



The Martian Race

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When the rocket launching the Mars Transit Vehicle into orbit explodes on the launch pad, killing four crewmen, the President announces the U.S. will redirect its energies to near-Earth projects. The manned mission to Mars is officially dead. That is until billionaire John Axelrod steps in to fund the project. Although the risks are high, several young astronauts sign on. But these new pioneers are not alone -- a European-Asian airbus will be making a similar expedition. Now the race is on to get to the fourth planet first. Both teams reach the Red Planet, but with disastrous results. Now the problem isn't who will return to Earth first, but if any of them will return at all.

The Martian Race Details

Date : Published January 1st 2001 by Aspect (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780446608909

Author : Gregory Benford

Format : Paperback 444 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction

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From Reader Review The Martian Race for online ebook

Paul Weiss says

Perhaps not fiction for too much longer ... we can but hope!

Congress just couldn't stomach NASA's estimated \$450 billion price tag to send a manned mission to Mars. So the USA and a group of other interested countries agreed on a different approach - a \$30 billion prize to the first people that went to Mars and returned with a completed set of specified scientific explorations including geologic mapping, seismic testing, studies of atmospheric phenomena, core samples and, of course, searches for water, fossils and life. This was obviously much more than a flash and grab mission in the style of the first moon landings where the objective was to basically plant the flag and return. The stakes were enormous but, of course, so were the risks and there didn't seem to be any takers until a private consortium headed by flashy billionaire entrepreneur, John Axelrod, took up the challenge. Julia and her husband, Victor, along with Marc and Raoul, a team of ex-NASAnauts, hired on as crew for the mission found themselves facing a similar operation from China that had also tossed their entry into the ring. "**The Martian Race**" was on in earnest.

Set only in the very early 21st century, the familiarity and apparent reality of Benford's novel is breathtaking - the politics and governmental interference; the buffoonery of political protests launched by any number of right and left wing fringe groups with a variety of axes to grind; the media coverage and the outpouring of world adulation for the team's "right stuff"; the real hard core valuable first time scientific research; the money-grubbing and the commercial offshoots of the entire venture; the legal squabbling over contracts and the prize money; the hard core mechanics of how the landing is achieved; the daily crises, dangers and emergencies; the psychology of extended living in confined quarters; the inevitable boondoggles associated with such a mammoth undertaking and much, much more. As Julia was conducting some analysis protocols on samples obtained in an out-gassing vent on Mars to determine whether they were organic in nature or, perhaps even more exciting, whether they constituted Martian life, dead or alive, the tension was palpable and I found myself turning pages at a frantic pace. Who would have thought it possible for an author to inject that much excitement into a laboratory experiment?

Benford's dialogue was consistently witty, credible and germane to every situation and sounded appropriate in the mouth of each speaker - business-like yet casually slick for the entrepreneur, Axelrod; earthy, warm and romantic for Julia and Viktor as lovers, yet curt and workmanlike in the context of their roles as scientists and astronauts. Descriptive moments (not something I'd look for in a sci-fi entry that was so obviously geared to the hard side of the genre!) were beautiful and approached poetic in their eloquence:

"A ruby radiance suffused the horizon and above it rose a lustrous blue-white dot. Earthrise. A resplendent smudge, brimming brighter than Venus. She peered closely and could make out the small white point to one side. The only primary-and-moon visible to the naked eye in the solar system. Until now, that tiny little interval had been the full extent of the human reach. On the bigger creamy-blue dot, a million years of hominid drama had been acted out, blood and dreams playing on a stage a few miles thick, under a blanket of forgiving air."

The climax ... an eloquent statement of Benford's clear hope that **The Martian Race**, should it come to pass, would result in a new Martian race, as it were - one based in teamwork and cooperation and a new paradigm of exploration and cooperative problem-solving that has thus far eluded the best intentions of an earthbound mankind. Bravo, Gregory Benford! A magnificent tale!

