

The Astronaut Wives Club

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There are few moments as exciting as watching a manned rocket take off into space. Even more memorable were the sights and sounds of man's first steps on the moon.

Less than one-third of today's Americans were alive during the first moon landing. But history will long remember the unforgettable words Neil Armstrong spoke when he succeeded in landing the Apollo 11 on the moon. With a cool head and extraordinary skill, when he saw the lunar module was heading toward an unsafe landing area, he took over manual control and landed the lunar module with only enough fuel to keep it going for about 15 seconds. When he announced, "The Eagle has landed," people who were following the mission from earth breathed a sigh of relief.

It's easy to see why early astronauts captured the nation's love and admiration. Even though most are only dimly remembered heroes, astronauts like John Glenn, Gus Grissom, and Neil Armstrong served as shining examples of courage under pressure, mental and physical excellence, and the value of teamwork.

Many films were made about space missions, most famously *The Right Stuff* (1983) and *Apollo 13* (1995). Books were written about the brave and brainy men who were selected for the ultimate adventure. But until recently, little has been said about the wives who waited for them back on earth. Now a new book, *The Astronaut Wives Club* by Lily Koppel, has changed that. Koppel's bestseller tells the stories of the strong women behind the men who pioneered space travel.

The book begins in the late 1950s, when a man's family is seen as a reflection of his work life: a good home with a pretty wife and adorable children translated into a good career. An important part of an astronaut's wife's job was to maintain the perfect image of domestic happiness. Astronaut wives were pressured by NASA, their husbands, and their own sense of duty to display an outward image of family perfection. They had to smile their way through dealing with the fears for their spouses' safety and the challenges of maintaining a home and children with almost no help. It was a difficult path, but also served as the basis for the strong friendships that grew between the women. The astronauts' wives were in it together.

The Houston suburbs where the wives made a home for their heroic husbands were called the "Spaceburbs," or sometimes "Togethersville." Along with triumph, the town was also the scene of tragedy. Seven of the first 30 astronaut wives lost their husbands during the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo missions. After astronaut Ed White perished in a capsule blaze, his wife Pat fell into

a deep depression. In an interview with the author, another astronaut wife described Mrs. White: “She just worked at being Ed's wife. She was wonderful at it. That's all.”

Ms. Koppel called the wives' accounts “the emotional story of the space race.” She said, “Why I was so excited about writing this book was because it really was the heart of the American space adventure.” It tells a story about female friendship, about how these women comforted each other while their husbands catapulted through space.

She recalled her inspiration for writing *The Astronaut Wives Club* as struck-by-lightning chance. After she saw a *Life* magazine photo of the wives in their skyrocketing beehives and outfitted in their swirling candy-colored mini-dresses, the author turned to her husband, who is also a writer, and asked, “Has a book ever been written about the wives?” She said she had always loved *The Right Stuff* and *Apollo 13*, but never realized how much she wanted to know more about the women until seeing that picture. “When I found out they actually have a club, and that they raised their families in the Houston spaceburbs near NASA’s operations, in a community known as Togetherville—the whole thing was just amazing!”

She began gathering information for the book by visiting wives scattered all across the country. Most of the women who Ms. Koppel interviewed were in their 70s and finally ready to talk freely. “They told me about their friendships with Jackie Kennedy.” Meeting with the elegant First Lady was often their reward after their husbands had completed a successful mission. They talked about how unprepared they were to have the eyes of the world upon them. With constant attention from the press, “they were like America's first reality stars,” Koppel said. “They all felt young and inexperienced, thrown into this role.”

Joan Aldrin, wife of the second man to walk on the moon, gave the author her diary. It told the story of Buzz Aldrin's Apollo 11 world tour. It was a difficult time; her husband's life had started to spiral out-of-control. In the 1970s, their marriage ended in divorce. After enduring divorce and retiring from NASA, the former astronaut returned to studies involving space. He won several patents on space-related inventions and also founded the ShareSpace Foundation, whose stated mission is to “share the wonders of space with children of all ages and to foster affordable space travel opportunities for all people.”

“What I wanted to communicate in *The Astronaut's Wives Club* is that the women behind the astronauts were almost in their own crazy NASA space program. They had this equally challenging role of keeping the home fires burning bright and projecting this perfect American family image to the world,” said Ms. Koppel. “These were very different, complicated women.”

When asked why she thought the astronaut wives' stories were ignored for so long, she said, "The wives saw their devotion as part as their duty. They weren't outspoken; they weren't heroes. We can now take a look back and see that it wasn't just about the guys in the silver suits. There was this whole community of engineers, and there was this whole story at home. These wives were basically single mothers during the week who were mowing the lawn, keeping the checkbook balanced; making sure their husbands weren't overly stressed at home, according to NASA's recommendations."

Although being an astronaut's wife required an independent and courageous spirit, space travel strained most of their marriages. Yet most of the wives would not have traded places with anyone. "I haven't heard one person say they would do it another way," Koppel said.

Looking back, Apollo 13 astronaut Jim Lovell's wife Marilyn said, "It was the best time of my life." She recalled that the wives sacrificed as much as their husbands. "If he couldn't make it home for two or three weekends in a row because he was training, it was just part of the mission. But then there were incredible things like round-the-world tours after your husband came back, and meeting heads of State, and feeling like you were higher-than-high society and royalty. Your husband had gone where none of this international jet set could even dream of going."

While gathering information for the book, Ms. Koppel met and spoke with many of the former astronauts. All expressed appreciation for the significant role these women played in the space race. One of the astronauts said, "We could not have done it without them. We could not have landed on the moon without them."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What is Lily Koppel's book about?

- A the wives of astronauts
- B the Apollo 11 moon landing
- C the life of Neil Armstrong
- D pioneers of space travel

2. How does the passage describe the wives of America's first astronauts?

- A examples of mental and physical excellence
- B perfect American wives and homemakers
- C strong, courageous, and independent
- D overwhelmed by responsibility and pressure

3. While the astronaut wives faced many difficulties and challenges, they also had opportunities and privileges that other women didn't. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A The wives all lived together in a community called Togethersville.
- B The wives got to meet Jackie Kennedy and go on world tours.
- C The wives ran their households as single mothers a lot of the time.
- D The wives made sure their astronaut husbands weren't too stressed.

4. Based on the passage, how did most of the wives deal with the stress of their husbands being in space?

- A They became depressed and kept to themselves.
- B They relied on support from NASA employees.
- C They toughed it out on their own.
- D They relied on the friendship and support of other wives.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A movies about famous space missions, such as *Apollo 13*
- B the problems and difficulties faced by American astronauts
- C the strong wives who supported the first astronauts
- D the Houston "spaceburbs" where astronauts' families lived

6. Read the following sentences: "They had to smile their way through dealing with the fears for their spouses' safety and the challenges of maintaining a home and children with almost no help. It was a difficult path, but also served as the **basis** for the strong friendships that grew between the women. The astronauts' wives were in it together."

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**basis**" most nearly mean?

- A the starting point of something
- B something that divides people
- C the ending point of something
- D something challenging or hard

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Astronaut wives had the difficult job of caring for homes and children with little or no help, _____ they were expected to display the image of family perfection.

- A thus
- B yet
- C like
- D before

8. What was an important part of an astronaut wife's job, according to the passage?

9. What were some of the challenges or difficulties faced by astronaut wives? Give two examples from the passage.

10. Explain why strong friendships formed between the astronaut wives, and how these friendships may have affected the wives as they faced challenges. Support your answer using information from the passage.
