



## The New Guys: The Historic Class of Astronauts That Broke Barriers and Changed the Face of Space Travel

William Morrow

By Meredith Bagby

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*The New Guys* is the never-before-told story of NASA's 1978 astronaut class, which included the first American women, the first African Americans, the first Asian American, and the first gay person to fly to space. Set in the 1980s and '90s, this is the behind-the-scenes saga of the generation that changed the face of space exploration.

### Praise for *The New Guys*

"As we embark on a new era of space travel, *The New Guys* rockets readers back into the not-so-distant past, telling the propulsive story of a brave and competitive community of explorers—men and women who changed space, and Earth, forever."

—Liza Mundy, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Code Girls*

"A riveting page-turner! Meredith Bagby's thoroughly researched and finely crafted account captures the highs and lows of life as an astronaut—the grueling training, wild partying, cutthroat competition, and tragic losses of the *Challenger* and *Columbia* crews—all with spine-tingling thrills and genuine pathos."

—Kyra Sedgwick, actor, director, and producer

### Introduction

The story of NASA's Astronaut Class 8—or "The F\*cking New Guys," as their military predecessors nicknamed them—is an unprecedented look at these charismatic young astronauts as egos clash, ambitions flare, and romances blossom. As they struggle to navigate the cutthroat internal politics at NASA for their chance to rocket to the stars, they must also work together to master NASA's newest spacecraft, the space shuttle.

Following the teardrop-shaped space capsules that defined Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo eras, the space shuttle is a revolutionary space plane capable of launching like a rocket, hauling

cargo like a truck, and landing back on Earth like an airliner. Overcoming its dangerous first test flights, the space shuttle led NASA to some of its greatest achievements: launching hundreds of satellites, building the International Space Station, and deploying the HubbleSpace Telescope.

However, despite the exuberant social and scientific progress of the space shuttle program, NASA officials struggled to meet America’s military demands and commercial aspirations. Caught in the crosshairs of this battle are the shuttle astronauts who risk their lives and, when the agency was pressured to fly more often and at greater peril, fourteen brave astronauts were lost in the program’s two biggest disasters: Challenger (1986) and Columbia (2003).

Despite these tragedies, the New Guys dedicated their lives’ work towards pursuing a more equitable future in space for all humankind. Through it all they became friends, rivals, lovers, and ultimately, family.

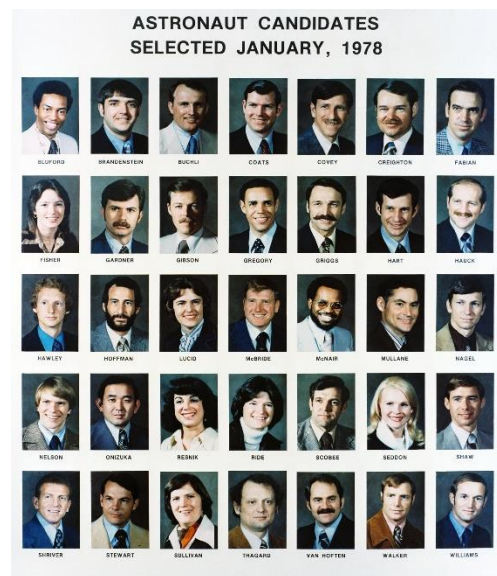
For additional resources, please visit the [author’s website](#).

### Questions for Discussion

1. When each “New Guy” first shares that they’re applying to NASA, they seem to be met with similar skepticism, from, “What do you mean, you’re going to be an astronaut?” (pg.16) to “They’re going to eat you up and spit you out.” (pg. 48) How does external doubt influence each of the New Guys, and their big ambitions? How do you think each of the New Guys found the courage to apply, despite these doubts?

2. In the author’s note, author Meredith Bagby writes that she “relied on their own firsthand accounts” for those who had passed and “attempted to re-create certain scenes from their perspectives, so that their voices are not lost from this story.” How does that influence your opinion of the book and the research that went into it?

3. In Chapter Three, we meet our “New Guys” and come to understand the NASA history that led to the New Guys’ recruitment. What role did the Civil Rights movement play? What if the political landscape had looked different at the time? How do these factors influence NASA’s development and how the agency eventually allowed women, minorities, and non-military civilians a seat at the table?



