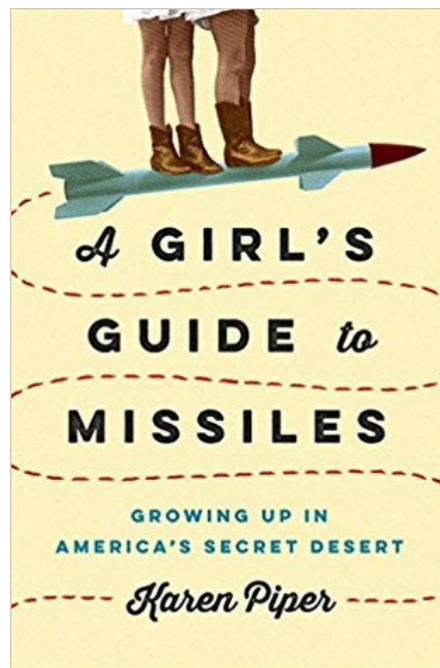




A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing Up in America's Secret Desert

Karen Piper

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A poignant, surreal, and fearlessly honest look at growing up on one of the most secretive weapons installations on earth, by a young woman who came of age with missiles

The China Lake missile range is located in a huge stretch of the Mojave Desert, about the size of the state of Delaware. It was created during the Second World War, and has always been shrouded in secrecy. But people who make missiles and other weapons are regular working people, with domestic routines and everyday dilemmas, and four of them were Karen Piper's parents, her sister, and--when she needed summer jobs--herself. Her dad designed the Sidewinder, which was ultimately used catastrophically in Vietnam. When her mom got tired of being a stay-at-home mom, she went to work on the Tomahawk. Once, when a missile nose needed to be taken offsite for final testing, her mother loaded it into the trunk of the family car, and set off down a Los Angeles freeway. Traffic was heavy, and so she stopped off at the mall, leaving the missile in the parking lot.

Piper sketches in the belief systems--from Amway's get-rich schemes to propaganda in *The Rocketeer* to evangelism, along with fears of a Lemurian takeover and Charles Manson--that governed their lives. Her memoir is also a search for the truth of the past and what really brought her parents to China Lake with two young daughters, a story that reaches back to her father's World War II flights with contraband across Europe. Finally, it recounts the crossroads moment in a young woman's life when she finally found a way out of a culture of secrets and fear, and out of the desert.

A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing Up in America's Secret Desert Details

Date : Published August 14th 2018 by Viking

ISBN : 9780399564543

Author : Karen Piper

Format : Hardcover 336 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Biography Memoir

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From Reader Review A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing Up in America's Secret Desert for online ebook

Janice says

I enjoyed this ARC. I wish the author had gone into a bit more detail on life at China Lake. As soon as she became a teenager there was far too much about her various relationships with men. None of which were interesting. I would also have liked to learn more about her academic career. For the most part, her parents were to me, by far the most interesting characters in this memoir. A lot less of Karen and a lot more of her parents please. This is a pleasant book, don't look for anything profound in it. As such, it falls a bit short of the mark of really engaging the reader.

Emmkay says

Readable, slightly meandery memoir. The author grew up on the China Lake Station in California during the Cold War, where both her parents worked in weapons development. The parts of the book about this strange milieu and about her parents were especially interesting, as was the part about her sojourn at a downright disturbing private Christian school, where the children silently completed booklets in cubicles. Lost its way a little in a thicket of romantic relationships and a failed marriage (which seems to have left Piper with some weird ideas about Canadians), and was a bit choppy towards the end.

Ask Mor says

I knew of the NAWS China Lake installation as a child in the 1980s only because my great uncle worked and lived on base as an electrical engineer. Little did I know I would end up there as an adult when my husband's military career would lead us to the Californian desert.

I enjoyed reading about those things that are exclusively "Ridgecrest" and military base China Lake. Those things that are local land marks that are still here today. And the familiarity of the places, street names and local things that only someone who has lived here would understand or get. Like a secret language or inside joke.

I like memoirs that tell about a specific incident in someone's life. Not a random mishmash of someone's anecdotes of childhood and growing up; like this one was.

The author speaks of the innocence that can come from both growing up living in a small town to the interesting dynamic that can happen when so many people around are so mathematical or scientific in their thinking. And a household of secrets which makes it hard for children to even understand what her parents do for a living all day at work.

I liked the moral questions raised by the author regarding her father's trouble with the making weapons capable of taking people's lives, wanting to preform his job honorably with integrity and also being a religious man. It made for a very complicated inner struggle.

