

She was found nine days later, crewless and intact, drifting in the light of a cold December morning — her cargo undisturbed, her provisions untouched, her log-slate carrying its last notation in a doomed man's hand.

Benjamin Briggs had not panicked. He had not lost his mind. He had not conspired in any crime, nor suffered any mutiny, nor made any foolish error. He had done exactly what any sane, sober, experienced captain would have done.

Unavoidable though it was, he had simply made the wrong choice.

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REVIEWS

Out of This World, by Peter Bond (Reaktion), 2026. Pp. 376, 24.5 × 16.5 cm. Price £25 (hardbound; ISBN 978 1 83639 199 9).

Is there a need for another book about humans' adventures in space? As the author Peter Bond recognizes in the acknowledgements, many books have been written about the Space Age, and indeed as he says those have provided much of the background information for this book. Bond's book is a bit different: although it covers much of the same ground as many others, it deals with the subject matter thematically rather than directly historically as is usual. In nine readable chapters, he deals with the particular issues and concerns that must be answered in order to enable humans to live and work in space.

There are chapters covering such topics as the development of suitable rockets, astronaut selection and training, crew health and happiness, and one emphatically dealing with the risks involved. Within each chapter a particular topic is covered semi-historically, illustrated with examples chosen from all of the nations either currently involved or who have previously contributed to the project of humanity's efforts in space. That is an interesting approach which allows for a wide-ranging appreciation of each country's ambitions and concerns, to act almost as a glimpse of national philosophies as well as building a much more global overview of human achievements in space. Some light asides from that international approach involve the food choices available to those early space pioneers — in 1982 the French astronaut Jean-Loup Chrétien brought French cuisine to the Russian three-man Soyuz spacecraft; that included jugged hare, crab soup, and lobster pilaf and must have been an interesting zero-g eating experience. Two years later the first Indian to fly in space, Rakesh Sharma, provided curry, Ravi Shankar music, and Bollywood films, another atmospheric experience. Bond does not record any menu items supplied by Britain's first astronaut, Helen Sharman, who spent a week on the *Mir* space station in 1991 — maybe a couple of those dense, calorie-rich chocolate bars manufactured by Mars, her employer at the time?

Peter Bond tells us that at the time of writing this book, in 2025, 637 people have orbited around the Earth, and another 119 have taken suborbital flights beyond the 80-km altitude recognized by the US as the boundary to space, with many of those above the higher internationally recognised 100-km Kármán line. Those people came from most varieties of humanity, ranging in age from 18 to 90 and from almost all walks of life — artists, pop singers, politicians, as well as the expected cohort of test pilots, scientists, and engineers. The one excluded exception would seem to be the poor — although as Bond reminds us, for their initial flights the Russians used the homeless as test subjects: the stray dog Laika became the first living creature to orbit the Earth, and within a few hours, the first to die there from shock and heat exhaustion. Spaceflight, as well as being dangerous, is an expensive business, so those without government funding, or who are not the CEOs or friends of one of the world's tech giants, must spend vast sums of money to buy a seat as a tourist. \$20 million is reported as the ticket price Dennis Tito, an investment manager, paid for Star City training and a trip in a *Soyuz* craft to spend eight days on board the *ISS* in 2001. At the government-employee end of the business, US astronauts do their work on a salary of up to \$152 258 per year.

Outside the relative safety of their spacecraft, astronauts have made 483 space walks, in space jargon EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity), into the raw, unforgiving, vast vacuum of space; 277 of those space walks were related to the assembly and maintenance of the *ISS* which totalled thousands of hours in that unimaginably challenging immensity. There have also memorably been 12 men who walked on the surface of the Moon, in a total of 14 excursions, some lasting more than seven hours. In Bryan Burrough's book about working in the *Mir* space station, *Dragonfly*, one astronaut describes the first moments of paralysing fear on stepping out from the spacecraft into the constant falling nothingness of orbit and the extreme effort of will required to overcome that brain-numbing effect. Some very dangerous EVAs are described by Bond — for example the Gemini astronauts getting to grips with docking procedures in preparation for the Apollo Moon-landing missions. Those exercises involved practising linking with the seemingly unreliable Agena rocket upper stage. On one occasion, NASA astronaut Richard Gordon had to grasp the Agena and bring it under control by mounting it much as a cowboy on a wild bronco. Several times astronauts have rescued stricken satellites, including on occasions those in which a live rocket motor has failed to fire. Did those guys never read the instructions on the back of a packet of fireworks about never returning to a failed firework?

