



The Gilded Years

Karin Tanabe

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Passing meets *The House of Mirth* in this “utterly captivating” (Kathleen Grissom, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Kitchen House*) historical novel based on the true story of Anita Hemmings, the first black student to attend Vassar, who successfully passed as white—until she let herself grow too attached to the wrong person.

Since childhood, Anita Hemmings has longed to attend the country’s most exclusive school for women, Vassar College. Now, a bright, beautiful senior in the class of 1897, she is hiding a secret that would have banned her from admission: Anita is the only African-American student ever to attend Vassar. With her olive complexion and dark hair, this daughter of a janitor and descendant of slaves has successfully passed as white, but now finds herself rooming with Louise “Lottie” Taylor, the scion of one of New York’s most prominent families.

Though Anita has kept herself at a distance from her classmates, Lottie’s sphere of influence is inescapable, her energy irresistible, and the two become fast friends. Pulled into her elite world, Anita learns what it’s like to be treated as a wealthy, educated white woman—the person everyone believes her to be—and even finds herself in a heady romance with a moneyed Harvard student. It’s only when Lottie becomes infatuated with Anita’s brother, Frederick, whose skin is almost as light as his sister’s, that the situation becomes particularly perilous. And as Anita’s college graduation looms, those closest to her will be the ones to dangerously threaten her secret.

Set against the vibrant backdrop of the Gilded Age, an era when old money traditions collided with modern ideas, Tanabe has written an unputdownable and emotionally compelling story of hope, sacrifice, and betrayal—and a gripping account of how one woman dared to risk everything for the chance at a better life.

The Gilded Years Details

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From Reader Review The Gilded Years for online ebook

Susan says

I'm having a difficult time formulating my thoughts on "The Gilded Years." The novel is based on the true story of the first black woman to graduate from Vassar by "passing" as white. The story of Anita Hemings is fascinating and I love this time period: the gas lamps, the tremendous wealth of families like the Vanderbilt's, the customs and manners of the day juxtaposed against severe poverty, racial and gender inequality, lack of modern medicine, etc. there is just something lacking in this novel for me.

While you can tell the amount of research that went into this book, there was a distinct lack of believable motivation for why the characters make certain choices rather than others. Not much is known about the real Anita Hemings, and the author (for me anyway) didn't craft a believable narrative for why the characters do what they do.

Something just doesn't ring true in the overall fiction and while it's a fast read and moves along quickly, I kept thinking all through the book "why would she do THAT? I don't get it." When that happens for me with a novel, I just never get "lost" in the story. I always remember I'm reading a book. Kind of like when you're having a dream and you're almost awake and know you're dreaming (if that makes any sense.). Ultimately, it's just not very satisfying. Sigh. I had really high hopes for this book as I loved the premise. And I just think, meh. Kind of disappointing.

DeB MaRtEnS says

Brilliant in its possibilities, unfortunately "The Gilded Years" did not fulfill its potential, aside from bringing attention to the notable story of the Afro-American woman and Vassar graduate Anita Hemmings, beginning in 1897. Although a few post-secondary institutions accepted African-American applicants, Vassar was not among them. With her parents' full blessing, Anita "passed" as white until her last year when her roommate divulged a private detective's findings to the college, just prior to graduation.

The press fallout was huge, and attention merciless. The lattermost chapters of the novel were among the most interesting, dealing with Anita's opportunities and marriage to a light man like her, a medical doctor. In her acknowledgments, the author explained that Anita's great-granddaughter did not know about her roots until that elder's death in 1994.

The narrative could have incorporated that fact somehow at the onset, and created something emotionally and socially significant around the issue of "passing", and its cross generational impact. Instead, this take on Anita Hemmings is one of life during the "Gay Nineties", with girls flirting and trying to be the belles of the social season to attract the most well-heeled husband of the nearby college and her trying to fit in, as inconspicuously as possible. It boiled down to basically a historical romance, a fictitious one, with a white suitor, lots of girly chit chat about the boys and Anita quailing whenever put at risk.

