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There's never been a better time to be an armchair astronaut. Forget this planet. The economy is terrible, global warming is inevitable, and there are at least eight major wars happening right now. That's why Kessler left home and moved to Mars. Well, not all the way to Mars. The closest spot on Earth you can get without a rocket. In the summer of 2008, he lived his space dream, spending the months in mission control of The Phoenix expedition with 130 top scientists and engineers as they explored Mars. This story is a human drama about modern-day Magellans battling NASA politics, temperamental robots, and the bizarre world of daily life in mission control. Kessler was the first outsider ever granted unfettered access to such an event, giving us a true Mission-to-Mars exclusive.

The Phoenix Mars mission was the first man-made probe ever sent to the Martian arctic. They wanted to find out how climate change can turn a warm, wet planet (read: Earth) into a cold, barren desert (read: Mars). That might seem like a trivial pursuit, but it's probably the most impressive feat we humans can achieve, and it took the culmination of nearly the entirety of human knowledge to do it.

Along the way, Phoenix discovered a giant frozen ocean trapped beneath the north pole of Mars, exotic food for aliens and liquid water. This is not science fiction. It's fact. Not bad for a summer holiday.

Martian Summer: Robot Arms, Cowboy Spacemen, and My 90 Days with the Phoenix Mars Mission Details

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From Reader Review **Martian Summer: Robot Arms, Cowboy Spacemen, and My 90 Days with the Phoenix Mars Mission for online ebook**

Joe says

Once I got past my palpable jealousy of the author's opportunity to document a mission like this, I really enjoyed the book!

Reading a few papers and articles that come out of a mission doesn't really communicate just how politically and technically complicated space exploration is. *Martian Summer* does a great job demonstrating the brittle nature of such a feat, which makes any science gleaned from the mission that much more impressive and inspirational.

Though I would have enjoyed a few more technical interludes — maybe some details from the science talks to explore the actual science in addition to the day-to-day operations — it still was a great peek inside mission control.

The author's account was a touch narcissistic, though I understand that it is as much a personal account of nerd immersion as it is a narrative about mission control. Plus, I can't say I wouldn't do the same.

What I really appreciated was the sense of family that developed to even include the author. We humans really pull together under self-imposed insurmountable stress, sleep deprivation and possible career suicide.

It's rare to find a work of non-fiction with the scientist-as-hero (and robot-as-hero) that puts so much about personal achievement into perspective. Throw in some jokes, some casual drug use and a few pop cultural references and you've got yourself a very enjoyable account of one of the coolest things humans have ever done.

Chuck Weiss says

Once you get past the self-congratulatory "Wired Magazine" method of writing the author chose to pen his book, the contents of this freshman work are quite good. Learned a lot about the business and politics of unmanned spaceflight, and there was enough information about hardware systems to keep me interested to the last page. Overall a very good read, although I might have liked to hear a little more of the actual design and construction and the results of the post-landing research.

Chris says

Very enjoyable and engrossing non-fiction account of the 2008 Mars Phoenix Lander mission, a lander type spacecraft and the first robotic laboratory send to the polar regions of Mars, which dug into and investigated the Martian soil:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars_Pho...

Told from the perspective of a non-scientist/space enthusiast with access to the mission control (almost in the "gonzo journalist" school of journalism, but smarter and less egotistical), Kessler does a very good job of explaining how planetary science actually happens, including the effects of the longer Martian day on the work staff (a Martian day is 24.4 hours long, slightly longer than a day on Earth - this plays havoc with the work and sleep schedule of the crew).

Just getting robotic arms to dig into the frozen Martian ground, scoop up some regolith, deposit in the laboratory module, conduct tests, and receive the data is an incredibly complex project, which the Phoenix was able to do over and over again. It requires incredible dedication by engineers, scientists, programmers, and others, all working hard and communicating with each other, facing risks and deciding on priorities. Official images and data can be found here: http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/pho...

The Phoenix lander helped us to develop a better understanding of Mars, to be further developed by the next big science laboratory to go to Mars, the Mars Science Laboratory (Shorthand: "The MSL" for space insiders).

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars_Sci...

Understanding Mars will help us plan further robotic and eventual human missions there. Many questions and mysteries about Mars remain, but it is, in my opinion, the crucial destination in our solar system, the most like Earth, the most hospitable. Creating a sustained human presence on Mars is THE goal of humankind for the next 1,000 years.

<http://www.globalspaceexploration.org/>

Rebecca says

This was a great idea that kind of feels like it was wasted.

The topic is fascinating--a writer tags along with the team running the 2008 Phoenix mission to Mars, attending the science sessions, watching the engineers, getting horrible time lag along with everyone else. It's a chance to get inside a world that's usually closed-door, and it's insight into what's probably going on right now with the Curiosity lander team. The scientists and engineers are fascinating, dedicated people trying to do cutting edge science on a budget under some incredibly difficult conditions.

My problem is that the writer's tone is so twee I wanted to strangle the guy. He's smart--he's got a degree in math from Berkeley. But he writes in the persona of a doofus, in what's obviously an attempt to be accessible for non-science folk. Here's the thing--we're not talking about Neil Armstrong here. This is a relatively minor mission in the history of NASA that almost everyone had probably forgotten about by the time the book was published. The only people who would read it are space nerds who are already invested and aren't going to scare off easily. So dumbing things down just comes off as condescending.