The author's innocence is even more extreme because of her home life which her parents were overly

protective and extremely religious both in early elementary education in private school all the way through into college.

She was very gullible and easily swayed that almost made some parts of the book difficult to read. I have to give the author credit for being so honest about very embarrassing moments. I would have never had the courage to put such personal information out into the world.

Sarah says

My feelings about this book seem to echo most of the reviews that have already been written for Goodreads. This is a fine coming of age memoir about a woman who happened to grow up in China Lake, but it is not a book about China Lake. What she shared about "America's Secret Desert" was interesting, as was her fundamentalist Christian schooling (horrifying is probably a better descriptor than interesting in this instance), but overall the book felt a bit flat for me.

I received an ARC from NetGalley. The book will be released on August 14, 2018.

Penmouse says

Very few books make me angry but A Girl's Guide to Missiles by author Karen Piper angered me enough that I quit reading her book. I returned her book to Amazon due to Piper's poor research and due to the book's poor editing.

I have a deep understanding of China Lake history and how China Lake operates. China Lake was founded by the United States Navy during World War II. Today, China Lake supports national defense through research and development. A little known fact is China Lake's role in developing the popular Glow Stick. Glow Sticks were originally developed to help with military search and rescue, if I remember right, and are now used by many children to promote Halloween safety. Dare I digress.

Piper reports in her book her father designed the Sidewinder missile. In fact, the Sidewinder missile was conceived by Dr. William McClean in the mid-1950s. Many engineers and scientists have worked on the Sidewinder program throughout the years. McClean headed the engineering team though. Piper also relates her living at China Lake was filled with low flying aircraft near public areas, ordnance laying around, and how there were no religious services available at China Lake. All these things are incorrect. Naval aviators take great pride in flying safely. In fact, a local school was named after a naval aviator who elected to ride his failing jet to the ground to prevent hitting the elementary school. Ordnance testing is done on distant ranges and nowhere near public facilities including China Lake housing. Religious services have always been part of China Lake. The All Faith Chapel, I do believe was one of the original buildings constructed, and has been providing services to Catholics, Jews, Muslims and Protestants who live and work at China Lake.

There are other fact-based issues wrong with this book which I won't detail here.

If you do read this book, do realize her book is based on her personal experiences and biases. The historical research is a bit lacking and suspect. As I wrote earlier I returned the book as it was poorly researched, edited and written.

Do not recommend.

Jodi says

This was an advanced readers copy, that I recieved through the Goodreads Giveaways. I might not have bought this book, if I hadn't won it, but I would have missed out on a sometimes funny, sometimes sweet, and sometimes sad, description of growing up in a place where every life is spent building bombs to wipe out our enemies...from WWII to Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan and beyond. Karen describes a childhood of secrets learned and kept; of the love (and barely disguised fury) between siblings, the parents who couldn't talk about their work, the life on a military base in the middle of the desert, church school education, and growing up and moving on - escaping the barren dessert for a life in the outside world. Her description of her father's descent into Alzheimers' darkness is particularly poignant during her ill-fated wedding, when he couldn't remember the phrase she had drilled into him for "giving the bride away". The marriage was doomed to fail, just like the Sidewinder missiles that were made and tested at China Lake, and the foreboding feeling , the sense of doom, that hovers over her story of the brief good times, followed by the bad times, with Keith, feel as immediate as if you are watching them implode in front of you. All in all, this is a hidden gem of a book, warm and relatable, yet, impossibly distant and foreign to non-military brats, and all the more fascinating because of that distance.

Christen says

I enjoyed this memoir. I thought it was an interesting juxtaposition of war and religion in the author's life. I related to her religious upbringing and enjoyed the history of weapons her family made and then living with the effects of making technology and then having no control over the use.

Thanks to Edelweiss and Penguin Publishing Group for the digital ARC.

Ren says

For my personal taste, I would have given this 2 stars - but, gave it 3 thinking about other readers.

I'm starting to realize that I prefer my memoirs more focused and thematic (David Sedaris, Ariel Levy, Augusten Burroughs, and The Glass Castle). The thing about these types of memoirs...the titles of their books really set you up for the theme of the book. Even The Glass Castle, which walked you through a lot of lifespan was anchored in the parent/child relationship. You don't get all of the details, some stories or details that I'm sure are interesting to the author, but maybe less so for the reader, have to be sacrificed to editing - maybe saved for the next book. There's a maturity in the writing that goes beyond the writer's own perspective and it's clear the author has done the work - both internally examining the events presented and keeping a consistent believable narrative - no matter how outrageous the actual events are.

