

Discussion Questions for “The Woman Who Smashed Codes” book, Parts 2 and 3, by Jason Fagone

The following questions are meant to get the discussion started in small groups. Feel free to use these questions and/or add your own interesting questions.

Part 1 Questions:

Describe Riverbank and the work being done there. Does Riverbank still exist?

Who was Elizebeth Smith and how did she come to be at Riverbank?

How did Elizebeth’s background contribute to her success in code-breaking?

What types of ciphers did Elizebeth determine were being used?`

Why are shorter segments of text harder to decrypt?

How did she meet her husband, what drew them together?

Who was William Friedman and how did he come to be at Riverbank?

What do you think of the relationship between William and Elizebeth?

Do you think marriage can be successful today if both parties aren’t in love, to begin with?

Why/how do you think that her feelings changed?

Do you think that there could be a code hidden in Shakespeare’s plays? Do you think there was any merit in looking? What do you think of their original boss?

Describe the impacts of gender bias and sexism in the United States during the period before, during, and immediately following World War II. Has this bias changed since that period, and if so, in what ways? What societal forces drive such changes? What forces hinder such changes?

Are there similar stories of women’s contributions being “forgotten” to history? How much of Elizebeth’s case was due to gender bias and how much was the secretive nature of the work?

Describe the role-mission of Elizebeth and William during World War II.

How has code-breaking changed since World War II? What technologies now do the same things that Elizebeth and William did?

New Questions for Part 2 and 3:

Elizebeth and William focused on “analytical” solutions, while the machines seem to have focused on brute force or collecting statistics to aid analytical solutions. Are analytical solutions still relevant, and have they been automated by computers? Or is the joint solution of identifying “cribs” (footholds, leads) by humans followed by machine analysis, as is described happening at the Naval Annex, still a common strategy?

Which character in the book would you most like to meet and why?

Which places in the book would you most like to visit and why?

What do you think the author's purpose in writing this book? What ideas was he trying to get across?

If you could hear this same story from another person's point of view, who would you choose?

What did you already know about this book's subject before you read this book? What new things did you learn? What questions do you still have?

What else have you read on this topic, and would you recommend these books to others?

Why do you think Elizebeth was content (or not?) to sit back and let others (her husband, the Coast Guard, the FBI) take credit for the work she was doing? Was it a strategic plan? Did it help protect her children/allow them to live more normal lives? Would you be able to allow others to take credit for your work if you knew it was for a greater good?

Why didn't they talk about William's health problems?

How do you think his "melancholy" would have been treated today?

What does the author mean when he refers to "the brutal choices that codebreakers must live with" (237)?

In what ways did the FBI help or hinder the Coast Guard's WWII cryptology program?

What's your sense of how long it actually took to crack a message? At times it implied that it happened very quickly and others when it would take months.