And there's a lot that could use more explanation that gets skipped. For example, a lot of fuss is made over possible liquid water that turns out to be perchlorate. Is it liquid? Is it frost? Tempers are lost, NASA gets involved and hijacks the mission parameters, a giant conspiracy theory gets started. The author never bothers to explain what the ramifications are. We know there's ice--Mars has ice caps. Visible ones. So why is NASA so invested in finding ice? If a theory is right and the matter on the lander legs is splashed water and not frost from the air, what does that mean? I have only the shadiest notions, which are entirely from previous knowledge. He never tells us himself. But I do know far too much about the author's own

insecurities about possibly getting kicked out.

Documenting the mission in a human way was a fantastic idea. I just kind of wish that this book had done so in a more scientifically compelling way. It feels like a wasted opportunity.

Andrew Kessler says

This review might be biased.

Jeff Hoppa says

Love the author and his one-book bookshop idea. And loved the story, but Kessler isn't the most engaging storyteller I've ever encountered. If you love this topic, read it. If you're on the fence, there are other, better books about Mars exploration (see Andrew Chaikin).

Ellen Currie says

I really enjoyed this book. The author did a good job of making the complexities of space science real. Kessler did a good job of describing the personal characteristics of the scientists in general as well as the difficulty in balancing the sometimes conflicting demands for resources. The acronyms did become annoying.

Chris Aylott says

Journalist and self-professed space fanboy Kessler embeds himself in the Phoenix Mars Mission for three months, detailing his trials and tribulations as he observes scientists at work.

The stuff Kessler writes about himself is dull, and I would have preferred more of a fly on the wall approach. However, the scientists he writes about are much more interesting. These are smart but flawed people, doing the best they can to solve difficult problems in short periods of time. In many ways, they're just like any set of office workers trying to survive a bureaucracy and beat a deadline -- except that what they're doing is the epic exploration of another planet.

Despite its flaws, this book does what it set out to do: show what the Mars scientists are up to, and why this work is exciting. This is a good book for anyone who loves science or has to deal with overcomplicated technology.

Kent Archie says

As far as learning about the Phoenix Lander on Mars, it was pretty good. I would have liked more details on

the hardware and especially the data processing, but I'm a software engineer and not the target audience. But the authors writing style was irritating. It was told in first person. Parts of this, like telling what it felt like to live on Mars time, were relevant and interesting. But I don't care if he feels like he is part of the team or has bonded with the team leaders.

Andy Parkes says

An insider's view of the Mars Phoenix mission. It's harder to write about than it sounds as the majority of day to day activities aren't actually that interesting as so much of it is really repetitive. The author tries to give it a humorous take and it mostly works but not 100% of the time. A decent read for someone with passing interest in space missions or the science that goes with it but not for everyone

Jesware says

Probably one of my favorite books now. I can't say that I have a deep knowledge of space-related literature under my belt, but this is like Hunter S Thompson collaborated with Adam Gopnik ... and they went to a space camp that had really, really patient counselors

So: funny? Yes. Insightful? Yes. Opportunity to actually learn something about the topic AND people? Yes+

Travis says

I've always enjoyed the whole behind the scenes type things, and this book was no exception. It's always fascinating to see how things happen, and this book has plenty of details on how the mars spaceraft did its thing. The martian days, the uploading missions, downloading results, working out problems, trying to solve glitches, troubleshooting problems, and so on. There's plenty here to keep anyone busy for a while. If you like technical aspects of technology, then this is the book for you. Thoroughly enjoyed this one.

Harry says

The author is too cutesy. I may not finish this one.

Patrick DiJusto says

My three star ranking breaks down this way:

- One star for coming up with the idea of embedding himself in the Mars Phoenix science team for the entirety of the 90 day mission and making it happen.
- One star for sticking it out through more than 90 grueling days of living on Mars time -- sleep deprivation,

hardly ever seeing the sun, being treated like an outsider by the real Phoenix science team.

- One star for actually sitting down and writing a 330 page book.
- Minus one star for taking on the job of chronicling an important Mars mission without bothering to educate himself about Mars, spacecraft, rockets, trajectories, chemistry, computers, robotics, geology, or biology. Dude, to write a book like this you need to read 100 books like this. He presents scientific debates about some of Mars Phoenix's findings, and admits that he has no idea what the scientists are talking about. And then doesn't bother to explain it to us. This whole idea of "Oh, I'll go in not knowing anything and bring the reader along on my quest to find things out" resulted in nothing but a wasted opportunity.
- Minus another star for writing like that weird goth poetry chick in seventh grade. The guy is in mission control for the Mars Phoenix mission, so what does he write about? His little feelings. The guy has a chance to interview the head of the Mars Phoenix mission. What does he ask? "Why don't you like me?" Actually, I'm not being fair -- he only writes like a weird goth seventh grader part of the time. The rest of the time he writes like a seventh grader who thinks he has fooled his AOL chatroom into believing he's an adult. I fully expected some of the paragraphs to end with "LOL!"

A previous reviewer said the writing style was too "Wired Magazine". I take exception to that. I used to write for Wired Magazine. No one at Wired has ever written this badly.

One final note: The author got the head of the Mars Phoenix project to blurb the book. The scientist wrote "It is as if I imagined Holden Caulfield writing about the mission". That's very perceptive. And it is not a compliment.

Julia says

Wow. If you have even a teeny bit of curiosity about how the hell your fellow Earthlings are able to get science robots to Mars & then spend months remotely communicating with them, you will love this book. Kessler spends 90 days in Mission Control getting the fly on the wall perspective on the Phoenix Mars mission. From the beginning he admits that he knows as little about science as the rest of us, probably liberal arts majors, which means he'll spend paragraphs breaking down complicated scientific jargon into something a little kid would instantly get & then hysterically laugh at. Hilarious observations & never-waning enthusiasm for discovery make *Martian Summer* a wonderful book every Earthling should read.
