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First Man: The Life Of Neil A. Armstrong



Synopsis

On July 20, 1969, the world stood still to watch thirty-eight-year-old American astronaut Neil A. Armstrong become the first person to step on the surface of another heavenly body. Perhaps no words in human history became better known than those few he uttered at that historic moment. In a penetrating exploration of American hero worship, Hansen addresses the complex legacy of the First Man, as an astronaut and an individual. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

In a powerful bit of foreshadowing, the moment that made Neil Armstrong famous came at a time when his face was blocked by a reflective visor and no clear photographs of him were taken. In fact, the only visual records of his becoming the first human to walk on the Moon are a low quality black and white television transmission and a 16 millimeter color film taken from afar and above. Much the same could be said to describe the view Neil Armstrong has allowed the public into his life since that day in July 1969. Mislabeled as a recluse by the general public and press, Armstrong didn't retract from the world; rather, he followed his moonwalk with a relatively quick return to normal life instead of the role as a celebrity many had expected and some of his peers had embraced. After more than 35 years of avoiding public introspection, it may have also been assumed that Armstrong was as happy living out his rest of his time on earth with just as little fanfare. It's that very reason why "First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong" by James Hansen is so remarkable. Armstrong didn't just

authorize a biography being written, as if not caring how it ultimately read, rather he opened his entire life to Hansen, from the 50 hours of interviews he took part in, to encouraging his friends, family and colleagues to cooperate. The result is a book that not only explains the "first" in its title - as other books about the Apollo program have done before - but also the "man" that was behind the visor, a first in its own right. Hansen uses the unprecedented access he had gained to offer a comprehensive account of Armstrong's journey from his youth to naval aviator, research pilot to astronaut to ultimately an icon and family man. The level of detail surpasses at times what one would expect from even the most researched of profiles. For example, while discussing Armstrong's training with the Navy, Hansen shares not only the memories of class mates but performance records from individual flights or "hops". "July 8 [1949] (A-2): Average to above. Student looks around very good & appears to be at ease. Applies instructions above average." Hansen uses this approach - citing personal documents - whenever possible, granting the reader access to papers generally held as private. This extends to such disparate themes as Armstrong's relationship with his parents to the details of his two flights into space. For the average biographical subject, this insight would amend previously disclosed details; for Armstrong, these offer fresh light on full passages of the moonwalker's life. The reader learns how others viewed Armstrong at the time of the event(s), offering the untainted perspective that apparently became common after Armstrong landed on the Moon. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of "First Man" is how much time is spent correcting misconceptions or even outright lies about Armstrong's dealings with others. More than a few people who knew Armstrong - and a few who didn't - felt compelled to take credit for his moonwalk regardless if the facts supported such. From the neighbor who claimed to share private evenings studying the moon through a telescope with young Neil (he didn't) to the town that identified itself as his hometown (it wasn't), there was apparently no shortage of people who wanted a share in Armstrong's fame. An entire closing chapter is devoted to Armstrong's role as an icon. From autograph requests to his adoption by religions (and the non-religious alike), Hansen paints the picture of a man being appropriated from all sides. By the time this section closes, readers gain an appreciation for the reluctance of Armstrong today to be more accessible. Throughout "First Man", Hansen interjects Armstrong's own reflections, which while discussing his astronaut years, fits the final missing piece into a series of well told tales. While Armstrong's first mission, Gemini 8 and its inflight emergency have been recounted before (most recently by Armstrong's crewmate David Scott, in his own biography), Hansen presents its effect on Armstrong for the first time. Readers learn that while the world celebrated his return, Armstrong privately struggled with a mission that was cut short. Hansen raises the beliefs by some astronauts that Armstrong made the

wrong choices during flight and was at fault; if they only knew of his own privately-held regrets at the time. Armstrong's second, last and most famous mission - his Apollo 11 landing on the Moon - might have also been the least interesting in "First Man" on the account that it's been described so many times that one might assume there is nothing more to add. Hansen's version is engaging, as he alternates between the transcripts from the flight, others' memories (including Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins) and Armstrong's own recollections. There are even a few new, not-so-minor details to be learned, including why and how Armstrong became the 'first man' to step onto the surface and who, other than Aldrin, might just have been second. In the end though, the most powerful stories told in "First Man" take place on the ground, as Hansen delves into the death of Armstrong's daughter Karen and his divorce from his first wife Janet. Perhaps because of their extremely personal nature, or perhaps because they offer a glimpse of Armstrong's humanity these sections stand out among the book's 700 pages. They serve to remind readers that Armstrong is first a man. At the end of the last millennium, historians and futurists alike suggested that the only event to be remembered of the past 1000 years in 1000 years time would be the first moon landing. The only person to be remembered, Neil A. Armstrong. Thanks to Hansen, future historians will know more about the man than the fact he was first.

I've never bought for an instant that Neil Armstrong was a recluse. I guess that compared to the celebrity driven world we live in today many are hardpressed to understand why Armstrong didn't cash in on his celebrity....didn't sell his soul for a few minutes of fame. Reading First Man, The Life of Neil A. Armstrong is a refreshing glimpse into the life of one of the most significant individuals of the 20th Century. I'm amazed at how indifferent we all became over not only spaceflight, but manned flights to the moon and then landing and getting back alive. James Hansen has brought it all back. Wonderfully written with generous doses of Armstrongism's, First Man is a terrific review and expose of the 20th century. More importantly, we are given a wonderful tour of the life and times of Neil Armstrong. From his birth to what he's doing today.....it's all here. You appreciate what a cool customer Armstrong really was as you sit in Apollo 11 with him waiting for the engines to kick in. Hansen not only gives us a well written story about Armstrong, he does it in a professional manner. Copious endnotes, bibliographies, lists of interviews, email messages....it's all here. The documentation is refreshing especially the way so many biographies are put together today. I'm impressed and I highly recommend this biography to any space enthusiast.

Hansen has penned an epic look at the life of Neil Armstrong and the early history of unmanned and

manned flights to the moon. His look is both telescopic and microscopic. Telescopic in the grandeur of its scope, moving from 500 years ago in Armstrong's ancestral Scotland to Armstrong's life today, and everything in between. Microscopic in the detail of its scope, examining every cell of Armstrong's life from his mother's character, to his boyhood fascination with engineering, to his early training, to his relationship, to his inner thoughts and feelings. Weighing in at a hefty 784 pages, "First Man" is a heavyweight edition to the growing historical biographies about manned space flight. Armstrong, notoriously private, opens his life to Hansen leading to many surprising revelations, especially the details of the Gemini 8 emergency which reads like a Ronnie Howard Apollo 13 script. "The Life of Neil A. Armstrong" dips equally into his career and his character. At times the mind-boggling vocational details are over-presented, slowing down an otherwise gripping historical narrative. Counterintuitively, the most compelling narratives occur on earth, not in the heavens. Hansen's account of the death of Karen Armstrong, Neil's daughter, personalizes the engineer into the father. His account of Armstrong's divorce from Janet personalizes the engineer into the human being. Reading "First Man" feels like having the visor lifted from Armstrong's Apollo 11 spacesuit. We glimpse the man behind the mission, and the mission of the man. Reviewer: Bob Kellemen, Ph.D., is the author of "Soul Physicians," "Spiritual Friends," and "Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction."

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