

Of a Fire on the Moon

Of a Fire on the Moon is most basically described as an account of Apollo 11 from the perspective of the author and journalist Norman Mailer. The book concentrates on the events of the mission as well as on Mailer's own thoughts and questions brought up by Apollo.

Norman Mailer, a leading author of the counter-culture '60s, was known for a style known as "new journalism", in which nonfiction is written using literary devices to tell an entertaining narrative. This book was written in a deal with *Life* magazine to allow him to cover Apollo 11. The liberal Mailer at first seems like an odd choice for someone to write about the "waspy" Space Administration (as he often describes it) but in fact, Mailer majored in aeronautical engineering while at Harvard and is more than adept at understanding and describing engineering details. The fact that he comes from a completely different perspective than the personnel at NASA makes the book all the more interesting and adds an element that is non-existent in the vast majority of books on Apollo. He actively questions the inherent value of going to the moon and offers more than the official statements from NASA. Since he covered Apollo as a journalist he had access to many of the facilities, technical manuals, and personnel and used his own observations and interviews as his main source, as the only other source he sites is First on the Moon, by the Apollo astronauts themselves. But since he focuses much more on his own thoughts and views, this book should be seen more as a source for the opinions of one man on the Apollo missions than as a central source for technical information on the mission itself. In terms of Launius's categories, Launius himself classifies the book as a narrative of the astronauts and the actual flights. But because Mailer is much more interested in telling us his own thoughts and opinions of the mission, I would argue the book should also be classified in the fifth category of social and cultural investigations into the meaning of Apollo to modern America.

From the very beginning, it is clear this book will be different from any other book on the subject. This is because the first thing Mailer talks about has nothing to do with Apollo: Ernest Hemingway's suicide. To add to the strangeness, the book is written in the third-person, with Mailer referring to himself as "Aquarius." Mailer's emotional reaction to the death of Hemingway is indeed a strange way to start a book about the space program, and is one example of many where Mailer refers to events in his own personal life. Mailer talks extensively about his divorce, Vietnam, and his experience with marijuana. At times this is extremely distracting and can take away from the focus of the book, but it provides context and certainly adds an interesting angle on a story that has been told many times before in a more traditional manner.

Mailer's ambivalence about the moon landings is prevalent throughout the novel. He says he "hardly knew whether the Space Program was the noblest expression of the 20th century, or the quintessential statement of our fundamental insanity." He even goes so far as to compare NASA to the Nazis and ponders that "Man was voyaging to the planets to look for God. Or was he trying to destroy Him?" On the other hand, he shows a respect for both the astronauts and the NASA engineers and writes in awe about the actual launch. His writing shows not his disdain for the space program itself, but his skepticism on what this use of technology is doing to our culture and our society. In what is the main theme of the book, he contemplates often on "the psychology of machines" and what this infusion of technology means to humanity on a metaphysical level. This is a provocative question that captures Mailer's imagination and therefore this is generally what he focuses on during the novel.

However, in the second section of the book there is an extremely detailed account of the activities of the astronauts during the mission. This section seems oddly disjointed from the philosophical musings of the first and third sections, although Mailer does inject his own opinions throughout. In describing the astronauts' role on the mission, he makes their days seem mundane and business-like, as if just his description is in some way a

commentary on the impact of technology on man. Mailer seems to be asking that if technology can make going to the moon a boring and everyday activity, then what will it do the rest of our lives? In addition, this section focuses on the psychological make-up of the astronauts as Mailer questions why these three men of all men were destined to be first on the moon.

Mailer does not delve too deeply into many technical decisions, but one he finds particularly fascinating is the decision that Neil Armstrong will be the first man on the moon. Mailer likes to believe that Deke Slayton, Director of Flight Crew Operations, completely realized the gravity of choosing the first man on the moon and contemplated all the factors involved. The book states that the first man on the moon must first be “a superb pilot, better if possible than his peers. On the other hand, it would not hurt if he were a man who would appeal to a large number of Americans.” And in this statement Mailer hits on a fundamental dilemma in almost all major decisions of the Apollo program or other major public engineering project: the public’s opinion is nearly as important as technical reasoning. Mailer admits that Armstrong was bland in interviews and not as charismatic as he possibly could have been, but says that one reason Slayton picked him because he had “motivation beyond measure,” which meant he would not crack under pressure during the mission or before and after while facing the public. It should be noted however, that in his description of this decision, as well as throughout the entire book, Mailer seems to focus on his own opinions and admits making his own assumptions. For example, it is unlikely Slayton actually contemplated on Armstrong’s “intimacy with death” as the book stipulates. This also brings in an interesting point about these kinds of decisions, that when analyzing them from the outside, many other reasons can be divined that may not have been considered at the time by the decision makers themselves.

Adding another element to the book, Mailer uses religious symbolism extensively as he calls the moon landing the “climax of the greatest week since Christ was born” and often delves into the question of whether technology is inherently good or evil. In fact, he questions if it is God or the Devil that is really controlling the Apollo program. This is

one of many questions posed that you will not find in any other books on Apollo, which is why I feel this book has a unique relevance to getting a complete view of the program. The book focuses on the man vs. machine dilemma, not in the autonomy vs. manual operation aspect of this class, but in the core metaphysical ramifications of this battle on the future of mankind. Mailer brings Apollo into the context of the counter-culture 60's and lets us know exactly what he thought about it at the time (the book was published in 1970). This provides us with an idea of how Apollo was viewed by Americans that were not particularly interested in space and did not merely believe everything the press told them about the moon landings. It give us an outsider's look at the topic from a highly entertaining and opinionated author, assuring the reader that he or she is not getting the usual "company line" from NASA. In some cases, Mailer's ego seems to get in the way and his thoughts can be condescending, but there is a lot of value in the questions he raises, and the reader can not help but contemplate his or her own responses.

Despite its uniqueness bordering on oddity, I would recommend this book for anyone interested in researching not only in the space program, but also the culture of America in the '60s. Mailer describes the moon landing in a way that may not be the most ideal for extracting technical detail, but a way that captures the reader and presents the landings in a singular perspective. He brings up masses of thought-provoking philosophical questions regarding the true meaning of the use of this technology and landing on the moon as a symbol more than an achievement, but he never actually answers them completely. The aim of the book is to get the reader thinking in a new way and as Mailer says, "the questions were grand at least, they could occupy the consciousness of the century."

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