



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

By Denise Kiernan

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

Now a New York Times Bestseller!

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 U.S. history. The Tennessee town of Oak Ridge was created from scratch in 1942. One of the Manhattan Project's secret cities, it didn't appear on any maps until 1949, and yet at the height of World War II it was using more electricity than New York City and was home to more than 75,000 people, many of them young women recruited from small towns across the South. Their jobs were shrouded in mystery, but they were buoyed by a sense of shared purpose, close friendships--and a surplus of handsome scientists and Army men!

But against this vibrant wartime backdrop, a darker story was unfolding. The penalty for talking about their work--even the most innocuous details--was job loss and eviction. One woman was recruited to spy on her coworkers. They all knew *something* big was happening at Oak Ridge, but few could piece together the true nature of their work until the bomb "Little Boy" was dropped over Hiroshima, Japan, and the secret was out. The shocking revelation: the residents of Oak Ridge were enriching uranium for the atomic bomb.

Though the young women originally believed they would leave Oak Ridge after the war, many met husbands there, made lifelong friends, and still call the seventy-year-old town home. The reverberations from their work there--work they didn't fully understand at the time--are still being felt today. In *The Girls of Atomic City*, Denise Kiernan traces the astonishing story of these unsung WWII workers through interviews with dozens of surviving women and other Oak Ridge residents. Like *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, this is history and science made fresh and vibrant--a beautifully told, deeply researched story that unfolds in a suspenseful and exciting way.

As heard on National Public Radio's Weekend Edition.

One of Goodreads' Most Popular Books of March 2013.
One of Amazon's Editors' Picks for Best Books of the Month (History)
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

A Note from Denise Kiernan, Author of *The Girls of Atomic City*

Most of us have grown up with the humbling power of the atomic bomb looming somewhere in our collective consciousness. We are at least familiar with the phrase "Manhattan Project," even if we know little of the history behind that World War II effort to make the world's first nuclear weapon. Los Alamos. Oppenheimer. Fermi. Groves. These names may ring a bell, if only a distant one. The story of the Manhattan Project is often discussed from the perspective of high-profile scientific minds and decision-makers.

A black-and-white photo of young women monitoring gigantic panels covered in knobs and dials both altered my view of this story and inspired me to write *The Girls of Atomic City*. I was struck by the youth of these women, the size of the room, the unfamiliar technology. They did not know they were enriching uranium and would not know until a bomb detonated above Hiroshima. What were *they* thinking? What did the Manhattan Project look like through *their* eyes? I had my way in. I tracked down everyone I could who had worked on the Manhattan Project in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, during World War II.

I entered a top-secret compound, one that straddled two worlds: that which existed before and that which followed the dawn of the nuclear age. Octogenarians as my trusted guides, I found not only fission and cyclotrons, but rations and dances. The satisfaction of doing one's part mixed with the anxiety of wartime. It was a world of pioneering spirit and propaganda, of scientific gains and personal loss. Loved ones were far away, deadlines and informants lurking much nearer. There was always waiting: for news, for cigarettes, for letters, for the end of the war. When that end came, it was a relief and a shock. Secrets were revealed, others still remain.

I hope readers will be as fascinated by this moment in time as I was, as I still am.



Young female cubicle operators monitor the activity of the calutrons, the heart of the uranium electromagnetic separation process at the Y-12 plant. *Courtesy of Ed Westcott*

Click here for a larger image.



Housing options included dorms and prefab homes, but also hutments and trailers, like those pictured here.
Courtesy of Ed Westcott

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Billboards and posters extolling patriotism and discretion were found throughout the United States during World War II. Images throughout Oak Ridge reminded residents to work hard and keep quiet about what went on inside their fences. *Courtesy of Ed Westcott*

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Young women exit their dorm to celebrate the end of World War II. *Courtesy of Ed Westcott*

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From [Booklist](#)

Atomic-bomb history includes works about the communities of workers attached to the main installations where the first nuclear weapon was built. Kiernan's contribution covers Oak Ridge, Tennessee, site of enormous factories built to separate uranium isotopes. A type of oral history, Kiernan's account derives from her intensive interviews with 10 women who, in their youth, labored in a range of occupations at Oak Ridge, from janitor to machine operator to secretary to engineer. With surrounding scaffolding of the scientific fundamentals and the 1942–45 technical development of the bomb, the narrative runs as a collection of individuals' life stories that recall circumstances of recruitment and the spartan conditions at Oak Ridge, on and off the job. Some commonalities of experience include the secrecy in which the women worked and the discrimination they endured (racial segregation in the case of the janitor; sexism in the cases of white women workers). Kiernan snugly fits original research into the creation story of Oak Ridge and should engage readers interested in both women's history and the background of the atomic bomb. --Gilbert Taylor

Review

"I love these kinds of books, and this is a great one....It's a phenomenal story." (Jon Stewart, *The Daily Show*)

"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 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." (*The Boston Globe*)

"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." (*The San Francisco Book Review*)

"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*)

"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*)

"Kiernan's accounts ring with authenticity....*The Girls of Atomic City* is fascinating." (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*)

"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)

"A fresh take on the secret city built in the mountains of Tennessee as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II... An inspiring account of how people can respond with their best when called upon." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Denise Kiernan recreates, with cinematic vividness and clarity, the surreal Orwell-meets-Margaret Atwood environment of Oak Ridge as experienced by some of the women who were there: secretaries, technicians, a nurse, a statistician, a leak pipe inspector, a chemist, and a janitor." (DailyBeast.com)

"Kiernan snugly fits original research into the creation story of Oak Ridge and should engage readers interested in both women's history and the background of the atomic bomb." (Booklist)

"This intimate and revealing glimpse into one of the most important scientific developments in history will appeal to a broad audience." (Publishers Weekly)

"A lively story about the tens of thousands of women who made the bomb -- from the power-plant janitor struggling each day through the mud to the exiled physicist in Sweden -- *The Girls of Atomic City* offers a bottom-up history revealing that the atomic bomb was not simply the product of J. Robert Oppenheimer's genius, but also of the work of women at every level of education and class." (BrainPickings.org)

"*The Girls of Atomic City* is the best kind of nonfiction: marvelously reported, fluidly written, and a remarkable story about a remarkable group of women who performed clandestine and vital work during World War II. Denise Kiernan recreates this forgotten chapter in American history in a work as meticulous and brilliant as it is compulsively readable." (Karen Abbott, author of *Sin in the Second City*)

"Great, relevant, readable." (--The Washingtonian)

"Kiernan has contributed a new and vital chapter to studies of American political development and women and politics." (American Political Science Association)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ricky Copeland:

Book is to be different for each grade. Book for children till adult are different content. As you may know that book is very important for all of us. The book *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* was making you to know about other know-how and of course you can take more information. It is very advantages for you. The guide *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II* is not only giving you considerably more new information but also to get your friend when you truly feel bored. You can spend your personal spend time to read your e-book. Try to make relationship using the book *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*. You never sense lose out for everything if you read some books.

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Brandon Erickson:

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Kaci Carter:

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