

RETRIEVAL

Of a Fire on the Moon

By Norman Mailer
Original Publication Date: 1970
(Little Brown & Co)

It's July 1969. Nixon is president and the hippie era is in full swing. In a country still reeling from protest, war, and assassination, teams at NASA prepare to attempt the most audacious technological feat in history. And Norman Mailer—who thinks that NASA's "blind push" is a distraction from problems on Earth—nevertheless finds himself in Houston, enduring press conferences, to write a book about it.

Mailer, best remembered as a larger-than-life pioneer of New Journalism, is the perfect writer to tell the story of Apollo 11. As a former engineering student, he expertly handles the technical details of the mission. As a master stylist, he frames the account in day-glo prose that blend gonzo delight in language with a sincere search for meaning.

Following the mission from pre-launch to touch-down, Mailer finds questions of religion, psychology, gender, and race in the Apollo narrative. He interrogates space exploration's symbolic values, wondering whether to call Apollo "the noblest expression of a technological age," or "the best evidence of its utter insanity?"

Mailer never answers his own question, his awe and skepticism each finally irreducible. Today his apocalyptic worries seem unwarranted. Still, NASA, which turns 50 this summer, hasn't put anyone on the Moon since 1972. Astronauts have gone from being figures of awe to, occasionally, objects of ridicule. It's almost quaint to think how momentous our first steps in space were. Reading *Of a Fire on the Moon*, one realizes that Apollo's legacies exist, but they're the subtler kind: not spaceships, but communications satellites; not colonies on the Moon, but the integrated circuits that increasingly sustain the colonies here on Earth. —Katherine Sharpe

WHAT THE
NOSE
KNOWS

THE SCIENCE OF SCENT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

AVERY GILBERT

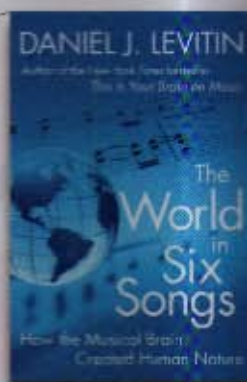
*What the Nose Knows*

By Avery Gilbert (Crown)

We have long underestimated the nose. Early researchers thought smells could be classified simply, and Freud believed odor perception was obsolete. In this book, smell scientist Gilbert finally gives the nose its due. With all the passion we would expect from a true devotee, he reveals the extraordinary power of human olfaction both to detect odors—we're just as talented as dogs at sniffing out cocaine—and to impact us emotionally: Years after severe trauma, victims still recoil at associated scents.

*The World in Six Songs*By Daniel J. Levitin
(Dutton)

Following up on his bestselling *This is Your Brain on Music*, musician and cognitive scientist Levitin argues that we evolved to produce and consume music for six reasons: friendship, joy, comfort, knowledge, religion, and love. Drawing on personal anecdotes, conversations with greats such as Sting and Joni Mitchell, and his own knowledge of evolutionary history, Levitin creates a rich account of how music has allowed humans to thrive even when faced with war, loss, and dwindling romance.

*Particle Zoo*Made by Julie Peasley
(www.particlezoo.net)

While scientists at CERN spend billions to observe the Higgs boson, physics fans can hold the massive theoretical particle in their own hands for under \$10. Inspired by a speech given by Lawrence Krauss, California artist Julia Peasley decided to create a line of plush toy particles with the hope of increasing scientific understanding. Each handmade particle is weighted according to the relative mass of its real-world counterpart, and each brims with a quirky (or quarky) personality.

IN-A-WORD

Tom Jones on *Fly Me to the Moon*, an animated 3D film in which three teenaged houseflies hitch a ride to the moon aboard the Apollo 11 shuttle.

"WEIGHTLESS"

Jones is a former NASA astronaut who flew on four Earth-orbiting missions and led the spacewalks to install the centerpiece of the International Space Station.

*13 Things That Don't Make Sense*By Michael Brooks
(Doubleday)

The placebo effect, dark matter, free will: Big Questions which will ultimately lead to Big Answers, or so Michael Brooks hopes. Each chapter tackles a different enigma, as well as the deep uncertainties of scientists who speculate on the legacy of unresolved work. A boundless enthusiasm resounds through this homage to the outstanding problems of science, as Brooks is firm in his conviction that the most elusive answers ultimately lead to the most profound scientific breakthroughs.