

Asha and Baz Meet Mary Sherman Morgan

Caroline Fernandez

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Asha and Baz Meet Mary Sherman Morgan is an exciting middle grade novel about the US's first woman rocket scientist; it emphasizes curiosity, teamwork, and creative thinking.

In Caroline Fernandez's engaging novel *Asha and Baz Meet Mary Sherman Morgan*, two students are excited to compete in a rocket contest; they hope to win and meet an astronaut.

Asha and Baz are young, interested in science, and stymied when it comes to getting their rocket to launch. Then they find an unusual stick on the playground that turns out to be a magic wand. It transports them to 1957, at the height of the Space Race. But at North American Aviation, the students are surprised to see that all the mechanics, pilots, and engineers are men, with one exception: Mary Sherman Morgan, America's first woman rocket scientist, the creator of the fuel that was used to launch Explorer 1 and the Jupiter-C rocket into space.

With Morgan as their guide, the children learn about rocket launches—and about the barriers that keep women from careers in science. Though Morgan proffered the solution to the rocket fuel problem that made the US's 1958 launch possible, no mention of her was made in the press when the event was celebrated. Still, her innovative thinking, and her courage to risk angering her superiors, led to the success.

Asha and Baz are shocked and angered to witness the prevailing biases against women, as well as by gendered pay disparities. In contrast, their story is used to highlight women's strengths and abilities. Outgoing Asha takes the lead in solving the friends' rocket launch problem, and the duo decides to be innovative, just like the woman who inspired them. With the USSR ahead in the race, though, time seems to be running out; at the same time, the date of the children's science class contest is also fast approaching. Tension builds toward the book's celebratory conclusion.

Both the text and the illustrations convey the story's full emotional range, and the basic science behind a rocket launch is presented in a clear manner. Spirited exchanges are used to propel the tale, though the disparaging remarks made by Morgan's haughty colleagues are a disturbing element. The cast is diverse, and their story encourages creative thinking, teamwork, and perseverance. However, an attempt to show the children passing as new rocket scientists is unconvincing.

With brief, educational biographies of the real people who inspired the story at its end, *Asha and Baz Meet Mary Sherman Morgan* is an exciting middle grade novel about the US's first woman rocket scientist; it emphasizes curiosity, teamwork, and creative thinking.

KRISTINE MORRIS (June 15, 2022)

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