



The Martian

by Andy Weir

Summary

Spoiler Alert: The following summary and discussion questions reveal plot information that some readers may prefer to encounter as surprises.

[The Martian](#) takes place in a near-future setting, and unfolds in fragmentary diary entries and third-person accounts. Ares III, the latest manned shuttle mission to Mars, lands with plans to remain on the planet's surface for several weeks. A freak, high-velocity dust storm strikes; mission engineer Mark Watney is impaled by flying debris and presumed dead after his bio-suit stops reporting his vitals. Commander Michelle Lewis orders the remaining crew to evacuate. They flee, mourning Mark's death during the long voyage back to Earth.

In reality, Mark is injured but alive. He regains consciousness to find himself utterly alone in the inhospitable alien landscape. The only hope of rescue (the next manned mission) is four long years away -- and he has supplies for, at most, only a few weeks. Fortified by his own wickedly blunt sense of humor -- and completely confident in his crewmates' loyalty and skill -- Mark painstakingly improvises ways of providing himself with water, heat, and shelter. He even establishes a mini-potato farm in his biosphere to extend his scant food supplies. None of it is easy, however: any small incident (torn fabric around an airlock) can have disastrous consequences (the collapse of his shelter -- and destruction of his garden). Although often amused by the realization that he is the first to do everything on Mars, he is also dismayed by the depth of his isolation as the weeks stretch into months.

Meanwhile, evidence of Mark's activities appear on satellite photos of Mars. Various NASA teams mobilize to investigate every possible means of rescue. Fearing that word of Mark's survival will distract his former crewmates -- thereby compromising their safety on the extended return trip to Earth -- NASA officials keep Mark's survival a secret. He scavenges probes left on Mars by previous missions and manages to rig a means of direct communication with NASA. Various plans for his rescue are devised and abandoned as circumstances intervene and various disasters occur -- on Earth, as well as Mars. The Ares III crew are at last told the truth: although thrilled to learn Mark is alive, Commander Lewis is overwhelmed with guilt for having left him behind.

With time and options running short, one NASA engineer proposes an unconventional plan: The returning Ares III crew will fly by Earth only for an emergency resupply, and then slingshot a return trip to Mars. To rendezvous with Ares III, Mark must trek across thousands of kilometers across Mars' deadly terrain to reach a Mars Ascent Vehicle (MAV) left in position for a future mission crew's transport back into orbit. If Mark succeeds at a precisely-time launch of the MAV, Ares III can intercept it with Mark inside -- and the reunited crew will circle back to Earth together.

Equipment malfunctions and political wrangling on Earth ratchet up the tension surrounding the Ares III resupply, but unexpected support from China's National Space Administration puts the crew back en route to Mars. Meanwhile, Mark at last reaches the MAV and modifies it for blast off. Despite some horrifying last-minute complications, the MAV reaches orbit and Ares III rescues Mark. The novel

concludes with Mark's final journal entry: he gratefully reflects on the generous and self-sacrificing nature of humanity, and rejoices at rejoining his crew.

Discussion Questions

Readers bring differing viewpoints to the story's characters, events, and what it all means; sharing those insights is what makes book groups rewarding. The following questions and answers should spark discussion, but are not all there is to say. Enjoy your discussion -- starting with these ideas!

How does the novel explore loyalty and trust?

The Ares III crew is clearly close-knit and loyal. Their deep bond was forged by grueling trials of both their physical and mental stamina:

[T]hey made us stay in the MAV simulator for three miserable days. Six people in an ascent vehicle originally designed for a twenty-three minute flight. It got a little cramped. And by "a little cramped" I mean "we wanted to kill each other."

Instead, they work through it together -- as they must in order to survive their mission as a team. The Ares III crew's loyalty is obvious in their willingness to sacrifice two years of their lives -- and risk death -- in order to attempt Mark's rescue. But the novel also uses more understated ways of showing the depths of their loyalty to one another: as Beck and Vogel plan their interception of Mark's improvised launch vehicle, Beck tells Vogel to cut his tether if it's too short to allow him to reach Mark (a breach of protocol, and against Commander Lewis's instructions). Vogel refuses in no uncertain terms, but Beck simply replies "you'll change your mind if push comes to shove." Beck trusts that despite whatever Vogel may *say*, Vogel will *do* what is right.

