A Passion for Mars: Intrepid Explorers of the Red Planet by Andrew Chaikin

The quest for Mars is chronicled by bestselling author Andrew Chaikin in this story of a passionate band of Earthbound explorers caught in the irresistible pull of the Red Planet.

They include celebrated figures: astronomer Carl Sagan, who champions the idea of life on Mars--; rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, drawing up plans for human Mars expeditions; and science-fiction author Ray Bradbury, standard-bearer for Mars’s crucial place in human destiny. Readers also meet the rogue grad students known as the “Mars Underground,” keepers of the flame when Mars falls off NASA’s radar; biologist Jerry Soffen, looking for signs of life in a Martian meteorite; geologist Mike Malin, who defies skeptics to reveal a Mars no one imagines; and many others, including Chaikin himself, who served on the first Viking Mars landing and covered Mars exploration as a science journalist.

Based on extensive interviews, illustrated with compelling images, and animated by the author’s own passion, Chaikin’s account will resonate with anyone who has ever dreamed of a journey to Mars.

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My Personal Review:
Andrew Chaikin is already famous for his splendidly entertaining history of the United States Apollo program. Oscar-winning Tom Hanks used Chaikin's A MAN ON THE MOON as the foundation material for the 1998 Emmy winning Home Box Office documentary series, From the Earth to the Moon. Chaikin now takes us beyond the moon for a delightful journey to the Red Planet with his latest work, A PASSION FOR MARS.

Chaikin knows Mars. Chaikin served as a young intern at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory during the Mars Viking Lander program and has since become one of the world's finest space exploration writers. Chaikin is one of those very rare writers who is able to inspire millions of readers by taking a non-fiction story and making it read like a best-selling novel. That unusual talent is probably the reason why Chaikin has inspired a master artist and producer like Tom Hanks.

Why Mars?

Mars has seduced human beings for thousand of years. Pre-telescopic observations of blood-red Mars in the night sky unnerved the ancients and inspired many myths linking Mars to warfare and other unpleasant events. Astrologers and soothsayers carefully monitored the motions of Mars and sought to determine the link between Mars and the fate of human beings. Mysterious Mars still defies our effort to fully unlock all of the secrets of the fourth planet from the sun in spite of the fact that we have landed robotic rovers there and even mapped the entire Red Planet from orbit.

In a single volume of 279 pages, Andrew Chaikin has done more to incite contemporary human interest in Mars than the National Aeronautics and Space Administration has done in fifty-plus years of trying to convince the public that Mars could become our next home.

Chaikin takes readers across that vast, challenging void that lies between Earth and Mars, only to discover that the Red Planet reveals as much about human nature and behavior as it does about the secrets of the universe. The quest for Mars is the story of many individual players who are driven by a variety of motivations and expectations. A PASSION FOR MARS is packed with tantalizing and little known, choice details about the lives of many of the key participants in the continuing story of human beings and the push to understand and reach Mars.

The Never-Ending Mystery of Mars

The scientific innovations of the modern era did little damage to human enthusiasm for Mars. The invention of the telescope inspired a new mythology surrounding the Red Planet called Mars. Earthbound astronomers were never able to see the details of the Martian surface in high resolution. It was obvious that Mars had white polar caps. Astronomers assumed that the poles were covered with ice and snow. The Martian day was almost identical in length to an earth day. Fuzzy
discolorations on the surface appeared to wax and wane over times. Some astronomers, as late as the 1950s and 1960s assumed that the changes in surface features were due to some sort of vegetation that blossomed and receded with the Martian seasonal cycles. Mars was ALIVE, in the minds of many.

The excitement over Mars suffered a serious setback when the United States space probe called Mariner 4 sent the first clear images of the Martian surface back to Earth. Mars died a sudden death when those pictures revealed a Moon-like, cratered, dry, world that showed no indications of vegetation, canals, or the ruins of ancient civilizations. The disappointment was devastating for many of those who had dreamed of a habitable Mars. eventually, Mars would undergo an unlikely resurrection when later Mars probes revealed new mysteries on the Red Planet.

Chaikin brings the reader up to speed on Mars as he essentially opens the door to Mars Mission Control and introduces us to the key players in the story of Martian exploration.

The thoughtfully chosen illustrations in Chaikin's book are essential to the larger story of people and Mars. When you purchase your own copy of A PASSION FOR MARS, remove the dust jacket immediately and allow your eyes to dwell on the beautiful images of Mars that are printed on the front and back covers. The illustrations found inside the book offer rarely seen glimpses of space-age players such as Carl Sagan, Wernher von Braun, Chaikin himself, and the more recent leaders of robotic Martian probes. Chaikin also shares some of the fine art created by twentieth-century illustrators in A PASSION FOR MARS.

In summary, Andrew Chaikin takes the reader on a journey through space and time as the human focus on Mars matured from mythology and wild speculation to the hard realities of the modern scientific age. A PASSION FOR MARS will undoubtedly inspire thousands to step out at night and look for the Red Planet for the first time in their individual lives. Telescopes may become a best seller this Christmas!

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