

## Pioneer who opened space to women

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Full disclosure: I wanted to be Sally Ride. When I was a graduate student in physics, I applied to be an astronaut and would have entered NASA in 1978, along with Ride, if I had been chosen. I had a second chance to blast free from Earth when I became a finalist in the journalist-in-space competition, until the Challenger disaster in 1986 put an end to that contest.

To my disappointment, I never had the opportunity to meet Ride, but Lynn Sherr has provided the next best thing: a biography of America's first woman in space that is riveting, beautifully written and rich in detail, largely because of the cooperation of family and colleagues in sharing reminiscences and correspondence.

As an ABC News reporter, Sherr covered the U.S. space program during Ride's stint as an astronaut and in the process became her friend. But this is far from a hagiography. Sherr effectively goes beyond Ride's familiar public facade - the bright smile and twinkling blue eyes - and reveals a complex woman who could be easy-going one day, hard-hearted the next and inscrutable about her love life. Though rare to show anger and a diplomatic leader, she did not suffer fools gladly.

Ride was a California gal, born into a loving and free-thinking family, but one that was not overly demonstrative. From early on, she was introverted and guarded but raised by her parents with the liberal mind-set (unusual for the 1950s) that women were equal to men. A sports enthusiast and gifted athlete, Ride took up tennis as a teenager, becoming so good on the amateur circuit that she briefly considered going professional.

But something else was more alluring. "If you woke up Sally Ride in the middle of the night and asked her what one word best described her," Sherr writes, "she would say, according to everyone who knew her best, 'Physicist.'" Her aim was to be a college professor, but in 1977, several months before her graduation from Stanford with a PhD, she read a headline in the student newspaper - "NASA to Recruit Women" - and soon sent off her application, as did some 8,000 others.

Within a year she was one of 35 new astronauts (including six women and four minority men), the first class to include non-pilots who would serve as mission specialists aboard the innovative shuttles then being assembled for launch into space. Soon the shy woman was adopting all the bravura of the "right stuff," even buying aviator shades and a leather jacket. Ironically, she was chosen to be the first woman on a shuttle just weeks before the Equal Rights Amendment went down in defeat.

The hoopla surrounding Ride's historic 1983 flight was immense and memorable. Sherr provides an insightful insider's view of the politics and atmosphere within NASA as the old boys' club was crumbling, and the little-known repercussions. So intense was the spotlight after Ride's visit to space (including threats from stalkers) that she had to undergo therapy to regain her equilibrium.

The book never loses momentum, even in Ride's post-NASA years, when she shifted to academia and the corporate world. It was while teaching and writing children's books about space that she decided to set up a company, Sally Ride Science, to make science cool for girls as well as boys. Its festivals and competitions have touched the lives of some 2 million youngsters, possibly her greatest achievement. She was still heading up the firm when she died of pancreatic cancer in 2012 at age 61.

That was when her obituary got worldwide attention for its closing line. "In addition to Tam O'Shaughnessy, her partner of twenty-seven years, Sally is survived by. . . ." Ride had a loving yet secretive relationship with a woman while in college, later more open ones with men. For five years, she was married to fellow astronaut Steve Hawley. It was after their divorce that she forged a permanent partnership with O'Shaughnessy, an old friend from her tennis days, an arrangement known to only a tight circle of friends. She never discussed it with her family. Ride's many strategies to keep this side of her life secret form a thread that stretches throughout the book, which seems so sad given the happiness the couple shared and the swift changes now underway for marriage laws across the nation.

Ride, writes Sherr, "was fiercely loyal to NASA, and . . . she might well have hidden her private life to help preserve its image." Would she have opened up today? Perhaps not. "She didn't want to be defined by the lesbian/gay label," O'Shaughnessy told Sherr, "just as she didn't want to be defined by a gender label. We both didn't like categories."

Ride was intensely protective of her privacy, a "locked box," friends said. But Sherr, with O'Shaughnessy's blessing, has at last opened the lid with this captivating biography.

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