The history is SO worth the time, but this fluff of a novel doesn't do it justice. Two unflattering stars.

Georgia says

The research on this book is outstanding. As a reader, I really appreciate when you can tell how hard the author's worked on a book, and how much thought and effort has gone into something, and that's evident here on every single page. The author's attention to detail really adds to the overall story-- references to Anita's childhood, details about clothing, the gas lamps, descriptions of a campus I've never seen-- all this stuff is so subtly placed but so important in general, and she just did a fantastic job with it.

I think Tanabe reveals the secret of Anita being black in the perfect way. It's well placed within the story, and done without fanfare. I think the fact that it's not some panicked, manic scene actually makes it appear as even more potentially harmful to her. She makes it clear that it's not fodder for gossip, but rather something that she feels very shameful about.

This story could've been really tangled and crowded, but I think Tanabe's biggest strength is that she has a firm grasp on it and tells it in a very quiet, fluid way. It's the treatment Anita's story deserves-- it shouldn't have been some scandalous wild story, and she tells it in a way that honors her memory in a really respectful and dignified way.

Tanabe's dialogue is on point, and it's fun to hear her try out different voices.

Additionally, the afterword for this book is beautifully done.

Absolutely one of the best books of the summer and of the year. An important read for everyone.

Book Riot Community says

This charming, thoughtful, and affecting book tells the story of the first black woman to attend Vassar. That she attended as a white woman, passing and always at risk of exposure, drives the plot and allows Tanabe to tell a rich, complicated story about race, gender, education, love, and belonging in the Gilded Age. Give *The Gilded Years* a try if you're drawn to any of the following: historical fiction, Edith Wharton, the history of women's colleges, Nella Larsen, passing as a literary device and historical fact, or reading good books.

—Derek Attig

from The Best Books We Read In February: <http://bookriot.com/2016/03/01/riot-roundup-best-books-february/>

Nadya says

Having received an early copy of this book, I can say without reservation that if you like historical fiction, *The Gilded Years* is a must read. Anita Hemmings, the first African-American to graduate from Vassar College, has a story that should be widely known, yet until now she has passed through the annals of US History with little fanfare. Thankfully, author Karin Tanabe has made a giant step in rectifying this error of omission with an insightful, poignant novel about one woman straddling two worlds in order to achieve her greatest ambition: an education.

While *The Gilded Years* thoroughly engaged me, it was difficult to watch the blatant hypocrisy displayed by many characters. Erstwhile friends, teachers, and suitors alike are depicted as being part of an ostensibly liberal world, one in which they give lip service to social justice as if it were a passing fashion, but when confronted with the truth of Anita's situation, they reveal their inner prejudices (some more virulently than others).

The book is rich in detail, and if you are not familiar with the Gilded Age, Tanabe provides a thorough grounding with her research to see you through. There is an almost cinematic quality to the writing whereby you can imagine scenes as if they were playing in front of you at the movie theatre. I suppose much of that is due to the author's brilliant dialogue, which sparkles and jumps off the page. For what it's worth, I'd also like to throw my hat in support for a Bessie Baker sequel! I loved the friendship between her and Anita, and I would be interested to know more about her experiences with higher education, especially since she did not pass while attending Wellesley.

Marta says

Great topic. Disappointing book.

The Gilded Years brings us a fascinating subject: Anita Hemmings, daughter of a mulatto janitor in Boston, graduated from the exclusive female-only Vassar college in 1897, while passing as white. Cum laude student, proficient in seven languages, a coveted soprano, popular and class beauty, she successfully hid her secret until her roommate broke her story near graduation. She was allowed to graduate, but her story and her beautiful photo kept the interest of news media for months.

Fascinating so far, isn't it? Yes. The problem is, the book is not about Anita. Ninety percent of the story is about Lottie Taylor, Anita's super-rich, spoiled yet charming roommate, her rebellious-yet-endearing chenanigans, her clothes, billionaire mansion, gilded New York life and charmed social life. There is gossip, clothes, a love triangle, romantic intrigue. While Anita is occasionally troubled by subjects of race, this is just a minor distraction in this young-adult romance novel.

