



Hidden figures

By Margot Lee Shetterly

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Genre & subject

Biography

Space race

African American women

Synopsis

Set amid the civil rights movement, the never-before-told true story of NASA's African-American female mathematicians who played a crucial role in America's space program. Before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, a group of professionals worked as 'Human Computers', calculating the flight paths that would enable these historic achievements. Among these were a coterie of bright, talented African-American women. Segregated from their white counterparts, these 'coloured computers' used pencil and paper to write the equations that would launch rockets, and astronauts, into space. Moving from World War II through NASA's golden age, touching on the civil rights era, the Space Race, the Cold War, and the women's rights movement, this book interweaves a rich history of mankind's greatest adventure with the intimate stories of four courageous women whose work forever changed the world.

Author biography

Margot Lee was born in 1969 in Hampton, Virginia. Her father worked as a research scientist at NASA-Langley Research Center, and her mother was an English professor at the historically black Hampton University. Lee grew up knowing many African-American families with members who worked at NASA. She attended Phoebus High School and graduated from the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce.

After college, Lee moved to New York and worked several years in investment banking: first on the Foreign Exchange trading desk at J.P. Morgan, then on Merrill Lynch's Fixed Income Capital Markets desk. She shifted to the media industry, working at a variety of startup ventures, including the HBO-funded website Volume.com. She married writer Aran Shetterly.

In 2005, the Shetterlys moved to Mexico to found an English-language magazine called Inside Mexico. Directed to the numerous English-speaking expats in the country, it operated until 2009. From 2010 through 2013, the couple worked as content marketing and editorial consultants to the Mexican tourism industry.

Shetterly began researching and writing Hidden Figures in 2010. In 2014, she sold the film rights to the book to William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins, and it was optioned by Donna Gigliotti of Levantine Films.

In 2013, Shetterly founded The Human Computer Project, an organization whose mission is to archive the work of all of the women who worked as computers and mathematicians in the early days of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Discussion starters

1. In what ways does the race for space parallel the civil rights movement? What kinds of freedoms are being explored in each?
2. In Chapter 23 we learn that some people thought that spending money on space exploration was wasteful when there were so many other problems in the United States. Do you think the U.S. achieved a balance between innovation in space exploration and advancing the civil rights of all its citizens during this time period? Would you have done things differently?
3. Would you consider NACA and NASA socially progressive institutions for their time? Why or why not?
4. In advocating for herself to work on the Mercury capsule launch, Katherine says to her bosses, "Tell me where you want the man to land, and I'll tell you where to send him up." How are the women in Hidden Figures able to express confidence in their work and abilities? In what ways is that confidence validated by their coworkers? Why is this emotional experience such an important part of their story?
5. What was special about the time period in the book that made it possible for those first 5 women to get hired? What had led to their ability to perform these jobs? What were the support systems that gave them the confidence to advocate for themselves in the face of discrimination?
6. Women's work has often meant lesser pay. Calling a woman a "computer" instead of a mathematician, denying women promotions to the higher grades, were all ways of keeping the higher paying jobs available just to men. How much has this changed? Has it changed at all for minorities?
7. The women at the centre of this story were all involved in community service, helping others get jobs, places to live, education and more. How did their memberships in Black sororities such as AKA, in their churches, and in Girl Scouts play in making them such influential role models?

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