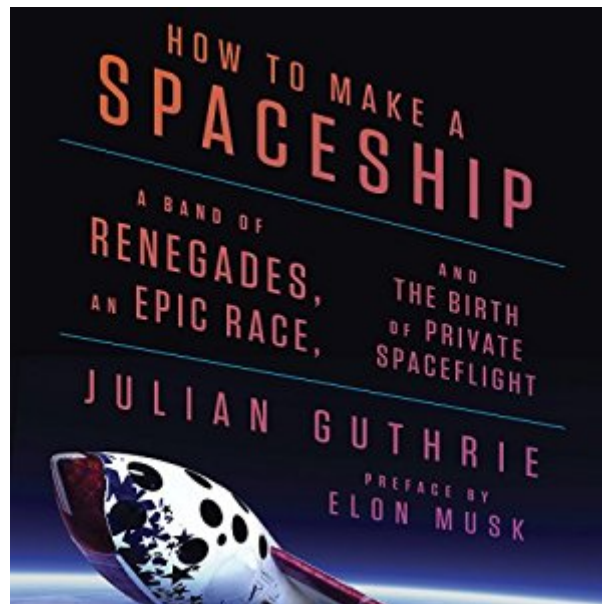


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How To Make A Spaceship: A Band Of Renegades, An Epic Race, And The Birth Of Private Spaceflight



Synopsis

The historic race that reawakened the promise of manned spaceflight. Alone in a Spartan black cockpit, test pilot Mike Melvill rocketed toward space. He had 80 seconds to exceed the speed of sound and begin the climb to a target no civilian pilot had ever reached. He might not make it back alive. If he did, he would make history as the world's first commercial astronaut. The spectacle defied reason, the result of a competition dreamed up by entrepreneur Peter Diamandis, whose vision for a new race to space required small teams to do what only the world's largest governments had done before. Peter Diamandis was the son of hardworking immigrants who wanted their science prodigy to make the family proud and become a doctor. But from the age of eight, when he watched Apollo 11 land on the moon, his singular goal was to get to space. When he realized NASA was winding down manned space flight, Diamandis set out on one of the great entrepreneurial adventure stories of our time. If the government wouldn't send him to space, he would create a private space-flight industry himself. In the 1990s this idea was the stuff of science fiction. Undaunted, Diamandis found inspiration in an unlikely place: the golden age of aviation. He discovered that Charles Lindbergh made his transatlantic flight to win a \$25,000 prize. The flight made Lindbergh the most famous man on earth and galvanized the airline industry. Why, Diamandis thought, couldn't the same be done for space flight? The story of the bullet-shaped SpaceShipOne and the other teams in the hunt is an extraordinary tale of making the impossible possible. It is driven by outsized characters - Burt Rutan, Richard Branson, John Carmack, Paul Allen - and obsessive pursuits. In the end, as Diamandis dreamed, the result wasn't just a victory for one team; it was the foundation for a new industry and a new age.

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Customer Reviews

As a retired systems engineer and manager with years of experience working on space programs at one of the "Big Three" aerospace companies whose very existence depends on the contractual largesse of the Federal Government, I've always been skeptical about "private" spaceflight. Spaceflight is a hard, dangerous and challenging endeavor. Putting payloads and/or people into Earth orbit or beyond requires the exquisite management and control of titanic forces, explosive energies and hostile environments that are uniquely unforgiving of the slightest fault in design, manufacturing, materials or operations. Years ago, I watched with mild bemusement as start-up companies founded by tech-billionaire entrepreneurs piled onto the private spaceflight bandwagon. Only a few survived the inevitable shakeout when their visionary dreams collided with harsh reality, and I never expected much to come of their efforts. But I was wrong - sort of. Commercial launch vehicles developed by some of these private companies now soar into orbit regularly, carrying cargo to resupply the International Space Station. Meanwhile NASA sits on the sidelines and buys seats for its astronauts in Russian Soyuz spacecraft, which currently are the only way crews can get to and from the ISS. The Orion program, NASA's latest attempt to restore America's indigenous manned spaceflight capability post-Shuttle, is a political football and a perennial target of the Congressional budget ax. Even if Orion doesn't get killed off, its first flight isn't scheduled until 2023 - TWELVE years after program inception. Compare that to the 1960s.

I watched the first astronauts launched into space as a child and the excitement and spirit of adventure was everywhere and it was all pervasive. Like everyone else at the time, I watched the first moon landing: which felt like the equivalent of accompanying some great explorer of the past - Marco Polo or Columbus, for example - as he discovered new worlds at an historic moment. But as the public's initial excitement wore off, the space program lost momentum. And as the attention of the media wandered into other areas, the political will to spend hard-earned tax dollars to continue space exploration in a logical and coherent fashion all-but disappeared. Since 1972 we have essentially been treading water in low Earth orbit as program after program was either drastically altered or canceled. That Mars landing never happened. While I watched SpaceShipOne make its exciting first sub-orbital flight, something of that old excitement returned. I'm still skeptical that

private enterprise can achieve anything as titanic as a Mars landing, which would require a massive commitment of resources beyond the capability of any single commercial entity. But with the space program constantly being whittled away by politicians until it resembles a mere shell of its former greatness, there is little to hope for but the continuing work of a few undaunted mavericks who share the vision of all space aficionados: that the exploration and colonization of space is mandatory if the human species is to survive. The lesson of the dinosaurs has not been lost on us. How to Make a Spaceship is the story of those visionary mavericks. Unlike the rest of us who yearn for a robust space program, they have actually gotten off their comfortable chairs and begun the difficult task of realizing a dream.

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