Question 1: As the book opens, the reader meets Melvin Butler, the white personnel officer at Langley who was searching desperately for qualified mathematicians and wound up hiring black women for jobs that historically had gone only to white men. Shetterly muses, “Maybe Melvin Butler was progressive for his time and place, or maybe he was just a functionary carrying out his duty. Maybe he was both.” Which do you think it was?

Question 2: The author says of young Dorothy Vaughan: “Possessed of an inner confidence that attributed no shortcoming to her race or to her gender, Dorothy welcomed the chance to prove herself in a competitive academic arena.” How did this approach to life help her at Langley? Was it an attitude shared by the other women in West Computing?

Question 3: A wife and mother of four, Dorothy leaves her family in Farmville to take a mathematician job over a hundred miles away. Working at Langley pays twice what she’s earning as a teacher at a segregated school, but it means she won’t see her family for weeks at a time. Would you have done the same? Was it a worthwhile sacrifice?

Question 4: The author tells us: “As far as the West Computers were concerned, they would prove themselves equal or better [than their white and male counterparts’, having internalized the Negro theorem of needing to be twice as good to get half as far.” Do you believe this is true? Why do you think they believed it?

Question 5: Mary Jackson refuses to let the children’s choir at her church sing the song “Pick a Bale of Cotton,” a happy tune about slaves: “The song reinforced all the crudest stereotypes about what a Negro could do or be. Sometimes, she knew, the most important battles for dignity, pride, and progress were fought with the simplest of actions.” Were there other simple actions described in this book that live up to this truth? What were they?

Question 6: Katherine Johnson’s mentor, the esteemed mathematician Dr. William Claytor, believes her exceptional talent would make her a first-rate mathematician, but when Katherine JOhnson asks, “But where will I find a job?” His only response is, “That will be your problem.” How would you have responded? Would you have continued to pursue a graduate degree given those challenges? Why do you think Katherine made the decisions she made?

Question 7: Mary Jackson, we learn, “saw the relationships between women as a natural way to bridge racial differences.” How did what the West Computers had in common with their white and male counterparts -- a love of math and science, bridge games, dedication to their work -- help bridge the divides  imposed on them by society?

Question 8: “Not a morning dawned that [Katherine Johnson] didn’t wake up eager to get to the office. The passion that she had for her job was a gift, one that few people ever experienced.” Was this passion for the job the key to Johnson’s overcoming the obstacles she faced because of her gender and race? Was she simply lucky to have found the right career? Do you think many people feel this way about their work?

Question 9: Ironically, the integration of the West Computers with the rest of the computing section meant a demotion for its supervisor, Dorothy Vaughn: “. . . despite knowing for many years that this day would eventually come, and having done everything within  her power to bring it about, the victory she savored . . .  was bittersweet. Progress for the group meant a step back for its leader; Dorothy’s career as a manager came to an end on the last day of the West Area Computing office.” What does this say about the nature of progress? How would you have felt if you had been Dorothy Vaughn?

Question 10: “Being on the leading edge of integration was not for the faint of heart,” Margot Lee Shetterly observes. Do you think the women of West Computing were unusually courageous? Did they arrive there because they were brave, or did they grow braver as they faced the challenges of working at Langley and living under Jim Crow?