



Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream

Tanya Lee Stone

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In a society obsessed with hero worship, few were as idolized as the early astronauts. Going behind the façade of the space program, Stone, an award-winning young adult writer, explores the “true story of the ‘Mercury 13’ women.”

Combining historical exposé, social analysis, and biography, Stone captures the times, the players, and the courage and capabilities of this extraordinary group of thirteen women. They participated in and passed early NASA testing but were prevented—through institutionalized and pernicious discrimination—from proceeding.

Delving into a treasure trove of research—including an incriminating letter filed away for decades—and interviewing these pioneering women, Stone uncovers an inspiring if heartbreaking true story of grit, persistence, and determination. Commenting on this shameful, hidden chapter of the space program, Stone notes, “...we are finally ready to acknowledge there should be no Wrong Time for women with the Right Stuff.”

The book opens in July 1999 with the historic launch of Space Shuttle mission STS-93 with Commander Eileen Collins, the first woman to lead a space flight team. Few realize that, thirty-eight years earlier, thirteen women were ready to take their place in space.

In 1959, pilot Jerrie Cobb “had already logged more than 7,000 hours in the air—far more than John Glenn’s 5,000 hours.” In February 1960, Cobb started astronaut testing. “In secret, she was the first woman to take all eighty-seven of the physical tests the Mercury 7 men had taken. The first woman to be told that she had passed...The first to open the door for others...” Stone reports that nearly two decades later—in 1978—six women finally joined the space program, among a group of thirty-five. Sally Ride, the first American woman in space in 1983, was in that 1978 group. The book’s title doesn’t do justice to the full coverage Stone offers, bringing current the role of leading women pilots, astronauts, and NASA officials.

Stone outlines a discriminatory wrong that can never be righted in the history of aviation. It’s challenging for readers to see their heroes, who seemed to stand for the good and true, turning their backs on these powerful and outspoken women. Well-documented with sections of further reading, Webliography, and extensive sources and notes, this remains a needed resource of encouragement for young women as it show-cases a poignant chapter in history, women who were “Almost Astronauts.”

BOBBYE MIDDENDORF (February 13, 2009)

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