

BOOK REVIEW

Genius Unbroken

by Craig A. Miller MD with Charlene Drew Harvis PhD

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Dr Charles R Drew was born to an African American family in Washington DC, in 1904, eight years after the US Supreme Court confirmed the legality of racial segregation. Yet the Drew family had a comparatively “privileged and pleasant experience.” Initially, the issue of race does not loom as large as might be expected in this biography, but it emerges very clearly.

Craig Miller tells the story of Drew’s family and his life in collaboration with Charlene Drew Jarvis, Drew’s daughter. It is primarily the history of a gifted and attractive black man who became a surgeon and a leader in blood banking. He overcame many, but not all, the limits of racism to achieve considerable success before his death in a car accident at 46.

Drew’s early prowess was athletic, and the book covers this in some detail. He graduated from New England’s prestigious Amherst College. Once he set his heart on medicine, there were more obstacles, including money, but he got to McGill University in Toronto. It was at McGill that his intellect matured.

Drew seems not to have been a confrontational man. He knew his value and persisted. Others also believed in him. After surgical residency at Howard University, he got a two-year assignment as a fellow at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he did his medical doctorate. There, he got drawn into research on blood transfusion and processing under one of the important faculty research men and acted as medical director of Blood for Britain, which sent life-saving plasma to Britain when the UK was at war but not yet the United States.

Drew returned to Howard as assistant professor of surgery, but as war loomed in the United States, he was drawn back into blood work for the American Red Cross and is credited with the concept of mobile blood banks. He left the programme in 1942. A national policy first of excluding and then accepting, but segregating, blood donations from African Americans seems to have been a turning point for Drew. We see him growing outspoken at the treatment of black doctors and black patients as his career developed.

It would be helpful to have a timeline of the Drew’s career and the important historical events. Thanks to his collaboration with Charlene Jarvis, Miller had access to many of original documentation, and he uses some large chunks of text which might have been better summarised for easier continuity.

This book is a moving personal story of a remarkable man and evidence of racism that affected even so gifted a surgeon as Charles Drew. It will interest readers to learn about Drew, the development of transfusion technology, the blood banks and the US medical profession and establishment during his lifetime.

Lee Coppack
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