

ROCKET GIRL: A Kick Johnson Mystery

A Historical Mystery Set in 1961 at the Dawn of the Space Race



Author: Diane Vallere

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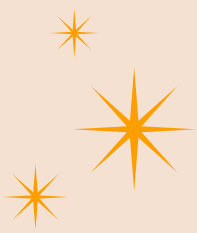
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A plucky, recently widowed mathematician takes a job with a new NASA-funded research center, but when a fellow employee turns up dead, things add up to murder...

Set in 1961 at the height of Cold War tension, *Rocket Girl* blends a traditional mystery with the story of women behind the scenes of the Space Race where ambition, secrecy, and survival collide.

"If you loved the smart women of
Lessons in Chemistry and *Hidden Figures* then this is for you."

—**Rhys Bowen**, *New York Times* bestselling author

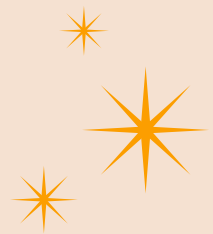


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QUICK FACTS

- Genre: Historical Mystery
 - Setting: Dallas, Texas, 1961
 - Protagonist: Math aide
 - Themes: equality, Cold War, ambition
 - Series: Book 1 of a decade-spanning series
 - Release: February 23, 2027
 - ISBN: 9798951039002 (trade paperback)
 - ISBN: 9798951039019 (ebook)
 - Trim size: 5.5x x 8.5
 - 336 pages
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ABOUT THE BOOK

A plucky, recently widowed mathematician takes a job with a new NASA-funded research center, but when a fellow employee turns up dead, things add up to murder...

Dallas, 1961. There's a new president in the White House, a new birth control pill, and a new Russian satellite called Sputnik flying overhead. Everything's new except Kick Johnson's options: she's unexpectedly on her own after three months of marriage to a man she barely knew, her car has been repossessed, and no bank will give her—or any single woman—a loan. When she answers an employment ad at the new Center for Rocket Science Research and lands a job as a math aide, her trajectory points upward—until evidence of a murder is found on the property.

The victim was an engineer who worked on the space program. His death raises questions about the safety of the center and the lengths someone will go to steal the research inside. It also highlights more personal issues like why he was at Kick's house two days before he was killed. Now her new life involves a fair amount of deception and danger with global stakes—not to mention a surprising secret that hits painfully close to home.

As the space race heats up, Kick has to solve a formula she had no part in writing before her future—and that of the space program she's learned to love—burns up on reentry.

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“If you loved the smart women of *Lessons in Chemistry* and *Hidden Figures* then this is for you.

Kick is a woman succeeding in a man’s world in the space program, against odds,
and solving a murder along the way!”

—**Rhys Bowen**, *New York Times* bestselling author of two mystery series,
plus several internationally bestselling stand alone novels

“Blast back to 1961 and the dawn of the Space Race with Diane Vallere’s latest, *Rocket Girl*. Kathleen “Kick” Johnson is a feminist heroine *avant la lettre*, flawed, to be sure, with a dangerously obsessive curiosity, matched only by her brains and wit. Superbly researched, with some intriguing historical cameos thrown in, and—of course—Vallere’s trademark eye for fashion and design,

Rocket Girl is an engrossing read not to be missed.”

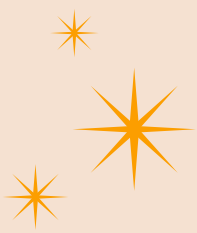
—**James W. Ziskin**, Anthony, Barry, and Macavity award-winning author
of *The Prank*, *Bombay Monsoon*, and the Ellie Stone mysteries

“*Rocket Girl* captures the excitement of the early space race through Kick Johnson, a math aide who solves a shocking murder. Fans of historical mysteries and the early space program won’t be able to put this book down.”

—**Jennifer Ross-Nazzal**, space historian and author of *Making Space for Women*

“It’s a roaring good mystery; a young investigator following the remnants of an unrealized aerospace endeavor through unexpected turns toward a stunning conclusion. Diane Vallere’s engaging book underscores aspiration as the enduring thread in our long engagement with the unknown.”

—**Roger D. Launius**, Former NASA chief historian and author of *From NACA to NASA to NOW*



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STORY ANGLES

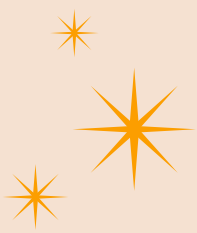
- Women behind the early Space Race
- Cold War America through the lens of mystery
- Before Title IX: opportunities for women in STEM in 1961
- Fiction at the intersection of women's history and space history

INTERVIEW TOPICS

- What inspired *Rocket Girl*
- Why Dallas? Why Space?
- Researching NASA in 1961
- Turning real history into fictional mystery
- From fashion buyer to historical novelist

WHY NOW?

- Current interest in NASA Artemis missions
- 55th anniversary of Title IX and women's educational equality
- Ongoing interest in women in STEM stories



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Short Bio:

National bestselling author Diane Vallere writes mysteries where ordinary women stumble into extraordinary situations...and murder is never far behind. From the dawn of the Space Race to contemporary America, her character-driven novels pair unforgettable heroines with intriguing mysteries, humor, and heart. A past president of Sisters in Crime Worldwide, Diane edited the Agatha Award–winning essay collection *Promophobia: Taking the Mystery out of Promoting Crime Fiction*. She studied art history at the College of William and Mary and spent years in luxury retail before trading fashion accessories for accessories to murder. She lives in Pennsylvania.

