

PROVING GROUND Reading Group Guide

1. Kathy Kleiman originally struggles to find the names and records of the ENIAC 6. What does PROVING GROUND reveal about who often gets left out of history and why?
2. As Kleiman proceeds through her computer science classes, she notices the number of women around her decreasing. Why do you think that was? How might uncovered histories like PROVING GROUND help change that?
3. The ENIAC 6 faced a variety of sexist treatment throughout their careers, such as being denied the professional “P” rating and subject to juvenile pranks, and yet they persevered. What lessons can they impart on young women today as they similarly navigate schools or workplaces that might have a gender imbalance? What about lessons for young men?
4. Kleiman describes the family backgrounds and traits of the Computers at length. What qualities, both in their personalities and upbringings, do they seem to share? How might these features have made them uniquely suited for the work at hand? How might more families encourage their daughters to pursue nontraditional paths?
5. John Mauchly and J. Presper Eckert Jr. are two of the most important inventors of the twentieth century. Compare and contrast their trajectories to those of more contemporary inventors. How did the respective eras they were steeped in indelibly shape them?
6. Given the technology of the 1940s, none of the ENIAC 6 believed that computers would ever be small or that ordinary people would ever be able to afford computers. How do you think they’d react to modern laptops and smartphones? What advancements that we take for granted today do you think would surprise them most?
7. As the ENIAC Programmers rushed to set up their own trajectory problem on ENIAC, they found themselves merging with the young men of the hardware group to create a more cohesive team. In your own life, how has a difficult project or problem helped you connect with peers or colleagues that previously did not know or work well with you?
8. When the ENIAC runs the ballistics trajectory problem on Demonstration Day, none of the men that day congratulate or thank the ENIAC 6, who feel shell-shocked by this lack of recognition. Have you ever similarly been denied credit or gratitude for the fruits of your labor? How did you handle the situation? How might the women have been constrained by their circumstances from reacting as they may have liked?
9. The ENIAC 6 made innumerable important contributions, including the training and mentorship they offered young programmers during their later work on the ENIAC for Aberdeen Proving Ground. Who were your most important mentors? How did they shape your path and understanding of your field?
10. Kathy meets a number of computer historians unwilling to recognize the valuable contributions of the ENIAC 6. From where do you think this reluctance stems? Can you see it reflected elsewhere in contemporary business and culture?