

# Glory was thin on the ground

**Astronauts' wives describe their own mission from NASA:  
Support their husbands and put on a brave face**

The Astronaut Wives Club: A True Story, by Lily Koppel (Grand Central Publishing/Hachette, 288 pages, \$29.99)

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One month ago, the wife of Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield was asked how she planned to celebrate his return home after five months orbiting the Earth in command of the International Space Station. "That," H el ene Hadfield replied coyly from mission control in Houston, "might have to be a little bit of a secret."

How times haven't changed.

Since the dawn of the space program in the late 1950s, the wives of astronauts have had many secrets to keep. Under heavy media scrutiny, "Astro-wives" have stuck to their part of the celebrity bargain: Support your husband, keep your home fires burning, don't show you're worried about him going "up there" in space.



Now there's a book that blasts through a lot of the silence.

"The story of the astronauts is well known, but this is the first time the wives' story has been told," author Lily Koppel writes in the preface to her breezy page-turner *The Astronaut Wives Club: A True Story*. "We have heard so much about the technological aspects of the space race, but not enough about the extraordinary day-to-day life the wives experienced behind the scenes."

Infidelity, depression, bad sex, suicide, alcoholism, sudden death, but also shopping sprees for haute couture, free sports cars and hotel rooms, dream homes and promotional trips, hobnobbing with popes and presidents - such were both the dark and bright sides of life for the astronauts and wives of the \$25-billion Mercury (1959-63), Gemini (1962-66) and Apollo (1961-72) space programs featured in the book.

Based on interviews and diaries of many of those involved and illustrated with two dozen vintage photographs, it chronicles those early years of space

exploration through the eyes of the wives left behind on the ground, women who were made to present one happy face to the public as characters in "America's first reality show," as Koppel has called it, while filing their secrets away.

They lived in dread of the knock on the door telling them their husband had been killed in training or on a mission. But they couldn't show it. Instead, on "death watch" before every launch, sitting in their living room in front of the TV, picking at potluck plates of devilled eggs and "Moon cake" and waiting to uncork the champagne, they hid their fear of disaster to reporters who'd come to capture their every move.

At first, money and fame bought their silence.

To the "Original Seven" wives of the Mercury program, Life magazine paid \$500,000 for exclusive access - \$24,000 each a year for the duration, more than triple their husbands' usual salary. And as ghostwriters for the women's first-person pieces, journalists made sure to cover up a lot of their flaws.

That's why, under the pen of, say Loudon Wainwright Jr. – patriarch of the singer-songwriter clan of Loudon III, Sloan, Rufus, Martha and Lucy – the public would never know Marge Slayton was a divorcee, Annie Glenn had a terrible stutter, Alan Shepard was a notorious horndog and Jo Schirra – gasp! – couldn't bake.

If you're a fan of Mad Men or Desperate Housewives, enjoyed watching the family scenes in Apollo 13 or Joanne Herring's high-society parties in Charlie Wilson's War, and thrilled to The Right Stuff, you'll love The Astronauts Wives Club. It's rich with '60s period detail: Playboy bunny jigsaw puzzles, early Zenith Space Command TV remotes, parties with Jackie Kennedy (who apparently hated her Size 10 figure and bow legs), sleek Corvette convertibles and the Byrds singing "Hey, Mr. Spaceman."



It's also very funny: glamorous Rene Carpenter (JFK's favourite) does a comic skit as Primly Stable, the perfect astrowife to Squarely Stable (modelled on John Glenn); an anonymous Gemini wife puts an ad in the paper before moving to Houston that says "House for Sale."

Owner Going to the Moon"; Jane Conrad's gynecologist, remarks how much she looks like Marilyn Lovell - "Inside or out?" Mrs. Conrad quips; and the astronauts nickname the KC-135 Stratotankers they do their weightless space flight training in "Vomit Comets."

But there's tragedy behind the laughs.

The astronauts are rarely home, don't know their kids (who, of course, idolize them), and are almost all serial philanderers (23 of the 30 couples in the three programs ended up in divorce, thanks to a slew of mistresses named Suzy and other "Cape Canaveral cookies"). Five astronauts die in crashes of their T-35 supersonic trainer jets, another dies drunk at the wheel of his VW Bug, and three (the Apollo 1 crew) die in flames in a launch rehearsal. One couple's young son dies of leukemia; another, still despondent at being left a widow over two decades past, commits suicide.

Between some couples, there are moments of tenderness. "I'm going down to the corner store to buy some chewing gum," John Glenn used to tell his wife, Annie, before blasting off. It was their private joke.

"Don't take too long," she'd respond. After he'd return to Earth, he'd switch his briefcase from one hand to the other in view of the TV cameras, a sign to Annie that said "I love you." Some astronauts named parts of the Moon after their wives: Mount Marilyn (Jim Lovell), Valerie's Valley (Bill Anders). And Michael Collins and his wife, Pat, had fine taste in wines and literature, and liked to share.

(What a romantic that Collins was. As a junior reporter years ago in Ottawa, I once got to interview the man about his book; *Liftoff: The Story of America's Adventure in Space*. Besides saying how lovely the Earth looked from space compared to the "dry, barren, gnarled peach pit of a planet" that is the Moon, in his book he went on to extol the "exquisite possibilities" of someday having sex up there, calling it "the ultimate use of weightlessness."

Other astronauts were decidedly less starry-eyed. "You just worry about the custard," Frank Borman used to say to his nervous wife, Susan, before going up, "and I'll worry about the flying."

The book is full of cameos by famous people. There's "a peppery little reporter named Regis Philbin" who tracks down one of the wives to interview, a "pale-faced" Truman Capote who doesn't much like Jane Conrad's new suede hat, and writers Dodie Hamblin ("Life's new bureau chief for outer space"), Norman Mailer (the "macho writer" who called himself Aquarius, on assignment with *Life* for Apollo 11), and white-suited Tom Wolfe, covering Apollo 17, the sixth and final mission to the Moon, for *Rolling Stone*. Making several presidential appearances

are Lyndon Johnson (who's opportunistic), his Lady Bird (flighty), JFK (inspirational) and Richard Nixon (manipulative). There's also Buzz Aldrin's pet monkey, PoPo – but that story doesn't end well.

Like the title says, the wives did actually form a formal association, the Astronaut Wives Club, in 1966. They've had reunions, reminiscing over things like the "squawk-boxes" they had in their bedroom (tuned into transmissions between the astronauts and Mission Control in Houston); \$1,000 gift certificates to shop at Neiman Marcus; the suburban homes they had custom-built in what the media dubbed Togetherville, Texas; their run-ins with NASA over their husbands' behaviour and the agency playing favourites. They still meet today, "for cruises and getaways, space anniversaries and events."

They proudly wear "space bling, diamond-encrusted gold jewelry featuring their mission numbers and emblems," and all have golden whistles symbolizing they'll always be there for one another when they're in distress.

"Ultimately," Koppel writes, "the wives' story is about female friendships and American identity. While their husbands were launched into space, they were being launched as modern American women. If not for the wives, the strong women in the background who provided essential support to their husbands, man might never have walked on the Moon."

Now, with the good mixed with the bad, their secrets are out.

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