



# *The Girls of Atomic City*

by Denise Kiernan

*Martin County Library System Book Club Kit:*

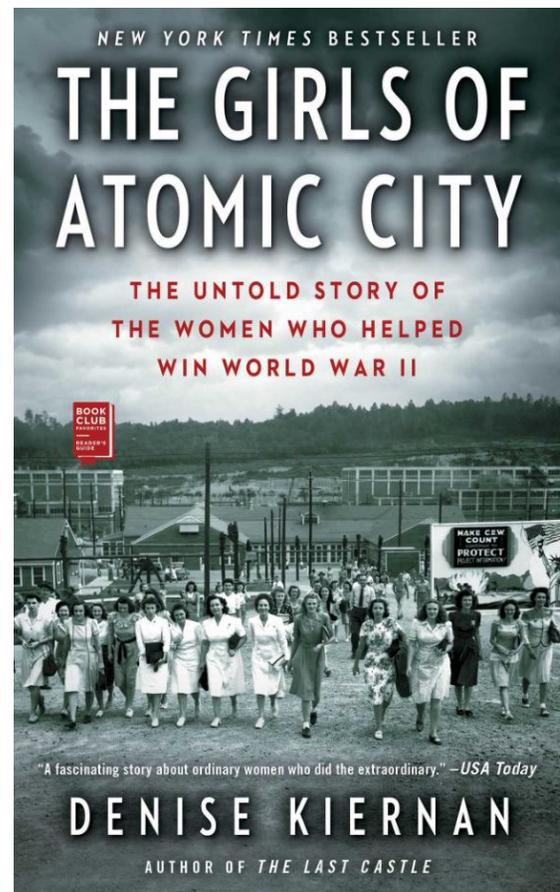
## *The Girls of Atomic City* by Denise Kiernan

Included in the Kit:

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### Book summary

At the height of World War II, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was home to 75,000 residents, and consumed more electricity than New York City, yet it was shrouded in such secrecy that it did not appear on any map. Thousands of civilians, many of them young women from small towns across the U.S., were recruited to this secret city, enticed by the promise of solid wages and war-ending work. What were they actually doing there? Very few knew. The purpose of this mysterious government project was kept a secret from the outside world and from the majority of the residents themselves. Some wondered why, despite the constant work and round-the-clock activity in this makeshift town, did no tangible product of any kind ever seem to leave its guarded gates? The women who kept this town running would find out at



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the end of the war, when Oak Ridge's secret was revealed and changed the world forever.

Drawing from the voices and experiences of the women who lived and worked in Oak Ridge, *The Girls of Atomic City* rescues a remarkable, forgotten chapter of World War II from obscurity. Denise Kiernan captures the spirit of the times through these women: their pluck, their desire to contribute, and their enduring courage. "A phenomenal story," and *Publishers Weekly* called it an "intimate and revealing glimpse into one of the most important scientific developments in history."

Source: Simon and Schuster

(<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Girls-of-Atomic-City/Denise-Kiernan/9781451617535>)





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## Meet the Author

Denise Kiernan (born July 31, 1968) is an American journalist, producer and author who lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Kiernan graduated from the North Carolina School of the Arts with an emphasis in music. She earned a BA degree from New York University in 1991 and an MA from the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and



Human Development of New York University in 2002. Kiernan started out in journalism, and as a freelance writer, her work appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Ms. Magazine* amongst 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 has ghost written books for athletes, entrepreneurs, and actresses.

Source: Wikipedia.





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## 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?
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?





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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?





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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?

Source: Simon and Schuster Reading Group Guide.

([simonandschuster.com/books/The-Girls-of-Atomic-City/Denise-Kiernan/9781451617535](http://simonandschuster.com/books/The-Girls-of-Atomic-City/Denise-Kiernan/9781451617535))



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## Recipes

### Spam Mousse

Spam was a staple during WWII.

- 1 (12oz) can of Spam
- 1 (8oz) package of cream cheese, softened
- 4 Tbsp. chopped onion
- 4 Tbsp. white wine
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh thyme
- 2 tsp. paprika
- 2 tsp. Dijon mustard
- 1/2 tsp. minced garlic
- 1/4 tsp. black pepper



Puree all ingredients in a food processor, scraping down the sides a couple of times. Refrigerate at least 4 hours ... overnight is best. We served with Ritz Crisp & Thins, but can be served on any cracker, or even little triangles of black bread.

Source: Minnesota Knights of Columbus ([mnknights.org/spam-mousse-recipe](http://mnknights.org/spam-mousse-recipe))

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## Brownie Bombs

- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/3 cup oil
- 1/4 cup butter, melted
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup cocoa powder
- 1 large egg
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 10 milk chocolate truffles
- 2 tablespoons powdered sugar, for dusting



Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, salt, and baking powder.

In a large bowl, combine the oil, melted butter, sugar, and cocoa powder and whisk. Add the egg and vanilla and mix until the ingredients are incorporated. Add the flour mixture and mix thoroughly with a spatula.

Roll the dough into 2-inch (5-cm) balls. Press a truffle into each dough ball and wrap the dough around so the truffle is not exposed. Place onto a parchment paper covered baking pan.

Bake for 10 minutes, until the dough is slightly firm to the touch. Dust with powdered sugar. Can be stored in an airtight container up to 5 days. Reheat in the microwave for 20 seconds before eating.

Source: Tasty. ([tasty.co/recipe/brownie-bombs](https://tasty.co/recipe/brownie-bombs))

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