in our own time. Watching the the birth of new technology and medical knowledge brings the discussion into a different light that I find useful. So in the end, I was surprised to really enjoy this book, and I find that it stands out from many books of this type.

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### **Lori says**

What an amazing story!!! As I read a novel like this, I am continuously reminded of how thankful I am for the rights that women now have!!! Even today, these issues still cause a lot of controversy... Manning does a wonderful job, through Axie's voice, of putting a face to the issues of birth control and I feel that regardless of your views it's impossible not to empathize with the difficult plight of these women!!!

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### **Karen says**

Excellent historical fiction about a midwife in the mid 1800's in NYC. Listened to an audio of the book, kept

me interested the entire time...

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### **Susan says**

I first became aware of author Kate Manning with her excellent 2002 novel *Whitegirl*, a fictional alternative story based on O.J. Simpson and his former wife, Nicole Brown Simpson. It has been too long since she has written anything new and I was delighted to see that she has now corrected that with this historical work. Again, the story is based on a real person - in this case New York midwife Ann Trow Lohman (1811-1879).

Using the form of a newly 'discovered' diary, this book tells the life story of Axie (Annie) Muldoon, a street urchin who is taken from her poverty stricken and injured mother and put on an orphan train to Illinois along with her brother and sister. Against her wishes, the family are split up and, as nobody wants to keep the difficult and aggressive Axie, she returns to New York along with Charlie - another unwanted child. Eventually, after many trials and tribulations, Axie is taken on as a maid to Mrs Evans and, later, as her assistant. For Mrs Evans is a midwife and there are many women in New York who have need of her services.

Axie eventually becomes the Notorious Madame X - successful and wealthy beyond her wildest dreams, but her wealth is made from scandalous means. For many are threatened by her success and her means of obtaining it. While women fear childbirth and pregnancy, her services are seen as a danger to society. Having made it to the top, there are those that intend to bring her down. Can Axie save herself and, more than that, can she learn to trust those who want to help her?

This is a really great read. It has a fantastic central character in the redoubtable Axie Muldoon and the author does a wonderful job of recreating both the era and the danger of childbirth at that time. You really wish Axie to succeed and will cheer her through her desperate childhood, her rise and possible fall. If you are looking for a book with substance, thrills and a really romping story, then look no further. I have to admit that I feared Ms Manning may have lost her touch after such a long time between books, but I am happy to say that is not the case. A brilliant story and it is well worth searching out her first novel too - perhaps it is too much to hope that it will be republished on kindle along with this new novel, which is sure to be a success? I hope so and, to the author, I trust she will not leave us waiting so long again for her next book.

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### **Diane S ? says**

Written in somewhat of a melodramatic fashion and yes sometimes I felt a little too dramatic yet it was impossible for me to not get caught up in Axie's story. For one thing I just love this character's name, Axie Muldoon, just resonated for me for some reason.

That this book is loosely built on the real life person of a female medical doctor once considered the Wickedest Women in New York, is a plus because it makes the story so much more genuine. This book contains so much history, and I feel that the author's writing was the strongest in her descriptions of the streets of New York, with so many immigrants and orphans, a street that was filthy and not very friendly too many. The orphan trains and the splitting up of families. A journey through women's contraceptive practices of the day, the beginning trade in medicines, where people were willing to part with their few dollars just on the hope that something would work. The trade of midwife and all it entailed and of course Comstock and



his moral crusade to clear out profanity of any kind.

Axie is a character that is larger than life at a time when choices for woman were at their lowest. The ending is a little too pat, but I can live with it. I kept thinking what a wonderful mini-series this book would be. Maybe gain a wonderful following like The Midwives and Downton Abbey. Think it would work wonderfully well.

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### **Hannah says**

Well, this was a surprise. I won it in a first reads giveaway.

I expected this to be about a prostitute in Victorian times and was more than pleasantly surprised that it's a completely different subject matter. That element of surprise is fantastic and it's actually a far more interesting and intriguing read because of the profession that Madame X is involved in :)

This is a real page turner, fairly easy read that doesn't feel at all like a slog. Often, books this long can feel a bit of a drag but this is perfectly timed and very, very well written. I love diary style books that ignore the correct grammar rules. They offer a lot of intrigue and give the protagonist much more character.