Extended Bio:

National bestselling author Diane Vallere writes mysteries where ordinary women stumble into extraordinary situations...and murder is never far behind. From the dawn of the Space Race to contemporary America, her character-driven novels pair unforgettable heroines with intriguing mysteries, humor, and heart. Her series include the Madison Night, Killer Fashion Mysteries, and the Sylvia Stryker Outer Space adventures.

Diane edited the Agatha Award–winning essay collection *Promophobia: Taking the Mystery out of Promoting Crime Fiction* and has contributed short fiction to numerous anthologies, including “We Don’t Get Along” in *Murder-A-Go-Go’s: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Music of the Go-Go’s* (Down & Out Books).

A past president of Sisters in Crime Worldwide, Diane remains an active member of the Delaware Valley chapter. She has served as co-chair of the California Crime Writers Conference and is a frequent participant in mystery conferences including Malice Domestic and Bouchercon. She attended both the Writers’ Police Academy and Homicide School for Writers. She is also a member of the Historical Novel Society, International Thriller Writers, Independent Book Publishers Association, and the Planetary Society.

Diane holds a BA in Art History from the College of William and Mary and spent more than twenty years working in luxury retail before trading fashion accessories for accessories to murder. After living in Texas and California, she now resides in Pennsylvania.

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Q. What inspired *Rocket Girl*?

A. Often times, a new-to-me nugget of information triggers an idea. In the case of *Rocket Girl*, I had discovered Nathalia Holt's non-fiction book *Rise of the Rocket Girls* in a local bookshop, and it opened my eyes to the opportunities that women had in the computing divisions of NASA. This was before I'd read or seen *Hidden Figures* (Margot Lee Shetterly), so I was coming to the information cold.

Back when I first went to college, my declared major was math. I graduated with a degree in Fine Arts instead, but I never forgot how much I enjoyed numbers. Perhaps because of that, I was drawn to the idea of these women who, in some cases, didn't have math degrees, but were mathematically gifted and found opportunities. Add in the parlor trick of the prolific mystery writer—being able to imagine a murder mystery in just about any setting—and I started putting the two together. What if a mathematically gifted woman landed a job in the space program and became embroiled in a murder investigation? How would her analytical skills shape the way she investigated it?

All of this came to me at a time when my life was in flux. I'd just moved across the country and had more questions than answers about my future. The questions that plagued me felt honest to this character: what if she was on her own? What if she had to figure out her future? And based on 1961 circumstances, what doors were closed to her? Those factors created the foundation for Kick Johnson and her experience in *Rocket Girl*.

Q. What surprised you most about researching NASA in 1961?

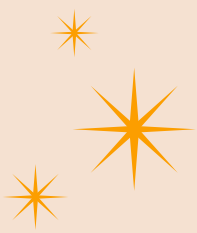
A. I was most surprised by the amount of information available. There are many books about the Space Race, some by historians, and some by the astronauts themselves. Reading books written at the time provided insight into how much of the technology and planning was being figured out every day.

I'm a goal-driven person, and there is possibly no bigger example in American history than setting the goal, in 1961, to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade and then doing it. I didn't expect to be so captivated by the sheer audacity of the objective nor how it inspired a generation of people, both male and female, to find ways to contribute.

Q. How do you balance historical accuracy with mystery plotting?

A. My process begins with identifying the timeline of the book. In *Rocket Girl*, I wanted to have one of the Mercury missions take place during the story, so I selected that and built my timeline out from there. That gave me tentpoles of history to help frame the story.

There were multiple factors to research: NASA, Dallas, the culture of the sixties, and women's rights. Researching NASA was the biggest, but 1960s Dallas has interesting history as well. The research allowed me to layer in historic cameos that readers may recognize, which (as a reader) I find to be some of the fun of historical fiction.



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Q. Why focus on women in STEM during this era?

A. That wasn't where I started. I've always been drawn to the sixties as a decade: the style, the art, the music, but the history of the Space Race ran parallel to those interests. I started to think about the impact that the moonshot had on popular culture at the time, and that led me to see the fresh opportunities for women that grew out of the moonshot too.

The term STEM didn't exist at the time, but that doesn't mean women weren't pursuing jobs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; only that these women were the exception, not the rule. I love reading stories about women succeeding in traditionally male fields, so once I tuned into the women working for NASA, that backdrop felt natural.

Those new opportunities became central to Kick's journey. She starts the book as a woman who's been told what her options are but starts to find new options for herself. This turned out not to be a book about sixties style but about women's rights and opportunities and, more than anything, about freedom.

Q. Why set the book in Dallas, TX?

A. One of my contemporary mystery series is based in Dallas and features a mid-century modern interior decorator. There is a fair amount of research that goes into that series to get the details right, and when I first started thinking about a math aide working for NASA, I wanted this to be a historical series born out of that other world. That didn't work out for a few different reasons.

NASA did not have a research facility in Dallas, but I placed my fictional one there anyway. Kick Johnson, the protagonist of *Rocket Girl*, is stepping into her own after a lifetime of being looked out for--first by her older sister when their mother dies, and next by her husband. When he dies after three months of marriage, she needs a job. As the series continues, Kick's world will continue to open up with opportunities, but first, she needs to decide if she's willing to take that giant leap. (ahem.)

Q. What made you decide to write a historical series?

A. This book had a long incubation period from idea to publication. Some of that was because the task of writing a historical series felt daunting. Years after I had the idea, I couldn't shake it. In that time I read over a hundred historical novels. I also wrote a historical fiction manuscript on spec which was a new creative challenge. Doing that put me back in touch with my love of research from college, and I finally felt ready to bring Kick to life. She, and the plot, were not what I'd expected them to be when I first had the idea, which I think benefited the story greatly.



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Resources

[Hi-resolution Cover](#)

[Author Headshot](#)

[Chapter 1 Excerpt](#)

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