



The Dream Life of Astronauts

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For readers of Tom Perrotta and Lorrie Moore, this sharp and affecting short story collection takes place in and around Cape Canaveral, from the 1960s to the present day, showcasing Patrick Ryan's masterly understanding of regret and hope, marriage and family, and the universal longing for love.

The Dream Life of Astronauts balances heartbreak with wry humor as its characters try to make sense of the paths they find themselves on. A would-be Miss America auditions for a shady local talent scout over vodka and Sunny D; a NASA engineer begins to wonder if the woman he's having an affair with is slowly poisoning her husband; a Boy Scout troop leader, recovering from a stroke, tries to protect one of his scouts from being bullied by his own sons; an ex-mobster living in witness protection feuds with the busybody head of his condo board; a grandmother, sentenced to driver's ed after a traffic accident, surprises herself by falling for her instructor.

Set against landmark moments—the first moon launch, Watergate, the Challenger explosion—these private dramas unfurl in startling ways. *The Dream Life of Astronauts* ratifies the emergence of an indelible new talent in fiction.

The Dream Life of Astronauts Details

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Kasa Cotugno says

The area around Cape Canaveral, consisting of several long islands, contains a population not all connected to the Space Center, but affected by its proximity in different ways. I was reminded of stories set in and around, say, Las Vegas, in which people leading ordinary lives cannot help but be associated with the Strip even if they never set foot there.

Each of these 9 stories presents a character recognizable in their human qualities. Ryan's writing style is smooth, his situations, distinct. The timeline runs from the 1960's to the present, and in some there is overlap, characters showing up decades later in surprising ways, so the trajectory of their lives can be followed, in many cases, poignantly. The people in these stories may not always be sympathetic. There are cases of bullying, by children against other children, children against parents, in one memorable instance, a mother against her son's cancer stricken wife. And the resolutions are far from cliched. One of my favorite stories actually made me laugh out loud -- a member of the Chicago mob in the Witsec Program finds himself in a retirement community under a different name, but still recognizes his former self when he looks in the mirror. That actually was the only story that made me laugh. The others made me think.

Debbie says

This was an unusual and entertaining book of short stories. They all take place in the Cape Canaveral area of Florida in the 1960's and 1970's. Most deal with dysfunctional families and I enjoyed how some of the same characters would show up in a later story under very different circumstances.

The stories immediately grab your attention. Here are 2 of my favorite opening sentences:

"We never would have laid eyes on Ike if his dad hadn't gone to sleep on a pair of railroad tracks somewhere in Jacksonville."

"About a month after Challenger blew up, Wendell Troup told me his wife was trying to poison him."

I will definitely be on the look-out for more books by Patrick Ryan.

S. Shirley says

This is a wonderful collection of funny, insightful, and sometimes heartbreaking stories. Ryan has a knack for describing the ordinary in a way that is anything but. His prose absolutely sings and his love for his characters shines through, even when their behavior isn't all that lovable. A brilliant read—I couldn't put it down.

Mrtruscott says

A stack from the short story collection/shelves that I'm re-visiting and re-reading before I take them away....not rated individually, no "review"/ comments, as I'm reading them in a very non-linear way.

I used to call these "waiting room books," and I'm surprised by how many of these stories I remember reading the first time around...almost a short story timeline/madeleine. Which makes it so hard to part with books....

The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen
Where The Money Went - Kevin Canty
Beautiful Girls - Beth Ann Bauman
Our Former Lives in Art - Jennifer S. Davis
You Are Not a Stranger Here - Adam Haslett
Anatomies - Andee Hochman
This Is Paradise - Kristiana Kahakauwila
Here In the World - Victoria Lancelotta
Female Trouble - Antonya Nelson
How to Breathe Underwater - Julie Orringer
Slow Dance on the Fault Line - Donald Rawley
Nightbird Cantata - Donald Rawley
The Hill Bachelors - William Trevor

Carrie says

Enjoyable collection of short stories that draw the reader in from the start. I like how some of the minor characters return as the main character in later stories, usually taking place years down the road. Nice way of tying some of the stories together. Wonderful description too. Not a collection to read if you want only happy endings, however. But at least they're realistic endings.

