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The Girls of Atomic City

The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II
By Denise Kiernan

READING GROUP

GUIDE

*This reading group guide for **The Girls of Atomic City** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Denise Kiernan**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Introduction *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.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

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?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Taking inspiration from restrictions on newspapers like the *Oak Ridge Journal* during wartime, try writing a censored news story about your book club meeting. The catch: the words "book," "author," and "reading" are censored and cannot be used in your article!
2. Listen to a recording of President Harry Truman's radio address announcing Japan's surrender at the end of World War II: <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3341>.
3. In tribute to Kattie's homemade biscuits baked in Willie's hut, cook up a batch of Southern-style biscuits for your book club meeting! Try this simple recipe: <http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/paula-deen/biscuits-recipe/index.html>.
4. Set the mood to discuss *The Girls of Atomic City* with the popular Johnny Mercer tune "Accentuate the Positive": <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3jdbFOidds>
5. Visit Denise Kiernan's interactive website, www.girlsofatomiccity.com, for a wealth of documents, photos, songs, and more related to the Oak Ridge workers' contributions to the Manhattan Project.

A Conversation with Denise Kiernan

1. Please tell us how you came to write about the women of Oak Ridge, Tennessee. When did you first learn about the ordinary people behind the atomic bomb?

I was working on another project, a book for the Smithsonian about chemistry. While doing research, I came across one of Ed Westcott's ("The Photographer") photos of the women working the calutron panels at Y-12. It was in a Y-12 newsletter and was accompanied by a short piece about one of the women in the picture. In that one, little article that I had accidentally stumbled across online, I learned there was a town built by the government for World War II, 75,000 people lived there, many were single women fresh off the farm and the vast majority had no idea they were working on the atomic bomb until it dropped over Hiroshima. Then I realized the town was a mere two-hour drive from my house. The more I read, the more I became hooked.

2. Tell us about your research process. How did you find the women you interviewed? What other archives and sources were essential to your research?

In the early stages, I cast a pretty wide net. I tried to get my hands on everything I could that's readily available. Today, that's a lot easier than it used to be. There are documentaries and public domain films online, brochures and reports from the Department of Energy and the Oak Ridge National Lab and Los Alamos. I read books about the Manhattan Project in general and the few books written specifically about Oak Ridge. I also drove over to the town a few times to see what I could see, visit some museums and just drive around. (I took a wrong turn into Y-12 and ended up getting pulled over by federal security officers. I never made that mistake again.)

After I was sure that there was a story here that hadn't already been told to death, I began reaching out to people. I started with the man who spearheaded the Y-12 history efforts, the one who had written that first article I came across online. He first brought me to meet a man named Connie Bolling, then 101, who was a Y-12 supervisor. While I was waiting in the lobby of his assisted living facility, I met Dot and Colleen. They introduced me to people they knew. This became a pattern. Everyone I met introduced me to another "old timer" from the war days.

The more research I did, the deeper I dug. I scanned as many personal documents as possible from the women and men I interviewed. I started making trips to the National Archives in Atlanta, which is home to the vast majority of all Manhattan Project and Atomic Energy Commission documents. I got oral histories from the Smithsonian and document collections from UCLA and military records for some of the family members.

I find with stories like this that there are several elements that you work to line up: Individual memory, collective memory of a community, primary source documents, media coverage from the time period, and of course books and reports. Sometimes what people believe beyond the shadow of a doubt isn't always totally accurate, and the same goes for the stories that a community tells over and over the same way. You have to come at things from as many different angles as possible and hope you're covering all your bases and telling the most balanced story possible.

3. You mention in your endnotes that it was extremely difficult to choose which women to feature in your book. (page 415) How did you ultimately decide? Are there certain stories that you regret leaving on the cutting room floor?

A combination of factors play into this. First, when dealing with such an aged population, some people were ruled out because their memories were very limited. There were a few things that they remembered well that were very interesting, but beyond that, they didn't have much more to add. I wanted women who not only had one or two good anecdotes but what I felt to be an engaging experience overall that could be carried through the book. Some women had great stories but arrived right at the end of the war, in spring or summer 1945, and I didn't think that would work.