Paul Weiss

Jon says

It's interesting how scifi dates but this is still a good read and ironically it may turn out to be prophetic as to how we reach Mars in the end with the announcement this year of a gameshow designed to fund a man mission to Mars!

Douglas says

Well written hard sci-fi. Just like I enjoy.

Ken Doggett says

This is a story of a future space race, a race to Mars, and the winner who returns with the proper amount of scientific research and a payload of areological, biological, and other samples retrieved from the Martian surface wins the payoff of \$30 billion offered by combined funding from a few advanced industrial nations. A wheeler-dealer by the name of John Axelrod puts together the first team to lift off and make its way to Mars. A second team, called "Airbus," apparently with Chinese backing, lifts off somewhat later, and arrives late in the story as a competitor for the prize. The novel follows mainly one character, Julia, a biologist who hopes to find evidence of former Martian life. The year is 2018.

A lot of research went into giving this story the feel of realism, and on that level it worked. Many pages were dedicated to the ways in which life on Mars could have developed and even thrived--perhaps still held on--in the underground areas of the vast Martian deserts. A number of other pages were given over to how the team was put together, and how it reached Mars and began exploration. The story explained a lot of the other technology as well, in some detail, as if it existed today. All of this contributed to a feeling of realism; however, it was often tedious to read while you wait for something to happen.

As it begins, mostly it's minor things, an accident that sprained an ankle, Julia almost suffocating as she lowers herself into a Martian vent to explore some misting that might indicate an ancient harbor for life eons past. Only near the end does it start to get interesting, almost harrowing, as the adventure deepens. And it does become a page-turner in the end, but it seems that much padding needed to be waded through to get there.

If you like hard Science Fiction, this has as much realism as you can handle, but if you like action, expect delayed gratification. It compares somewhat to "The Martian," by Andy Weir, but without the drama and the feeling of intense risk that Weir managed to convey through a single character. I also found some of Gregory Benford's prose to be awkwardly worded in places, so that I often had to read the same sentence or paragraph two or three times to untangle it. Maybe it was me, but I think the writing could have been a little smoother. Also, I found quite a few typos in this Warner Books publication.

In summary, I found it to be a reasonably decent, if leisurely, read, and I rate it at 3 out of 5 stars.

AudioBookReviewer says

ABR's original The Martian Race audiobook review and many others can be found at Audiobook Reviewer.

Nicholas Sansbury Smith continues his exciting series with this second book, Extinction Edge. At the close of Extinction Horizon, we are told there is a cure or rather that Dr. Lovato has created a “larger monster.” We expect things to go much better on Plum Island and the rebuilding of civilization can begin. Uh, no!

Lovato sets the “larger monster” loose in the U.S. killing off most of the variants – all but about 10% ... of over 300 million people – that leaves close to 30 million variants NOT dead. Beckham, Horn and others are charged with going into New York and laying claim to the city by eradicating the remaining variants ... 2000 or 3000 supposedly.

As is usually the case, the military has underestimated the number of variants and the bigwigs are broadcasting and strategizing with the wrong intel. Lovato knows better – she tries to correct the military’s error but is ignored. Not only are the numbers wrong but the variants are smarter! They communicate, they fight united and they strategize!

Beckham, Horn and now Lovato are fighting for their lives. The human race is quickly moving towards true extinction. It seems no one can win against the new and improved variants.

And if this is not scary enough for you – imagine the dark murky depths of the sewers and large cocoons of spider-like webbing holding what few survivors there are in New York ... The description of this was horrifying!

Smith does an excellent job of continuing the story plot and keeping the actors growing. Lovato and Beckham are dancing around a romance but it is far from the true focus of this story – no, its the flesh ripping, terrifying variants!

I keep wondering what more can Smith dish out in the way of horror but it seems he knows no bounds! Read his series if you are a true lover of horror, apocalyptic worlds far scarier than zombies and gore!