All of the things I am finding I enjoy about memoirs, I did not find in this book. The theme felt a bit forced, a lot of her assertions felt factually unbelievable and had me fact checking, which I never do. It felt more like someone telling you about their childhood at a dinner party than a piece of literature. I liked the idea of

wrapping in the missile theme with the sections and titles - but, the actual writing in the chapters wasn't strong enough to make it work. It reminded me of "The Undertaker's Daughter", which I didn't love for similar reasons. A bit self-aggrandizing (right out the gate with how she talks about her sister), a bit immature.

I learned something about myself - but unfortunately, it was just what memoirs to avoid. If you are a fan of autobiography type memoirs over thematic memoirs, you may enjoy this more than I did.

Elizabeth says

A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing Up in America's Secret Desert (Hardcover)
by Karen Piper
from the library

heard the au on Fresh Air on the radio: <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/14/638543...>

<https://www.npr.org/templates/transcr...>

Yeah, you say that math was considered women's work at the base. Why is that?

PIPER: Well, it's interesting. It was considered clerical, you know, that you have, like, a little calculator and that's what, you know, women do, things like that. But then these calculators gradually turned into computers. And so then the women kept doing that job but now on computers. And they were called computresses. And because they learned computers before men did, they ended up actually being able to run a lot more things than the men could, if that makes sense, because the technology all gradually shifted to computers. And so they had a lot of power but not necessarily a salary that reflected that.

GROSS: Or probably a degree of respect...

PIPER: Yes, exactly.

GROSS: ...That reflected that.

PIPER: Yeah. Yeah.

GROSS: My guest is Karen Piper, author of the new memoir "A Girl's Guide To Missiles."

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This book is about the author's childhood in the Mojave Desert while her parents worked designing missiles at China Lake. It's also about civilian vs military life, fundamentalism, and how much of childhood can be held on to. I enjoyed some funny descriptions of Eugene and Oregon weather from the perspective of someone accustomed to desert climate. I got a little bogged down in the middle but appreciated how so many topics come back around in the end, with one big surprise.

I had a funny moment where she is doing the pledge of allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Bible, and I flashed back to Awanas and Vacation Bible School - some of her childhood religious surroundings were identical to mine. And then when she talks about the books she read in school about missionaries breaking the rules - I also read those as a child! Bizarre.

The writing about the landscape that appears from time to time can really be evocative:

"A fierce wind kicked in and the sky smelled of creosote bushes, that musky electric smell, which meant it was raining nearby."

Military life:

"After a while, knowing that war fills your bellies, peace can feel like starvation."

"Growing up in a war town does not mean you know a thing about war."

I received an eARC from the publisher through Edelweiss, this came out August 14, 2018.

SM says

The title for the book could have been "A Missiles Guide To Girl's". This is Karen Piper's coming of age story of growing up at China Lake, a Naval missile development base in the Mojave desert. Empty and sparse for blowing up missiles but rich in her childhood memories of the plants, animals, and people that she grew up with. Church and family were a big part of her life. Her time in college wasn't a straight line but she got a bachelors, two masters, and a PhD in spite of man problems. She makes the projects and people interesting while reminding us of national events that were going on "off base". An interesting time capsule of a place I knew little about.

Rebecca says

I received a free copy of this e-book from the publisher (via NetGalley) in exchange for an honest review.

2.5 Stars

I wanted this book as soon as I saw the title. If I ever wrote a book about my passion for Cape Canaveral, I would have used that title. By the end of the book, I felt the title was used because it sounds good, not because it accurately reflects what happens in the book.

I am fascinated by the history of missile test sites, especially the oldest ones which emerged in the 40's and 50's. I knew of China Lake's test area, but I hadn't dug too much into it's history (I prefer the air breathing missiles and ICBMs). This book seemed like the perfect introduction.

While both the author and her parents worked at China Lake in various capacities, it felt like very little of the book was about what went on there. The book is more the story of the author's life, including various boyfriends, her brief job in the payroll department, going to college, getting married and her father's descent into Alzheimer's. I'm sorry, I got this book to hear about life in China Lake, not about trying to sell Amway.

At one point, she mentions the abandoned Lark missile ramp. Lark missiles were also tested at Cape Canaveral - but there was no ramp involved. I want to know more! But alas, the author has moved on to

something else.

I suppose this book would be good if you liked memoirs of non-celebrities. It was definitely not what I hoped it would be.