Melki says

"My grandmother's having sex with that driving school man."

"Uh-oh," the bird man said.

Mrs. Kerrigan's grip went slack, causing Steve to tilt to one side. "Do you even know what that means?" she asked Becca.

"There's a thing, and a hole, and the thing goes in the hole ---"

"Never mind! I know you're going through a hard time right now, Becca. I think maybe you're angry at your parents for not staying together, and you're angry at your mother for travelling so much."

"She's not traveling. She moved to California."

"Okay, then you're angry at her for moving to California. But that doesn't mean it's okay to take it out on your grandmother."

"I can't stand that witch," Becca said. "She smells like hairspray and she farts."

"Your grandmother is a good friend of mine, and I happen to know she's doing the best she can."

"She doesn't even *like* you," Becca said. "She told me you're lonely. And sad."

Mrs. Kerrigan's chin quivered for a moment.*

Becca, her smelly grandmother, and Mrs. Kerrigan are just a few of the many quirky characters who populate Ryan's tales of strange, disenchanted, and lonely folks who live in and around Cape Canaveral. Most of his players are not particularly likable. There are cheating spouses, creepy lechers, ex-mobsters, bullies, brats, and swinging former astronauts. Though they're all leading the proverbial lives of "quiet desperation," most of them have chosen not to go down without a fight. Their struggles to rise above their current problems are frequently touching and humorous.

While these stories are probably not for everyone, I truly enjoyed all of them, and would be more than happy to read 'em again.

*from *Earth, Mostly*

Helen Marquis says

An excellent collection of short stories with a common thread of the Space Center at Cape Canaveral in Florida. The characters are all drawn from the lower rungs of success, with failed careers, marriages and relationships, populating the pages, set against headline news events such as the Watergate scandal, and more poignantly, the Challenger disaster.

Ryan's characters are all instantly memorable, despite their seemingly normal existences, due to his incredibly evocative writing style. He picks instantly recognisable traits in people, so you feel you know the characters from the off, meaning the reader is engaged and invested in their stories.

A hugely enjoyable collection of wonderful stories. Highly recommended.

Dede Ward says

Loved this! Great voices, great humor. Captures a time in America I remember well. I don't typically read short story collections, but I found myself looking forward to each new story. I will say there is a bit of unevenness here--some of the stories were standouts, and one or two were not. But that seems to be par for the course with short story collections. I love humor and pathos in equal measure and this had both.

Lori says

I was a goodreads first reads winner of "The Dream of Astronauts:Stories.This is a book of short stories. Most take place in Florida in and around Cape Canaveral.Most of the stories take place around big historical moments, such as Watergate, In 1969 at the time of the rocket sent up for the moon landing. the Challenger explosion. A teenage boy watched the arrival of his hippie uncle and the slow break up of his parent's marriage. A foster girl lives on a farm around the time of the first moon landing. A teenage girl dreams of being in a Miss America pageant.A boy scout leader is sad to see his own so bully another boy. There are many other stories as well. They span from 1969 up to the early 2000's. Some stories are tragic others

humorous. I liked the stories. I liked that some took place around important times in history.

Mary Lins says

“The Dream Life of Astronauts”, a short story collection by Patrick Ryan, captured me with the very first story. “The Way She handles”, is set in the summer of 1973 during the Watergate hearings. I remember it well and appreciated all the references, and I even felt a little rush when the love song from “The Poseidon Adventure” was mentioned and I knew what that was (“The Morning After” by Maureen McGovern”) and then spent the rest of the day trying to get that tune out of my head!

Most of the stories are set in the 1970s and all are set in or around Cape Canaveral and mention the US Space Program. I have worked at the Johnson Space Center here in Houston for over 26 years, so I appreciated many of the details.

It’s rare to like every single story in a short story collection, but in this case, I did enjoy each and every one. Though the longest story, “Miss America”, was my favorite. It’s about 16 year old Dani, who aspires to being Miss Florida and then Miss America one day. Her stepfather has just left her mother, who is not handling it well (whatever that looks like). Her mother suddenly wants them to be “friends” but Dani has a secret and needs a mother very much.