Despite a year and a half alone on Mars, Mark's loyalty to his crewmates remains absolute. As they plan his rescue, he muses: "I've been in mortal danger for months; I'm kind of used to it now. But I'm nervous again. Dying would suck, but my crewmates dying would be way worse. And I won't find out how the launch went until I get to Schiaparelli." In this moment of selflessness, Mark shows he is as committed to their well-being as they are to his.

Arguably, no character in the novel more fully embodies trust and loyalty than Commander Lewis. A disciplined, tough, rational Navy officer-turned-astronaut, Lewis is utterly loyal to her mission -- and first and foremost, that means the safety of her crew. On Mars, Lewis decisively orders the crew's evacuation only after all available evidence points to Mark's death. Just as the crew is loyal to her, she strives to be loyal to them -- which, in that case, logically requires putting the welfare of the living above that of the dead. That is precisely why she is so horrified to learn that Mark was, in fact, still alive:

"I left him behind," Lewis said quietly.

The celebrations ceased immediately as the crew saw their commander's expression.

"But," Beck began, "we all left together--"

"You followed orders," Lewis interrupted. "I left him behind. In a barren, unreachable, godforsaken wasteland."

Rationally, Lewis knows that decision was right and necessary, but still cannot escape feeling that she

betrayed Mark's trust. She is harder on herself than on anyone else, precisely because trust and loyalty are ingrained in her nature -- and essential to her role as a commander.

How does *The Martian* portray scientists?

Science itself is often regarded as a cold, logical, and impartial field of knowledge -- but the novel reminds us that it is practiced by people who are *not*. The scientists portrayed here are motivated by powerful, passionate emotions. Mark is emotionally awed by "the sheer number of people who pulled together just to save my sorry ass." The hundreds of scientists and engineers who worked together to save him were not motivated by professional acclaim, but rather simple human decency: "[E]very human being has a basic instinct to help each other out. It might not seem that way sometimes, but it's true."

We often characterize logic and feeling as opposite forces -- if you are logical, you do not rely on your feelings. If you are an emotional person, you may not be very logical. The novel pushes readers to a more complex understanding of both logic and emotion, by portraying scientists who are simultaneously both logical, fact-driven thinkers *and* compassionate, empathetic individuals. Tears are shed for Mark over and over again: when he is lost and believed dead, when a NASA engineer discovers that he is still alive, and during the many setbacks on the road to his rescue. People cry to release the fear, concern, and frustrations they feel over Mark's fate. *The Martian's* most personal and touching scenes focus on the scientists, technicians, engineers, and programmers who worked ceaselessly to bring him home.

What does the novel say about communication and isolation?

Human beings are social animals, and Mark spends eighteen months alone without any direct contact with the rest of his species. While he is painfully aware of the whole time, the reality of his situation doesn't hit in full until he begins to explore the Martian surface out of sight of his shelter: "Mars is a barren wasteland and I am completely alone here. I already knew that, of course. But there's a difference between knowing it and really experiencing it." While it is his nature to be resilient, Mark is like each of us: alone time is valuable -- but to be constantly alone is very different. The novel underscores that it is simply human nature to want to feel connected, to communicate oneself to another -- and to share in what they know and feel as well.

Mark's inability to communicate with anyone on Earth is a logistical problem, but NASA officials also fear that the utter solitude will shatter Mark's spirit. Mark's desperate urge to communicate reflects a basic human impulse -- as one character says simply: "When facing death, people want to be heard. They don't want to die alone." This poignant observation underscores the novel's central idea that humans need one another: as a species, humans are hard-wired to live, work, and cooperate in society together -- and that living in isolation from one another is all but a death sentence.

What does Mark's sense of humor reveal about his character?

Mark's flippant, blunt humor ("I'm pretty much fucked") and childish joking ("Bad woman take pillow," when his commander wakes him up) may at first make him seem like a rather superficial jokester. In reality, humor is arguable one of humanity's most essential coping mechanisms for survival. American clergyman Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) once wrote that "A person without a sense of humor is like a wagon without springs. It's jolted by every pebble in the road."

Humor is uniquely human, and arguably one of our most powerful coping mechanisms when faced with life's many difficult and painful experiences. It is the "shock absorber" that prevents us from being knocked off the road by every pebble (or boulder) of despair. Engineers tend to be detail-oriented, methodical, and highly pragmatic -- all characteristics that set Mark apart from his peers when studying botany:

I got my undergrad degree at the University of Chicago. Half the people who studied botany were hippies who thought that they could return to some natural world system. Somehow feeding seven billion people through pure gathering. They spent most of their time working out better ways to grow pot. I didn't like them. I've always been in it for the science, not for any of this New World Order bullshit.