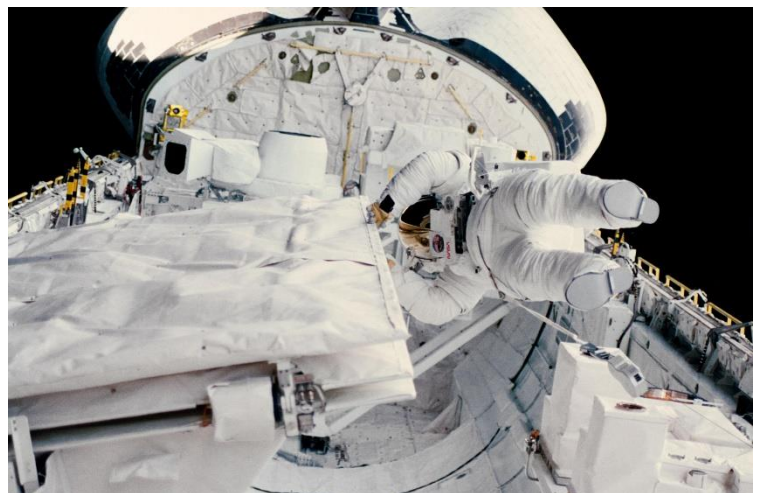
4. In Chapter Four, we are introduced to Hoot and Rhea's budding romance, born out of a terrifying flight experience. Rhea fears crashing but Hoot's self-assured confidence enables Rhea to be brave. How does this potentially deadly experience affect Rhea and Hoot's bond? Does an emotionally charged experience always lead to closeness and/or romance? Why or why not?



5. In Chapter Five, we learn Kathy's story and why she does not want to participate in "competing for the boss's attention" (page 92) through after-hours activities like drinking and partying. How responsible is NASA leadership for creating such a highly competitive and high-pressure environment, especially for a historically diverse class? Do you think the sense of competition is created by the leadership, the astronauts themselves, or both?

6. Throughout their missions, the New Guys manage high-pressure, potentially life-threatening situations, while handling millions of dollars worth of equipment and experiencing intense public scrutiny. How would you fare in the face of so much stress? What do you think are the qualities that make up the "right stuff" that an astronaut needs to succeed?

7. At the end of Chapter Twelve, "the country would celebrate not one but two new space firsts: the first time two women traveled together to space and the first spacewalk by an American woman." Discuss the significance of Kathy's historic spacewalk. What, in your opinion, does this mean for women at the time? How did you react to her thoughts of her mother as she "took her last look at space from her extraordinary vantage point?" (pg. 220)



8. Conversely, there are many moments of casual misogyny and doubting of women's abilities throughout the book. Discuss the barriers particular to the women of NASA, especially to their unique experience of fighting to be taken seriously while competing with a majority of white men from military backgrounds.



9. Discuss the aftermath of the Challenger explosion. Specifically, when Sally Ride, in a TV interview in Chapter 21 says “I think there are very few astronauts who are ready to fly again now.” (page 348). What implications did this have, on NASA, and its New Guys? What was your reaction to Morton Thiokol reprimanding people for giving their testimony?

10. Author Meredith Bagby conducted over one-hundred hours of interviews to hear these stories. There are over 16 names in the character list, proving how far reaching this storytelling of NASA is. Which story stands out to you after reading the book in its entirety? Whose testimony created the strongest emotional reaction for you?



11. This book has a balance of expository history and character-driven narrative. How did this help you engage with the story? How do the personal histories of these characters affect your understanding of NASA’s history?

12. Many readers share a fascination with space and NASA, but there is always more to learn about the history of this organization. Which stories or facts in The New Guys were new to you? What new information surprised you the most? Why?

13. In an author interview on YouTube, Meredith Bagby discusses witnessing the Challenger explode in 1986 on a class trip. She mentions it “really sticking with her,” leading to her research about this historic class of astronauts. Discuss the significance of this personal experience. Why do you think this experience motivated Bagby to research and write about this historic class of Astronauts?



14. In the same interview, Bagby discusses modern space travel, and NASA’s push for the “next big thing,” such as commercial space travel. Modern space travel, she says, was “created by [the New Guys]. Modern space travel means you don’t have to be a military person, you don’t have to be a pilot, you can be anybody.” Discuss what this means for the future of space travel, and what role the New Guys played in getting us here.