I wanted a balance of work experiences, as well. I wanted women from K-25 and Y-12. I wanted women who worked in administrative posts. I wanted to be able to show as much of the town as possible through the eyes of the characters, so those women could not all work at one plant. I could have had all the women come from Y-12, and that is one way to do a book like this. But it's not what I chose to do. And, finally, some of my decisions of who to use and who not to use was based on my personal chemistry with the interviewees.

4. Please talk about the structure of *The Girls of Atomic City*, which reflects the secretive policy of “containment” within the Manhattan Project. How did you decide to narrate the book in this way? What were some challenges in explaining the bomb without actually naming it until the final chapters?

I was fascinated by the fact that people were so committed to what they were doing that even those who knew they were working with uranium never used that word. The language censorship—maybe because I started out in journalism—was particularly interesting to me. I also wondered what it would be like to live in that kind of world, a world of letters and numbers that you knew were important but didn't know why they were important. I wanted to try to recreate that, capture that feeling of “not knowing” experienced by the women and others.

At the same time, I realized that this might be the only book a potential reader ever cracks open about the Manhattan Project, so the project as a whole had to be explained as well. Otherwise the stakes are not clear. I also liked the idea of the two worlds: those who knew and those who didn't. I wanted those worlds to start to overlap and collide around the time of the Trinity test. So the challenge was making sure the science and situation were clear without being able to use words like “bomb” or “uranium.”

5. There are countless books and movies devoted to World War II history. Why do you think readers are perennially interested in this period? What new perspective on the war does *The Girls of Atomic City* provide on the era?

I think World War II on many levels made some sort of sense to people. We were attacked at Pearl Harbor. European countries—our allies—were being overrun. Unfathomable atrocities were being committed. That war touched so many lives. EVERYONE knew someone who was away at war and it permeated life in the United States, from the draft and rations to music and films. Everyone felt affected, whether or not they were fighting. American culture was submerged in that event during those years. Those people who lived through the war and the children of those who lived through the war are still alive, and I think the desire to understand as much of that period of time as possible remains.

What I hope *The Girls of Atomic City* adds to literature about that era is a look at one of the most significant—if not *the* most significant—scientific developments of the 20th century from the perspective of those who were not a part of the decision, those who were not privy to all the facts, people who were just trying to do the best for themselves, their families and their country. Many times history focuses on those in charge, and I think there is great value to the stories of “the others,” people who happened to find themselves in the midst of remarkable moments in time. They add an important layer to historical events that should be examined and shared.

6. The development and use of atomic bombs during World War II is still a controversial subject. Did you have trouble maintaining an objective point-of-view as you were writing this book? Did your perspective on the ethics of the bomb shift over the course of your research?

I doubt the debate about whether or not the bomb should have been dropped will ever end. I encountered people who felt very strongly that it should have been and people who felt very strongly that it should not have been. What I tried to focus on was how they felt *then*. We, today, know what the bomb is and what it's capable of. Many people, on that day, when they heard about the bombing of Hiroshima, didn't have that reservoir of knowledge about nuclear weapons. The words "fallout" and "nuclear winter" were not a part of common language. But that soon began to change. I tried as hard as I could to understand how they felt at that time about the events and not bring my own understanding to their memories.

7. *The Girls of Atomic City* presents complex scientific concepts, such as nuclear fission, in a clear and lucid way. What challenges did you face in learning and writing about the science behind the atomic bomb?

I'm a little lucky in that respect in that I have a bachelor's degree in biology, a master's degree in environmental conservation education, and took a fair amount of chemistry and physics along the way. So, I wasn't starting completely from scratch. That said, college was a long time ago and I'm no nuclear physicist by any stretch of the imagination. There are two steps: first, I have to understand the topic as deeply as possible, much more in depth than I would ever share with the general public. Then I have to winnow it down to the most understandable language. Enough to communicate the most important concepts without getting too confusing. Earlier drafts of the book had a lot more science that I gradually simplified throughout my revisions. But it was definitely one of the more challenging aspects of the book.

