

The Astrochimps: America's First Astronauts

Dawn Cusick

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Memorializing the unsung space travelers whom the US first launched into orbit, Dawn Cusick's charming history book *The Astrochimps* zooms in on peculiar and enlightening moments in the race to put a person on the moon.

In the wake of the Soviet Union launching the first satellite into space, agents of a top-secret NASA space program bought dozens of chimpanzees from zoos, poachers, and exotic bird farms. Alongside the development of spaceships, innovative training and research methods made these intelligent primates into ideal astronauts and test subjects. This is the story of the ethically-fraught yet unbelievable role that six such chimpanzees played in the Space Race. As Cusick reveals, it was an astrochimp named Ham who paved the way for both Yuri Gagarin and Alan Shepherd, the first Soviet and American human beings in space—but not the first astronauts.

The text zips through the initial training sessions in which the chimpanzees “bounced off the walls in a chorus of chaos,” moving toward practice in the notorious “Bored Room” where the social animals sat alone for long hours to imitate the experience of being alone in a rocket in space. Poignant and hilarious photographs document the frowned-upon relationships that blossomed between the chimpanzees and their human pilots and veterinarians. Terminology specific to the aerospace technology is included, though the improbable jealousy of Mercury Seven's human astronauts-to-be toward the astrochimps is more engrossing—a revealing behind-the-scenes look at John Glenn and Alan Shepherd's mindsets. Also included are idiosyncratic glimpses at world politics, though even these foreground the animals among anecdotes about John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev.

The Astrochimps is an exciting, specialized history of the Space Race.

WILLEM MARX (January / February 2024)

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