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# Hidden Figures: The American Dream And The Untold Story Of The Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win The Space Race



## Synopsis

The phenomenal true story of the black female mathematicians at NASA whose calculations helped fuel some of America's greatest achievements in space. Soon to be a major motion picture starring Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monae, Kirsten Dunst, and Kevin Costner. 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 shots 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 as they faced challenges, forged alliances, and used their intellects to change their own lives - and their country's future.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Much hullabaloo has appeared in social media based on the release of the preview for the movie based on this book. The movie will be historical fiction, the book is not. The book is as much about the advances and science done at NACA and NASA as it is about the black women who were an integral part of this piece of history. It is an easy reading book and most readers will find it an interesting read as well. I was an officer in the Air Force for 20 years, working in the missile and space industry. I also lived in Hampton, VA, for 6 years growing up. I feel like the author has given me back a piece of my history that I never knew was missing. I've always known that there are women who went before, upon whose shoulders I stand, but it is incredible to add a deeper understanding of what that meant and to know their names. Thank you, Margot Lee Shetterly, for persevering and doing the work to bring this history to light in a way that makes it accessible.

My comments are somewhat bias since Katherine Johnson is my aunt. I have seen the movie twice and read the book. My preference is the book mostly because of the additional information provided about Aunt Katherine. Many movie goers who only see the movie will miss out on a number of opportunities to see more realistically Aunt Katherine's nature, attitudes, and life's perspectives on work, family, and race. The movie is done very well and I commend all those involved in its production including the talented stars. It is a case of getting one slice of pie when you could get two slices. I suggest you eat WELL! ATB Broady

Hidden Figures has garnered much attention for being the heretofore forgotten story of the African-American women who helped build NASA (or to be more exact, the NASA field center at Langley). The media has boiled the tale of these women down to the oft-used cliché "heroes

I admit I was completely ignorant of the story presented in HIDDEN FIGURES. I had no idea that black women played such a key role in our space program. It's great to finally acknowledge those who contributed so much, but yet received so little credit for their work. HIDDEN FIGURES tells the story of four determined black women, who overcame numerous obstacles, and worked in the space program at Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory (now known as "Langley Research

Center.") It was at this Virginia lab where Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson and Christine Darden were able to employ their skills--and really make a difference. It was "behind the scenes" work back then--but now we know the real picture. To give the reader an idea of how difficult it was for a woman--much less an African-American woman--to actually become a mathematician, the author notes these statistics: "In the 1930s, just over a hundred women worked as professional mathematicians." The likelihood of a black woman actually becoming a mathematician working on the space program was about zero: "Employers openly discriminated against Irish and Jewish women with math degrees. The odds of a black woman encountering work in the field hovered near zero." Oddly, the Soviet Union actively encouraged women in engineering. The schools in the Soviet Union were "loaded with women" including many of their engineering grads. Alas--that was not the case in the United States, which "struggled to find a place for women and Negroes in its science workplace, and in society at large." At the time, women generally got little credit for their work. It was unusual for a woman to even be acknowledged as co-author of a report: "The work of most of the women, like that of the computing machines they used, was anonymous. Even a woman who had worked closely with an engineer on the content of a research report was rarely rewarded by seeing her name alongside his on the final publication." At the lab, life for black women was not quite as bad as outside, where strict rules were followed, with blacks always separate from whites. At Langley, the "boundaries were fuzzier. Blacks were ghettoed into separate bathrooms, but they had also been given an unprecedented entrance into the professional world." At Langley, the work was serious; lives were at stake: "Sending a man into space was a damn tall order, but it was that part about returning him safely to Earth that kept Katherine Johnson and the rest of the space pilgrims awake at night." Recall that the U.S. did not yet have a track record of successful space launches. In fact, many launches were complete failures: "Two of the Atlas "sallies" had ended in failure. One of them had surged into the sky, erupting into spectacular fireballs with the capsule still attached. That wasn't exactly a confidence builder for the man preparing to ride it into orbit..." All in all, I found **HIDDEN FIGURES** to be a fascinating, as well as an informative read. The author paints a compelling picture, illustrating how difficult it was for these four women to accomplish what they did. Thanks to Margot Lee Shetterly for revealing this inspiring story about these unique women. These women all deserve a special place in the record books for such a remarkable, historical achievement. Advance Review Copy courtesy of Edelweiss.

I only read this because it was the choice of my book group, but I'm really glad that I did. It's well

written and a really good read. I learned a lot about the space program and what women have had to deal with in the work force. But this book dealt particularly well with how black society dealt with segregation and all the attendant hardships and how it fought against them. Although I thought I knew about segregation this author really opened my eyes to its day to day reality. This is one of the most important books I've read in a long time.

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