

## **The book is better, or is it?**

### **December 2017**

#### *Hidden figures*

Hosts: Alana Skwarok and Trish O’Flaherty

Alana: Hi, I’m Alana, and I’m here with Trish, and this the first in a series of short podcasts we will be doing called “The Book is Better – Or is it?” where we will be discussing film adaptations of books and essentially asking the question: Which was better, the book or the movie?

Today, we will be discussing Hidden Figures – the, until now, largely untold story of Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Dorothy Vaughan, three African American mathematicians who played an integral part in the success of NASA’s space program in the early 1960s.

So, I’m going to start us off by talking about my preference for the book or movie. I originally watched the movie when it came out. I read the book quite a while after that and then watched the movie a second time and did a little skim of the book. And I found that I had a lot of trouble deciding which one I liked better. I kind of did a little waffling back and forth, but ultimately I’m going to have to go with the book, just because it’s so meticulously researched and the amount of detail it goes into. I found it to be a great mix of history, science and tech, civil rights, and family and community.

Trish: I agree with you, Alana. Usually I read the book first as well before seeing the movie, but in this case I saw the movie first. Interestingly, while reading the book, I was very distracted. Forever picturing in my mind the actors who played each role and I found myself anticipating the storyline. Also, I found the book wasn’t moving fast enough for me. Fortunately, I was able to put the movie memories aside, become immersed in the rich details of the book, and appreciate the value they added.

Alana: One interesting thing that I read recently was that the film was based off a 55 page proposal of the book, rather than based on the book itself, so filming had wrapped up by the time the book came out.

Trish: That is interesting, and explains why there wasn’t any buzz about this book before suddenly the movie appeared.

Alana: Yeah, usually I’m used to knowing about the book beforehand and watching the movie later, but this movie just kind of came out of nowhere.

Trish: It did. I liked the book very much, and the movie as well, but the book fully explored the tensions in the United States at the time in the early sixties, following the second world war to the fifties. The political tensions of the Cold War era, the race for space superiority, the social

snapshot of being black in the U.S., including the limitations on access to education, as well as the tensions of being black in the workplace.

Alana: I definitely agree with that, and I thought one thing the book did really well was to illustrate the duality of these women being part of such an exclusive group in American society, and on the other hand, they are entirely excluded from American society. And I thought that the book also did a great job of tracing this sentiment back to the second world war, especially in terms of the irony of fighting against oppressors while simultaneously being the victim of oppression.

Trish: Exactly. The movie was successful, though, and very enjoyable. The movie's success to me is in bringing the story of Dorothy, Mary, and Katherine to life. Their accomplishments are the focus of the movie. Their stories do not get lost in the details, which is a common criticism of the book. Reading non-fiction, especially a science and history book, can be a bit slow and dry, but for me, the book wins this round of our discussions of "The Book is Better" for the depth and understanding it gives us of the history and tensions in the United States at a very critical time.

Thanks for listening. We hope you enjoyed our discussion of "The Book is Better – or is it?" Next time we will be discussing the novel *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood, along with the mini series adaptation, which begins airing on the CBC September 25.