Smith remains true to horror fans and delivers! Smith is definitely an author to keep an eye on ... he only gets better with each book. I recommend this book as a must read.

The narrator, Bronson Pinchot, performs excellently! His voices are consistent and his pronunciation is clear. His transition from one character to another is clear and smooth.

Blackstone productions did an excellent job of producing this audiobook!

Audiobook provided for review by the publisher.

Jamie Collins says

A sci-fi novel published in 1999, which “offers a portrayal of how humanity might explore Mars in the near future, at low cost and with foreseeable technology.” The writing is decent, if not elegant, and the story held my interest.

An international consortium has offered a \$30 billion prize to the first team to complete a successful manned mission to Mars. When a disaster forces NASA out of the contest, an American entrepreneur steps in and essentially turns the mission into a hugely successful reality show. Every ounce of drama is squeezed out of the interactions between the astronauts, the dangers and privations of spaceflight, and the scientific discoveries on Mars.

Julia and Viktor are married astronauts on the American team, and the story is told entirely from Julia’s point of view. She’s likeable enough, but there is minimal characterization; Benford is more interested in a straightforward account of the mission.

Keith Bell says

Second time through and it was long enough since the first time that it was fresh.

I am a sucker for stories of Mars exploration and this one is a great story. When the author is an established astrophysicist it helps.

Dan says

I am a candidate for Mars One's mission to colonize Mars in the next decade. (<https://mars-one.com>) Reading *The Martian Race* (especially the first third) was like reading the Mars One playbook. Benford drew heavily on the work of Dr. Robert Zubrin and the Mars Society (especially Zubrin's book *The Case For Mars*), so the science and engineering are very solid. That said, this book can be a little hard to get into, because it bounces back and forth between the main character's past and present. While I agree with Benford's artistic decision to structure the narrative this way, the potential reader should be warned, and encouraged to keep going. The payoffs are worth it.

Charles Daney says

Given that initial human exploration (and eventual colonization) of Mars is *seemingly* close to becoming a reality in two decades, possibly less, there's considerable interest in vicariously experiencing what this might be like. After all, the prospects of civilization's survival on Earth itself seem bleaker with every passing year. So unsurprisingly, readers of science fiction have been able to get realistic previews of what Martian exploration and colonization could look like, from prominent writers like Greg Bear, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Gregory Benford. Their books on Mars appeared in the 1990s, which (not coincidentally) was also the decade immediately following the announcement by a U. S. president of serious plans to actually go forward with a human mission to Mars, with a (for the time) breathtakingly large price tag of \$500 billion. (That was

in fact quite a large underestimate.) The impracticality of such a plan at the time was already apparent about 5 years later, when the plan was abandoned.

In reality, both initial human arrival on Mars and passing of the tipping point into the collapse of civilization on Earth may well happen somewhat later than often supposed. (In the case of the latter event, most hope it will be considerably later.)

More recently, due to a need to provide a popular rationale for the continued existence of NASA, as well as plans offered by ambitious entrepreneurs for privately funded human missions to Mars, the idea is again being taken quite seriously. (But it's still projected, conservatively at least, to still be two decades or so in the future.) As a result, the idea has received a fairly realistic treatment in a recent motion picture (*The Martian*), which presented some of the details of what's involved to a much wider audience.

Benford's book, which first appeared in 1999, was a little later than the others. It was also more realistic (for the time) in that it did not presuppose a dystopian or chaotic state of terrestrial civilization, and instead focused on a plausible picture of how the very first expedition to Mars might unfold. I won't say much about the plot, since plot summaries can be found in many other places (such as [here](#)). The plot isn't especially complex (although the narrative isn't quite linear), but there is a little suspense, yet the general outcome is fairly predictable. (It doesn't end in disaster.)

