

KIRKUS

REVIEWS

AFTERLIFE IN HARLEM

Mulligan, Terry Baker

October 1, 2014

The shade of Alexander Hamilton helps Bill Clinton and a homeless Harlem waif bond in this cheerfully haphazard fantasia.

With President Hillary Clinton settled in the White House circa 2016, first gentleman Bill Clinton is feeling somewhat emasculated—hemmed in by the Secret Service, blocked in his memoir-writing, restricted to boring protocol functions, itching to do something fulfilling. Seeing his distress, the spirit of Alexander Hamilton, America’s first secretary of the treasury and underappreciated Founding Father, descends from heaven in blue knickers and a tricorne hat to counsel and commune with him at the Clintons’ Harlem town house. The two have much in common, both being sons of single mothers who rose to power from humble origins, lived in New York and had their public accomplishments overshadowed by bimbo eruptions. Hamilton regales Clinton with tales of the 18th century, including an orgy at a negotiation with a Native American tribe; Clinton in turn shows Hamilton 21st-century Harlem nightlife and counsels him on his relationship problems with Sarafina, a slave whom Hamilton bought and freed back in 1777 and who has returned to Earth as his ghostly paramour. (Being a ghost in no way crimps the carnal excess in the book’s detailed sex scenes.) But Sarafina drifts away from Hamilton on a mission to find the re-embodied spirit of her long-lost child (and toward Clinton’s handsome Secret Service bodyguard); meanwhile, Hamilton urges Clinton to fill his ex-presidential void by taking in Abby, an abandoned child at a Harlem hospital who insists that he is destined to be her foster father. Mulligan’s tale is in part an homage to Hamilton, an early progressive on racial equality and economic policy, and to Clinton, who is totally down with all Harlem; the two spend much of the book bemoaning the injustices meted out to downtrodden people over the centuries. The narrative blithely blends logic, common sense and piquant anachronisms in a quest for winsome political/spiritual epiphanies, but the melodrama is diverting, and the breezy, engaging prose goes down smoothly.

An entertaining supernatural soap opera on a political and historical stage.