Humor provides a crucial balance and grounding element that complements Mark's intense dedication to rigorous scientific inquiry -- and vice versa. After weeks of working simply to survive, Mark gets the chance to explore the planet and collect samples -- the mission Ares III was initially sent to accomplish. He is excited to be back in the proverbial saddle:

It just feels nice to be an astronaut again. That's all it is. Not a reluctant farmer, not an electrical engineer, not a long-haul truck driver. An astronaut. I'm doing what astronauts do. I missed it.

His dedication to scientific study -- and his expertise as an engineer and a botanist -- mean that Mark has the *practical* knowledge to survive; but it is his sense of humor that sustains his spirit in the face of isolation, fear, and loneliness. He jokingly admires his every action as a unique milestones on the Red Planet: "It's a strange feeling. Everywhere I go, I'm the first. Step outside the rover? First guy ever to be there! Climb a hill? First guy to climb that hill! Kick a rock? That rock hadn't moved in a million years!" Yet the weight of isolation quickly transforms the feeling for him: "Jesus Christ, I'd give anything for a five-minute conversation with anyone. Anyone, anywhere. About anything. I'm the first person to be alone on an entire planet." Mark's dark humor and sarcasm enable him to remain a functional, hardworking engineer -- and that is what ensures his physical as well as mental survival.

How does the author incorporate realistic science to tell a better story?

As a work of literary science fiction, it's not surprising that *The Martian* draws upon real-world science. Author Andy Weir is the son of a particle physicist; in interviews, he describes studying orbital mechanics, astronomy, and manned spaceflight to get the details of this novel right. His protagonist Mark is not stranded by a freak meteor strike, but an event that scientists have documented is common on Mars: a vicious sandstorm.

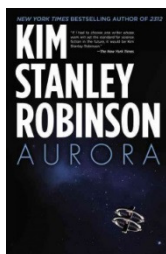
Whereas many science fiction novels imagine hostile Martians as the greatest threat to explorers of Mars, Weir instead presents believably simple, small issues that lead to potentially fatal consequences. For example, Mark's repeated (and necessary) use of an airlock weakens the structure of his shelter and ultimately causes a blowout. In turn, this destroys his only food supply -- the potato garden. In another case, Mark's vital and hard-won ability to communicate with Earth is destroyed when he accidentally fries a critical circuit. On his journey to the MAV, a patch of soft ground causes his rover to overturn, and nearly dooms his escape. In sum, Weir demonstrates that the scientific reality of being stranded on Mars is scary enough without inventing evil alien foes.

However, the novel is ultimately optimistic. It celebrates the fundamental unity of the human race, as well as science's power to solve the problems we face as a species. Mark's resilient, wise-cracking humor symbolizes the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, while his engineering and botanical knowledge testifies to human intelligence. Finally, the novel hints hopefully of a world in which science even allows us to reach across political boundaries -- as partners, not foes. At least part of the novel's message seems to be that if humans naturally want to help one another, then science as one of the best means of doing so.

About the Author

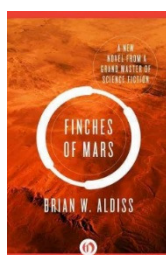
At age fifteen, American writer [Andy Weir](#) began work as a computer programmer. The son of a particle physicist, Weir wrote science fiction stories during his twenties and later dabbled in web comics. He self-published his first novel in 2011: *The Martian*, a compelling outer-space survival story about an astronaut stranded alone on Mars. In 2014, Crown Publishing bought the rights and re-released the novel to considerable critical and public acclaim. Weir's plausible approach to hard-science mechanics, fast-paced writing, and courageous, surprising funny protagonist endeared have endeared the novel to hard SF fans (and SF readers at large). An award-winning film adaptation of *The Martian* -- directed by Ridley Scott and starring Matt Damon -- was released in 2015.

