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BOOKS

A definitive history of Apollo 11

History writer Craig Nelson set out to create 'that one book' on the space race

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VIT WAGNER
PUBLISHING REPORTER

The race to land the first man on the moon officially ended on July 20, 1969, when an Apollo 11 lunar landing vehicle carrying astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin touched down on the dusty surface of the Sea of Tranquility, giving the U.S. bragging rights over its bitter Cold War adversary, the Soviet Union.

While New York author Craig Nelson didn't expect the same level of competition in his quest to write an authoritative, 40th-anniversary history of the event, he was nevertheless surprised to find the field largely to himself.

Rocket Men: The Epic Story of the First Men on the Moon, newly published by Viking, is being described by reviewers as the definitive book on the subject. It arrives in stores with a handful of other new titles, including the coffee table volume *Voices from the Moon*, a new Aldrin memoir *Magnificent Desolation* and a slew of books for young readers.

"Four years ago, I started thinking that I really wanted to read a big, historic account of what will probably be the biggest historic event of my lifetime. And I couldn't find it. I found fantastic books that were memoirs or written right after the event, but I couldn't find that one book that covered everything in a popular and scholarly way. So that's what I set out to do," says Nelson, a popular historian whose resumé includes a prizewinning biography of U.S. founding father Thomas Paine and a World War II history, *The First Heroes*.

In 350 pages, *Rocket Men* spins a highly detailed and readable account of the Apollo 11 mission, from the origins of rocket technology in Nazi Germany through the Cold War rivalry that spurred president John F. Kennedy's 1961 vow that the U.S. would put a man on the moon within a decade. In the process, the book closely examines the countless bits of crucial minutiae that went into the planning of the operation and all the things that might have gone wrong – but mostly didn't – during its virtually flawless execution.

It was an astonishing technological accomplishment, especially when you consider that the mission's \$28 million price tag, allowing for inflation, was roughly equal in real dollars to what the U.S. spent during its first 18 months of its second Iraq invasion. Mind you, there was that little problem of forgetting to put a proper handle on the outside of the landing vehicle, which meant that Armstrong and Aldrin had to leave

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the door open during their moon walk or risk never getting back inside.

Nelson received some help from Michael Collins, the astronaut who remained aboard the Apollo 11 capsule, but didn't talk to Armstrong, who long ago decided he had nothing new to add to the discussion, and Aldrin, who has his own book. Instead, the author relied heavily on declassified CIA documents relating to the space race and the 23,000 pages of NASA-compiled testimony from many of the 400,000 people who had some part to play in the program.

"The story has mostly been about astronauts and ground controllers," says Nelson. "You never hear about who did the plumbing. A lot of people feel disconnected from the space program because they feel it has nothing to do with them. But in fact a lot of these 400,000 people were plumbers, iron workers, welders and that kind of thing."

Besides its largely technological and scientific emphasis, the book gauges the reactions of the 600 million Earthlings – a fifth of the world's population at the time – who tracked the event on TV and radio. Nelson examines how the media frenzy affected the families of the astronauts. In the years following, Collins was the only one of the three astronauts to remain married to his wife of that time.

Not everyone is convinced, of course, that the moon landing even happened. Speculation abounds that the whole business was a hoax.

"Armstrong said that it was easier to go to the moon than to fake it, which was probably true," says Nelson, 54, who recalls watching the landing on a large screen in an outdoor amphitheatre while attending an Eagle Scout jamboree in Idaho.

Conspiracy theorists aside, other critics argue the landing was overrated. Humans have not been back to the moon since Apollo 17 returned in 1972. In an age of robots and computers, manned space flight is increasingly being challenged as frivolous and unnecessarily expensive.

Nelson insists that the Apollo 11 mission has left an impressive legacy, from numerous scientific advancements that include the development of MRI technology to the way that the view of Earth from the moon helped inspire the environmental movement. He is also convinced that the story is not necessarily over.

"It could be the Chinese. It could be India. It could be space travel. It could be mining operations. But the United States will get back into manned exploration in a big way. We just need that competition to spur us on."

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