BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Most know about the world-famous Wilbur and Orville Wright and their contribution to aviation history, but not many know about their sister, Katharine, a woman whose support was instrumental in her brothers’ pursuit to build and fly the first heavier than air, power controlled machine known as the Wright Flyer. Maiden Flight is the true-life story of the "Wright Sister," who, at the age of fifty-two, left her world-famous and intensely possessive older brother, Orville, to marry the man she loved and suffered the unhappy consequences. Katharine Wright, an international celebrity in her own right, embodied the worldly, independent, and self-fulfilled “New Woman” of the early 20th century, yet she simultaneously remained a Victorian whose devotion to her family was deep and, for most of her life, unquestioned. Torn between duty and love, Katharine agonized before making an emotionally devastating break with her brother Orville, the revered elder statesman of American aviation, to marry newspaper editor Henry J. Haskell (Harry). Maiden Flight, written by Harry Haskell, the grandson of Henry J. Haskell, is cast in the form of three interlocking first-person memoirs, imaginatively reconstructed from personal letters, newspaper reports, and other period documents. Although the narrative straddles the line between historical fiction and creative nonfiction, it is solidly grounded in historical research: every incident, fact, and emotion that the members of this lovers' triangle describe in their own words is either fully documented or can be confidently inferred from the historical record. In allowing Katharine to step outside of Wilbur and Orville’s shadow, Maiden Flight sheds new light on the central role she played in their private lives, as well as on her often misunderstood contribution to their scientific work.

Questions:

1. Independent by nature and upbringing, Katharine prided herself on being unconventional in her relations with men. She supported woman’s suffrage, equal pay for equal work, and other aims of the women’s movement, even as she assumed the time-honored role of homemaker. From reading her personal reflections, in what ways did Katharine subscribe to traditional Victorian values and in what ways did she represent an emerging feminist sensibility? Would you describe her as a feminist of her time?
2. Katharine’s mother died when she was fifteen and she grew up in an all-male household. Later she served with distinction as the lone woman on Oberlin College’s board of trustees. Katharine observes that she has always lived with men and doesn’t regard them as “such a wonderful treat.” What strategies did she adopt to survive and excel in a man’s world? Do you see a connection between her interest in aeronautics and the visibility of many early women aviators?

3. The relationship between Katharine and Orville was so close that casual observers often mistook them for man and wife. Did this seem strange or unusual? Do you think Orville was justified in feeling betrayed when his sister left him to marry Harry? Would you have a different answer if Katharine had been open with Orville about her wedding plans from the beginning? Do you believe that he would have taken a different view of the situation if she had given him more of a chance to get used to the idea before she married? Why all the secrecy?

4. Harry observes that both Orville’s scientific genius and his fundamental character were built on “resisting outside influences.” A contemporary historian whom Katharine quotes regarded Orville’s “immensity of perseverance” as the key to his success. What does Orville’s unrelenting opposition to Katharine’s marriage reveal about the strengths and weaknesses of his character, both as a human being and as a scientist?

5. Katharine and Harry both rebelled against their strict religious upbringings and the fundamentalism of their parents, yet religious values continued to shape their attitudes and actions. When Stef, the dashing Arctic explorer, betrays Katharine and Orville’s confidence, she observes that he would be “an entirely different kind of person if he had grown up in the wholesome surroundings Harry had as a young man.” What is the foundation of Katharine’s moral code, and how does it manifest itself in her relationships with Orville, Harry, and Stef?

6. Throughout her adult life, Katharine went out of her way to refute news reports that she had provided either mathematical or financial assistance to her brothers in inventing the airplane. Wilbur and Orville scrupulously acknowledged the debts they owed to other aeronautical pioneers, but said little in public about Katharine’s unstinting practical and emotional support. Why? Should our iconic image of the Wright brothers be adjusted to give greater prominence to the “Wright Sister?”

7. A sense of family solidarity and the freedom to pursue individual interests were instilled in the Wrights from childhood. This ethic encouraged Wilbur and Orville, who were generally progressive in their social philosophy, to take their sister’s self-sacrificing devotion for granted. In later life, Katharine came to resent that attitude, complaining that “the more you do for a family, the more they take as a matter of course.” How has the role of the family and the roles each family member assumes in American life changed over the past century? How did the Wrights’ clannishness affect their ability to deal with the outside world?

8. Katharine criticizes herself, and many of her fellow women, for having no useful occupation. She gave up a career in teaching to become Wilbur and Orville’s “social manager” in Europe, a decision she later came to regret. What does her story tell you about the opportunities that American women of her time and social class had to do what Katharine considered “meaningful” work? If Katharine were alive today, what career do you think she would choose, and why?

9. What are some of Katharine’s most admirable qualities?