



FOPSL Book Club: November 20, 2020

Book: *Fly Girls*

Author: Keith O'Brien

Discussion leader: Christine Houser

Christine Houser Presents *Fly Girls* by O'Brien



True Tales of the First Women Aviators

In November, Christine Houser led the presentation of *Fly Girls* by Keith O'Brien. *Fly Girls*, his third book, became a *New York Times* Bestseller after publication in 2018. Mr. O'Brien was born in Cincinnati and graduated from

Northwestern University. He is an award-winning journalist, a former reporter for the Boston Globe, and a regular contributor to National Public Radio and Politico. Mr. O'Brien was a 2017 finalist for the PEN/ESPN Award for Literary Sports Writing.

At a book signing at Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington, DC (see the video: <https://www.politics-prose.com/video/fly-girls-keith-obrien>) Mr. O'Brien reported he didn't like to fly, but it was a job requirement and he enjoyed seeing new places. Upon learning about the women aviators of the Powder Puff Derby of 1929 he discovered the possibility of writing about "an epic quest populated by characters willing to sacrifice everything." His two and half years of research for the book revealed "an entire world we had forgotten." He noted that among the most popular sports of the late 1920's in America were "baseball, boxing and air racing." His book narrates key events in the lives of women aviators including Amelia Earhart, Louise Thaden, Florence Klingensmith, Ruth Nichols, and Ruth Elder. Mr. O'Brien noted two books that gave him a point of reference for *Fly Girls*, ***The Astronaut's Wives Club*** (2013) by Lily Koppel and ***The Right Stuff*** (1979) by Tom Wolfe.

The book club discussed the role of women in America in the early Twentieth Century. At the time, women had limited rights and as such, were treated almost like children. Some present faced similar obstacles in their careers and educational pursuits as the women aviators. Among the women book club members who have flown planes or have female relatives who pilot aircraft, all would recommend the book to women interested in aviation. The Midwest was featured in the book and references to the origins of Kansas-based Beech Aircraft Corporation and its cross-town Wichita rival, Cessna Aircraft Company brought back memories. Everyone had some knowledge of Amelia Earhart before reading the book, but many of the other women were unknown. Some knew of the Powder Puff air races and about barnstorming, too.

To see a short video trailer about the book go to <https://vimeo.com/283238759> and visit the author's website at <http://www.keithob.com/> to see more pictures of the aviators. Amazon has a DVD, ***Beyond The Powder: The Legacy of the First Women's Cross-Country Air Race***, a documentary film that follows the female pilots of the 2014 Air Race Classic as they make their way across the country, while telling the story of the first women's cross-country air race of 1929, also known as the Powder Puff Derby. Today the Powder Puff Derby continues as the

Air Race Classic, with modern day racers carrying out the legacy and the adventurous spirit of the original racers.

The [Palm Springs Air Museum](#) has an exhibit dedicated to women aviators. Because of COVID there are no opportunities to get a docent-led tour of the museum exclusive to women aviators. Contact the museum if you would like to see books or videos that are part of their collection.

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