



# The Peerless Four

*Victoria Patterson*

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Running so hard you think you'll choke on your next breath. Lungs burning like they're drenched in battery acid. Peripheral vision blurred by the same adrenaline that drowns out the cheers coming from the full stadium. And of course, the reporters. The men scribbling furiously on their notepads so they can publish every stumble, sprain, and snuffle.

This was the world of the female athletes in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, the first games in which women were allowed to compete in track and field on a trial basis. Nicknamed "The Peerless Four," the Canadian track team included some of the strongest, most diversely talented women on the scene. Narrated by the team's chaperone—a former runner herself—the women embark on their journey with the same golden goals as every other Olympian, male or female. But as the Olympic tension begins to rise with unexpected injuries and disqualifications, each woman discovers new fears and priorities, all while the weight of women's future in the Olympics rests on their performance.

*The Peerless Four* is more than a sports novel, more than a record of women's rights. It's a meditation on sacrifice, loyalty, perseverance, and the courage to live a true underdog tale.

## **The Peerless Four Details**

Date : Published October 22nd 2013 by Counterpoint (first published January 1st 2013)

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Author : Victoria Patterson

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## **From Reader Review The Peerless Four for online ebook**

### **Christy says**

This was a wonderful story of four women athletes and their chaperone. It will make you cheer for the girls and cry when life for women at that time did not look kindly on their choice to excel at sports. It physically hurt to read about Mel running in secret because Doctors had told her not too. We've come far... But still have a long ways to go.

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### **Becky says**

I read Patterson's last book (This Vacant Paradise) and I enjoyed it, despite it being quite a ways outside my usual reading preferences. Don't get me wrong, I'll give anything a try, but TVP was about people that I in no way identify with at all, and so it's not the type of book I'd usually look for. Still, I liked it. The writing and the story worked well together.

I wish I could say the same about The Peerless Four. I struggled with this one, personally. I'm not much of a sports reader (OK, I don't really care for reading about sports at all), but having liked TVP, I thought I would give this one a try as well. And I can see how it would appeal to many people. The story is set in an interesting time period, less than a decade after women had fought for, and earned, the right to vote, and right before the Great Depression. Women were still, hell, ARE still thought of as less than men in almost every way. We're still fighting for equality. Anyway, there's a lot of sexism and condescension in this book, and I feel that it was represented well and truly for the time, but it was rather aggravating to read about.

I also wasn't really in love with the characters, either. Our introduction to two of the Peerless Four girls was sitting witness to their use of extreme manipulation to get their way. One girl locked herself in a closet and refused to eat until she was allowed to continue doing just exactly what she wanted, and the other nearly ran herself to exhaustion to get her coach to give in to her whims. It was not really an auspicious beginning, and I never really warmed to either of them. It seemed more "spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum" than "girl on the edge of womanhood fighting for her rights". Especially Bonnie, the runner, who ran to prevent her coach from ending their barely-begun affair. She was 16. And this was our introduction to her.

That being said, I am a huge character reader, and likable, identifiable characters play a huge part in my enjoyment of a book. If this was not such a sticking point for me, I'd have probably liked the book much more.

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### **Melissa says**

I almost recommended this to my 15 year old "soccer star" for her upcoming freshman English book report- I'm very glad I read it first and quickly decided not to let her read it. While it is fiction, the main idea I came away with was that these athletes never could carry one with a "normal" life-that once they competed at the Olympics, everything they wanted was over. Much too heavy for a young athlete who is anxious to begin the college recruiting process for competitive soccer. And really, a little heavy for her over 40 mom-who may be having a midlife crisis :)

That being said, it was an interesting read, and a quick one at under 100 pages. Just be careful who you recommend it to.

"Running so hard you think you'll choke on your next breath. Lungs burning like they're drenched in battery acid. Peripheral vision blurred by the same adrenaline that drowns out the cheers coming from the full stadium. And of course, the reporters. The men scribbling furiously on their notepads so they can publish every stumble, sprain, and snuffle. This was the world of the female athletes in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics, the first games in which women were allowed to compete in track and field on a trial basis. Nicknamed "The Peerless Four," the Canadian track team included some of the strongest, most diversely talented women on the scene. Narrated by the team's chaperone—a former runner herself—the women embark on their journey with the same golden goals as every other Olympian, male or female. But as the Olympic tension begins to rise with unexpected injuries and disqualifications, each woman discovers new fears and priorities, all while the weight of women's future in the Olympics rests on their performance."

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### **Jo Kadlecek says**

Beautifully written sports novel based on the fascinating story of the first four Canadian women athletes and their 'guardian.' Definitely worth a read. Thank you, Victoria, for such care with story and language.

