

Fast Flying, Faster Living

Light This Candle: The Life and Times of Alan Shepard, America's First Spaceman

by Neal Thompson. Crown Publishers, 2004. 436 pp., \$27.50.

In 1979 Tom Wolfe pounded the first nail into the coffin of the BSA myth (that's Boy Scout Astronaut) with his book *The Right Stuff*. Consider *Light This Candle* another nail. Wolfe set a precedent by reporting that some of the seven Mercury astronauts, certainly including Shepard, fell far short of the way they were sold to the world by NASA image-makers. One famous scene in the book and the film has John Glenn—"Mr. Clean Marine"—admonishing the other astronauts to keep their pants zipped, an allusion to flagrant womanizing. The incident

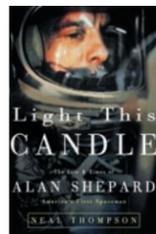


To shuttle between astronaut training sessions at NASA centers, Alan Shepard frequently flew a T-38. He logged 3,700 hours in jet aircraft during his career.

leading to that nasty confrontation, as described by Neal Thompson, occurred when flashbulbs went off while one of the seven was entertaining a senorita in Tijuana. The transgressor, later identified as Shepard, appealed to Glenn for help, and Glenn, in turn, had to beg what this book calls "a leading West Coast paper" on patriotic grounds not to run the story. It didn't. The news media knew about many of the Mercury astronauts' indiscretions, but they ignored them. The cold war was on, and as Walter Cronkite said, "The country needed heroes."

Shepard said he hated *The Right Stuff* and quipped that his and Deke Slayton's own sanitized history of the Apollo Program, *Moon Shot*, should have been titled *The Real Stuff*, "since his [Wolfe's book] was just fiction." Well, maybe *The Gruff Stuff*.

After Shepard's death in 1998, Thompson, a veteran journalist, gained exclusive access to Shepard's papers and interviewed his family and fellow astronauts. His material shows that Shepard was an immensely complicated and conflicted man whose many passions drove him to feats of extraordinary bravery and accomplishment, but also to dangerous flirtations with self-destruction. Shepard was the scion of a New Hampshire family that went back to the *Mayflower*, and grew up to become the sort of maverick for which the New England upper crust is renowned. His father's wish that he go into the Army sent him directly to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, where he was nearly expelled twice, and then to Corpus Christi, Texas and Pensacola, Florida flight schools, where he realized a boyhood dream of becoming an aviator.



MUSEUM COLLECTIBLE

America's Hangar: Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center

by the staff of the National Air and Space Museum, 2003. 72 pp., \$14.



This first souvenir book for the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center is filled with tack-sharp photography depicting some of the center's 200 aircraft and spacecraft, as well as rockets, missiles, and other artifacts on display there. Also included are photo-essays about the journey of the Boeing B-29 *Enola Gay's* fuselage to a restoration facility and then to the museum via the streets of Washington, D.C., and the construction of the Udvar-Hazy Center's observation tower and three-football-fields-long hangar.

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He turned out to be a brilliant, instinctive flier who loved landing on pitching carriers at night, and who went on to defy death by testing high-performance jets at the Naval Test Pilot School at Patuxent River, Maryland. Flying brought out Shepard's mercurial nature. One minute he was the cool, calculating aerodynamicist in the cockpit. The next he was roaring so low—"flat-hatting"—in his F2H Banshee that hundreds of sailors standing at attention had to dive for cover. The latter incident nearly led to a court-martial. Another time he did a complete loop under and over the uncompleted Chesapeake Bay Bridge. And in an effort to put fighter pilots in the proper mindset when steering their fuel probes during aerial refueling, he painted pubic hair on tanker drogues.

Shepard's ambition and tenacity were legendary. He assured his place as the first American in space by going to a private physician for an experimental operation that cured a severe balance problem. He also used adroit politics to out-maneuver six competitors for the honor. And he stayed in the astronaut program long enough to eventually get to the moon on Apollo 14.

And, yes, he did love comedian Bill Dana's character José Jiménez, the Latino astronaut. He did urinate in the Mercury Redstone capsule, reporting in José's dialect, "I'm a wetback now." And on May 5, 1961, exasperated by the long delay launching *Freedom 7*, he really did bark at the mission controllers: "I'm cooler than you are. Why don't you fix your little problem and light this candle?" —William E. Burrows, the author of *This New Ocean, is an Air & Space/Smithsonian contributing editor.*

Fire Flight

by John J. Nance. Simon & Schuster, 2003. 353 pp., \$25.

