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Ray E. Boomhower. *Gus Grissom: The Lost Astronaut.* Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2004. xii + 393 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-176-2.

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The Heroism and Tragedy of Gus Grissom

Having grown up a Hoosier in the golden age of space exploration, Ray E. Boomhower opens his book on Gus Grissom with a personal account of his connection with the astronaut and his childhood desire to follow Grissom and the other Mercury astronauts into space. It seems fitting, then, to open this review with my own childhood recollections and connections to Grissom. As a toddler I was present when Apollo 11 departed for the moon, and I recall my mother always speaking reverently about Gus Grissom and his two colleagues who lost their lives in the fire that tore through their Apollo 1 capsule as they trained for the first Apollo flight. In retrospect, now I can grasp more keenly my parents' connection with Grissom. My mother always commented on his cheerful demeanor and his "just folks," "man of the people" image. Here was a fellow Midwesterner leading the nation into space and tragically yet heroically sacrificing his life for the cause.

Boomhower's account of Grissom's life in *Gus Grissom: The Lost Astronaut* crafts just such as image of Grissom–a heroic Hoosier everyman. The nation's astronauts have received lavish attention over the years from writers and scholars. Grissom has been the subject of several memoirs from family members and has been mentioned often in the numerous works on the space program. Yet no definitive biography has appeared until this long-overdue book. Why do we need another book on an astronaut? First, Grissom's experience with NASA offers an unrivaled story of the program's highs and lows, achievements and tragic failures that deserves a careful chronicling. But as Boomhower asserts, regardless of the tragedy linked to his name, Grissom's story is a quintessentially American tale–small-town boy rises up to become a revered space explorer–made more significant by successfully overcoming of his very public mishap on the second manned space flight and then his death during the ground tests for Apollo 1. The author notes a third reason, however. Boomhower feels the need to vindicate Grissom, to pointedly combat the image fostered by Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* (1979) and the subsequent movie of the same title that depicted Grissom in the early days of the space program as a good- natured oaf, who botched his Mercury mission when he panicked and blew the hatch prematurely, losing the Liberty Bell 7 capsule in the ocean. Correcting this image forms a powerful undercurrent throughout the book and helps drive the narrative.

Boomhower organizes the book as one might expect. Seven chapters trace Grissom's life from a small town in southern Indiana, through his days in the Air Force, and then his meteoric rise to fame as an astronaut. The second chapter explores Grissom's early life, college years, and military service, and Boomhower does a nice job of describing the influences and experiences that shaped the astronaut. The bulk of the work, of course, deals with NASA, and subsequent chapters examine significant episodes of Grissom's service to the program–astronaut selection and training (chapter 3), the Mercury program (chapter 4), the Liberty Bell 7 launch (chapter 5), the Gemini program (chapter 6), and Apollo (chapter 7). One would expect the author to focus on the controversies of Grissom's career, and he does so usually quite well. Boomhower devotes an entire chapter to the Liberty Bell 7 mission and the lost capsule. He is especially good, though, on the Apollo 1 fire and investigation that followed. Yet I think the chapter on Grissom's involvement with the Gemini program one of the most significant contributions of the book. Gemini represented perhaps the professional highpoint of Grissom's career, as he spearheaded the program and captained the inaugural flight. The chapter also emphasizes the critical achievements of that program, which are too often overlooked. Throughout the book excellent photographs abound, and the author included a wonderful appendix offering the reader the entire transcript of flight communications during the Liberty Bell 7 mission.

One persistent problem that dogged Boomhower in

this book, however, was the strange dichotomy of a wealth of written material on Grissom in various venues (NASA archives and reports, memoirs and autobiographies, newspaper and magazine articles) and yet little material that really allowed one to hear Grissom's voice or capture his thoughts. One wishes at times that the author could have probed deeper. For example, when the list of the first three astronauts selected for launches in the Mercury program was announced, we hear far more on the reactions of Shepard and Glenn than of Grissom. The only new research performed (five interviews with family and friends) did add some much needed color to Grissom's life, the famously laconic Grissom left few direct records. Boomhower drew from these oral histories and the numerous accounts of Grissom in other sources to show Grissom's devilish lighter side, a real prankster. And in the case of Sam Beddinfield's oral history (a NASA engineer and close friend) we also see with added clarity the exceedingly driven, meticulous and quite ambitious side of Grissom, something lacking in most other accounts. If we do not learn much that is stunningly new about Grissom from this book, still the chief contribution of the author derives from simply assembling the scattered recollections and accounts of Grissom's life and career into a coherent narrative. Boomhower successfully meets the task of taking immensely technical matters and relaying them in a very clear manner. And he is at his best when he employs the numerous memoirs and other existing writings to set a context for the reader–to remind one, for instance, of the tensions surrounding the start of the space program(the Cold War and Sputnik) and of the incredible technical and administrative complexities of sending humans into space. Accounts of the endeavor never fail to fascinate, and the author does a credible job of examining the story as much as possible from Grissom's perspective.

And what about dispelling the image cast by *The Right Stuff*? For the most part, Boomhower's examination of the technical reports, surviving astronaut's opinions, and other resources (such as the Beddinfield interview) succeeds in exorcising the oafish demons summoned by Tom Wolfe's characterizations. Grissom would not have been allowed to lead the way on Gemini and Apollo if NASA administrators had lost faith in his abilities. Yet Boomhower does not do enough to effectively take on Wolfe's sources. For example, while the author successfully counters the notion that Grissom "screwed the pooch" (in test pilot lingo) when the door prematurely blew on the Liberty Bell 7 upon splashdown, Wolfe's infamous account of Betty and Gus arguing after the flight is simply dismissed, using Betty as the source. Why not go after Wolfe's sources? Did he just make it up? Such omissions just fuel more speculation at times.

Such problems, however, fail to detract from a solid biography, one long overdue. Grissom's life is a great American story, and Boomhower's most critical service to scholarship is simply to have written the difficult biography using the vast but maddeningly spotty sources available, even if at times one cannot help but wish for more insight. With Grissom's tragically premature exit, such wishes must go unfulfilled.

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