8. One important theme of *The Girls of Atomic City* is the inequality that women and minorities dealt with on a daily basis. Were the women you interviewed bitter about their treatment in the past, or did they remember the wartime years fondly?

I didn't encounter a lot of bitterness. If people complained about anything it was the food. Jane was already annoyed at not being allowed to matriculate as an engineering student, so it was little surprise to her that men beneath her were getting paid more. She didn't like it, but it didn't override her fondness for the experience. People like Kattie and other African Americans I interviewed were certainly not happy with their treatment. However, most of them were already living in the south before coming to Oak Ridge and were likely facing similar discriminatory practices back home. That didn't justify the treatment in their eyes, but it wasn't really a complete shock, either, except where the children and spouses were concerned. Not being able to have your children with you or be with your spouse was probably the biggest issue, the one that caused the most bitterness. But many still have some fond memories from their days in Oak Ridge. Again, I have found that this was not a generation of complainers.

9. From ordinary workers to brilliant scientists, there are plenty of women from this period who have been forgotten in popular history. Why do you think these stories are important to tell? Do you think readers today are fully receptive to women's histories?

I think women's roles, big and small, provide an added perspective to any historical event, and if history is to be as completely and accurately told as possible, all possible perspectives and

experiences must be included. Their stories also serve as an inspiration to young women making decisions about careers and choices available to them today. I think readers are more receptive today than they were in the past, but I look forward to the day when women's roles in history are not looked at as anything unusual or extraordinary. *A woman helped discover fission? So what? Of course she did. What's so unusual about that?* That's the reaction I still look forward to.

10. You previously published books about the men who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. What was it like to write about a much more recent period of history in *The Girls of Atomic City* ?

There are certainly more documents I can get my hands on writing a book about World War II. The biggest plus is being able to speak directly to the people I'm writing about, and not rely on interviews conducted by others. Being in the same room with someone makes a big difference; conversations with the people who actually lived through what you're trying to describe cannot be beat.

11. “All in the same boat” is possibly the most oft repeated phrase I heard while conducting interviews for this book, from both men and women.” (418) Why do you think the men and women you interviewed used that phrase so frequently? What does it capture about that time and place?

What's interesting about that phrase is that it's not entirely accurate. Certainly Kattie was not in the same boat as the others. Those living in the trailers and huts—white and black—were not in the same domestic boat as those in the prefab houses or even dorms. But they were all subject to rations, they were all riding the same buses, they were all trudging through the mud, and they were all waiting for the war to end. The war was the biggest boat of all.

12. Imagine you were a worker at the Clinton Engineer Works. What job do you think you'd be best suited for? What kinds of work do you think you would have enjoyed the most and least?

I think I would have liked to be one of the dorm marms. I imagine it would have been fantastic to watch all the different comings and goings of so many young women on their own for the first time. Any job featuring rote repetition, where I would have had to suppress my curiosity—the majority of factory work—would not have been a good fit for me.

13. What is the significance of this story today, in your view? What can we learn from the workers, scientists, and politicians behind the atomic bomb?

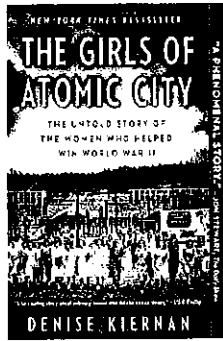
Many people know very little about the development of the atomic bomb, despite the fact that nuclear weapons and nuclear energy play a significant role in our lives today. I hope presenting this story in an accessible manner will help fill some gaps in people's knowledge about that period and that particular scientific development. I think it is interesting to examine the willingness of most Americans, from factory workers to members of the media, to get on board with whatever the American government asked of them. There was a trust in our leaders that is hard to find today. I am not saying one era is better than the other, but that the difference in and of itself is interesting to explore. Whether or not

you agree with the outcome, the tremendous amount that the Manhattan Project accomplished in such a short amount of time—just under three years—is astonishing. It makes you wonder what other kinds of things could be accomplished with that kind of determination, effort, and financial and political support. What if the kind of money, manpower and resources that went into the Manhattan Project went to the fight against hunger? Cancer? Homelessness?



