

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. Who is your favorite character? What made you relate to that particular wife?
2. Would you let your significant other be blasted into space? What do you think allowed these women to let their husbands go on these incredible, but also very risky, journeys?
3. Does the sudden celebrity around the astronauts and their families depicted in this book remind you of today's celebrity culture in any way? How does it strike you as different? In what ways are the astronaut wives similar to today's reality show families? In what ways are they different?
4. *The Astronaut Wives Club* depicts the female friendship and female bonding that result from an unusual circumstance. Do the friendships and bonds in this book remind you of friendships you've experienced? What tensions did you see between the different groups of wives? Did you expect more solidarity? Less? Were you surprised at how the friendships evolved over time, so that the wives now meet for reunions and are able to be more open with one another than they ever were back then?
5. In many ways, *The Astronaut Wives Club* is about what it meant to be a "good" wife in the 1950s and 1960s, and how that role changed over the course of the space program. What do you think it means to be a good wife? A good husband? How do you think those roles have changed since the time of this book?
6. The wives in *The Astronaut Wives Club* were often under a high level of stress and intense scrutiny, without the benefit of preparation for or training in dealing with the

media. Do you think NASA should have prepared them better to deal with the pressures of public attention?

7. The early astronauts and their families had deals with *Life* magazine to let photographers and reporters into their homes. In many instances, the lives they were sharing with the media seem idealized. How do you think those idealized stories affected their lived day-to-day experiences? How might they have affected the day-to-day lives of housewives who read the pieces?
8. Were you surprised at what happened to the widows of the Apollo 1 fire like Pat White? Do you think being in the space program was harder on the astronauts or their wives?
9. As a contemporary reader, were you surprised to read about the extramarital affairs between a few of the astronauts and the Cape Cookies at Cape Canaveral, Florida? What did you think of the two worlds: the playground of the Cape and the wives' suburban world back home in Houston? Putting yourself in their shoes, do you think you would have challenged the status quo?
10. One of the wives, Rene Carpenter, always seemed to challenge the existing state of affairs of being the perfect archetypal astronaut wife and went on to write an opinionated women's column and host her own feminist television talk show. How do you think she was able to do this?
11. Were you surprised by any of the wives' reactions to their husbands' decisions to go to space? How about the wives' decisions post-space program? What did you think about how going to the Moon changed the men and the marriages (often expanding the men's horizons and leading to divorce)?

12. Do you think Betty Grissom had good grounds for her lack of confidence in NASA, going so far as to sue?
13. The wives themselves set up the Astronaut Wives Club, but in many ways the official, all-inclusive organization failed to become the space for open sharing that the founders intended it to be. How did the on-record Astronaut Wives Club differ from the smaller friend groups that formed among the wives? What purpose do you think the official club ended up serving, and why do you think it might not have become what the founders had hoped? Do you think it finally comes together with the reunion group of wives that meets today?
14. The astronaut wives' world was an era of women sharing intimacies on a daily basis over coffee, cocktails, and cigarettes. What have we gained today that the wives didn't have, and what have we lost?

Author Q&A:

Why did you decide to write about the astronaut wives? What attracted you to this topic?

I saw an incredible *Life* magazine photo of the wives in their skyrocketing beehives, outfitted in their swirling candy-colored Pucci minidresses. I've always loved *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13*, and *Mad Men*, but I never knew how much I wanted to know more about these women until I saw that picture. I now know that what drew me to those movies and the books was an interest in the women. When I learned that they actually have a club—and that they raised their families in the Houston “space burbs” near NASA’s operations, in a community known as

“Togetherville”—the whole thing was just amazing! I knew I had to write the book and tell their story: the emotional side of the space race.

There seems to be a cultural fascination right now with the '50s and '60s. Do you think that nostalgia has anything to teach us, today, about our contemporary world?

Well, there is definitely a different way of living from the 1950s and 1960s to the 2000s. As the wives told me, they were stay-at-home moms first and foremost. They had tea with Jackie Kennedy and appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine, but they did womanly, wifely things. Revisiting those times was very comforting to me. Just how they would pick up a pink or white rotary phone and call a friend to come over for a cup of coffee and a cigarette, or a cocktail, if they were feeling alone or needed to talk. They walked (and ran) to friends' homes across lawns. One astronaut kid told me nostalgically how his mother used to lock him and his siblings out of the house and tell them to go play with their friends and be home in time for supper. It was a more innocent time. It was a time when people got to live in the moment without yoga, Twitter, Facebook, and all the rest. It was also a magical time when human ingenuity meant everything and America accomplished amazing things. I think today is wonderful, but we need to incorporate some of yesterday's examples into how we live (of course, I am a sucker for '60s fashion, too, not to mention the music).

The scope of this book is wide—you report on many wives and devote attention to a broad range of women, while also focusing on a few notables like Rene Carpenter, Annie Glenn, and Betty Grissom. Given the breadth of the space program, how did you decide what stories to include?

I focused on the wives who had the most interesting, dramatic, and at times difficult experiences. I let their stories, missions, and personalities guide me in an organic way, focusing on the moments that jumped out at me, like when the Mercury wives were introduced to America like the country's first reality stars, and how this very different group of women bonded and came together. Also, my favorite mission turned out to be Apollo 8, about the first flight to the Moon on Christmas 1968, given a fifty-fifty shot (Genesis was read during it), because it showed how two women dealt, in very different ways, with the pressures of having their men go to the Moon. Mission wife Susan Borman truly believed her husband would die orbiting the Moon; while Marilyn, married to Jim ("Houston, we have a problem") Lovell, who later become famous for commanding Apollo 13, kept the faith. Although it is serious history, I always wanted it to read like a page-turner. I hope readers will get into the spirit (with me) of what it meant in a very real, womanly way, to send your husband a quarter of a million miles away—to the Moon (and back)!

This book documents some remarkably intrusive behavior by reporters—one journalist surreptitiously tails a wife to the hair salon hoping for a scoop. As a reporter yourself, where do you draw the line when it comes to pursuing a subject? What obligations do reporters have to their subjects—and what obligations do they have to their readers?

I started writing the book by visiting the wives across the country, unlocking the secrets of this very exclusive club of women behind the astronauts with the "right stuff." I was very conscious that the press had often hunted down and harassed the wives (and their children), and so it was important for me to get to know them as women and friends. I interviewed them

extensively and spent heaps of time with them. I was lucky that the women were so forthcoming with me. Now in their seventies, they finally felt it was time to let loose a little and come clean. Reporting is always a relationship of trust, working both ways. For example, Joan Aldrin, Buzz's wife, gave me her diary to explore, which she kept on the Apollo 11 "Giant Step" world tour as her husband's life was spiraling out of control.

What other books on the space program do you recommend?

The Right Stuff by Tom Wolfe; *Of a Fire on the Moon* by Norman Mailer; *Carrying the Fire* by astronaut Michael Collins; and one of the only other books about the space program written by a woman, *If the Sun Dies* by the controversial Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. (In it, astronauts spout Julius Caesar poolside and dream about opening a chain of A&W stands on the Moon.)