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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

*Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women
Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*
by
Margot Lee Shetterly

Author:

- Birth—1969
- Where—Hampton, Virginia, USA
- Education—B.A., University of Virginia
- Currently— Charlottesville, Virginia

Margot Lee Shetterly was born in Hampton, Virginia, in 1969 where she knew many of the women she later wrote about in her debut *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race*.

Shetterly's father worked as a research scientist at NASA-Langley Research Center, and her mother was an English professor at Hampton University. She attended Phoebus High School and graduated from the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce.

After college, she 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 then made the transition to the media industry, working at a variety of startup ventures including the HBO-funded website Volume.com.

In 2005, she and her husband, the writer Aran Shetterly, moved to Mexico to found an English-language magazine called Inside Mexico, for expats. The magazine operated until 2009.

From 2010 through 2013, they worked as content marketing and editorial consultants to the Mexican tourism industry.

Shetterly began researching and writing *Hidden Figures* in 2010. The book was published in 2016, and its 2017 film version stars Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monáe, and Kevin Costner.

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). (*Adapted from Wikipedia. Retrieved 12/6/2016. – retrieved from LitLovers 2/12/2020*)

Summary:

The phenomenal true story of the black female mathematicians at NASA whose calculations helped fuel some of America's greatest achievements in space.

Before John Glenn orbited the earth, or Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, a group of dedicated female mathematicians known as "human computers" used pencils, slide rules and adding machines to calculate the numbers that would launch rockets, and astronauts, into space.

Among these problem-solvers were a group of exceptionally talented African American women, some of the brightest minds of their generation. Originally relegated to teaching math in the South's segregated public schools, they were called into service during the labor shortages of World War II, when America's aeronautics industry was in dire need of anyone who had the right stuff.

Suddenly, these overlooked math whizzes had a shot at jobs worthy of their skills, and they answered Uncle Sam's call, moving to Hampton, Virginia and the fascinating, high-energy world of the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory.

Even as Virginia's Jim Crow laws required them to be segregated from their white counterparts, the women of Langley's all-black "West Computing" group helped America achieve one of the things it desired most: a decisive victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and complete domination of the heavens.

Starting in World War II and moving through to the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Space Race, *Hidden Figures* follows the interwoven accounts of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson and Christine Darden, four African American women who participated in some of NASA's greatest successes.

It chronicles their careers over nearly three decades they faced challenges, forged alliances and used their intellect to change their own lives, and their country's future. *(From the publisher, retrieved from LitLovers 2/12/2020.)*

Questions:

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? (*Questions from a teaching guide issued by the publisher – from LitLovers, retrieved 2/12/2020*)