


## The Last Pilot

*Benjamin Johncock*

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**"Harrison sat very still. On the screen was the surface of the moon."**

Jim Harrison is a test pilot in the United States Air Force, one of the exalted few. He spends his days cheating death in the skies above the Mojave Desert and his nights at his friend Pancho's bar, often with his wife, Grace. She and Harrison are secretly desperate for a child-and when, against all odds, Grace learns that she is pregnant, the two are overcome with joy.

While America becomes swept up in the fervor of the Space Race, Harrison turns his attention home, passing up the chance to become an astronaut to welcome his daughter, Florence, into the world. Together, he and Grace confront the thrills and challenges of raising a child head-on. Fatherhood is different than flying planes-less controlled, more anxious-however the pleasures of watching Florence grow are incomparable. But when his family is faced with a sudden and inexplicable tragedy, Harrison's instincts as a father and a pilot are put to test. As a pilot, he feels compelled to lead them through it-and as a father, he fears that he has fallen short.

The aftermath will haunt the Harrisons and strain their marriage as Jim struggles under the weight of his decisions. Beginning when the dust of the Second World War has only just begun to settle and rushing onward into the Sixties, Benjamin Johncock traces the path of this young couple as they are uprooted by events much larger than themselves. The turns the Harrisons take together are at once astonishing and recognizable; their journey, both frightening and full of hope. Set against the backdrop of one of the most emotionally charged periods in American history, *The Last Pilot* is a mesmerizing debut novel of loss and finding courage in the face of it from an extraordinary new talent.

## The Last Pilot Details

Date : Published July 7th 2015 by Picador (first published June 30th 2015)

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Author : Benjamin Johncock

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## From Reader Review *The Last Pilot* for online ebook

### Candi says

This book caught my attention immediately – a story about test pilots, the Space Race and the first astronauts, and a compelling narrative about one of those pilots, his wife, and their desire to start a family. Jim Harrison is a U.S. Air Force test pilot who risks his life on a daily basis. Grace is a devoted wife that waits anxiously for her husband to walk through the door every night, hoping his photo won't be the next on the wall of dead pilots down at the local bar. It's the late 1940s and by day the men push the limits at Muroc Field in the Mojave Desert. At night they can usually be found unwinding and sharing stories at Pancho's. *"Pancho's place sat squat in six acres of bone-dry desert taut with Joshua trees. It has a wooden veranda, flyscreen door and looked like hell. She served scotch and beer and highballs and called it the Happy Bottom Riding Club."* Pancho has a very colorful and sensational history, she loves to cuss and taunt the men to no end – but all in good fun. This eccentric has a heart of gold and you would be lucky indeed to have her on your side.

Fast forward to the late 1950s/early 1960s. The Space Race is in full throttle and America does not want to fall behind the Soviets. *"We're standing still. The American man is drinking beer on his sofa in front of his new television set, while the Soviets are toiling, sweating and bleeding, becoming masters of the universe. Maybe Average Joe should concern himself less with the depth of the pile in his new broadloom rug, or the height of the tail fin on his new car."* NASA is looking for qualified men for the astronaut program, and Jim Harrison fits the bill. Choices will need to be made as Jim and Grace also face significant changes in their personal lives. Can Jim turn his back on this momentous opportunity or will he need to make considerable sacrifices to stay in the race?

I enjoyed this debut novel by Benjamin Johncock. The backdrop of the Mojave Desert appealed to my desire to read about places I've never been, to experience them through books. I learned a lot about test piloting and the NASA program, and appreciated a glimpse of real-life figures like Deke Slayton, Chuck Yeager, Jim Lovell, and John Glenn, that surrounded the fictional characters of this novel. The technical aspects at times went a bit over my head. I felt it was expected that I would be a bit savvier regarding aircraft and aerospace technology coming into this book. The prose was spare and this doesn't typically detract from my fondness for a book. However, the lack of quotation marks throughout the book made me double back many times to determine who was speaking – especially when multiple characters were present during many of the conversations. I felt a certain distance towards the characters at various times throughout the novel. However, there were moments when I could sense the real anguish, the torment of those experiencing immense tragedy. These moments became so authentic that I have high expectations from this author and what he can accomplish with his writing.

