

## Xanthe Brown

“Hidden”: How Shetterly’s Book Emboldens Our Quest

To Uncover Subtle Forms of Oppression

By definition, Margot Lee Shetterly’s novel *Hidden Figures*, which depicts the harsh realities of racism and sexism in mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century America, is a story underscored by sorrow. Fear and hatred drum behind the stories of Mary Jackson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Katherine G. Johnson as they fight to put a man into space against narrow odds. However, while *Hidden Figures* could be a sad tale, Shetterly paints the narrative with optimism. Although the subjects of activism have changed since their time, these women’s stories could not be more relevant. Nowadays, social justice means asking ourselves huge questions about little things. We seek to end not only obvious injustices but the unjust attitudes living within us and in the minutia of our lives. *Hidden Figures* renews our hope as we uncover the far-reaching and hidden effects of injustice.

Although powerful on its own, *Hidden Figures* is especially salient in the context of today’s social justice movements. The focus is expanding beyond legal or political wrongs to subtler systemic and personal wrongs as manifestations of the same phenomenon. Sometimes social injustice, like a tumor, is obvious. Life-threatening tumors must be taken out first. Eliminating oppressive practices and policies has dominated America’s resistance movements, though subtler issues and rhetoric were always involved. The Bus Boycott of Montgomery and Women’s Suffrage all attacked big “tumors” such as legalized segregation and the lack of voting privileges. Activism still fights tumors, but it now fights the invisible cancerous tendrils of oppression. This cancer lives in the tiniest actions. Microaggressions, subtle behaviors which indicate prejudice, exemplify the way we carry injustice unknowingly. White people commonly touch black people’s shoulders or hair without permission, a behavior advocates have

discouraged as it may communicate a feeling of ownership to black people. One microaggression prevalent in *Hidden Figures* is calling (especially black) women “girls”, which ignores their adulthood. Our attitudes not only drive these interpersonal transgressions but also inform structural inequities. The absence of grocery stores in poor neighborhoods causes health problems, and makeup marketing creates and targets insecurities. All forms of oppression, obvious and unapparent, stem from the cancer embedded in our values. Modern activists scrutinize subtle behaviors and structural nuances because they know that until we eradicate the injustice within us, we cannot keep injustice from metastasizing everywhere.

To rid ourselves of the attitudes, values, and behaviors that perpetuate injustice, we have to use introspection to notice them where they hide. People are beginning to question how they carry systematic injustices, both in the ways they are unknowingly complicit with the injustice and in the ways they are unknowingly affected by it. “Why did I laugh at that offensive joke?” or “why was I afraid when I saw that person?” can reveal harmful attitudes. Asking these questions of ourselves and honestly answering them reveals our unconscious biases that hurt others. Laughing at an offensive joke, though it might feel harmless, could signal lack of empathy for the group being mocked, translating into apathy over the group’s social issues. The same principle applies when the attitudes we carry harm our own identities. “Why didn’t I stick up for myself?” and “why aren’t I being treated as well as those other folks?” can reveal unconscious biases that hurt us. Not sticking up for yourself could result from internalized prejudice – it’s possible that you were not taught to value your right to fair treatment because you are of an undervalued group. Understanding our internalized prejudice helps us predict challenges, support others, and identify harmful attitudes everywhere. Introspection and recognition have become the MO of our activism.

The biggest challenge of this endeavor is simple – it hurts. Once you start looking at your actions and thoughts that closely, you uncover biases you didn't even know you had. It can be mentally exhausting to sort through the endless ways your actions are informed by prejudice, whether it targets you or others. The instant sharing of information via social media is causing people to scrutinize themselves more than ever. While this introspection heightens social expectations (racist Facebook comments now end careers), the task's gravity can be exhausting. Unearthing injustice is a terrifying, though necessary, biopsy.

As we discover the softer ways society thwarts justice, stories like *Hidden Figures* keep us going. *Hidden Figures* reminds us both that we can triumph over injustice and why we're fighting it. Mary Jackson, Katherine G. Johnson and Dorothy Vaughan put a man on the moon despite discrimination in segregation's heyday. They won against known science, the white patriarchy, and their doubts. Can't we do it too? And, when our souls are tired from the weight of seeing every setback working against us, they remind us of the bright future we're fighting for, a future where people of all identities are celebrated and loved. Love anchors the women's fight, and their story anchors ours. Mary Jackson fought injustice for her Girl Scout troop, refusing to let them internalize the message of "Pick a Bale of Cotton", and worked to give others special opportunities like educational hiking trips. Dorothy Vaughan took her job at NACA to secure her children's future and advocated for promoting women whenever she could. And Katherine G. Johnson, who silenced her doubts with willpower, loved her country and work so much that she refused to let her circumstances limit her as a mathematician, serving America's scientific legacy. We must remember that our pursuit of self-correction is not only about us. We are unraveling ourselves to build up the people around us, and our efforts, like those of Mary, Dorothy, and Katherine, will someday reward America with justice.

Shetterly's novel articulates *Hidden Figures*' cultural significance in its epilogue: it's a story of hope. As we purge unconscious wrongdoings, we need hope to keep us alive. We need hope to rediscover our victories as we prepare for new battles, battles so small they are huge. We need hope to kill this cancer. We need hope to bring light to what's hidden.