A WELL-READ ONLINE COMMUNITY

Girls of Atomic City (Kiernan)

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The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II

Denise Kiernan, 2013

Simon & Schuster

416 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781451617535

Summary

The incredible story of the young women of Oak Ridge, Tennessee, who unwittingly played a crucial role in one of the most significant moments in US history.

At the height of World War II, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was home to 75,000 residents, consuming more electricity than New York City. But to most of the world, the town did not exist. Thousands of civilians—many of them young women from small towns across the South—were recruited to this secret city, enticed by solid wages and the promise of war-ending work. Kept very much in the dark, few would ever guess the true nature of the tasks they performed each day in the hulking factories in the middle of the Appalachian Mountains. That is, until the end of the war—when Oak Ridge’s secret was revealed.

Drawing on the voices of the women who lived it—women who are now in their eighties and nineties—*The Girls of Atomic City* rescues a remarkable, forgotten chapter of American history from obscurity. Denise Kiernan captures the spirit of the times through these women: their pluck, their desire to contribute, and their enduring courage. Combining the grand-scale human drama of *The Worst Hard Time* with the intimate biography and often troubling science of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, *The Girls of Atomic City* is a lasting and important addition to our country’s history. (From the publisher.)

Author Bio

- Birth—July 31, 1968
- Where—N/A
- Education—M.A., New York University
- Currently—lives in Asheville, North Carolina

Denise Kiernan is an American journalist, producer and author who lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She has authored several history titles, including *Signing Their Rights Away* (with Joseph D'Agnese, 2011) and *The Girls of Atomic City* (2013).

Education

Kiernan graduated from the North Carolina School of the Arts with an emphasis in music. She earned a BA degree from the Washington Square and University College of Arts & Science in 1991 and an MA from the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development of New York University in 2002.

Career

Kiernan started out in journalism, and as a freelance writer, her work appeared in the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Ms. Magazine* among other publications. She served as the head writer for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* during its first season. She has produced pieces for ESPN and MSNBC.

Additionally, she has authored several popular history titles and ghost written books for athletes, entrepreneurs and actresses. Her most recent book, *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*, traces the story of the women who worked on the Manhattan Project, unknowingly helping to create the fuel for the world's first atomic bomb. The book became a *New York Times* best seller in its first week of publication.

Personal life

Kiernan is married to author and journalist Joseph D'Agnese, with whom she co-authored several books including *Stuff Every American Should Know* (2012); *Signing Their Rights Away* (2011); *Signing Their Lives Away* (2009). (From *Wikipedia*. Retrieved 2/21/2014 .)

Book Reviews

The image of Rosie the Riveter—women filling in at factories to help the war effort—is well known. But women also assisted on the Manhattan Project, signing up for secret work in Oak Ridge, Tenn., to help build the atomic bomb. Kiernan looks at the lives and contributions of these unsung women who worked in jobs from secretaries to chemists.

New York Post

Fascinating.... Kiernan has amassed a deep reservoir of intimate details of what life

was like for women living in the secret city, gleaned from seven years of interviews and research.... Rosie, it turns out, did much more than drive rivets.... The fascinating story of the Manhattan Project has been told often, and often told well.... But given the project's significant and lasting impact, there's plenty more mining to be done, and Denise Kiernan has found a rich vein in *The Girls of Atomic City*. Rosie, it turns out, did much more than drive rivets.

Scott Martelle - Washington Post

Kiernan...brings a unique and personal perspective to this key part of American history.... Instead of the words of top scientists and government officials, Kiernan recounts the experiences of factory workers, secretaries, and low-level chemists in a town that housed at its peak 75,000 people trained not to talk about what they knew or what they did. She combines their stories with detailed reporting that provides a clear and compelling picture of this fascinating time.