*"Live your life. Don't waste it lamenting what you think is required to complete it."*

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### Simon Juden says

This superbly crafted work, evocatively set amidst the space race, is a stunning first novel. Small steps taken, or not taken, in the context of a bleakly burdened marriage are juxtaposed with the “giant leap for mankind” and what achieving it took from the families who realised Kennedy's vision.

This is a masterpiece of storytelling: pacy, suspenseful and with genuine emotional depth. The prose is sharp and tight; the reader is trusted, not spoon-fed. There is warmth and profundity, with themes of love, loss and faith (among others) in the spaces between and behind the sparsely-drawn dialogue.

It's intelligent and unputdownable at the same time, and I can't recommend it strongly enough. I already can't wait for his second novel.

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### **Kate says**

This book is simply wonderful - an extraordinary debut. Beautifully written, it follows the early years of the American space programme, focusing on its cost for one of its pilot astronauts and his family. Outstanding.

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### **Tripfiction says**

Novel set in the Mojave Desert, Houston, and Cape Canaveral

I feel very lucky. The Last Pilot by Benjamin Johncock is the third debut novel by a British writer that I have read in recent weeks. All have been quite excellent... First was The Killing of Bobbi Lomax by Cal Moriarty, then came White Crocodile by K T Medina – and now, The Last Pilot. Two of the three (The Killing of Bobbi Lomax and The Last Pilot) are set in the States, and written with an authentic American feel. White Crocodile is set in Cambodia.

The Last Pilot is a very comprehensive and tightly written first novel. It starts in the Mojave Desert in the 1940s when a group of US test pilots are trying to break the sound barrier. Jim Harrison is one of the group. They are a hard drinking and hard living bunch (nothing wrong with a couple of stiffeners before a flight...). Harrison is married to Grace on whom he dotes. They eventually (after some problems) have a daughter. After a family tragedy, the story moves on to Houston in the early 1960s where Jim has become one of the select few astronauts at the beginning of the US space programme. He and Grace live in a 'village' alongside the Glenns, the Lovells, and the Bormans... It is a strange existence, Kennedy has committed to having a man on the moon by 1970, and that is the absolute focus. At the same time, though, the families have all become media celebrities – with all that entails. The stress and pressure grow, both for Harrison himself and for his marriage. No spoilers, but he heads rapidly downhill... All quite believable until the slightly strained and unlikely (to my mind) denouement.

The Last Pilot is a very interesting book that examines in some detail a more than significant period of recent American history. Perhaps particularly so because, although clearly a work of fiction, it is well researched (see the list of references and sources at the end...) and you feel as though Harrison is actually part of the project. No doubt aided by the device of his living alongside, and being friends with, some of the real astronauts. Perhaps, though, a little worrying in that one wonders how much of the story is true and how much is fiction. I feel I could give a lecture on the early US space programme – but I wouldn't be quite sure that I might not make a fool of myself!

The Last Pilot is a great debut novel from a British writer who will be very well worth following.

This post first appeared on our blog: <http://www.tripfiction.com/novel-set-...>

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### **Jaclyn Day says**

This book hit me hard in the gut. The pilot/NASA story is inventive and interesting, but the book is really about personal relationships and healing. The characters are fleshed out with incredible detail, especially Pancho—a good friend of our two married main characters. This is one of the better books I've read this year. I guess I'm a sucker for a rich story with beautiful writing. I wish I could write more about this, but I just finished it yesterday and it's still a little raw. Sitting too close to the surface. Anyway, you should read it.

