

Book Club Discussion Guide

The Girls of Atomic City

By Denise Kiernan

Author:

Denise Kiernan is an author and journalist who started her career writing for newspapers and magazines. She has written about everything from women's issues, sports and history to food, travel and education in places like the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Village Voice, Saveur, Ms. Magazine, Reader's Digest, and other publications. She worked as head writer for ABC's "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" during its Emmy award-winning first season and is author of the popular history titles "Signing Their Lives Away," "Signing Their Rights Away," and "Stuff Every American Should Know." She currently lives in North Carolina with her husband and author Joseph D'Agnese.

(From the Publisher's Website)

Summary:

The Girls of Atomic City tells the true story of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a secret city founded during World War II to help create fuel for the atomic bomb. Oak Ridge didn't appear on any maps, but thousands of workers moved there during the war, enticed by good wages and war-ending work. Their jobs were shrouded in mystery, but the workers – many of them young, single and female – were excited to be "all in the same boat," buoyed by a sense of shared purpose. But these hardworking young women also faced unexpected challenges. One young woman, Helen, was recruited to spy on her fellow workers. An African-American janitor, Kattie, faced daily discrimination and separation from her children in segregated Oak Ridge. Toni, a secretary, was mocked by her Northern bosses for her Tennessee accent. Dot, a factory operator, had lost a brother at Pearl Harbor and had two others still away fighting. Through it all, day in and day out, nobody knew what they were working on, only that they had been told it would help end the war. The secret wasn't out until after the first atomic bomb, powered by an uranium enriched in Oak Ridge's massive factories, fell on Hiroshima, Japan. Today, Oak Ridge and the other Manhattan Project sites continue to carry the legacy of helping to make the first atomic bomb a reality

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Discussion Questions:

1. Denise Kiernan explains in an author's note, "The information in this book is compartmentalized, as was much of life and work during the Manhattan Project." (page 18) How does the book manage to recreate the workers' experience of months-long ignorance, and the shock of finding out what they were working on?
2. Consider the losses of lives, land, and community that resulted from the Manhattan Project. What were some of the sacrifices that families and individuals made in their efforts to end the war? How do these losses compare to the gains of salary, solidarity, and peace? Do you think the ends of the Project justify the means? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the role that patriotism played in everyday life during World War II. Do you think Americans today would be willing or able to make the same sacrifices – including top-secret jobs, deployment overseas, rationed goods, and strict censorship – that families of that era made? Why or why not?
4. Consider the African-American experience at Oak Ridge. What kinds of discrimination did Kattie and her family face? How did Kattie manage to make the best of her substandard living conditions? What role do you think race played in the medical experimentation on Ebb Cade?
5. Helen was recruited to spy on her neighbors at home and at work. Discuss the ethical implications of this request. Was it fair, necessary, or wise to ask ordinary workers to spy? Why do you think Helen never mailed any of the top-secret envelopes she was given?
6. Although the Clinton Engineer Works was, in many ways, a tightly controlled social experiment, the military didn't account for women's impact on the community: "a sense of permanence. Social connectivity. Home." (page 135) Consider the various ways that the women of Oak Ridge tried to make themselves at home. Which of their efforts succeeded, and which failed? Why were some women so successful at making Oak Ridge home while others were not, were depressed, looked forward to leaving?
7. Consider the legacy of President Truman, who made the decision to use atomic weaponry for the first time. How do Americans seem to regard Truman's decision today? How does Truman's legacy compare to other wartime presidents, such as George W. Bush or Lyndon B. Johnson?
8. "The most ambitious war project in military history rested squarely on the shoulders of tens of thousands of ordinary people, many of them young women." (page 159) Compare how *The Girls of Atomic City* contrasts "ordinary people" to the extraordinary leaders behind the atomic bomb: the General, the Scientist, and the Engineer. Are the decision-makers portrayed as fully as the workers? Do the workers get as much credit as the leaders?
9. Kiernan sets *The Girls of Atomic City* entirely in the past, recreating the workers' experiences from her interviews with the surviving women. How would this book have differed if the interviews from the present day were included? Does Kiernan succeed in immersing us in the era of World War II? Explain your answer.

10. Among the workers at Oak Ridge, whose story did you find most fascinating? Which of these women do you think Kiernan brought to life most vividly, and how?

11. Discuss the scenes in the book that take place far from Oak Ridge, Tennessee: scientific discoveries in Europe, secret tests in New Mexico, political meetings in Washington, and post-atomic devastation in Japan. How does this broad view of the bomb's creation and aftermath enrich the story of wartime life in Oak Ridge?

12. Discuss how various contributors to the Manhattan Project felt about the use of the atomic bomb, including General Leslie Groves, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Albert Einstein, and Harry S. Truman. What regrets did they express about the bomb's results, if any? Do you think a weapon of that magnitude could or should be used in present-day warfare? Why or why not?

13. Kiernan writes, "The challenge in telling the story of the atomic bomb is one of nuance, requiring thought and sensitivity and walking a line between commemoration and celebration." (page 412) What lasting contributions to society have come out of Oak Ridge, Tennessee? Why is it difficult to celebrate or commemorate the work that has been done in that secret city?