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### **Michael says**

Fascinating and beautifully written novel based upon the first women to enter the Olympics in 1928. In this novel Patterson demonstrates her mastery of point of view as she delves into the minds of several different characters, the most principal being Mel, an ex-athlete, alcoholic who is trying to redeem herself acting as coach to the four hapless but endlessly striving young women competitors.

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### **Holly Stauffer says**

Patterson is a stunning writer and this book she so beautifully and eloquently written. She communicates what it is like to be a woman in the early 20th century and consequently makes you reflect where we are today. Her characters are so richly drawn, complex, encompassing the hope and heartbreak of their experience to the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928. If you are woman you must read this book and give it to every woman you know.

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### **Diane S ? says**

2.5 Our narrator for story is now middle aged and forced to give up hers athletic pursuits to become the chaperon to the four girls heading to the Olympics/ It is 1928 and this is the first time women are allowed to compete.

There is much that is good about this novel, reading about the horrible treatment these young women received in the press and in person. At this time many thought that it was very unwomenly to pursue any type

of sports unless it was dancing or ice skating. The high jump, the javelin and the metered races.were all taboo. These women were the first to break that barrier.

Also reading about their quest for a personal life coinciding with all their trainman. My problem with this novel was the extremely slow pace and the narration which bordered on melancholy. Also I really did not like the girls, some of them acted like spoiled children when they did not get there way, just had a hard time relating to any of them. So this was good and not. Just wish the energy and the pacing of the book had been more fluid.

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### **Nancy says**

This book was a little too scattered for me. I enjoyed learning about the the characters but I feel the book could have had more flow and perhaps a bit more character development. I knew this was a novel, but like some other reviewers I would have preferred an afterward by the author crediting The Matchless Six - the real Canadian women from the 1928 Olympics.

Being a former track and cross-country runner I enjoyed the small, but true glimpses into the athlete's mind during training and racing. I am grateful to all these former athletes who allowed me to participate in sports and compete without worries over things like my uterus falling out - it is hard for me to believe that such excuses were made for barring women from athletics. Thank you to all the women who charged ahead, participated in sports they enjoyed, and paved the way for the rest of us.

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### **Julia Drake says**

I loved this book for so many reasons. First off, it is the only sports novel I know of that is about women and actually written by a woman and that takes place in a time when leading media around the world hailed the Olympics as "reserved for the solemn and periodic manifestation of male athleticism," when the only academic career for women was in "Domestic Science" and where a woman running out on the street would be stopped by the police for madness.

You'd think we have come a long way from that, but the banning of Women's Ski Jumping from the Olympics until just recently (due the ancient idea that athletics are harmful to the female uterus) goes to show that women still have a long way to be accepted into the male-driven world of sports. THE PEERLESS FOUR not only brings these pioneering women to life, but it is a genre-bounding work of historical fiction, superbly written, ruthlessly honest, daring, action-driven and leaves no doubt that women can truly kick butt! It's a testament to womankind, our virtues, strength, compassion and integrity.

Women need to know about and champion this book, because if not us, then who will?

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### **Rick says**

(Full disclosure – I received this book through a Goodreads Advance Readers contest.) The surface tale in “The Peerless Four” by Victoria Patterson is that of women experiencing Olympic track and field sports for

the first time ... but that is the low-hanging fruit. The larger narrative is a nuanced telling of the ups and downs, and hopes and dreams, sports minded women faced in coming of age in the Roaring 20s as many slowly began to realize they could be more than wives and mothers.

The Peerless Four is a fictional telling of the experience of four female athletes on the Canadian track and field team who were allowed to attend the 1928 Olympiad in Amsterdam as a trial for women in Olympic sports. We all know how the trial ends up over time, but this period piece in the same era as women's suffrage gives us more – it gives us a bit of perspective.

This book does not come off as a story of women's lib - but it does show some of the hurdles placed in the way of women along the path to equality. Ostensibly the story of the four athletes, it is narrated through the words of their chaperone and in the end is really the tale of her blossoming consciousness. The telling is subtle ... good stuff in this spare little book.

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### **Jo Davies says**

I thought this would be an interesting book. The dust jacket said it was about the four Canadian women who competed in the 1928 Olympics. It did virtually nothing to enlighten me on the subject, as Patterson opted to use a style of storytelling that was deliberately vague and open-ended. Of the four girls who went overseas to compete, I came away with descriptions of the pretty one, the butch one and I can't remember the other two. Blah. Blah. Blah. Yuck. This one finishes dead last, in my books.

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### **Jo Butler says**

In 1928 women competed in the Olympics for the first time, and Canada sent a track team to Amsterdam, Holland. The four young women and their coach are accompanied by a chaperone, Mel Ross, who narrates Victoria Patterson's novel, *The Peerless Four*.