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### **Holly says**

I really don't want to write a lukewarm review, but I didn't like this much and know a couple of reasons why. Johncock has some nice descriptions of the Mohave desert, and empty bars, and loneliness, and the cold interior of the cockpit. But I found his dialogue truly boring and hated the family story - the marital arguments, the wife's shrillness, the protagonist's taciturnity, the tragic deaths, the general sentimentality - it read like a *Lifetime* movie script. Also, I disagree with those who think the novel was well-researched: I may be wrong but I got the impression Johncock studied Tom Wolfe and that's it. So much of the first half of the novel came straight out of *The Right Stuff* - I don't just mean the history, which is public property, but actual scenes and dialogue from the book and the film. Isn't there anything else about that American time/place to mine for good fiction? What he didn't borrow was Wolfe's journalistic energy! I admit that I long ago imprinted on Wolfe's version: *The Right Stuff* was my favorite book when I was fifteen, supplanted only by Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (guess how I learned my history?), so for me this subject matter - Air Force test pilots and life & death and the early days of the space program - calls for kinetic energy, wordplay ("pushing the envelope"), macho boasting, and a judicious use of honest profanity. I found Johncock's restraint a little .... incongruous. And boring.

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### **Ellie says**

The Last Pilot is an intimate tale of the space race told from the perspective of one man. A man whose wife fears for his life every day, never knowing if this will be the day he fails to return from work. There is one particularly effective scene where Grace misremembers the time Harrison says he will return. The worry is palpable.

Harrison's progression mirrors that of Neil Armstrong's. He starts out as a US Air Force test pilot for rocket powered planes, attempting to break the sound barrier, and is a favourite to fly the X-15 when the temptation of space beckons. Whilst Harrison is an entirely fictional character, many of those around him are real people, either involved in aviation or the space programme. It's definitely one of those books where it's worth checking out the bibliography.

Three words were trying to get her attention, like a small child. Something has happened.

Dialogue makes up a large proportion of this novel, the brevity of character's sentences reflecting real speech. Lack of speech marks, and often indicators to who is speaking, will not be to everyone's tastes

though, and there were a few times where I had to trace back because I lost track of who was speaking.

When Josh asked me about the book I was reading he joked “it’s not going to go all Aviator is it?” and I was all, no, it’s about the space race. Well, maybe I should trust his intuition more, as Harrison starts to show signs of OCD. Incidentally, Howard Hughes is mentioned briefly, as Pancho starred in one of his films. Whilst the onset of OCD was realistic, its course was a little rushed and it all seemed to be brushed off lightly by the end.

Against the backdrop of great, technological achievement, it’s a sad story of loss and guilt, and the destructive powers of those feelings.

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### **Melissa ♥ Dog/Wolf Lover ♥ Martin says**

[www.melissa413readsalot.blogspot.com](http://www.melissa413readsalot.blogspot.com)

I thought this book was really sad. It's good but it's sad too. You have Harrison who is a test pilot for the US Airforce and his wife Grace. Every day there is the fear that Jim isn't going to make it back home.

I think the author did a great job at explaining some things a test pilot does that I would have never known.

But this book isn't just about that, it's about friends and family. Jim and Grace have a hard time trying to have kids and they have some really horrible things happen to them. It was nice to just step into another world where life just seems to be going along, history, heartaches, just life.

I must say my favorite and the funniest person in the book is Pancho. She owns a bar and she puts up with nothing from no one. I loved hearing about her story in the book. I'm not going to tell it here, but let me say she went through it.. all the way through it and came out on top with a thriving business and close friends. She's one tough cookie, but one of the greatest friends you would want to have.

\*I would like to thank Picador/St. Martins Press for a free print copy of this book through my book club for my honest review.\*

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### **switterbug (Betsey) says**

"Then let's hit the sky and light this candle"

This debut novel by an English author packs in an integral slice of American history—the space program in the late fifties/early sixties and the Cold War. However, what makes this book utterly compelling and emotionally acute is a story of one family—(fictional) test pilot Jim Harrison, and his wife, Grace. They live in the high desert of The Mojave Desert, in Muroc, “the largest slab of uninterrupted flatness on Earth.” It’s a

wide expanse of nothingness, but they love calling it home. This is where their friends live, and their life is built. The story begins in media res, demanding that the reader focus intently.

