

For Spaceous Skies: The Uncommon Journey of a Mercury Astronaut
Scott Carpenter and Kris Stoever
Harcourt, New York, NY
358 pages
for IEEE Spectrum

This biography and semi-memoir is the last personal account of a space career by a Mercury astronaut. The six other members of that cadre selected in 1959 have already written their books and had their says, but Carpenter – although he earlier wrote sections of joint books and gave interviews as requested – waited forty years to do this book.

Much of it does deal with his own first-hand experiences, such as the best ever published account of the Mercury astronaut selection process, based both on his own experience and on the subsequent interviews. His daughter Kris did the actual writing, which involved a great deal of follow-on research about events that Carpenter was involved in.

This has the pleasant result of providing much wider context than the more typical “there-I-was” first person account, limited by the person’s own contemporary perceptions. However, this also introduces an awkwardness from time to time when it is not clear which narrative style is being used: Carpenter’s highly-personal view, or a third-person hindsight rendering of Carpenter’s actions, or an omniscient narrator. Except in all-too-brief excerpts from a journal that Carpenter kept, he is referenced in the third person.

This question ties in with another reason for the publication delay. The book strives to respond to persistent rumors and accusations (most recently by Chris Kraft in his 1999 book on running Mission Control during the 1960’s) that somehow or other, Carpenter’s performance on his space mission in May 1962 was unprofessional. His spacecraft landed 250 miles ‘down range’ and for a brief period there were fears that it had burned up and he had been killed. Kraft devoted an entire chapter of his book to vilifying him.

These pages provide the hoped-for information that good on-the-scene reportage should provide. There are insightful descriptions of his fellow astronauts, particularly John Glenn (“The true John Glenn was more ambitious, more talented, funnier, and more charismatic than the humorless Calvinist of ‘The Right Stuff’”) and Gus Grissom, and excellent accounts of how he strove for maximum efficiency in his flight training.

Carpenter’s account is consistent with other versions of the mission and the men involved. Kraft had been publicly dressed down by Glenn for not disclosing the ‘heat shield’ problem on his flight, and the issue of ‘Who’s Boss?’ was now at stake. Carpenter had to step in for a medically grounded pilot, Deke Slayton, who was a favorite of Kraft’s team. The research workload for the mission had been vastly increased. And when the flight actually took place, an orientation sensor broke in the worst possible way – intermittently, and with no backup except eyeballing the horizon.

Historians, aerospace engineers, and space buffs will find this new version helpful in understanding both what happened, and how people later reacted. It quotes extensively from a memoir he wrote years later. But it still concentrates only on what happened. I couldn't find any descriptions of his personal impressions of the flight. What was he thinking, or feeling? We aren't told much.

There are good details about how Carpenter felt out of step with the other astronauts. He tired of pilot talk at cocktail parties, and "liked scientists". He played a guitar. He used training sessions to try things out for learning, not to make highest scores by not risking new techniques. Although he had superb flying skills and an impressive record as a test pilot, his original candidacy for the program was a clerical error in which the personnel office mistakenly believed he had completed a college degree before going on active military duty (it was only a matter of one class, and his alma mater later gave him a 'life experience credit' for his space flight and granted the degree formally). Even Life magazine saw him as "a different kind of hero – more Holden Caulfield than John Glenn."

Even before a motorcycle accident that restricted wrist movement so severely he was medically grounded, Carpenter describes how he had decided to switch to the US Navy's 'Sealab' underwater habitat development program. The events of that program are well chronicled, but again we don't learn how Carpenter felt about living underwater for so long. Nor do we learn much at all about what he did for the next thirty years of his life.

All of these discussions are in the second part of what is essentially two books in one. In the first half, Stoever describes her father's childhood in Colorado, living with grandparents after his mother fell ill and his father deserted them. These are fine, loving portraits of a functioning extended family that didn't fit the 1950's 'Ozzie and Harriet' stereotype, and fully justifies the book's subtitle, an 'uncommon journey'. For everyone who has had to overcome such challenges while growing up, this narrative will strike a chord of familiarity.

The book's two halves differ in the level of intimacy of personal relationships. Once we begin Carpenter's life as an adult, his feelings become encapsulated. Whether it be the death of a child, or the decay of a marriage, or the thrill of a space journey, the descriptions fall back on action narratives, not inner journeys and thoughts. Carpenter is willing to share the facts, but his inner self remains sealed off. There are occasional quotations from a private diary he kept, as well as extensive use of his wife's journals and of letters passed between him, his mother, and his absent father, but these only leave the impression that we see more deeply into THEIR souls than into Carpenter's.

Carpenter's journey, and the account of it in this highly readable book, brought back valuable data about outer space and about how to safely fly there. Along with him, we learn much about his exterior world. It was clearly a deliberate choice that his inner world remain private, and he's earned that right.