For all of the seemingly everyday, run-of-the-mill nature of spaceflight which seems to exist in the current era of the space station, Bond's book constantly reminds us just how dangerous that endeavour actually has been and indeed still is. The last two chapters on going to the Moon and the risks involved in human spaceflight are engrossing reads full of

additional detail about Apollo, and other more current programmes, and it has to be said some rather ghoulish accident information.

After over 60 years of human excursions beyond the atmosphere of our planet, perhaps it is time to make an evaluation of what we have learned; what benefits have accrued to those left on the ground, and to make a judgement on whether it has all been worth the vast outlay of earthly resources and to answer the question; is the project worth continuing? With his wide experience in communicating space science, Peter Bond is perhaps a well-placed writer to do that. I lost count of the number of times he reports astronauts taking part in experiments to do with human physiology, or making use of various furnaces and electron guns to study metallurgy or crystallography, although rather few results are described. Experiments to test antibacterial and antiviral materials are apparently useful for application in the design of lift buttons. However, other than those examples and some generic statements about the development of high-tech industry and associated jobs and of course the few satellite-repair missions, this book does not address any major developments that have resulted from people doing science in microgravity.

Space research is currently being funded by national governments and the four wealthiest private-enterprise organizations the world has ever seen. This book does not tell us how any of those organizations suggest putting people into space will assist in solving the major problem currently facing humanity: the relentlessly warming planet. In the 65 years since Gagarin's flight the world annual CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels have increased from around eight billion tonnes to 38 billion tonnes and the average global temperature during the summer months has increased from 15.6 °C to 16.8 °C and with each decade that increase is accelerating. Space research has certainly been absolutely central to our knowledge of those numbers but almost exclusively by the use of sophisticated unmanned satellites. There is a very good case to be made that humanity has gained enormous benefits from the use of unmanned satellites through all sorts of remote sensing: Earth observation, astronomy, telecommunications, navigation, *etc.*, *etc.* — it is less clear that such obvious returns can be seen from manned spaceflight.

The case is not made in this book, which does not claim to be a book of analysis but a very thorough compilation of historical facts arranged in thematic chapters and as such it is a very good and often surprising resource. One must admire the research involved in assembling this detailed listing of components, processes, and interactions; there is, however, no attempt at understanding of purpose other than getting done the job of putting humans into space — there is no 'why'. It is a book of comprehensive listing and description of salient facts without addressing the current overarching purpose, and perhaps that is a true reflection of the space agencies' and private-enterprise ambitions. To use the coarse language of our times: is manned spaceflight any more than expensive 'willy wagging'?

In a book so full of facts I spotted just a few errors, and really only one worthy of comment. Unfortunately, it is on the first page of the first chapter, where we read that rocket propulsion is based on the principle of "Sir Isaac Newton's third law of *thermodynamics*" [my emphasis]. I guess an autofill-suggested word had slipped in, unnoticed by the author, it was then missed by the copy editor, and also missed again at the pre-publication proof stage. Maybe it is churlish to complain that in a book overflowing with facts I found only a few that bothered me — but but but, "Newton's third law of thermodynamics". Mr. Bond, I was "shaken and not stirred". Hopefully it will be corrected for the paperback edition of this thoroughly enjoyable, excellent compendium of the whole range of human space adventures. — BARRY KENT.

The Physics of Interstellar Travel, by Coryn A. L. Bailer-Jones (Cambridge University Press), 2026. Pp. 358, 26 × 21 cm. Price £55 (hardbound; ISBN 978 1 009 68392 8).

For many years now, unmanned space probes have been traversing the Solar System. Some have landed on, or gone into orbit around, some of the planets and their satellites. The very