I was glad that I didn't know much about the book, and I waited to read the cover flap until after I finished the last page. Discovery and pacing are intricately tied to the suspense, and going into it blind rouses intensity for the reader. I'm going to avoid talking about much content and primarily share impressions. Jim Harrison is fearless, instinctive, brave, and equipped to handle all the dangers of his job; each day he flies, he confronts mortal hazards. But what happens when he can't confront the pitfalls in his personal life? He is unafraid in the skies but timorous on the ground. How does this dissonance play out in a marriage? Grace is supportive and forbearing, and, at times, emotionally fragile. Empathy for both characters ripples from the narrative. The dialogue between them (and other characters) is superlative, without any clichés often present in a dialogue-heavy book. There are no quotation marks—the aesthetics are twofold--which in this book works well, as it generates intimacy, underscores the understated, and prevents messy-looking type.

In a lesser author, the sections of physics, engineering, plane and rocket-craft would cause me to glaze over, and unhinge me from the story at hand. However, from Johncock, it lends a cred to the story without adding pretense. He ties in celebrated figures of the space program—Jim Lovell, John Glenn, Chuck Yeager, and many more, and the Happy Bottom Riders Club bar and legendary owner, Pancho Barnes, a tenderly mouthy and accomplished pilot in her own right. And this is the time in history that the race for space heralded operatic platitudes: "It's a battle for the heavens. It's good versus evil and we're on the front line." That was how it was then. However, it's Jim's family story that provides the aching nuance, often words as weapons, or talk left unsaid, a Cold War on a microcosmic level.

My only complaint is the brisk ending, or it seemed that way after the sustained mental and emotional weight of the story. Small potatoes, though, as Johncock had me at the takeoff.

4.5 rounded up

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## **Larry H says**

Full disclosure: I received an advance copy of this book from NetGalley in exchange for an unbiased review. Many thanks to Picador for making it available!

In *The Last Pilot*, Benjamin Johncock brings a true-to-life, "you are there" feeling to the fictionalized story of Jim Harrison, a test pilot for the U.S. Air Force, who in the late 1940s and 1950s was one of the elite few attempting to break the sound barrier. It was a dangerous task, one that led to countless pilot deaths and injuries, but the risk was worth the potential reward.

Harrison and his wife Grace live in the middle of the Mojave Desert along with the other pilots risking their lives for this achievement. And if the worry over the potential harm that could come to Jim wasn't enough, the couple is struggling with fertility issues, although they want so desperately to have a baby. And when Grace miraculously becomes pregnant, Jim puts aside the chance to become one of the nation's first astronauts so he can help raise the couple's daughter, Florence.

When tragedy strikes, Jim must decide whether to pursue the opportunity to join the Space Race, or wallow in the sadness and guilt that threaten to envelop him. But although he has shown tremendous bravery and fortitude in the face of amazing risk and danger, he is utterly unprepared for how hiding his pain may come to haunt him, not to mention the effect a life in the public spotlight will have on his marriage.

Jim appears alongside such real-life astronauts as John Glenn, Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, Alan Shepard, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Jim Lovell, Chuck Yeager, and Deke Slayton, but his inclusion in their story never seems false. This is a tremendously well-researched and interesting look at the U.S. in the midst of the Space Race, and how the astronauts dealt with all they faced. But beyond that, this is a book about how dangerous unacknowledged feelings of guilt can be, and the harm that comes from the things that remain unsaid. It's a powerful look at grief and loss, and the need to come to terms with one's feelings.

If you're interested in the early days of the Space Race and never tire of movies like *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13*, this might be a book for you. Johncock goes into immense detail to provide context, but even while he's immersing you in facts, he's also capturing emotions as accurately. Maybe it was all of the detail that numbed this book's appeal for me; while I thought it was well-written, it just didn't grab me as I had hoped it might, but I've seen many other 4- and 5-star reviews, so it might just be me.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo...>

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### **Bookworm says**

I feel like I read a completely different book. The book seemed really intriguing from the initial hype and as I enjoyed astronomy as a kid I thought I'd really like it. Wow, this was really...dull.