Liz says

Perhaps 4 stars worth of enjoyment, but only 3 based on comprehensive, coherent delving into specific topics. I always enjoy memoir non-fiction, as a personal perspective provides "story" in addition to information. I liked the behind-the-scenes look at weapons development from the late Viet Nam War era onwards, and would have liked even more detail than we got. Not sure how much that limitation was due to the classified nature of some of the missile programs being discussed, or just in the interest of brevity/focusing on other topics.

Lily says

Karen spent her childhood in the "base" housing at China Lake. The civilian employees (of whom she was a part) were housed across from the military personnel. Her parents worked on missile components during the 50's. Karen herself ended up working in the same area for a while as a teenager. There was much humor interposed with her telling of her time there and afterward. Her life was not that different from most growing up during that era of anxiety of what the future might bring. I do not recall hearing about the naval base at China Lake, so this was food for thought.

Karen did not find out how much was involved in the secret goings on at China Lake until she researched what was left of the archives in Ridgecrest, CA. She wanted to get an understanding of who her parents were by seeing what they were involved with. Her mom was still alive when she was doing this research. She even ended up buying a condo with her mom; which I found refreshing.

Aria says

---- Disclosure: I received this book for free from Goodreads. ---

So, firstly I just want to say that I don't understand why people think this is a book about missiles. It says right there in the title that it is about growing up. Sure, it's about growing up in a particular place, but it unequivocally states that this is a book about "growing up." Honestly, if it had been a book about missiles I'd have been quite irritated at having been mislead. I signed up for a memoir, & that's exactly what I received. Really can not grasp what was so unclear to other readers.

As far as this book goes, I can honestly say that I enjoyed it. It's not like any other memoir I've come across. I noticed the difference in the honest goals of the scientific employees, as opposed to the military. The obvious despair that the scientists went through when they began to piece together that perhaps the military was not an honorable institution was of note. In that time period such thinking was not so common, so it had to be quite a thing for logical persons' psyches to try and process. Of particular interest was info. toward the end pulled from the declassified files, as well as from a convo. w/ an elderly former military man who had left the program amidst controversy. That info. points to directly to what can be surmised as no less than heinous & straight-up evil fuckery by the gov. that continues today & screws the entire globe, very much in

line w/ the military-industrial complex warnings of Eisenhower. So, yeah. Pretty interesting stuff, right there.

That said, I do have a few complaints. There are a few statements that need to be re-written, b/c they are just wrong. Firstly, (p.67) she states that Catholics worship the Pope. What utterly obvious bologna. F'ing no, Catholics do not worship the Pope. If you are going to make distinctive statements of fact about someone else's belief system, maybe bother to verify it first. For something so easy to check, this is unforgivable. Ask any Catholic, or maybe, idk, use the bloody internet. Second, (p. 69) the Beatles did not say they were, "better than Jesus." Ffs, already. This one is particularly annoying b/c later on in the book it is correctly referenced as Lennon having said that they were more popular than Jesus. (Side note: they still are.) Now, here's the thing. It is possible that the author meant to write both of these as something like, "the preacher had told us," or "my Mother thought," or some other such thing that would change the aforementioned problematic statements from being simply definitive into something more like explanations of someone's thinking at the time. I honestly was unsure what might have been meant, b/c I was trying to give the author the benefit of the doubt, being that I read those things fairly early on in the book, & it is an ARC. However, as I got further into the book, I found that I kept coming across areas where the writing was just not all that clear, or didn't flow in a way that kept things clear. From someone that studied literature & writing (as the author claims to have done), this is really unacceptable.

See, the thing is, stuff like that makes it harder to believe the more serious info. one might glean from the book. It makes it all too easy for one already inclined to do so, to dismiss any info. in here that they simply don't like & therefore don't want to even consider accepting as possibly accurate. It's not an inconsequential problem. So, despite actually enjoying this read, I have to seriously knock off stars. I mean, I think the word for it, sadly, is sloppy. It's too bad, but the fact is that despite all the potential goodness in here, the execution really went full Sidewinder & just spun out into the equivalent of that cliché about shooting oneself in the foot. It needs work. It'd be totally worth it to clean up what remaining issues there are here & put it out in better form. As it stands now though, it's just not a clear piece of work, & the obvious inaccuracies make everything else presented suspect, which is just a shame. Walking away from it, I feel like I just want better for this. It's an odd feeling.