I don't like to give away any plot lines in reviews as I am a real spoiler hater, but this is full of surprises and Axie is an unbelievable character. She's written so perfectly. I was hooked at the first chapter and stayed hooked throughout. Well worth a read, I would recommend it to anybody especially those with any kind of an interest in history. Fabulous!

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### **Alicia says**

Once I got past the style of writing, it was a really quite enjoyable!

A big eye opener to the way things were done back in the day... women's rights, birthing rights, women's health care... The feminist in me really came out :)

Also, I loved the cover and the print on the inside of the cover!!

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### **Angela M says**

There's the hook right at the beginning and I didn't want to stop reading . Then there are the three hungry children on the streets of New York in the mid 1860's. Before you know it they are on the Orphan Train for Illinois, though not yet orphans .

Several months later, twelve year old Axie Muldoon is back on the train to New York City, where she really becomes an orphan. Sad and alone, little Axie Muldoon will steal your heart as she dreams of reuniting with her brother and sister . She will capture your imagination as she grows into a smart, tough, headstrong and caring , woman, who eventually makes and sells medicine " to help a girl in trouble". Axie becomes a midwife who delivers babies and performs abortions . Even though activities other than to save the life of a mother were illegal, the laws were not enforced for a time. However, trouble for Axie soon begins.

This book is just so interesting in its depiction of New York City during this time period, the Orphan Trains, and the issues surrounding reproductive rights of women. Manning's inspiration for Axie's story is Ann Trow, a physician "who practiced midwifery and was called the "wickedest woman in New York." I don't know how much of the real Ann Trow is represented in Axie, but Manning has created one of those characters that help me understand just why I love to read.

I won't give away Axie's fate, in case someone decides to read this and I hope you do. I will say that she was destined to become an unforgettable character whose wonderful name and story I'll always remember. I just can't give this book anything less than 5 stars.

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### **Jen says**

Axie Muldoon. A stubborn, brazen and relentless Irish orphan who became a notorious midwife in the 1860's in New York. A highly likeable character with her numerous flaws. This is her story and how she rose from poverty and became a medical practitioner in a day and age where it was frowned upon for taking an interest in anything outside of being a wife and mother. From her early days of being a housemaid, she learned the skill of assisting women during their confinement along with other female issues - including being an abortionist to those women whom were victimized or whom would be if they carried their babies to term. This was her fight against the male dominated perspective that nothing should interfere with conception. It was also her emotional journey - learning to trust and love unconditionally. This probably could still be considered a controversial read and one whose subject is still under debate today, more than a century later. A great read and one I may have missed had I not seen the reviews by my GR friends. 4 ★

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### **Jenny says**

"When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood." -Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*

This quote is true for Axie Muldoon, the hardscrabble heroine of *My Notorious Life*. An Orphan Train reject, Axie returns home heartbroken, only to watch her mother die in childbirth when an ignorant neighbor causes a hemorrhage. It is this early experience, her poverty, and Axie's own independent nature that eventually lead to her rise as New York's leading expert on "women's maladies". Never mind that dispensing such advice was illegal at the time.

But the police have better things to do than prosecute, until a male doctor and his sanctimonious holier-than-thou friend cross Axie's path. The fact is, she can never deny her services to a woman in need, even if she recognizes at the time that trouble may be knocking at her door. And it takes her more than once to learn that to ensure her family's privacy and livelihood, she may have to journey away from her country and her identity.

This book was an interesting read, but seemed a bit longer than necessary in parts and occasionally seems

repetitive. A good addition to the available opinions on a hot button subject, this novel brings in history that often is ignored. It is obvious that it will not be popular with the pro-lifers.

(Readers who enjoy this may enjoy Angela's Ashes, When She Woke, Cider House Rules, and The Story of Jane)

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## **Linda says**

The descriptive writing in this book is a time traveling machine. I was instantly transported to late 19th century New York. The book comes on strong right "outta da'box." If one wants to visit a time when women and children were at the complete mercy of society, lived without civil rights, labor rights, and reproductive rights, this book will give you an education by way of living it for yourself. This book is an exquisite page turner, full of surprises, tears, laughter, sarcasm and wit. The main character, "Axie Muldoon" is passionate, strong willed, rebellious and sees the injustice of her life coming at her like a runaway freight train. "Axie," represents strong-willed women everywhere who are willing to pay the price of their convictions to ensure a better life for women and children.

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