

Buzz Aldrin Seeks to Alter Image of Space

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Thanks to video games, TV shows and movies such as "Star Wars: Episode III - Revenge of the Sith" that are loaded with special effects, today's children don't have a realistic impression of space or space travel, says Buzz Aldrin, one of the men who planted the U.S. flag on the moon.

But, he adds, it's not the kids' fault. Those working in the fields of math, science and engineering -- the people who were inspired by the accomplishments of Aldrin, Neil Armstrong and others during the space exploration boom of the 1960s and '70s -- haven't reached out enough to capture the youngsters' interest, he says.

Aldrin shares his memories of what it took to get man on the moon and his impressions once he got there in a new picture book, **"Buzz Aldrin: Reaching for the Moon"** (HarperCollins). The goal of the book, intended for 6- to 9-year-old readers that Aldrin calls "the third generation of space explorers," is to re-ignite interest and excitement in the space program, he says.

Aldrin, 75, says he's always considered it his mission to serve his country and the best way he can do that now is "by offering a vision into the future."

He gets help from illustrator Wendell Minor, whose paintings for "Reaching for the Moon" capture the vastness of space and the potential of what can happen in places where the rest of us can't see. Minor was inspired by Aldrin, specifically when the astronaut, standing on the moon and describing it to the whole world, used the words "magnificent desolation." "That was a beautiful artistic eye talking. ... He (Aldrin) is a rocket scientist and has the eye of an artist," Minor says.

Minor, an award-winning artist with an affinity for science and environmental stories, adds: "I wanted to give kids people to look up to other than rock 'n' rollers and sports stars." When he began to illustrate Aldrin's personal story, from his childhood home in New Jersey to his salute to the flag in space, Minor noticed some threads in his subject's life that he's not quite convinced are coincidence:

- Aldrin's mother's maiden name was Moon.
- The first plane he ever flew in belonged to Standard Oil and was completely covered with a painting of an eagle. The name of the craft that Aldrin and Armstrong used to break away from the Apollo 11 rocket and land on the moon was Eagle. The eagle is also featured on a patch on Aldrin's space suit.

- As a child, Aldrin enjoyed underwater diving and collecting rocks. As an adult, Aldrin trained for his space missions by simulating weightlessness under water, and one of his primary tasks on the Apollo mission was to collect moon rocks.

Aldrin, who got the nickname "Buzz" because, as kids, his sister called him "Buzzer" instead of "brother," started dreaming of a career in the air when he was in high school and his father was flying for the military in World War II. That's when he began to focus on his schoolwork so he could earn a spot at West Point, which he did. Aldrin also enjoyed sports, both on teams and when he was competing as an individual, in pole-vaulting. All of those athletic experiences helped him as an astronaut, he says.

He joined the Air Force and flew combat missions in the Korean War, then he went back to school, to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to earn a doctoral degree in aeronautics. From there, he went into the NASA space program.

His first spaceflight was aboard Gemini 12 in 1966, during which he took three spacewalks. But even more historic was the 1969 moonwalk with Armstrong.

"I was quite aware that Big Brother was a quarter of a million miles away and yet with a lot of ears listening to every word we said," Aldrin says. "There was such a contrast of the two of us being further away than anyone else had ever been, yet two people never had more people paying attention to them."

In the years that followed, Aldrin and his colleagues were heroes in the eyes of children _ children who also grew up with Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, who, despite being fictional characters, lived in a version of outer space that earthlings could relate to.

But Aldrin says when he sees kids raised in this high-tech age, they seem more interested in going to space in a virtual reality game than in reality. And if they ever made it to space, they'd be expecting nonstop action and one-eyed creatures.

"Unfortunately, kids are led to believe things are easier to achieve than they really are. ... They want instant gratification, they're not waiting for the bigger and better prize," Aldrin says.

He's not done, however, with his own dreams about the possibilities of space travel. Some time between now and 2035, Aldrin would like to see man visit Mars. Why 2035? Because it took 66 years for science to progress from the Wright brothers' airplane to Apollo 11, and that would allow another 66 years between man landing on the moon and man landing on Mars.

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