Further Reading



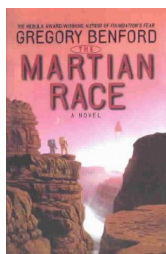
[Aurora](#) by [Kim Stanley Robinson](#)

The starship is headed for Tau Ceti, approximately 12 light years away. Launched from Earth in the 26th century, the vessel is nearing its destination after nearly 160 years. Devi, the chief engineer, has commanded the ship's AI to create a comprehensive narrative of their voyage. Technical elements of space travel (and space craft) are blended with the more personal stories of its passengers -- in particular, Devi's daughter Freya.



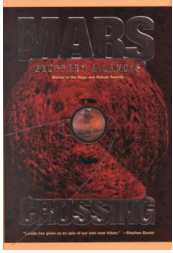
[Finches of Mars](#) by [Brian Wilson Aldiss](#)

A group of colonists on Mars struggle to survive after their irreversible choice to make a life on that planet -- where, for the last decade, every child born dies a few hours after birth. Realizing that few on Earth care about their fate, the colonists face a desperate struggle against their growing isolation -- and to discover what's killing their children. More speculative than *The Martian*, this novel explores similar themes of humanity, isolation, and community.



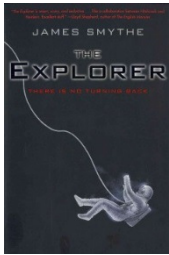
[The Martian race](#) by [Gregory Benford](#)

With NASA's mission to Mars scrapped because of a tragic accident, billionaire John Axelrod steps in to fund the expedition -- and the race is on, against a combined European-Chinese effort to reach Mars' surface first. Captained by Viktor Nelyubov and his wife Julia Barth, the American crew reaches the planet ahead of their rivals -- but what they discover may prevent them from ever returning. Suspenseful human drama and plausible hard SF details make this a great choice for fans of Weir's novel.



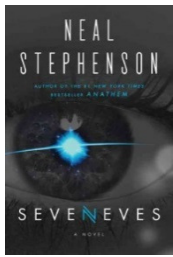
[Mars crossing](#) by [Geoffrey Landis](#)

After two disastrous, unsuccessful manned missions to Mars, a third expedition to the Red Planet goes wrong from the moment of landing and the astronauts' only hope of survival lies in a perilous journey across the surface of Mars. Sound familiar? Well, this time it's *Mars Crossing*. While Weir's protagonist is alone, here there are five survivors of a failed expedition to Mars – and the last-chance ship they're trekking toward will only carry three of them home. Readers who enjoyed *The Martian's* blend of hard SF with a rich human interest story and vivid descriptions of the harsh Martian landscape will relish this SF thriller, too.



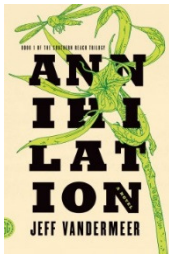
[The explorer](#) by [J. P. Smythe](#)

When journalist Cormac Easton is selected to document the first manned mission into deep space, he dreams of securing his place in history as one of humanity's great explorers. But in space, nothing goes according to plan. While *The Explorer's* protagonist, is stranded in deep space (rather than on a planet, as is Weir's) this novel also explores questions about the human need for communication and the terror of absolute isolation in an alien, lifeless setting. Predictably, some fare better than others in survival situations and fans of *The Martian* will want to discover for themselves what befalls this space-castaway.



[Seveneves](#) by [Neal Stephenson](#)

For readers who enjoyed the science of Weir's *The Martian*, *Seveneves* offers a similarly relatable, realistic cast of scientific characters grappling with an unthinkable disaster -- only here, it's not just one stranded astronaut on Mars but the end of life on Earth. The moon's destruction paves the way for a hail of debris that will destroy the planet; it will rebuild into something beautiful and habitable -- but humanity's outcasts will have to survive 5,000 years to come back home.



[Annihilation](#) by [Jeff Vandermeer](#)

Four women -- a biologist, a psychologist, a surveyor, and an anthropologist -- set out on a scientific expedition to Area X, a quarantined zone that defies all attempts to map its terrain or understand its nature. Eleven previous expeditions have failed. Narrated by the unnamed biologist of the group, *Annihilation* blends together science fiction and elements of horror set in a realm no more of this Earth (and no more hospitable) than the Martian landscape that Weir's narrator battles. This creepy, compelling SF novel for fans of *The Martian* is the first of the [Southern Reach](#) trilogy.

This NoveList Book Discussion Guide was developed by Michael Jenkins, a writer, community activist, and avid vegetable gardener in Wilmington, NC.