

ARRT Book Club Study
October 15, 2020
Virtual Discussion held via Zoom
Rocket Men by Robert Kurson
Led by Monique Flasch
Notes by Elizabeth Hopkins
11 participants

Monique began by explaining Robert Kurson visited her library (Glenview) last year for their Community Read program and noted he's an eloquent speaker. She also mentioned that she was "never a great science person," so especially appreciates authors who make science accessible.

Did the science overwhelm you?

- I didn't think I would like this, but I found it really approachable.
- Reminded me of Mary Roach. A skill set in translating non-fiction into stories. These are "journey stories."

How would you describe the Rocket Men as characters?

- Straight-laced, "squares."
- Kurson discussed including their families in the author's note...these 3 guys are still married to the same women!
- It felt very Norman Rockwell.
- Very rare to include wives/families in astronaut stories.
- The women were part of the team. Very surprising to discuss Susan Borman's alcoholism. In that time frame they were all competing against each other, so you kept that stuff hidden.

What was so amazing about this mission?

- How rushed it was! They only had four months. But their commitment to safety was still so important.
- No one else had used those rockets before!
- It was incredible that everyone was watching this moon race.
- They learn from their mistakes, but the mistakes were sometimes tragic.
- I felt like it wasn't safe- they weren't really ready. But it felt like everything "should" work.

Why did they recruit the guys that they did?

- They chose test pilots- people who knew what they were getting into.

Favorite story?

- The wives had a radio right in their living room so they could hear their husbands communicating to mission control.
- The “open house” tradition where family/friends camped out at each family’s home during the mission.
- Lovell definitely comes across as a really great guy. And interesting that Borman was there to beat the Soviets while Lovell was there for the exploration.
- Using the bathroom in space! I found these details super interesting.

Any other supporting characters stick out?

- Mattingly. He was grounded in Apollo 13. The CAPCOM position...they wanted another astronaut so they felt supported.

This is a very specific time frame – 1968 – a time of turmoil...

- When we talk about the space race, it’s not usually in the context of everything else that happened in 1968. A big win in a year of losses. Contextualizes the joy they brought through this mission.
- For younger people, a lot of parallels with what is happening right now.

Other thoughts-

- Kurson tells the story so well that you still have little thrills while reading despite knowing the ending.
- The photograph of Earth became a symbol of the environmental movement. The photo went far beyond the Apollo 8 mission.

Links to Peruse:

[Washington Post book review by Mary Roach](#)

[Author Interview with Brian Lamb on CSPAN \(one hour\)](#)

[50th Anniversary of Earthrise \(Apollo 8\)](#)

[New York Times Book Review](#)