Boston Globe

Much was at stake, and in *The Girls of Atomic City*, Denise Kiernan tells a fascinating story about ordinary women who did the extraordinary. It may be difficult for today's readers to imagine so many people united behind cause and country to do what the women and men at Oak Ridge's Clinton Engineer Works did in just two years.

Patty Rhule - USA Today

Kiernan's book, the result of seven years of research and interviews with the surviving 'girls,' sparkles with their bright, WWII slang and spirit, and takes readers behind the scenes into the hive-like encampments and cubicles where they spent their days and nights.... *The Girls of Atomic City* brings to light a forgotten chapter in our history that combines a vivid, novelistic story with often troubling science.

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Kiernan's focus is on the intimate and often strange details of work and life at Oak Ridge. It's told in a novelistic style and is an intimate look at the experiences of the young women who worked at Oak Ridge and the local residents whose lives were changed by the presence of the project.

San Francisco Book Review

As most of us are all too aware, the generation who fought in World War II or supported the effort from home are leaving us—their children, grandchildren, and greats—to carry on without them. Thanks to author Kiernan, we hear from a group of that generation's women, now in their eighties and nineties, whose wartime experience matched no one else's. Ever. Anywhere.

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Kiernan's interviewees describe falling in love and smuggling in liquor in tampon boxes. But like everyone else, those lives were disrupted by news of Hiroshima. "Now you know what we've been doing all this time," said one of the scientists ... [An] intimate and revealing glimpse into one of the most important scientific developments in history.

Publishers Weekly

Living and working with thousands of others in a secret city built almost overnight, those involved in the "Project" were unaware that they were contributing to the most revolutionary scientific discovery of the 20th century.... Kiernan capably captures the spirit of women's wartime opportunities and their sacrifices in what is ultimately a captivating narrative. —*Kathryn Wells, Fitchburg State Univ. Lib., MA*

Library Journal

A fresh take on the secret city built in the mountains of Tennessee as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II.... The author parallels her account of the construction of Oak Ridge with chapters on the development of the science that made nuclear fission possible.... An inspiring account of how people can respond with their best when called upon.

Kirkus Reviews

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?
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

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?


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(Questions issued by the publisher.)

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About the Author

Full text biography:

Denise Kiernan

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

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about this author

Personal Information:

Education: Attended New York University and North Carolina School of the Arts. **Addresses:** Agent: Foundry Literary + Media, 33 W. 17th St., PH, New York, NY 10011.

Career Information:

Writer, journalist, and producer. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, ABC, head writer. Also independent producer for various film/TV projects.

Writings:

- (With John Harkes) *Captain for Life: And Other Temporary Assignments*, Sleeping Bear Press (Chelsea, MI), 1999.
- *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*, Touchstone (New York, NY), 2013.

WITH JOSEPH D'AGNESE

- *Chemistry*, Collins (New York, NY), 2007.
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Author maintains a blog at <http://denisekiernan.tumblr.com>. Contributor to periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Village Voice*, *Discover*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Savour*.

Sidelights:

Denise Kiernan is an author and producer who formerly served as head writer for the ABC show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* She is best known for her multiple collaborations with the author Joseph D'Agnesse. Their most widely reviewed efforts are the 2009 publication *Signing Their Lives Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who*

Signed the Declaration of Independence and the 2011 follow-up volume *Signing Their Rights Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who Signed the United States Constitution*. Both books offer biographical profiles of the men who signed the defining documents that shaped the United States. The latter examines thirty-nine men who signed the U.S. Constitution, including such notables as George Washington, James McHenry, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Franklin. The authors discuss William Blount, a known thief and con man who was impeached as the governor of Tennessee (the first impeached U.S. official of record) but who nevertheless convinced North Carolina to ratify. Another interesting figure is Gunning Bedford, Jr., who ensured that the Constitution allowed for fair representation of all the states, not just the most powerful or populated. A copy of the Constitution is included, as is a glossary, along with a list of the men who attended the constitutional convention without signing.

