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Science Fiction: *Encounter with Tiber*

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When a former astronaut writes science fiction, you have every reason to expect that it will champion the benefits of space travel against the doubters and penny pinchers in the scientific and political establishment. **ENCOUNTER WITH TIBER** (Aspect/Warner, \$21.95), by Buzz Aldrin and John Barnes, delivers the goods, and then some.

Mr. Aldrin, the second man on the moon, has clearly lost none of his zest for launchings and landings, orbital insertions, aerocaptures, gravity assists and similar maneuvers necessary for getting a spaceship safely from here to there. His enthusiasm has led him, in collaboration with the author of novels like "Kaleidoscope Century" and "Mother of Storms," to concoct a 560-page novel of the near future with a simple premise: Space holds the answer to all our problems.

To make this point, the authors weave together two tales of interplanetary adventure. The first focuses on Chris Terence and his son, Jason, a dynasty of clear-headed astronauts with a knack for being in the right place at the right time. Chris helps save the United States' faltering space program from budget-minded politicians just in time to fly to the moon to retrieve a newly discovered alien artifact of incalculable importance. When his mission fails, the torch is passed to Jason, who joins an expedition to recover the artifact's twin on Mars.

The journeys of the Terences and their colleagues are described in a prose dense with technical details and augmented with textbook-style diagrams. It quickly becomes apparent that the authors expect you not only to read through paragraph after paragraph about "Lagrange libration points" and "Mars-Earth Return Cycles," but to comprehend the information and apply it to the unfolding plot. Almost as an aside, the authors note that the worldwide mobilization required to support a really serious space program has virtually eliminated crime and ushered in an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity.

The second story centers on the aliens who deposited the artifacts in our solar system some 9,000 years ago. Although they have more hair and more advanced science, these spacefarers closely resemble earthlings in one important respect: their clear-headed astronauts are also bedeviled by political and military types whose incomprehension of the principles of physics and engineering brings disaster after disaster -- not least of which is the stranding of aliens on Earth in a manner that may have given rise to certain curious details in the Hebrew Bible.

The aliens' motive for venturing into space is simple enough: their home world is about to be destroyed in a collision with "a huge cloud of rocks, dust, balls of ice and all sorts of junk" known as the Intruder. Although Earth is also vulnerable to devastating encounters with space debris, the authors refrain from adding this argument to their brief for a vigorous space program. Perhaps to encourage readers to make the connection on their own, all the characters, human and alien, male and female, communicate in virtually identical techno-speak. When one alien asserts that the best way to cope with a disaster is to "get every gadget that we can working," he earns this supreme accolade from his boss: "Spoken like an engineer."