



Project Orion: The True Story of the Atomic Spaceship

By George Dyson

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The improbable story of the wildest idea—a space craft powered by hydrogen bombs—to come out of the space race.

It was the late 1950s. The Cold War was raging. *Sputnik* had made its voyage and the space race was on. In America, it was the age of tail fins and "duck and cover," but it was also a time of big ideas and dreams. On his way to school one day, George Dyson learned of a truly fantastical idea: massive space vehicles that would be powered by explosions of multiple hydrogen bombs. Among the brilliant minds behind this project was George's father, the eminent physicist Freeman Dyson.

Project Orion chronicles this fascinating episode in U.S. scientific research, while capturing a unique time in American history and culture. The project brought together a cadre of brilliant physicists, the first such assemblage since the Manhattan Project of fifteen years earlier. In an idyllic seaside community in southern California—the very picture of 1950s suburban prosperity—a handful of scientists, tackled a massive project that required the ingenuity of an engineer and the vision of a great theoretician. Their work—ambitious but ultimately futile—took place against the political and cultural backdrop of the Cold War, when nuclear technology spelled both promise and terror.

Dyson's prodigious historical and scientific research, combined with his personal reminiscences and connections, make for a lively, richly detailed narrative.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Like cheap, shiny space suits and bug-eyed rubber monsters, nuclear-powered spaceships today seem like little more than laughably naïve 1950s science fiction tropes. It might have been otherwise--and still could be. George Dyson, son of supergenius physicist Freeman Dyson, wrote *Project Orion* to share some of his father's amazing research with the world. Much had been kept secret for years, but Dyson's unique insider status permits great depth and breadth on this important tale. Conceived in the wake of *Sputnik*, Project Orion was a true vision of '50s engineering: a huge 40-person ship powered by hundreds of tiny atomic bombs, capable of much greater lift and efficiency than chemically driven rockets. Struggles between NASA, the military, Congress, and other parties doomed Orion, but Dyson has gathered hundreds of documents and interviewed most of the researchers and engineers who worked together, trying to reach "Saturn by 1970." His knack for storytelling makes the book a quick, delightful read; even the staunchest anti-nuke activist has to admit that lighting a cigarette off a parabolic mirror facing a bomb test is pretty cool. By the end of the 20th century, technology had caught up with the vision of Orion--it's considered one of our best bets for long-distance space transit. Whether or not that could ever happen politically, *Project Orion* is a compelling exploration of scientific imagination. --Rob Lightner

From Publishers Weekly

In the years after WWII and the Russian launch of two sputniks, Americans were searching for any technology that would give them dominance in the space race. In his latest, Dyson (*Darwin Among the Machines*) charts the history of the failed Project Orion, which called for a massive rocket to be built atop a nuclear-powered piston. The project's physicists and engineers, buoyed by the thrilling idea of traveling through space on "pulse technology," conducted a number of explosive experiments to ascertain the abilities of such a system (which reveals how little was actually known about the bombs being produced by the world's superpowers). Meanwhile, the project, started in 1957, ran headlong into detractors Kennedy and NASA included and eventually was canceled. Much of the technical information in the Orion files remains classified, but Dyson's explanations of the nuclear science behind the system are lucid. A great strength of Dyson's project is the interviews he conducted with surviving Orion team members among them his father, Freeman Dyson affording readers an intimate view of the story's central characters (and its government contractors) who helped shape Orion. At the same time, these compelling interviews drag on; the story's drama is diffused by the musings of its key players, who sometimes crowd out the dynamic background of the Cold War, Wernher Von Braun's chemical rocket program, atmospheric weapons test bans and presidential administrations vested in nuclear capacities only designed for destruction. Illus. and photos. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

From Library Journal

Shortly after the first Sputnik launch in 1957, an American scientific team proposed Project Orion, an enormous interplanetary spaceship propelled by exploding hundreds of nuclear bombs. The project commenced during the golden age of support for U.S. scientific research, but the team struggled to find ongoing funding. Civilian NASA found Orion unpalatable because of its inextricable link with nuclear weapons, while the military regarded the team's ultimate goal exploration of the solar system as peripheral to their own space research program. As public opposition to atmospheric nuclear testing grew, making even a small-scale test shot politically unfeasible, the project died for lack of support. Dyson, son of physicist Freeman Dyson (himself an Orion consultant), interviewed team members and tracked down scores of technical reports to compile this unique history. Unfortunately, some of the author's and interviewees'

remarks about fallout and classified bomb research seem naïve, cavalier, or just plain insensitive in a post-September 11 context. For academic and larger public libraries. Nancy R. Curtis, Univ. of Maine Lib., Orono
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Isaias McGee:

This Project Orion: The True Story of the Atomic Spaceship book is simply not ordinary book, you have it then the world is in your hands. The benefit you will get by reading this book is actually information inside this book incredible fresh, you will get facts which is getting deeper anyone read a lot of information you will get. This kind of Project Orion: The True Story of the Atomic Spaceship without we understand teach the one who reading through it become critical in contemplating and analyzing. Don't possibly be worry Project Orion: The True Story of the Atomic Spaceship can bring once you are and not make your tote space or bookshelves' turn into full because you can have it within your lovely laptop even telephone. This Project Orion: The True Story of the Atomic Spaceship having excellent arrangement in word and layout, so you will not experience uninterested in reading.

Paul Simpson:

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Mildred Lucas:

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Melissa Broussard:

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