Second Reaction: Lunar Literature on the Fortieth Anniversary of Apollo 11


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From a teacher’s perspective, space-themed children’s literature is both appropriate and anticipated on the fortieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 lunar landing. Robert Burleigh and Buzz Aldrin are two contributing authors whose books offer elementary students very different literary experiences. Aldrin’s work affords readers a history of flight, while Burleigh focuses specifically on the Apollo 11 mission. In the classroom, these pieces work well together when utilized for their intended purposes.

Aldrin’s *Look to the Stars* may be best suited for a fifth or sixth grade audience. There is a great deal of aviation history to be found within its forty pages. This picture book begins with an introduction describing Buzz and his father’s lifetime passions for flight. In the pages that follow, an account of pertinent achievements leading up to and including recent space exploration are presented. Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, and Hubble are credited for their contributing theories and inventions, while the Wright brothers, Robert
Goddard, and Wernher von Braun are recognized for their technical innovation. Astronauts alive and dead are honored for their bravery. Aldrin uniquely includes his own predictions for future space advancement at the book’s conclusion. The illustrator, Wendell Minor, employs an impressionistic style, and his paintings add to the technical feel of the book. The pictures further enhance the text by clarifying more complex concepts and ideas. In summary, text and illustrations combine in *Look to the Stars* to succinctly highlight the intellectual and technological advancements of the past five hundred years.

Burleigh’s *One Giant Leap*, with its narrower focus, attempts to recreate the feeling of traveling to the moon. The author writes with a distinct rhythm to depict the astonishing lunar events of July 20, 1969. Poetic phrases such as “The Eagle dips. Hovers. Zigs. Zags. Dances over its own dark shadow” convey to readers the weightlessness of the moon as well as the fragility of the mission. Mike Wimmer’s accompanying paintings utilize cool blues and greens to complement the mystic and worrisome tone of the book. The possibility of failure lurks in the mind of the reader throughout much of the book. Only in the final pages do the astronauts, and in effect the reader, relax and enjoy the amazing accomplishments of *Apollo 11*. Though intended for lower grades, upper elementary students will also appreciate the beautiful language and mood created by Burleigh and Wimmer.

In my sixth grade classroom, I found that the two books worked well together when presented in a logical order and as part of a larger unit. Background information proved vital to understanding the *Apollo 11* mission, and *Look to the Stars* immensely enhanced students’ historical lenses. Aldrin’s book was introduced to students first for this specific reason. The scope of the book spanned from Copernicus’s heliocentric ideas to the completion of the present-day International Space Station and proved to be more complete than students’ textbooks. Much appreciated was the author’s insight and relation of personal ideas and thoughts. Specifically, the students commented on the high credibility they felt Aldrin deserved as an author and were excited to read about future commercial travels in space. The descriptive pictures and detailed timeline located on the final pages of the book provided additional opportunities for students to acquire an understanding of key concepts and proved valuable in the completion of group projects. Students who preferred *Look to the Stars* when compared to *One Giant Leap* often mentioned the technical illustrations as an important factor in their decision.

The class was almost evenly split, however, in regards to book preference. For some, the mood and language of *One Giant Leap* overpowered the above-mentioned qualities of *Look to the Stars*. Several of the students who chose this as their favorite enjoy crafting their own poetry and mentioned that they found the book to be inspirational. Struggling readers remarked that they understood the events of July 20, 1969 more clearly after reading *One Giant Leap*. Specifically, the relationship between the *Columbia* and *Eagle*, only just mentioned in their textbook, was better exemplified by the words and illustrations. This text served as the students’ third opportunity to learn about the *Apollo 11* mission in
my classroom. This detail in addition to the lower reading level allowed most students to focus on the poetic qualities and mood-setting images. When used in this way, *One Giant Leap* proves an asset to upper elementary classrooms.

The authors and illustrators of these two books have successfully teamed up to contribute praiseworthy pieces of historical nonfiction. Both books uniquely complement space study in the elementary classroom. *Look to the Stars* grants readers a history of space advancement, while *One Giant Leap* takes a closer look at the lunar landing. Used collaboratively, the books reach a wide variety of learners.

**About the Author**

*Joy Dangora* is a sixth grade teacher at Happy Hollow Elementary in West Lafayette, Indiana. She received a Bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a Master’s in literacy and language education, both from Purdue University. She is currently earning a second master’s degree in educational leadership in hopes of one day becoming an elementary principal.