I knew right away that this was going to be a struggle for me from the prologue. Although the time-shift had me intrigued, I really can't stand it when quotation marks aren't used. Maybe it's just me, but it just seems really sloppy and a lack of effort than a stylistic choice.

Anyway. Jim is a pilot who turns down the chance to be an astronaut so he can be around to raise his daughter (who was born after a bit of a journey). But tragedy strikes and Jim must grapple with loss and how he fits into the world afterwards. Most of the book chronicles that journey.

As I said, this book was a struggle. It was an attempt to put a fictional story in the midst of an interesting time in history. And while this can and has worked elsewhere, it doesn't here. Something about the writing is very "distant," that made it really hard for me to empathize with Jim and his wife. Although parts of the book were compelling reading, the choice to present the dialogue as printed was a huge pain for me to read and I hated it.

I've also seen several references that said the dialogue is actually taken from the film 'The Right Stuff.' That seems like a really bizarre choice (especially as the movie is an adaptation of a book) to make. I haven't seen the film. And while the author acknowledges the movie (among other works) at the end, that seems really sloppy and strange. It makes it seem like some sort of weird fan-fiction hybrid instead of a homage.

A lot of people seemed to enjoy it, but I'm not one of them. Library for sure.

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### **Book Riot Community says**

Jim Harrison, a test pilot, gives up his dreams of going to the moon to raise a family. When tragedy strikes, Harrison and his wife are set adrift by their grief. Jim feels he must lead his family through turbulent times,



both personal and national. *The Last Pilot* is a wonderful debut about grief and dealing with shortcomings as both parents and humans.

Get our weekly New Books! newsletter delivered to your inbox each week, featuring all things....well...new books: <http://bookriot.com/2014/07/29/new-bo...>

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### **Liz Barnsley says**

Admittedly I'm struggling a little with this review because this book was as near perfect as it's possible to be when it comes to genius storytelling, emotionally resonant use of language and the ability to get you right in the heart.

Set against the backdrop of the space race, in a bubble of time and place that the author brings utterly vividly to life, *The Last Pilot* is a character drama that deals with themes of love, loss and family that will speak to each different reader in it's own way. A truly gifted blend of history and fiction, the sheer exhilaration of those in the programme, offset against the life of one family in the public spotlight means that *The Last Pilot* will stay with you forever.

I really did love everything about this – Benjamin Johncock writes with a truly unique and gripping style, there is a quiet passion to the prose that just gathers you into the moment and wraps you up in the feel of it. The characters are inspired, all of them, but I will truly hold onto Jim, Grace and Florence for a long long time and I'm positive that this is a book I shall return to again and again.

The hook may well be in the wonderful interpretation of an era gone by, a time when humanity was attempting to spread its wings – that in and of itself would have made for a fascinating novel. But the heart of it is in the people, their daily struggles, the authenticity of a life less ordinary within an ordinary life – there is where this story shines like a beacon, a very special once in a lifetime read that I truly cannot recommend highly enough.

That's all she wrote.

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### **Imi says**

This was a great idea: a test pilot, training to be one of the original NASA astronauts, struggles with personal problems after a family tragedy. This could have been an intriguing exploration of ambition, grief and loneliness while striving towards glory, but the novel wasn't strong enough to pull this off. The writing style was sparse and lifeless, which I think is the main reason I felt completely disconnected from the characters. The dialogue was pretty terrible at times and I hated the lack of quotation marks, along with the overuse of the verb "said", which just made the prose feel even more stilted. Not one I can really recommend.

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## **Barbara says**

It was a book that covered much of the same time frame as *The Astronaut Wives' Club* by Lily Koppel. They are both worth reading and this story has a subplot that is so appealing. The whole story put together makes for a wonderful first effort and a good read and I will continue to follow this author. I don't want to give anything away so that hopefully some of you will be interested enough to read it and rate it in here too! It's about the Mercury 7 and the New Nine too. Astronauts in the Mission to the Moon. Enjoy!

