

The Girls of Atomic City

Session One Chapters 1 - 4

- What made these women open to doing this? How hard was it on people to leave? Was it harder for some than others? What about those who had families?
- 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 the families of that era made? Why or why not?
- Consider the African-American experience at Oak Ridge. How were African Americans treated differently than the white Americans in Oak Ridge? How do you feel about this? Did they sacrifice more? What kinds of discrimination did Kattie and her family face? How did Kattie manage to make the best of her substandard living conditions? (*pages 37, 47-48*)
- Do you think it was acceptable to hire people to work on this project without them knowing what it was that they were helping to make? Do you think the government did the right thing by keeping it a secret, or was it unethical of them to do so?
- In what ways are secrecy and security maintained throughout Oak Ridge as discussed in chapters 1-4? Do you think this will/does cause mental or emotional stress for the workers at the “*secret city*”?
- How do you think you would feel if you were Helen...do you think she “*really*” had any choice in the decision she had to make? How do you think you would have responded to the men’s request? (*pages 73-74*)
- Open discussion for any additional comments or details that stood out to you from chapters 1-4.

Session 2 Chapters 5 - 8

- Lise Meitner played a large part in discovering atomic fission, but when she realized the application of this discovery, she decided not to join the Manhattan Project? How do you feel about that?
- We talked last session about unknown risks the CEW workers were exposed to. Radiation exposure is one; asbestos housing was another. Knowing what we know now, could the government undertake a project like this today? What would need to be different (or not) and why?
- Why do you think the book is called “The Girls of Atomic City” not women?
- It was requested that the “good girls” and “bad girls” be separated so as not to tarnish the reputation of the “good girls”. Women in dorms had dorm mothers (p 94). What are your thoughts on these arrangements?
- “Women seeking work or promotion were quizzed about whether they planned on having a family,” (p. 97). What are your thoughts on this? Have times changed in this regard?
- Talking about your day and its stresses is a natural way to unwind. These women didn’t have that option, and it led to psychiatric concerns. What other options did they have (if any)?
- Toni turned down a raise (p. 129) to maintain her pride. Was this a wise decision? Is there a way that she could have done both?

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Session 3 Chapters 9 – 12

- Human beings are naturally curious, and many people speculated about what they were making at Oak Ridge while others were just happy to be working on something to stop the war sooner. What do you think about some of the gossip and theories on what they were making that were shared in this week's reading?
- Secrecy and confidentiality have been an overwhelming theme in the book so far. In the reading this week, we learned about a person who wanted to tell the Japanese Emperor what was being done at Y-12 and about Soviet spies on the project who were feeding information to Russia. How do these examples change your thinking about the use of spooks in Oak Ridge?
- On page 187, Virginia Spivey, a college educated chemist, shared that a male co-worker "casually and assertively said he didn't think women needed to go to college" and on page 188, "she spoke up and let him know she did not agree"? What do you think about how Virginia handled the situation, and would you have done the same thing?
- Colleen had "a baptism by fire into the deep and endless of waters of acronyms", how does this align with your experience in joining the nuclear industry?
- The story of Ebb Cade (or HP-12) was shared in this section of the reading. What do you think about the testing of plutonium on humans and the treatment of Ebb as it was outlined in the book?
- V-E (Victory in Europe) day was declared on May 8th but the work on the project did not stop. Japan was still at war with the rest of the world. What do you think about the decision to continue to work on the project after Germany surrendered?
- Chapter 12 discusses the testing of the gadget in New Mexico and the reactions of the scientists 'in the know' on the project. What do you think of the reactions and the recommendations made by the key players (scientists, the engineer, the general)?

Session 4 Chapters 13 - 15

- When the news leaked out – after the bomb had been dropped – how did the workers at Oak Ridge react? (Chapter 13, pgs 249 - 261)
- How about Lise Meitner and Otto Hahn? How did they react to the news? (Chapter 13, 262 – 267)
- Following the bombings some felt relief and pride while others found it difficult to comprehend. It stated Rosemary had conflicted feelings how did Rosemary feel and why? How did she feel about taking a permanent job at the facility? Do you think you would have taken the job? (Chapter 14, pg 272 - 278)
- It stated Dot struggled to process the "strange mix of feelings" how did Dot feel and why? Why did Dot choose to quit volunteering at the museum? Do you think you would have felt the same way Dot did? (Chapter 15, pg. 305)
- How does Oak Ridge change after it's "original purpose" is complete? The book states it becomes a more "normal" space? (Chapter 15)
- Open discussion for any additional comments or insights that stood out to you from chapters 13-15.