This still might be fine, since there is plenty of interesting material of the social life of the day. Unfortunately the writing is middle-grade at best. The dialogue is trivial and repetitive, the characters are flat, the situations mundane. Anita's occasional confrontation with her secret is awkward and inauthentic, so is most of the dialogue. There are anachronisms (such as the words genetics and carbon monoxide in conversation), full names and academic exposition in dialogue. The eighth-grade writing is the same for all interactions, which is too mundane to be used by high society and too academic for poor people.

Unfortunately, the wasting of the subject does not stop here. Granted, it is tough to measure up when one is reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* at the same time, because it throws in sharp relief the biggest fault of the book: Karin Tanabe is half-white, half-Asian, and does not have the foggiest idea about the African-American experience. She is a Vassar graduate and is primarily interested in Vassar. Those parts are beautifully researched, but there is nothing about Anita's neighborhood in Roxbury, and the cheerful attitude of her father after working two shifts as a janitor, is cringe-inducingly naive. She could have read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, which includes a colorful section on Roxbury, or other books by African American authors. As it is, Anita's struggle as a black passing as white is white-washed - a white, privileged woman's romantic idea what it might have been like. No insight there what we could not deduce ourselves.

Overall, I am very disappointed. This could have been so much more. Two stars for the subject selection and the effort.

Reading in Black & White says

"I did not want to attend Vassar just for myself; I wanted to attend Vassar to show that a Negro woman is just as intelligent as a white woman. That we deserve to be at Vassar, that we deserve to be in every school that admits white women. In my own way, I did that. But William, if I could have attended the school as Negro, I would have."

The Gilded Years was a fascinating and eye-opening fictional account of the life of Anita Hemmings. I could tell the author completed extensive research to write such a believable tale of how Anita chose to pass as white to receive an education. I love that the author included an Afterword which included factual information about all of the individuals discussed in the book and she pointed out where she made some embellishments.

MaryannC.Book Fiend says

Like other readers, I never knew that Anita Hemmings was the first African American woman to graduate from Vassar college making this a fascinating read. While this was mostly fictional, the story gave you a sense of the harsh reality of Anita's life as she struggled to keep her race a secret in order just to achieve her goal to graduate. What a world we lived in when an African American was not allowed to attend a college just because of the color of her skin which deemed her inferior despite her high academic achievements. It's such a ludicrous thought today, but was a sad reality back then. I enjoyed the storyline the author created for Anita, even the back-stabbing, over spoken Lottie who angered me throughout the book but made this a compelling read

Steph says

Plot: While the premise was extremely promising, I found the novel to be a little dry. I didn't mind reading it while I was reading it, but once I put it down, I didn't bend over backwards to pick it back up. The story is interesting, but I didn't feel that every scene was necessary and some chapters were a bit frivolous, and I'd find myself skimming as I grew to recognize what wouldn't be important. That, and there was always a heightened sense of expectation, many times of danger, throughout the book that kept being dashed, and it made the story fall flat at times. Still, it wasn't a bad read, and it did pick up at the end. I just felt that a premise like this could have been done much, much better.

Characters: I found our leading girl Anita to be rather dry, and while I understand she needed the elements of meekness and modesty to keep her secret hidden, I didn't always find myself particularly interested in her. The depth of the friendships between the Vassar girls that Tanabe tried to translate through the text didn't feel very full or fleshed out to me. Anita's roommate Lottie's character was intriguing, but a lot of times I tired of her. Most of the time she was the same type of rich, spoiled upper class girl I'd read in other books, and I had been hoping I'd be proven wrong by some twist that never came. Porter, Anita's love interest, had no depth, and because of that I couldn't particularly bring myself to care about their relationship, or feel as if

it was something Anita should risk her secret for. I did like Frederick, Anita's younger brother at MIT, a lot. Bessie, Anita's best friend, was probably my favorite character. They seemed the most real to me, the most interesting, I always felt more engaged in the story when Anita was interacting with them.

