

THE SHORTLIST

Space

By Sam Kean

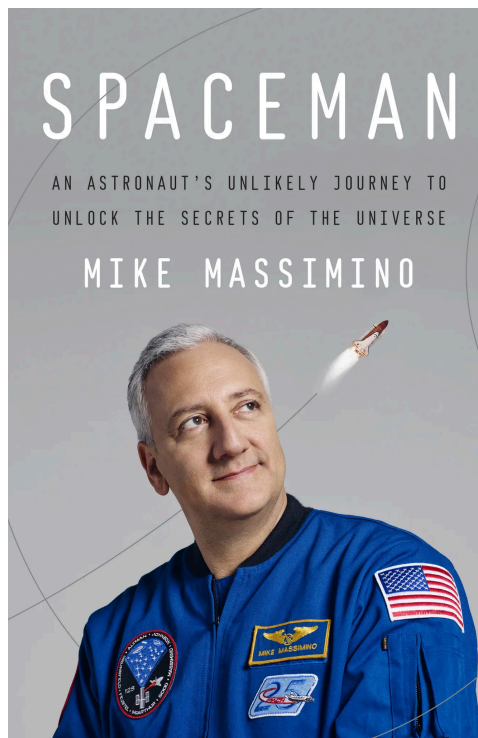
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SPACEMAN

An Astronaut's Unlikely Journey to Unlock the Secrets of the Universe

By Mike Massimino

313 pp. Crown Archetype, \$28.



Minutes before his first spaceflight, Massimino had an epiphany: This was really stupid. He hated heights and roller coasters, so why had he strapped himself into a space shuttle, the most dangerous ride imaginable? If something malfunctioned

now, “all those years of training were completely pointless,” he realized. “There are emergency placards and safety signs all over the interior of the shuttle. . . . That stuff is there to give you something to read before you die.”

“Spaceman” isn’t a typical astronaut memoir. Massimino confesses to feeling scared and inadequate sometimes, and rarely flatters himself. Some astronauts look fighter-pilot cool; he looks like “a guy who’d be working at a deli in Brooklyn, handing out cold cuts.” In an engineering course in college, he once scored 11 percent on a midterm. He also failed his Ph.D. oral exam.

What kept Massimino going was an unrivaled ability to shrug off humiliation. “Everyone from the NASA administrator to our janitorial support . . . had confidence in me,” he writes about one low moment. “I needed to have the same confidence in myself.” However hokey, these pep talks worked: He eventually became a NASA “Jedi,” a member of the ace spacewalking crew that repaired the billion-dollar Hubble Space Telescope in orbit. (Of course, being Massimino, he almost broke it later.)

Still, Massimino was right to feel a premonition of death on his first launch. His mission actually got swapped in NASA’s shuttle lineup with Mission 107 — the Columbia flight that disintegrated over Texas in 2003. That should have been him up there, and in a poignant scene he describes being flooded with memories as he wandered the wreckage. Yet he supports continued human spaceflight, dismissing the argument that unmanned probes can make progress more quickly. If nothing else, he says, we need humans up there to inspire us. During astronaut training, Massimino was merely adequate at most tasks, never the best. But after returning to Earth, he began lecturing on his experiences, and he decided, “Maybe I could be one of the best at telling the story of space.” If “Spaceman” is any indication, he might well be.

A SPACE TRAVELER’S GUIDE TO THE SOLAR SYSTEM

By Mark Thompson

257 pp. Pegasus, \$27.95.