

First Opinion: Fly, Girl, Fly!

Nancy Roe Pimm. *Fly, Girl, Fly*. Minneapolis, MN: Beaming Books, 2020. Print.

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The book is based on a short biography of Shaesta Waiz and her journey to achieving her dreams. Born to Afghan parents in a refugee camp in Afghanistan, Shaesta's family escaped the war-torn region in Afghanistan and flew to America, the land of the free, and numerous opportunities. In America, her family settled in California and began growing their family until Shaesta was one of six girls. Being natives of Afghanistan, the family conversed in Pashto and Farsi and followed their homeland's traditions, including cuisine and eating habits. Shaesta led two lives, one as an Afghan at home and the other as an American at school. As Shaesta grew, she blossomed into this amazing girl who wanted to reach great heights. She often told her family that she would "do great things," while she did have big dreams and ambitions, she was met with her siblings' ridicule – "You are afraid of everything, even planes in the sky." As days passed, Shaesta graduated high school and was ready for a vacation. Fortunately, her cousins

invited her to visit them in Florida, and Shaesta had to take a plane to get there. Though Shaesta was hesitant to embark on this journey, little did she know that this would change her life forever. Like every curious teenager, she wondered, will the plane "soar like a rocket or rumble like a roller-coaster?"

Once the plane took off, Shaesta gazed upon an incredible view – a pilot's view of the world – bright colors of green, brown, and gold, no separation between the states, one big world. Free from her phobia of flying, Shaesta made it her life's mission to become a pilot. However, her decision faced heavy criticism – "What Afghan man would want to marry a woman pilot?", "Girls do not belong in the cockpit," "foolish dreamer," and many more snide comments. This did not stop Shaesta from pursuing her dream, and she had only one response to the critiques – "An airplane does not know if I am a boy or girl." As her family was not financially strong enough to support her dream, she found a way to fund her studies, graduated college with flying colors, and was the first person in her family to hold a degree. Soon after graduating, she met Barrington Irving, another immigrant from Jamaica and the first Black person to fly solo worldwide despite all odds. He inspired Shaesta to soar high and never to let anyone or anything stop her from achieving her dreams.

Similarly, she met Jerrie Mock, the first woman to fly solo all around the globe. As they exchanged knowledge and personal experiences, Shaesta wondered, instead of flying solo worldwide, something that several other women have accomplished, why not fly worldwide to meet young individuals and get them interested in STEM careers? She embarked on this adventurous journey with several uncertainties but kept soaring high without giving up. She thought about all the young children expecting to meet her, especially those from her homeland of Afghanistan. Shaesta went to several countries and inspired young girls and boys to

"challenge the possibilities and to dream big." Even though she encountered numerous dangerous events while flying, such as thunderstorms and heavy rains, and thought about giving up yet she still steered on. Finally, she became the first female pilot in history to fly a single-engine aircraft and a role model to several little girls aspiring to make great strides in STEM fields.

The story of Shaesta Waiz serves as an inspiration for young girls all across the globe. Irrespective of color, race, ethnicity, and background, anything is possible if you believe in it. Moreover, it gives hope and strength to several young children and even adult women to 'soar high' despite all criticisms and backlash that you may receive during your journey. Shaesta's story hits home for me as STEM fields are heavily occupied by male figures and often have the notion that these fields are no place for girls and women to work in or be a part of. I pursued my Bachelor's in Electrical Engineering in India and my Masters in Aviation Technology here at Purdue, both fields that are heavily influenced and dominated by the opposite gender. Several studies can corroborate this and many factors influencing decision-making in STEM fields. First, demographic characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have been identified as primary predictors in determining women's decision-making about pursuing STEM careers (Perez-Felkner, 2018; Sax & Newhouse, 2018). Second, women are underrepresented in STEM majors and professions (Jiang, 2021). This is attributed to the fact that there are gender stereotypes about women's abilities in sciences, mathematics, engineering, and technology passed down through generations and sometimes in educational settings (e.g., schools). Third, there is a lack of female role models in STEM fields to motivate and inspire young girls and steer them toward pursuing careers in STEM (Shapiro & Williams, 2012). In line with the need for a role model, the story of Shaesta Waiz is an excellent example for young children who are

interested in choosing STEM careers but lack the support and motivation to make an informed decision.

Works Cited

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About the Author

Bhavana Kotla is a Ph.D. candidate and an Instructor for Design Thinking in Technology at the Department of Technology Leadership and Innovation, Purdue Polytechnic Institute. Her research interests include Engineering and Entrepreneurship Education specifically finding alternative ways to assess programs/courses instead of traditional assessment approaches (e.g., surveys, interviews, and standardized questionnaires) and how student perceptions can be

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