Aviation safety advocate John J. Nance is best known as a writer of thrillers, two of which, *Pandora's Clock* and *Medusa's Child*, became television mini-series. His newest effort, *Fire Flight*, traces the tribulations of a group of flying and parachuting firefighters charged with preventing a major forest fire from destroying Jackson, Wyoming, and environs.

The action unfolds over three days, during which we meet a collection of comic-strip-like heroes who fight fires and the forces of evil with equal vigor. Nance defines evil as having two heads. One advocates extinguishing forest fires rather than



BOOK BITES

Spirit and Creator: The Mysterious Man Behind Lindbergh's Flight to Paris

by Nova Hall. ATN Publishing, 2003. 184 pp., \$39.95.

Four years ago, Nova Hall discovered an old locked chest in the family garage. Within it was his grandfather Donald's collection of photos, documents, design tools, movie footage, aircraft models, and correspondence with Charles Lindbergh, for whom Donald Hall had designed the *Spirit of St. Louis*. *Spirit and Creator* is an inside look at the creation of the legendary Ryan monoplane and the man who, at Lindbergh's side, first sketched it out and saw it through to completion.



—Patricia Trenner

The Flying Book: Everything You've Ever Wondered About Flying

by David Blatner. Walker Publishing, 2003. 248 pp., \$22.

If you've ever wondered why your flight route never runs in a straight line, or why pulling away from the terminal makes your airplane's cabin lights flicker, you can find the answer in *The Flying Book*. A multitude of pictures, subheadings, and pullouts make it easy to learn practically everything about the history and inner workings of commercial air travel. Readers learn how technological advances have led to water-efficient airplane toilets and why the wings of a 747 are designed to bend up to 10 feet up or down during flight. While thorough, *The Flying Book* does at times slide off-topic; one section focuses on why news media report airplane crashes but not successes in airplane safety; another describes the physics behind insect flight. Still, David Blatner weaves history, techno-babble, and quirky fact into a complete and fun book.

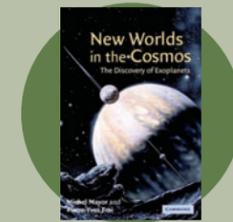


—Theodore Carter

New Worlds in the Cosmos: The Discovery of Exoplanets

by Michel Mayor and Pierre-Yves Frei. Cambridge, 2003. 248 pp., \$30.

Michel Mayor, co-discoverer of the first planet outside the solar system, and science writer Pierre-Yves Frei walk the reader through mankind's views about the universe from early civilizations to the potential contributions of still-distant technologies. Mayor is a connoisseur of astrometrical techniques, able to deftly describe the centuries of layered cleverness that ultimately led to his and Didier Queloz's detection of planet 51-Peg b in 1995 and the nearly 100 planets found by others since. While the authors have written clearly and engagingly about a difficult subject's obstacles and epiphanies, *New Worlds* may be best appreciated by those with a more-than-casual knowledge of astronomy or physics.



—Sam Goldberg

letting them burn out, a procedure that has infected forests with a carpet of low-lying tinder and kindling waiting to erupt. Evil's other head is personified by independent firefighting contractors who use decades-old aircraft that don't always work properly and put courageous crews at risk.

To end a fire that threatens both natural resources and overpriced real estate, intrepid pilot Clark Maxwell, smokejumper Karen Jones, conniving fleet operator/media controller/banking controller Jerry Stein, Stein's volatile maintenance boss (who does double duty as Karen's abusive husband), and a host of others work at cross-purposes.

Fire Flight's numerous subplots and

personalities make *War and Peace* seem like minimalist literature, and the novel's adventure highlight, involving a Beechcraft Baron pilot flying upside down with a broken wing, is resolved in a manner that, by comparison, reduces the parting of the Red Sea to the level of a card trick.

The characters march bravely through one crisis after another, teetering on the wrong edge of believability. Too many of the bad guys turn out in the end to be okay, though one of these was so obnoxious this reader prayed for him to go up in flames along with his towering and tacky house.

Nance, a 13,000-hour military and commercial pilot, is on firm ground when he takes us inside a variety of aircraft and into the air under terrible conditions. He makes a compelling case for establishing a