



Moondust

By Andrew Smith
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Introduction

Cultural history is a fickle thing, and the men who set foot on the moon, came close, or died trying, have slipped into irrelevance for some people. Andrew Smith has accomplished a wonderful thing in *Moondust; In Search of the Men Who Fell to Earth*. Part history and detailed research, part enlivening recreation of an extraordinary time period, and part personal memoir, Smith opens up a world that has remained closed to all but the tiny number of people who were there. At the time, the Mercury and Apollo missions didn't seem to have much to do with the upheaval and excitement that we now call "The Sixties," but Smith's eloquent reinterpretation shows that Kennedy's imperative to beat the Russians, and the many instances of almost romantic bravery in the face of outrageous risk, could not have happened at any other time. As well as being a curious investigator and a thoughtful historian, Smith is a terrific writer. His narrative is layered with humor, insight, and eloquent compassion for the men whose lives were completely formed, and sometimes destroyed, by these amazing adventures.

The story reveals the best and worst of humanity: courage, curiosity, vision, hubris, and pride. After you've walked on the moon, what could possibly come next?

Questions for Discussion

1. On the first page of his prologue, Smith says he became fascinated with "the strange and intense three and a half years in which the landings took place, during which the world seemed to shudder and change shape forever." After reading this book, how would you describe some of the ways in which the world changed shape, and why?
2. What was it about the cultural moment in the U.S. that would have made it so important to President Kennedy to beat the Russians to the moon? How does his decision appear to you now, in retrospect?
3. Did Smith's thoughtful interviews and insight into the men who went to the moon, and his revelations about what happened to them afterwards, add to your understanding of what type of person went to the moon and why?
4. Did this book change your opinion about the moon missions? In what ways? Did it change your opinions about any possible moon exploration in the future?
5. Edgar Mitchell was completely changed by his time in space, where he had the type of epiphany that seems more religious than scientific. He comes to believe that the solution to the world's problems is a "global change of consciousness." (Page 44) What does he mean by this? Do you agree?
6. The author seems to have a personal affinity for Buzz Aldrin. In what ways is he different from the other astronauts? Did you find him compelling, or sympathetic? Why or why not?
7. On page 122 Buzz Aldrin talks about his experience with depression. Many of the returning moon walkers seem to have had trouble with alcoholism, depression, divorce, and various other kinds of obstacles. Do you think this is solely because of the let down after going to the moon? Were there other factors, such as NASA and military training, the upheaval of the sixties, or other reasons?
8. Smith includes his personal memories of the sixties and his experience of the space program. Is this an effective narrative method? Did it inspire to think of your own memories?
9. On page 156, Smith asks the question, "Is it possible that our adulation of the famous is no more than a Trojan horse for our own disappointment and anger?" What do you think? What does the pursuit of famous people reveal about human character?
10. What do the lives of the astronaut's wives tell us about the position of women in the culture of the time, and even now? Each of them were placed in nearly impossible positions, living daily with so much fear and the need to raise a family. How do you think each of them handled it?

About the Author

Andrew Smith has worked as a critic and feature writer for the *Sunday Times*, the *Guardian*, *The Observer*, and *The Face*. He was born in the United States and lives in Norwich, England.