“The Dream Life of Astronauts”, is about a young man named Frankie and his burgeoning sexuality. Later in the collection, as story called “Earth, Mostly” links and continues both Dani and Frankie’s stories.

Ryan is an absolutely wonderful writer, often his descriptions (two brothers who are bullies, or a wife that may-or-may-not be poisoning her husband) are both hilarious and harrowing at the same time; not easy to pull off! I’ll be eagerly watching for more from Patrick Ryan in the future.

Kathryn Jacoby says

Sympathetic stories about disappointed but surprisingly expectant people, most of whom have a new relationship come into their life that ultimately leads to nowhere but more disillusionment. The person who appears to be their ticket out of their life refuses to take them, or turns out to be even more broken than they are. The setting for the stories is the space program in Florida from the 60s to the present day. Set against a horizon lit up by stunningly powerful rockets and spaceships able to go further than man had ever gone before, the characters are trapped in their loneliness in an indifferent world.

Some perverse favorites: the neighborhood bullies who attempt to draw and quarter their favorite victim with two highly uncooperative springer spaniels, the teenage boy who’s seduced by an impotent ex-astronaut and his wife, and the grandma who has a one-afternoon stand with her married driving instructor, who dons a bizarre getup for their rendezvous.

Although well written, the stories felt somewhat pointless, ending untidily and unpoignantly, as if nothing is really over but it’s time to move on. However, the last story, about an unkind 92-year-old mother in a nursing home who’s visited by her middle-aged son, offered a nice counterpoint. Whereas the previous characters were reaching out (toward affairs, fantasies of fame and celebrity, escape, addictions) in their search for solace, the son, Martin, puts up a hedge around his new marriage to protect it and keep the harmful influences of his toxic mother out. He only tells her about the marriage six months after it’s occurred,

informing his mother that he won't be introducing her to his new wife.

"Why even tell me, then?" she asked. "Why tell me you've married this person, if you don't want me to meet her?"

He wagged his head a little. "I don't know. I guess so I could tell you I was happy."

"Oh," she said. "And that's it?"

"That's it."

"Well, good for you!" she said, raising her voice, nearly shouting. "Martin is happy, hip hip hooray!"

Finally, someone who doesn't have to fantasize about running off, but can instead stay put and hide a little happiness away. The dream lives of astronauts are revealed to be sordid and sad; the real lives of down-to-earth folks are mostly the same but occasionally conceal unexpected reserves of joy and triumph behind battered exteriors.

Larry H says

So let me make one thing clear before you make the decision whether or not to read this collection of short stories based on the title: despite taking place at or around Cape Canaveral (in some cases simply in the same Florida county), the majority of these stories have nothing to do with astronauts.

While a few have the space program as a narrative thread within them (or at least mention something space-related in passing), for the most part, these well-written stories are about people who find themselves at a crossroads in their lives. Some are emotional, some are thought-provoking, and at least one was laugh-out-loud funny, and a few are interconnected with others in the collection.

Among my favorites in the collection were: "Earth, Mostly," in which a woman who is raising her granddaughter finds herself assigned to a driver's ed class after a traffic accident and is attracted to the instructor; "Go Fever," which is about a man whose coworker is convinced his wife is poisoning him (but that's just the tip of the iceberg); "Miss America," in which an aspiring Miss America contestant is taken to an audition with a less-than-reputable talent scout, while she is dealing with upheaval in her own life and her mother's; "Fountain of Youth," about a man in witness protection from the Mafia now living in a retirement community and matching wits with the power-hungry head of the condo board; "The Way She Handles," which tells of a young boy whose parents' marriage hits a rough patch with the arrival of his carefree uncle; and the beautiful title story, in which a young man is drawn to a former astronaut and is unprepared for what comes next.

While one or two of the stories didn't resonate for me as much as the ones I mentioned above, Patrick Ryan is a tremendously talented writer, and he created some memorable characters and situations I really enjoyed reading about. Although I felt that a few of the stories could have taken place anywhere and the connection with Cape Canaveral almost felt like an afterthought, it is the foibles of the human heart and our interactions with lovers, colleagues, family members, children, and strangers that powered these stories and imbued them with impact.