Writing: The words could be pretty, but mostly the writing felt dry and stiff and wordy, and I'd begin to skim if a scene got overly descriptive. The dialogue I found to be a bit overloaded with information at times, like a casual conversation between characters would suddenly become a history lesson for the reader. I've never read Tanabe's writing before, so I don't know if this is her usual style, but it felt as if she was trying to emulate the writing style of books written during the 19th century, which isn't a bad thing, if that is what she was going for.

Was I satisfied? It was a good read, but my overall thought for this book is "it could have been done better."

Bonnie says

FABULOUS!!!! I don't read the foreword or the synopsis on the back of books, so I did not realize that this book is based on a true story! Literary license used of course when the author needed to "fill in the blanks". To set the stage..... "The circle in front of Main was crowded with carriages, tired horses, & girls bidding their families goodbye while vying for help with their boxes & suitcase. Before Anita & Caroline had arrived at Vassar as freshmen in 1893." This was a joy to read, but kept you holding your breath waiting to see what would happen next! Has more twists & turns than a road in the Swiss Alps, keeping you immersed & turning pages not realizing how much time has gone by. I loved the descriptions of the hair styles & dress! Was hoping for a sequel to find out about the next chapter in this life of this fascinating central character! ".... the novel that emerges here is an unputdownable and emotionally compelling story of hope, sacrifice & betrayal". Thank you for giving me the chance to read this ARC & write this review.

Aerion says

I've never heard of Anita Hemmings, which is a shame because I grew up an African African woman living so close to Vassar College. I wished for this to have more historical and biographical fiction but the author Tanabe writes so beautifully, I was still very enthralled in the book. I love her style of writing, outside of more personal history of Ms. Hemmings this book was a fantastic read

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

"The Gilded Years" is the story of college senior, Anita. The year is 1915 and it is still quite rare for women to go to college in the first place. Anita is incredibly unique though. She is a black woman passing for a white woman so that she can attend the prestigious Vassar. For the first three years of college, Anita has been incredibly careful not to reveal her true background in order to be allowed to stay at school. Things are threatened by a new roommate and a new love.

I was drawn to this book by the idea of what it meant to pass as another race. Anita realizes the importance of a good education and so she is willing to hide her true self in order to do so. We see how she has to compromise some of her character in order to "pass." One powerful scene in the beginning of the book talks

about how Anita is forced to defend Plessy vs. Ferguson, one of the most famous segregation related court cases, in her debate club. It's a hard road to go but education is paramount to her! I was so nervous for her throughout the book as she continued to run into situations that could unmask her.

The writing of the book is good. The author takes a very important subject and infuses characters into the situation to help modern day readers to understand what perils those trying to pass as another race faced every day. The flow of the story works well. There were a few places sprinkled throughout the book where the author did more telling than showing but overall, the story kept me engaged and entertained!

Alicia Danner says

Just read this for book club and it broke my heart. In the best of ways. College students today could really take a lesson from Anita Hemmings and how hard she had to fight to get an education. Also the roommate, that roommate. I don't want to add spoilers, but THAT ROOMMATE!!

Christine says

I was completely unfamiliar with the story of Anita Hemmings and am so glad that I was able to get my hands on an early copy of this book. I can't imagine how hard it was for Anita to even get to the point in her education where she passed the Vassar entrance exams, because education for African-Americans was abysmal at the turn of the 20th century, but she did, and managed to stay sane when she passed as white for her four years there.

She has definitely been overlooked as an important figure of the Gilded Age, but I think this book did her story justice and hopefully she'll get the attention she deserves.

Tia says

I love historical fiction especially when there are truths to the story. I loved Anita's story so much 'The Gilded Years' propelled me to do outside research on the characters. I will admit that this cover doesn't do this book justice. I don't want to give anything away. This is definitely a book that you won't forget and bonus it's a page turner for sure. I'm anticipating Ms. Tanabe's next book.

I'd like to thank Netgalley and Washington Square Press for the opportunity to read and review 'The Gilded Years'.
