

Books by the Stack



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

An account of the previously unheralded but pivotal contributions of NASA's African-American women mathematicians to America's space program describes how they were segregated from their white counterparts by Jim Crow laws in spite of their groundbreaking successes.

Why you'll like it: *Science writing, richly detailed, race relations, inspiring.*

About the Author: Margot Lee Shetterly was born in Hampton, Virginia in 1969. She is a graduate of the University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce. After college she worked in investment banking for several years. Her other career moves have included working in the media industry for the website Volume.com, publishing an English language magazine, Inside Mexico; marketing consultant in the Mexican tourism industry; and writing. *Hidden Figures* is her first book, a New York Times Bestseller and was optioned for a feature film. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for discussion

1. *Hidden Figures* uncovers the story of the women whose work at NACA and NASA help shape and define U.S. space exploration. Why is their story significant to our culture, social and scientific history?
2. In what ways does the race for space parallel the civil rights movement? What kind of freedoms are being explored in each?
3. In what ways was Melvin Butler, the white personnel office at Langley, who was searching for qualified mathematicians and wound up hiring black women for jobs that historically had gone only to white men. Was Butler progressive in his hiring practices or was he just carrying out his duties? Do you think he did the best he could under the circumstances?
4. Shetterly says of young Dorothy Vaughn: "Possessed of an inner confidence that attributed no shortcoming to her race or to her gender, Dorothy welcomed the chance to prove herself in a competitive academic arena." How did this approach to life help her at Langley? Was it an attitude shared by other women in West Computing?
5. In her employment application, Dorothy said she could be ready to accept employment at Langley within 48 hours. Why do you think she makes that claim?
6. Why does the President's Advisory Committee on Science say a space program is in the interest of every American? What are the reasons for it?
7. Shetterly tell us: "As far as the West Computers were concerned, they would prove themselves equal or better [than their white and male counterparts], having internalized the Negro theorem of needing to be

twice as good to get half as far.” Do you believe this is true? Why do you think they believed it?

8. “Not a morning dawned that [Katherine Johnson] didn’t wake up eager to get to the office. The passion that she had for her job was a gift, one that few people ever experienced.” Was this passion for the job the key to Johnson’s overcoming the obstacles she face because of her gender and race? Was she simply lucky to have found the right career? Do you think many people feel this way about their work?

9. 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 the time period? Would you have done things differently?

10. “Being on the leading edge of integration was not for the faint of heart,” Margot Lee Shetterly observes. Do you think the women of West Computing were unusually courageous? Did they arrive there because they were brave, or did they grow braver as they faced the challenges of working and Langley and living under Jim Crow?

(Questions provided by Litlovers.com, publisher, and bondedmagazine.com)



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