

A CONVERSATION
WITH KATE MANNING
AUTHOR OF MY NOTORIOUS LIFE

What inspired you to set your story in 1860s Manhattan?

I wanted to write a good old-fashioned rip-roaring tale, and the drama and hysterics of Victorian New York are perfect fodder for that. The headlines were always screaming about scandal and morality. Good guys and bad guys, the very, very rich and wretched bare-bones poor. Sin, disease, hucksters, con artists. Wild, brash characters trying to reinvent themselves in that very American rags-to-riches way. Immigrants were pouring into the city. The country was at war with itself. Attitudes toward women and children and religion were starting to change. Writing this book, I loved exploring the seeds of current social issues that were planted over a hundred years ago, marveling at what has changed and what hasn't.

***My Notorious Life* is told from the point of view of Axie Muldoon. Can you talk a little about her?**

Axie is the orphaned child of Irish immigrants and a creature of the New York City slums. She grows up to become notorious for the simple reason that she helps women. Especially pregnant women. And especially women who don't want to be pregnant. She's fierce and outspoken and because she stands up to the authorities, she gets herself in a fair amount of trouble with the press and with the law. But really, her main wish is for love and safety—she's searching for a family, and that intense longing motivates her to help powerless women like her mother was, and like she herself once was, or could have been, had she not stumbled into her profession.

Is Axie based on a real person?

Part of Axie's story borrows from the life of a lost historical figure named Ann Trow Lohman. Lohman was infamous as "the wickedest woman in New York." Her name was in the scandalized headlines for decades in the 1800s, and when she died she was among the richest women in the country, with an enormous mansion—the size of a city block—on Fifth Avenue. She'd made a fortune selling "medicines" which were euphemistically labeled "Lunar Tablets for the Relief of Female Complaint." These pills were known to cause a miscarriage—women with unwanted pregnancies were desperate for this remedy and for Lohman's midwifery services. If the pills didn't terminate the pregnancy, Lohman would help put a child up for adoption, or as a last resort, perform an abortion. Reading about her, it

seemed unlikely to me that she was entirely the “Hag of Misery” that the press constantly made her out to be.

What happened to Ann Lohman?

She met a pretty grisly end. Because she provided abortions, she was jailed several times and served a year in the penitentiary on Blackwell’s, now Roosevelt, Island. The advertising she did, and her wealth, attracted the law and religious crusaders. When she was arrested a final time, she was despondent and afraid, and killed herself in quite a dramatic fashion, by slicing her own throat.

But some people believed she wasn’t dead at all and had faked her death by substituting the body of one of her “victims”—a woman who’d died during a procedure—and absconded to London or Paris. They worried that she might one day spill her secrets, revealing the names of all the society women and mistresses of prominent New Yorkers who’d used her services. When I read that people thought she wasn’t dead, I wondered, well, what if she had lived to tell her story? And that’s how the book first caught fire in my imagination.

Axie walks down New York City streets that, although the names are still the same, would be virtually unrecognizable to current day Manhattanites. What was Axie’s Manhattan like?

Cherry Street, where Axie spends her childhood, was among the most harrowing, dangerous, and filthy quarters of the city. It was a few short blocks of extremely crowded and dark tenement slums with as many as three families in two rooms. There were open sewers and slop pits in rear yards, pigs and chickens wandering around. The sounds were of horse hooves on paving stones and the cries of oyster-sellers and other peddlers hawking their wares from carts. The smells must have been overwhelming.

Axie’s Manhattan was polarized by race and war and class. The Civil War increased the number of prostitutes, destitute women, and unwanted pregnancies. In 1863, the Draft Riots shook the city, where whites blamed blacks for the war and were angry that blacks were not drafted. At least a dozen black men were lynched—one on Clarkson Street—and the Colored Orphans Asylum was looted and burned down. These events worked their way into *My Notorious Life*.

Of course, as a true New Yorker, Axie loves fashion and craves the glitter of the shops on Lower Broadway where Haughwout’s Department Store opened on the corner of Broome Street in one of those gorgeous old cast-iron buildings. It was then a marvelous new wonderland of fashion and fine furnishings and crystal.

From the first line, “It was me who found her,” readers quickly realize Axie speaks her own brand of English. How did you get Axie’s voice and what are some of your favorite words from her time that you discovered?

It was torture getting her voice at first, but once I got going, it was a pleasure. Starting out I wrote without any punctuation, since I wanted to get the feel of Axie as semi-literate, with a voice flavored by Irish and the tough New York street. The fun of it was in finding slang words and bits of English that have fallen out of use and putting them in the mouths of the characters.

“Reticule” is a good one, for a purse. “Cabbage-hearted” means cowardly, a “unicorn,” is a lusty old man. One of my favorites is “Grannymush” which is what my Irish friend calls somebody acting fussy. We really ought to resurrect some of the great old-fashioned insults and euphemisms: “bungstarter” comes from the tool used to tap a hole in a wooden keg. Words like “baubles,” “cunicle,” “the crinkum-crankum,” and the “monosyllable” conjure anatomy perfectly, but they don’t sound obscene to my ears—the same way foreign curse words don’t seem crude. A euphemism is often more colorful than the technical term, anyway.