So why read the book at all? Unlike other post-1990 Mars books, there aren't any especially profound ideas (either political, scientific, or science fictional). The characters are realistic and relatable, but not all that deep or interesting. Reading this has to be mostly for the vicarious experience. And it does fairly well in that respect. A reader will receive a decent sensory account of what it might be like to be one of the first humans on Mars. Readers may also take advantage of such suspense as exists to enjoy puzzling out how the characters might navigate the dilemmas that are thrown their way.

Here are a few random additional observations.

Most of the science in the story is fairly accurate, as is usual with Benford, a physics professor (emeritus) at U. C. Irvine. Although much of the story's plot turns on the discover of a life form on Mars, the various robotic explorers sent to Mars have found very little evidence for the possibility of (current) biology there.

At least three people mentioned in the book are important real-life scientists or engineers: Robert Zubrin, an aerospace engineer, who has been a strong advocate of Mars exploration and wrote *The Case for Mars: The Plan to Settle the Red Planet and Why We Must* (my review); Craig Venter, a biologist and entrepreneur who became famous for leading the first (and non-government sponsored) sequencing of the human genome, and Carl Woese, a microbiologist, who extensively studied possible mechanisms for the origin of life on Earth, including the "RNA world" hypothesis, and identified the biological "kingdom" of Archaea.

The title of the book is a double (or even multiple) entendre. A casual browser of book titles might assume it is about a "race" of human-like Martians. The life forms that are discovered could be considered a "race", though very unhuman-like. However, more prosaically the plot deals with a literal "race" to reach Mars (as in "space race"). Lastly, two of the main characters of the story do not leave Mars immediately as scheduled, and could possibly be the first of a nascent race of humans on Mars.

Nicolas says

Ce roman raconte, dans un futur trop proche, une possible mission d'exploration de la planète rouge. S'il n'a pas l'ambition du cycle de K. R. Robinson, il est en revanche aussi précisément documenté qu'on peut l'attendre d'une novelization de plan de vol.

Évidemment, comme l'auteur est plus physicien que romancier, la précision des détails vient parfois gâcher l'ambition littéraire. Mais je crois bien que, d'une façon presque perverse, l'une des ambitions de l'auteur est précisément en faire une oeuvre non littéraire. Malheureusement, comme toujours dans ce genre de situation, je crois que l'auteur a fait pencher la balance du mauvais côté, ce qui altère nettement pour moi les qualités de cette oeuvre.

Cela dit, il y a quelques moments d'authentique grâce (qui n'ont rien à voir avec l'hypothèse de la vie martienne développée dans ce livre).

A lire pour tous les adeptes de la planète rouge.

Shannon says

Great book by my friend Greg Benford. I really like his treatment of life on Mars with a small landing party and the struggles they go through. I recommend this book whole-heartedly!

AJ Nelson says

I like hard SF but this was just dry. Might be OK for a die-hard Benford fan or if you just can't get enough on mars colonization.

Gendou says

This is classic Benford. You've got your one-dimensional bad guy who's motives are contrived to fit the plot. Then there's some hard science fiction with rockets and stuff. Plus, chauvinism in space!

Mishehu says

Blueprint for an actual Mars mission in the guise of a novel? A compelling (and convincing read). Terrific book!

Ernest says

You've got to hand it to Benford. If you want hard sf, go to a pro. Unfortunately, even with what should be a lot of human tension and drama, and the appearance of an alien the like of which we haven't seen since James White's Sector General series, it's still about as dry as the Martian air.

The Martian Race plays the trick of moving forward from two points in the story at once, alternating between chapters about the prelaunch to Mars and the preparation for return. The drama is all about whether their return vehicle will work, and whether the second team to reach Mars will steal the thunder of the first, a private enterprise jumped up after NASA threw in the towel following a launch disaster.

The space science all plays out reasonably, but then we get into the Martian life discovery bits, which just don't play that well anymore.

The only thing that pulls the story along is waiting for the next test of the return vehicle engines to see if anyone is going home. How Clark managed to engineer a human connection to his characters, I don't know...but he did, and Benford doesn't quite get it.