Although some reviewers pointed out the odd narrative structure and lack of straightforward chronology, most critics declared that *Signing Their Rights Away* is an entertaining and informative volume. Magda Healey, writing in the online *Bookbag*, felt that "the style is breezy and conversational but erudite, accessible but not gratingly colloquial." She went on to note: "Before picking up the book I expected more of a continuous narrative but I found the dip-in format surprisingly enjoyable," and she advised "If you happen to know somebody who has just become a freshly naturalised U.S. citizen *Signing Their Rights Away* would make an ideal gift (assuming they feel like celebrating the fact in any way). A U.S. teen keen on history or anybody else with interest in Americana might also like it." Another positive assessment was offered by a contributor to the *What Would the Founders Think?* Web site, who remarked "The authors have written a light-hearted book about the 39 men who signed the Constitution. They manage to be entertaining and informative at the same time, a not inconsiderable feat. ... All in all a good reference book for anyone curious about those we call the Founders." The contributor additionally commented: "Having read the short biographies and each man's contribution to the Constitutional debates, this reviewer concluded that no other group at no other time could have done what they did. What amazes is that, exceptional men and scoundrels notwithstanding, the real greatness of the Founders was in their totality."

Assessing *Signing Their Rights Away* in the online *Portland Book Review*, Liz Friedman stated that this "remarkable book" offers "a wealth of information to keep the reader interested." Seconding this high opinion in his *Wall Street Journal* article, Charles S. Dameron found that *Signing Their Rights Away* sheds a hopeful light on contemporary government. He observed: "Ms. Kiernan and Mr. D'Agnes challenge the notion that the group that crafted this document of enduring genius was uniquely brilliant or visionary," which "should at least give readers some hope for our own seemingly uninspired political era." But *School Library Journal* correspondent Ann Welton warned that "this entertainingly written book may take a bit of promotion due to the subject matter and dull cover." David G. Schwartz, writing on the *David G. Schwartz* Web site dubbed the book "a quick and thought-provoking read," and added that although "it lacks a driving narrative . . . its structure makes it ideal for reading in short bursts or as a handy reference." In *Publishers Weekly*, a critic asserted: "This is a lightweight introduction to a crucial moment in American history." *Booklist* contributor David Pitt pointed out: "For readers of American history, this is both educational and entertaining."

Related Information:

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, September 1, 2011, David Pitt, review of *Signing Their Rights Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who Signed the United States Constitution*
- *Library Journal*, June 15, 2009, Jane B. Manno, review of *Signing Their Lives Away: The Fame and Misfortune of the Men Who Signed the Declaration of Independence*, p. 78; April 15, 2010, Poppy Jonsson-Rennell, review of *The Money Book for Freelancers, Part-Timers, and the Self-Employed: The Only Personal Finance System for People with Not-So-Regular Jobs*, p. 91
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- *School Library Journal*, August 2009, Brian Odem, review of *Signing Their Lives Away*, p. 123, November 2011, Ann Welton, review of *Signing Their Rights Away*, p. 148.
- *Wall Street Journal*, September 24, 2011, Charles S. Dameron, review of *Signing Their Rights Away*.

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- *Bookbag*. <http://www.thebookbag.co.uk/> (July 16, 2012). Magda Healey. review of *Signing Their Rights Away*.
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- *What Would the Founders Think?* <http://www.whatwouldthefoundersthink.com/> (July 16, 2012), review of *Signing Their Rights Away*

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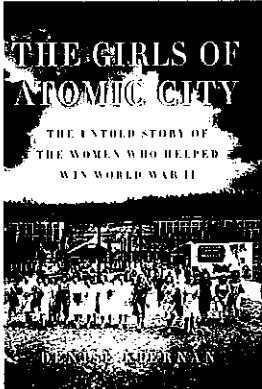
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