Axie and her young brother and sister are begging on the streets when they are “saved” by Reverend Charles Brace of the Children’s Aid Society. Brace really existed, didn’t he?

Charles Loring Brace founded the Children’s Aid Society, which is still a force for good in New York today. He comes off rather badly in *My Notorious Life* because he separates a family. But his impulses were philanthropic. He was one of the first to realize that nobody in the mid-nineteenth century was taking care of destitute children in any sort of organized fashion. By 1850, there were about thirty thousand kids living on the streets of New York—kids as young as two, shoeless and sleeping on steam grates. Brace really grappled with the question of what, exactly, was society’s responsibility to the poor and to children. His ideas resulted in the Orphan Train movement, which is a little-known chapter in US history, and one that sweeps up the characters in *My Notorious Life*.

What was the Orphan Train Movement?

Brace believed that what these kids needed was fresh air, and fine Christian families to take them in. Of course he knew that Midwestern farms required strong backs to help work the land. So he started a project where these orphaned New York children would be shipped west. Signs advertising “Homes Wanted” would go up along the train route and people at the various stops would step forward to inspect the orphans—looking at their teeth and muscles. They’d then adopt a kid as if they were

adopting a puppy or a kitten. Many of these children met difficult fates. They were servants, or worse, abused. Still, some did find happy families, and Brace began a conversation about society's responsibility to its children that we continue to have today.

At a young age, Axie becomes an apprentice to a midwife caring for pregnant women. What kind of research did you have to do, how factual are you, assuming you had to learn along with Axie?

I read a lot of old medical textbooks and books of marriage advice that were written in the nineteenth century. It was fascinating to see what passed for science back then. The “milk leg” for example, was the name for the condition when a pregnant woman's ankles swelled up—it was thought to be caused by an excess of mother's milk. As if milk just filled up the whole body somehow. That may sound almost hilarious to us now, but back then it was disastrous if you were a pregnant woman who was really suffering eclampsia. The novel is as true to the times as I could make it. I constantly referenced a crumbling 1864 medical textbook called *Lectures on the Diseases of Women and Children*. I also got help from two obstetrician-gynecologists I know, who basically talked me through how it would be to deliver a baby or do an abortion.

What were conditions like for pregnant women in nineteenth-century America?

Grim. Even for rich women. There was no anesthesia stronger than a shot of whiskey. Doctors didn't know yet about infection, how unwashed hands could kill a patient. Women died in childbirth at very high rates. And God help a woman if she became pregnant out of wedlock. She was considered “ruined.” She was often disowned or cast out by her family and shamed in public. A pregnant woman without a man had limited options: prostitution was a common fate.

There was little understanding of birth control, and women went to horrible extremes to end unwanted pregnancies. Termination was one of the only forms of birth control available and often carried out by the woman herself. They swallowed lye, turpentine, applied leeches, used knitting needles, turkey feathers, or crochet hooks. They would beat themselves or throw themselves down a flight of stairs.

When nineteenth-century newspapers began to advertise pamphlets like “Advice to a Wife,” or medicines for “the relief of female complaint,” women who were desperate for birth control responded, and midwives, like Axie in this novel, got rich as a result. But also around this time—maybe because of the money—the male medical profession began to insist on control over pregnancy, and midwives were forced out of the delivery room.

Obviously a lot has changed for women since the late nineteenth century. But in what ways has nothing has changed?

In this novel, Axie Muldoon's offices are surrounded by a mob. They want to haul her out and hang her. Such a riot actually happened in 1846 to Ann Lohman when her clinic was attacked. Today, Planned Parenthood clinics are routinely surrounded by protestors who try to interfere with women seeking reproductive health care. Clinics are firebombed. Dr. George Tiller and other abortion providers have been murdered. Today, people who oppose abortion and birth control still use tactics first employed in the late 1800s. Back then, the Comstock laws made it illegal, under obscenity statutes and US postal laws, even to give people information about birth control or abortion. Today, the antiabortion movement demonizes abortion providers and women who seek terminations—even if they are pregnant as a result of rape. Antiabortion crusaders are chipping away at women's reproductive rights by imposing all kinds of picayune restrictions on clinics—like the exam rooms and hallways have to be a certain measurement, doctors must have extra credentials—which shut down women's health care clinics and effectively and outrageously, in my opinion, make abortion inaccessible for women in 87 percent of US counties, according to the National Abortion Federation.

Today, thankfully, women don't often die in childbirth or from abortion, either. Abortions are safer than having an injection of penicillin—and for now, still legal. But writing this novel made me realize women have been fighting for reproductive rights forever. In *My Notorious Life*, Axie is scapegoated and trapped by political and religious forces that are still in play, that still trap and scapegoat and blame women who are simply trying to do what's best for themselves and their own families.