I am continually amazed at the immense talent among those individuals writing short stories today, and Ryan definitely belongs in this community. If you like short stories, this is a collection worth reading, even if

you're not a space enthusiast. I look forward to seeing what's next in his career.

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

Leslie says

Fast read. Storytelling that feels like the work of someone who really understands the craft. Many of these stories ruminated on the domino effect of cruelty - how one hurt makes the victim lash out at another. I liked that. My favorites were the title story, which was really clever and suspenseful, and then the last - You need not be present to win, which was the most emotionally resonant.

Jill says

A short story is like a kiss in the dark from a stranger. So said Stephen King. I am a lover of short stories and I've found that that kiss can be anything from a brief (too dry to care), sloppy (too undisciplined) or intense (need a bit of distance).

Patrick Ryan gets the formula just right. He's a natural-born storyteller and I loved every single one of these nine touching stories. All of them take place around Cape Canaveral as public enthusiasm for the NASA space program was dying down. And each is about individuals who have been left at the launching pad, trying to build propulsion for take-off.

My favorites? The eponymous story *The Dream Life of Astronauts* introduces us to Frankie, a teenage boy who is remarkably comfortable in his own skin after coming out to his family. At a public library, he meets a former astronaut, Clark Evans, who is now out of the NASA program and touts real estate business cards that read: "I'll travel the galaxy to meet your needs." What happens next is a painful and unexpected look at suburbia and the chasm between innocent youth and cynical adulthood.

We will meet Frankie one more time in this collection, in the equally fine story *Earth, Mostly*. He's grown up now, yet has moved back to his mother's home. That story – which also features characters we've met in a former story *Miss America* – cuts right to the chase by portraying ordinary life with all its foibles (including a grandmother who has arranged to meet her married driving instructor after crashing her car).

There are more delights in store for the reader as well. One story portrays a bookkeeper of an extortion program who lives in a Florida retirement home under the witness protection program and clashes with the anal-retentive head of his condo board. There's a great story about a NASA engineer who is romancing his boss's wife...and wondering if she's trying to poison that boss. Whether he's writing about a 70-year-old man who finally reaches closure with his toxic 92-year-old mother or two bullying teen brothers and their stroke-impaired father, Patrick Ryan's characters ring authentic.

The strength of this collection was such that I wanted to read it straight through without pause. This space-era collection is decidedly down to earth. 4.5 stars.

Bonnie Brody says

Patrick Ryan's collection of short stories, 'The Dream Life of Astronauts', takes on several universal themes. The characters he evokes often appear in more than one story, usually after a passage of time. All of them are searching for ways to find more meaning in their lives, often sliding backwards as they try to go forward. The protagonists are often troubled by addiction, family dysfunction, divorce or loneliness. The one thing they have in common is that they all live in Florida near Cape Canaveral.

In the title story, Frankie is a 16 year old boy who has come out to his family. He goes to the library to hear a retired astronaut speak and is invited to the astronaut's home. What follows is a sexual gambit that is entirely unexpected by Frankie.

'Go Fever' takes place after the Challenger disaster. Wendell is a supervisor at the launching site who believes that his wife Loretta is trying to poison him. The story is told from the viewpoint of an employee and friend of Wendell's who just happens to be having an affair with Loretta.

'Fountain of Youth' is a delightful story about a man in witness protection who is now residing in a retirement community. He states "Life is fickle, you know? You can be somebody one minute and nobody the next, full of yourself in the morning and empty as a tapped well in the afternoon. I don't know who I am anymore, but sometimes, just for a second, I know who I want to be." This excerpt pretty well summarizes the feelings of many characters in this collection.

I loved several other stories in this collection and liked the author's frequent technique of switching narrators within the story. It is interesting to see characters from early stories return in later ones. Frankie, courted by an ex-astronaut as a teen-ager, returns in a later story as 'bird man', a young man who is obviously mentally ill and may be suffering from AIDS. In this same story, we meet the mother of the teen-ager in 'Miss America' who is now raising her daughter's child.

I can't name my favorite story because I loved so many of the nine in the collection. I read the book in one day and I felt that there was a power house of inner worlds and puzzled characters all facing the human condition, attempting to succeed when they were prisoners of fate more frequently than choice.