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## **Joanne Harris says**

This is by far the best début novel I've read in years. You can read about the plot elsewhere, but for me, the beauty of this novel is in the balance of the dialogue; the sustained emotion that runs through the whole; the haiku-like simplicity of the prose (and trust me, it takes a long, long time to create that sense of effortlessness). Like so many of America's stories, this is a Western in disguise; a quiet, limpid Western, where the action mostly takes place in the air and in the chambers of the heart. To me, it reads like the the reclusive disciple of Cormac McCarthy and St-Exupéry, and if it doesn't get at least on the shortlist of a major literary prize, then the book world is even more clueless than I've always suspected...

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## **Rebecca Foster says**

Cinematic descriptions of the California desert setting plus excellent characters and dialogue enliven this debut novel about a fictional test pilot and his family troubles during America's Space Race. Johncock is British, but you can tell he's taken inspiration from stories about the dawn of the astronaut age. If I allowed myself small points of criticism, I would say that it's a challenge to accept the passage of time in the final 50 pages, and that a keen interest in astronauts is probably a boon to keep readers going through the test flight portions, which to me were less compelling than the domestic drama of Jim, Grace and Florence.

See my full review at [The Bookbag](#).

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## **Jill says**

Oh, this book! I was a child when the whole country held its collective breath as Alan Shepard coolly exclaimed, "Let's light this candle" and became the first American to orbit the Earth. Dewy-eyed, I worshipped a whole new group of heroes.

The mastery of *The Last Pilot* is that within its pages, the heroes become human. The story centers on the fictional pilot Jim Harrison, who straddles that moment of time when we forevermore separated the old from the new and claimed the heavens as our own.

Laconic, enigmatic and courageous, Jim Harrison rubs elbows with the legends of American lore – Chuck Yeager, John Glenn, Gus Grissom Deke Slayton, Jim Lovell. Yet while he's being tested as a pilot, he also

faces a devastating test at home. He and his wife Grace face a heartbreaking trauma and Harrison's trademark saying, "It'll be okay" doesn't necessarily make it so.

What's so incredible is that the author, Benjamin Johncock, is not an American, but a Brit. And, this is his debut novel. Yet somehow, some way, he gets it all so right. The dialogue is pitch perfect, aptly described as desert-dry, with not one note out of place. A paean to a time when Americans were inspired to reach the heavens, it captures the nostalgia while at the same time not denying that real lives diverged from the public relations narrative.

It has been awhile since I read a 300 page book in 24 hours because I just couldn't stop. This is a wonderful homage to an astronaut (translated as "star voyagers") who single-mindedly pursues his dreams while striving to fight one's worst nightmare.

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### **Ron Charles says**

Although Benjamin Johncock is a young writer in England, in "The Last Pilot" he re-creates the early days of the U.S. space program like someone who lived through them. His story opens in 1947 when a hot-shot Air Corps captain named Jim Harrison is on his way to becoming the fastest man in the world — or another bloody smear on the Mojave Desert. He's flying the X-1: basically a rocket launched from the belly of an airborne B-29 bomber, which is fuel-injected craziness, but Jim and his buddies aren't fools. They relax each night at a bar decorated with photos of their dead colleagues. "There are no mistakes," Jim says coolly, "just bad pilots." During one particularly gory 36-week stretch, they lost 62 men.

Flying through these pages, you'll recall that dynamic era when a mix of physical science and political anxiety propelled the United States to unprecedented speeds. "Someone's gonna do it eventually," a pilot's wife says. "Better that it's us. Old allies aren't lookin so friendly anymore." So, they beat on, pushing against the limits of their rockets and their bodies, wondering what exactly might happen next. In one cameo, Chuck Yeager notes that some engineers worry that "at the speed of sound, g-forces become infinite."

Scientists and test pilots get a taste of infinite pressure when President Kennedy commits America to. . . .

*To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:*

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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### **Carol Magnus says**

I'm not too sure what to say about this book! I struggled to empathise with the main character. The writing style, tight and sparse, although clever left me feeling as if I was viewing the story through a pane of glass. The detail about the test flights and space race is clearly well researched. I liked learning the origin of the word 'astronaut'. The female characters seemed cliched. However, the final pages of panic attacks caused by suppressed grief were genuinely moving.

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