



Andrew Smith

Moondust
ISBN13: 9780007155422

Q: Obviously writing this book brought up a great deal of personal memories for you. The first moonwalk was, as you say, a moment when the world was united to observe an almost unbelievable event. Why do you think it is that people reacted to this in such powerful, personal ways, and were almost never neutral about it?

A: In a way, the whole book is an attempt to answer this question. The fact is that most people experienced the first moon landings as an intensely emotional thing, which may have had more to do with humanity really leaving the earth for the first time than actually landing on another world. But that said, the Moon has always had enormous imaginative resonance for us as a species: every culture has surrounded it with mythology and lore. Quite apart from that, everyone instinctively understood that this was a hugely dangerous undertaking, and that two people, as alone and reliant on their own skill and courage as two people could ever be, were effectively doing this amazing thing on behalf of humanity as a whole. Don't forget that, at the time, we thought Apollo was a giant leap into the future, not the weird chimera it appears as now.

Q: What is it about Buzz Aldrin that captured your interest in such an empathetic way? Did you find yourself identifying with him, or any of the astronauts, in any way?

A: Buzz Aldrin has had a pretty rough ride since that first landing. I think of him as a complex and talented, but slightly eccentric man whose strengths and vulnerabilities are so closely entwined that it's hard not to empathize with them. I also admire his courage in dealing with the depression and alcoholism that fell upon him after his flight. In short, he's a very human kind of hero and I found him fascinating. And yes, I identified with him and most of the others in all kinds of ways. Alan Bean, who became a very fine painter, and Edgar Mitchell, who is one of the most open-minded and enquiring people I've ever met, were probably the two I felt the strongest connection with, but each and every one of them was fascinating in his own way. The revelation that they were all either eldest siblings or only sons shook me to the core, because it's such a striking psychological fact.

Q: Do you think that the wives of the space program were victimized?

A: No, I don't think the wives were victimized, but I do think they had a pretty hard job. Like the men, none of them were prepared for the maelstrom they found themselves at the centre of, but while the men were compensated with excitement, the women got mostly fear, anxiety and the need to run a family more or less on their own while the men were training. The wives I met and spoke to struck me as a very colorful and wise collection of people, who were central to a time of enormous change. I love the fact that Rene Carpenter claims to have been the first woman in Washington to wear a pants suit and that it made the papers!

Q: You mention several of the films that have been made about the moon missions—*The Right Stuff*, *Apollo 13*, etc. I wonder if you'd care to share any which you think did a particularly good or accurate job?

A: Well, most of the astronauts seem to have hated *The Right Stuff* at the time, though many admit that it was accurate and important in retrospect (needless to say, I adore both the book and the film). In contrast, the astronauts appear to admire *Apollo 13* for its attention to detail and research. Unfortunately, I made the mistake of watching *Apollo 13* with my young son while I was writing *Moondust*, and every so often thereafter he would come to me with concern in his voice and ask: 'Dad, you're not going to go to the Moon are you?' My own favorite film on the subject is probably Al Reinert's *For All Mankind*, which is a collection of Apollo footage set against a soundtrack by Brian Eno: it took him years to make and deservedly won an Oscar. Other than that, most of my favorite space films are 1950s B-movies, which aren't factually accurate, but capture the sense of wonder and adventure people felt at the time. Of the modern films which do this, I think the Australian picture *The Dish* is the most imaginative and evocative in approach.

Q: What are you working on now? What other writers or books have inspired you in your development as a writer?

A: Right now I'm in the process of finishing my first novel, and about to begin work on a documentary film. I can't tell you the subject for my next non-fiction book just yet, but it's going to be on another big subject, and I'm feeling that same mix of excitement and apprehension that attended the start of *Moondust*, where you know something is going to take you on a journey, but don't know where to or what effect it'll have on you! Funnily enough, although I've lived in the UK for most of my life now, most of my favorite writers are American. Raymond Carver is the most enduring inspiration, but I also love Steinbeck, Annie Proulx, Jonathan Franzen, Douglas Coupland, Tom Wolfe, James Ellroy and Elmore Leonard. People who strip away the layers and make everyday life seem astonishing.