Though the team is made up of women favored to win their events, *The Peerless Four* is an underdog story from beginning to end. In the 1920s, women who competed in sports were regarded as near-freaks, and the press treats the Peerless Four with a combination of adulation and bemusement. The future of female participation in the Olympics rests on these athletes' performances, and also on how they bear up under the world's scrutiny.

As a former runner, Mel sympathizes with the athletes' struggles both on and off the field. She also battles with her own disappointments in sports and her personal life. For me, Ms. Patterson's novel shines when Mel is focused on her charges, whether on or off the track. *The Peerless Four* is not so much a sports story, but a story about women who participate in sports, and the men around them.

*The Peerless Four* opens with a chapter narrated by each character in first person before Mel takes over, and I didn't settle into the story line easily. Mel's personal life was confusing at times as she tries to sort out her husband's disapproval of her athletic participation and her mutual attraction to the team's coach. The Peerless Four women also struggle with memories of glory and failure as their particular Olympic moments fade. They each tried their best, and that was their victory.

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## Dpalange44 says

More like a 3.5, but I decided to round up. At some points I really liked this novel, but at others I could not figure out what was going on. Very interesting topic though. Pioneers of women's sports and the struggles to overcome gender bias.

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## Bonnie Brody says

In 1928, four Canadian women are headed for the Olympics in Amsterdam. It is a time when women were not competing and the options were for men only. This was the first Olympics open to women, and on a trial basis only. The newspapers and general public relations were not kind to the female participants who were told that they were manly, would not be able to bear children and would suffer health defects - all from participating in athletic events.

The story is told in a narrative primarily by the chaperone who herself is a woman ahead of her time, a runner who married early and has suffered from depression because her dreams have been foiled. There are also newspaper articles, pieces of writing and letters from which we learn about the 'Peerless Four'. This is the name that has been given to the female athletes from Canada who have traveled across the ocean in search of gold medals.

The coach has had to talk every parent into giving permission for the women to participate in the Olympics. Some of them are still in high school. Additionally, the chaperone's husband had to give permission for her to travel, which he gave reluctantly. She quite eloquently speaks about the plight of women:

"Once", she said, "a man saw me running and he called the police."

"Why?"

"He figured", she said, "that someone was chasing me, or that I was sick. "Girls don't run", he said.

What happens to the Peerless Four in Amsterdam is the meat of the story, and a good story it is. Additionally, the author has an appendix that lists the names and feats of female athletes from 776 B.C. through 1928. The accomplishments of the four Canadian athletes is phenomenal and breaks way for other women to follow in their footsteps.

The only part of the book that I thought was superfluous was a research paper that the chaperone did on her cousin. I think that could easily be removed and the rest of the book would stand firm.

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## Judy says

I love nothing more than a well-written unique story. I was blown away by *The Peerless Four*, a fictional

account of four young Canadian girls who competed in the 1928 Olympics, the first time in thousands of years women were ever allowed to compete.

These sixteen/seventeen year old girls each not only enjoyed being athletic from a young age, they craved it. Whether running, high-jumping or shooting hoops, each one overcame objections from parents, some through drastic measures such as the one who hid in a closet and refused to eat.

Here is what men thought about females in the Olympics in the 1920s: "No female should be seen swaggering around, pretending to be male. If females must compete in the Olympics, they should be consigned to participating in ladylike sports that allow them to look beautiful and wear some pretty cute costumes: archery, figure skating, and horseback riding being the best examples--activities that would not cause them to perspire. Furthermore, there is scientific evidence that the rigors of athletic activities weaken women for motherhood."

After introducing the four women with a quick chapter each on how they became athletes in childhood, the author gives us Mel, who narrates the novel as the chaperone for the Peerless Four.

Mel was a runner herself. As the story progresses we learn that she quit running after a miscarriage or two, falling for the idea that motherhood makes a woman complete. What made Mel complete was running and her marriage became a prison where she could not be herself, even though the husband wasn't necessarily a bad guy. He even allowed himself to be convinced to let Mel go to Amsterdam with the female team.

I am possibly the world's most unathletic person but this ostensibly sports novel got hold of me and would not let go. Mel, Jack the coach, and the four girls circle around each other in varying states depending on how training is going, the differing pressures on them all, and each one's past baggage. The climax at the Games themselves is so full of tension, I could barely breathe as I read.

Finally comes the real truth about any athlete--the aftermath of winning or losing. Who came through unscathed? The chaperone who never competed, the coach who had made those girls his reason for living, or the girls themselves? Read *The Peerless Four* and find out.

The other day I watched the movie "Foxcatcher." I kept wishing I were watching a movie made from *The Peerless Four*.

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