P.S.: That stuff about Amway & the DeVos family was something else. Capitalist Pyramid Scheme Jesus is now in the U.S. Dept. of Ed. Combined with the other info. presented there is so much in here that people don't need to be confused about, or given the easy opportunity to dismiss w/o checking deeper into it, so please, please, please fix the problems. I'll come back to give this all the stars, alter the review, & recommend it to everyone if I find the problems have been handled.

The Folding says

At its core, Karen Piper's memoir "A Girl's Guide to Missiles: Growing up in America's Secret Desert" is about war. However, it's not just about military warfare and the weapons used to wage it, developed in the laboratories in California's China Lake Desert where Piper's parents worked and raised her and her sister. Pairing keen childhood observations with contemporary thoughts on the way the world has shifted since her adolescence, Piper crafts a fresh, intimate perspective of America's biggest wars and shows how they are not that much different from the small, daily wars we wage in our own lives.

At the heart of "A Girl's Guide to Missiles" is the story of Piper's parents, Earl and Mary, neither of whom wanted to end up a weapons developer. Earl, a WWII veteran who grew up poor and parentless, found there was little else he could do when no other job would take him and Mary found the work gave her a sense of purpose otherwise lacking from her life on the base. While there may have been more to unpack in the

couple's history on the base, Piper uses their decisions to show that after a while "knowing that war fills your bellies, peace can feel like starvation."

Beyond the narrative of weapons within Piper's family, the book marvelously captures the charms and dangers of the physical surroundings of the desert as well as enriching perspectives on iconic figures and events through vivid depictions of the cultural surroundings of each era. Piper traces war through Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush; through Germany, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq; from newspapers, Tom Brokaw, 24-hour streaming, to social media. These seamlessly flow into one another, painting a glaring picture of the way war launched from policy to business and entertainment, all neatly confined into the perimeters of Piper's childhood in China Lake.

There are occasional moments that stray away from these targets, such as Piper's intricately-detailed history with religion and her various romantic relationships. These anecdotes seem to point toward her impression of the personal wars we wage, but end up distracting from the notion more than they correspond.

The book, as the name implies, serves as a guidebook and reminder of the irreparable damage we have caused in the past, where our reliance on war has taken us, and where it might lead in our future. At a point in time where even the next week is muddled with uncertainty, the book offers some, albeit grim, clarity as to how our nation operates in defending itself and suggests that we pay attention to the damage that we can mitigate in our own lives. It may be one of the few things left that we can still take control of.

Kathleen Gray says

This is very much a coming of age memoir with some details about China Lake, not a memoir about China Lake. Karen Piper has an interesting background, with parents who worked in the missile business (for want of a better description) and who had a strong religious bent. Her experiences with evangelism and struggle to move beyond that belief system, as well as her various relationships, form the bulk of the story. Thanks to Edelweiss for the ARC. This is a good read but not for the reasons I'd hoped.

Matt Hiebert says

No, this is not a textbook about military ordinance. For me, A Girl's Guide to Missiles is a story about "emergence."

It is the memoir of a woman coming of age in the 80s, rising out of a barren culture of inflexible religion within the desert setting of China Lake, one of America's foremost weapons development facilities.

The story begins with Piper as a child, relocating from the Pacific Northwest to the hardscrabble of a southern California military base. She is close to her mother. Her sister is a beloved rival. Her father is a shy, born-again Christian, who only wants to do right by his family.

Through the first act of the story, we see Piper moving through the world of Christian indoctrination and growing up within the weapons industry that employs both her parents. We watch her rigid religious education, the misogynistic office politics her mother must endure, and her father's bewilderment with coworkers, supervisors and his renegade daughter.

We glimpse the mishaps of missile testing, but also are allowed to feel the values of a sincere, patriotic

family who prays for war because it's good for business.

Along the way, however, something misfires, and it is Piper, herself, who becomes the errant missile.

As she enters adulthood – and the world of higher education -- the young woman who cried with joy when Reagan was elected President, is exposed to new philosophies, new people and the possibility of love. She moves to Eugene, Oregon to enter the postgraduate world of academia and.....

You're welcome to find out the rest for yourself.

Piper's ability to move through the timeline of her life while maintaining narrative consistency, even as her values and perspective change radically through the years, made a Girl's Guide a wonderful read for me. It helps that I grew up during these decades. There were many times I remembered where I was standing during Piper's own milestones. She is someone I might have know back in the day.

The memoir is more than a personal/political coming of age story. It is a well-researched, engaging tale that lets us not only see, but understand, why Piper's hyper-conservative upbringing was the only origin story possible for the woman who would eventually emerge from that arid California desert and its culture of dogma and war.
