



Astro Turf: The Private Life of Rocket Science

M. G. Lord

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M. G. Lord is an author and critic. Since 1995 she has been a regular contributor to "The New York Times Book Review" and "The New York Times" Arts & Leisure section. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including "ARTNews," "Vogue," "The Wall Street Journal," "The Los Angeles Times Book Review," and "The New Yorker." She lives in Los Angeles. During the late 1960s, while M. G. Lord was becoming a teenager in Southern California and her mother was dying of cancer, Lord's father--an archetypal, remote rocket engineer--disappeared into his work at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, building the space probes of the Mariner Mars 69 mission. Thirty years later, Lord found herself reporting on the JPL, triggering childhood memories and a desire to revisit her past as a way of understanding the ethos of rocket science. "Astro Turf" is the result of her journey of discovery.

Remembering her pain at her father's absence, yet intrigued by what he did, Lord captures him on the page as she recalls her own youthful, eccentric fascination with science and space exploration. Into her family's saga she weaves the story of the legendary JPL--examining the complexities of its cultural history, from its start in 1936 to the triumphant Mars landings in 2004. She illuminates its founder, Frank Malina, whose brilliance in rocketry was shadowed by a flirtation with communism, driving him from the country even as we welcomed Wernher von Braun and his Nazi colleagues. Lord's own love of science fiction becomes a lens through which she views a profound cultural shift in the male-dominated world of space. And in pursuing the cause of her father's absence she stumbles on a hidden guilt, understanding "the anguish his proud silence caused both him and me, and how rooted that silence was in the culture of engineering."

As in her book "Forever Barbie," which demystified an icon of feminine culture, Lord brings her insight to bear on a bastion of American masculinity, opening our eyes in unexpected and memorable ways. "'Astro Turf' works well as a brief, clear history of a field and the lab that embodied it. It works even better as a piece of cultural criticism. [It] works best of all, though, as a moving memoir of the difficult love between a daughter and father."--"The New York Times Book Review" "'Astro Turf' works well as a brief, clear history of a field and the lab that embodied it. It works even better as a piece of cultural criticism. [It] works best of all, though, as a moving memoir of the difficult love between a daughter and father."--"The New York Times Book Review" "I had absolutely no idea of her arduous childhood, [Lord's] adult life, her interest in space, her ultimate affection for--and forgiveness of--her father, no knowledge of her prose style, which combines the madcap with the abstruse. I was blown away by this book. Lord reminds us once again that good and evil really are inextricably combined, that the legacy of these sometimes bumbling founders includes the presence of a JPL float in this year's Rose Parade and the ongoing discoveries of those aptly named JPL robots poking right now across the surface of Mars: Spirit and Opportunity."--Carolyn See, "The Washington Post" "Engaging . . . part memoir, part cultural history, part paean to unmanned space exploration."--Fritz Lanham, "Houston Chronicle" "'Astro Turf' is worlds apart from Lord's splendid debut book, 'Forever Barbie,' but the writing is as powerful and the intellectual scope as daring. Where 'Barbie' was a wry study of a totemic troll, 'Astro Turf' is a personal trek through a murky era. Decades later, looking back at the Space Age through the eyes of an adult journalist, Lord sees sexism and dysfunction, and her observations are mordantly funny."--"The San Diego Union Tribune" "In many respects this is a remarkable book . . . it is an enormously valuable addition to the literature [on the history of spaceflight]."--Roger D. Launius, Chair, Division of Space History, National Air and Space Museum "Exploring America's collective memory of glory rides to the Moon and Mars, M.G. Lord chases the contrail of her absent father. This book blends its own rocket fuel--one part daughter's love to two parts popular culture--and the launch makes a gorgeous explosion."--Dava Sobel, author of "Longitude" and "Galileo's Daughter" "Cultural historian Lord examines her childhood relationship with her remote father as a way of understanding JPL's

ethos, its boom-and-bust cycle, and the political changes that took place between the Cold War and present. Rather than discuss the science or engineering of NASA, Lord focuses on JPL's brilliant if flawed characters, from Frank Malina, the ousted cofounder of JPL, to the lionized former Nazi criminal Wernher von Braun . . . "Astro Turf" is . . . a captivating look at human foibles, family forgiveness, wins, and losses."--"Bookmarks Magazine" ""Astro Turf" is . . . a captivating look at human foibles, family forgiveness, wins, and losses."--"Booklist" "In a book that is part investigative history, part cultural analysis, and part memoir, Lord aims to sketch the history of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) within its historical and cultural context. She discusses the persecution of alleged Communist scientists working at JPL, the adoption of Nazi scientists such as Werner von Braun into the American scientific elite, and the rise of women engineers at JPL. She also touches on the persecution of homosexuals in the scientific community and the relationship between the science fiction of Robert Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, and Ursula K. Le Guin and engineering culture . . . [Lord] covers important new ground in her telling of alleged Communist JPL scientist Frank Malina's persecution and immigration to France."--Jana Beck, "Library Journal" "Cultural critic Lord's sharp turns from family affairs to JPL history result in wonderful discoveries for readers."--"Publishers Weekly"

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