2017–2018 FYRE Essay Contest

Hidden Figures traces the lives of the “computers” responsible for landing humankind on the moon: Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson, Christine Mann, Dorothy Vaughn, and many other mathematicians whose stories finally put the West Computing group on the map—as they have long deserved to be. In the excerpts you read (the first chapters of each of the four mini-biographies), Margot Lee Shetterly invites us to marvel over the qualities that led these four remarkable people to Hampton, Virginia, and the world to the moon through their work.

Because Shetterly’s book focuses on these women’s individual lives (more than the movie, which dramatizes their relationships with one another), we can appreciate the wide-ranging inspirations, motivations, passions, and real difficulties that guided their experiences over the years. Shetterly makes us wonder over what makes Katherine Goble Katherine Goble, Mary Jackson Mary Jackson, Christine Mann Christine Mann, Dorothy Vaughn Dorothy Vaughn. On the surface, this book may be about women whose most famous work was computing the vast distance between earth and moon. But it’s also about the inner lives of four women whose minds challenged a world that wasn’t, and still isn’t, always so beautiful.

Shetterly describes their most distinctive qualities—inquisitiveness, persistence, resilience, self-assuredness and humility in equal measure, strength of mind and strength of heart—not just through their grand, if long hidden, accomplishments but also through the details in her characterizations:

**DOROTHY VAUGHN**—“Paper resolve was one thing, the messiness of real life another. […] Once Dorothy made up her mind, no one—not her husband, not her in-laws, not the principal at Moton—would be able to dissuade her from her goal” (21).

**KATHERINE GOBLE**—“Katherine counted whatever crossed her path—dishes, steps, and stars in the nighttime sky. Insatiably curious about the world, the child peppered her grammar school teachers with questions and skipped ahead from second grade to fifth. When teachers turned around from the blackboard to discover an empty desk in Katherine’s place, they knew they’d find their pupil in the classroom next door, helping her older brother with his lesson” (71).

**MARY JACKSON**—John Becker “challenged Mary’s numbers, insisting that her calculations were wrong. Mary Jackson stood by her numbers. She and her division chief went back and forth over the data, trying to isolate the discrepancy. Finally, it became clear: the problem wasn’t with her output but with her input. Her calculations were correct, based on the wrong numbers Becker had given her. The best of the women made names for themselves for accuracy, speed, and insight. But having the independence of mind and the strength of personality to defend your work in front of the most incisive aeronautical minds in the world—that’s what got you noticed” (114–115).

**CHRISTINE MANN**—Christine “loved it her father taught her the tricks like priming the carburetor that would keep the temperamental machine on the road. Bold and curious, Christine earned to ride a bike by rolling at top speed down one of Monroe’s many hills, flying off in one direction like a daredevil at the bottom of the hill while the bicycle went banging off in another. Patching tires and adjusting the bike’s brakes with a coat hanger became important parts of her mechanical repertoire. Dolls interested her mainly for what was inside them; her mother would catch her tearing out their stuffing so that she could see what was making them talk” (155).

As you embark on your first semester of your first year of college, you’ll almost certainly find yourself reflecting on the personal qualities that led you to USCB—and those you’ll want to develop for the chapters that follow this important phase in your own life. What character-defining moments made you the person you are today, or the person you want to be tomorrow or twenty-five years from now? For the essay contest, we want you to figure out—and to write about—what makes you tick. Identify the character trait you admire most in one of these hidden figures. Think about why that particular quality is so important to that particular woman’s story but also why it is important to your own. Your essay should be between 500 and 800 words. We know you can’t tell us everything about yourselves, but we do hope to learn about some of your most powerful stories.