

A Conversation with SpaceGeek and Science Fanatic

Andy Weir

author of **THE MARTIAN**

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Q) So it seems you're a bit of a science geek. You list space travel, orbital dynamics, relativistic physics, astronomy, and the history of manned spaceflight among your interests. How did you incorporate these passions into your debut novel **THE MARTIAN?**

A) Those interests allowed me to come up with the story in the first place. I love reading up on current space research. At some point I came up with the idea of an astronaut stranded on Mars. The more I worked on it, the more I realized I had accidentally spent my life researching for this story. Early on, I decided that I would be as scientifically accurate as possible. To a nerd like me, working out all the math and physics for Mark's problems and solutions was fun.

Q) In one sentence, tell us what your novel is all about.

A) It's the story of an astronaut trying to survive after being accidentally left behind on Mars.

Q) Explain how the science in **THE MARTIAN is true to life.**

A) The basic structure of the Mars program in the book is very similar to a plan called "Mars Direct" (though I made changes here and there). It's the most likely way that we will have our first Mars mission in real life. All the facts about Mars are accurate, as well as the physics of space travel the story presents. I even calculated the various orbital paths involved in the story, which required me to write my own software to track constant-thrust trajectories.

Q) What inspired you to write **THE MARTIAN?**

A) I was thinking about how best to do a manned Mars mission (because that's the sort of dork I am). As the plan got more detailed, I started imagining what it would be like for the astronauts. Naturally, when designing a mission, you think up disaster scenarios and how likely the crew would be to survive. That's when I started to realize this had real story potential.

Q) Are you an advocate for a manned mission to Mars? Are you hopeful we'll actually make it out there sometime soon?

A) Of course I'm a huge fan of space travel, manned and unmanned. I would love to see people land on Mars in my lifetime. However, do I think it will actually happen? I'm not sure. Unlike the 1960s, we're not in a race with anyone to get there, so it's not a priority. Also, computer and robotics technologies are leaps and bounds better than they were during the days of Apollo. So logically, you have to ask why we would risk human lives rather than just make better robots. Still, it would be awesome, and maybe that's reason enough.

Q) Do you have anything in common with your wise-cracking hero Mark Watney?

A) I'm the same level of smart-ass as he is. It was a really easy book to write; I just had him say what I would say. However, he's smarter than I am and considerably more brave. I guess he's who I wish I were.

Q) In **THE MARTIAN, Watney has access to his crewmates digital entertainment on Mars, including TV episodes of *Three's Company*, a variety of Beatles songs, and digital books including *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Any reason you chose to work those specific examples into the novel?**

A) It's a selection of things I loved when I was growing up.

Q) You're stranded on Mars and you can only take one book with you. What is it?

A) It's always hard to pick one "favorite book." Growing up, I loved early Heinlein books most of all. So if I had to pick one, I'd go with *Tunnel in the Sky*. I do love a good survival story.

Q) How long do you think you'd last if you were left in Mark Watney's position?

A) Not long at all. I don't know how to grow crops, nor how to jury-rig the solutions he came up with. It's a lot easier to write about an ordeal than it is to experience it.

Q) You have the chance to meet any astronaut living or dead: Who is it and why?

A) John Young. He is the quintessential astronaut. Competent, fearless, highly intelligent, and

seemingly immune to stress. When *Apollo 16* launched, his heart rate never got higher than 70. Most astronauts spike to at least 120 during launches.

Q) Watney seems to be able to maneuver his way around some pretty major problems with a little duct tape and ingenuity! So he's a bit like MacGyver in that way. Did you watch the show as a kid? Any favorite episodes?

A) Indeed I did! I loved that show. My favorite episode was the one where engineering students had a barricade contest.

Q) *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*?

A) *Doctor Who*.

Q) Your idea of the perfect day . . .

A) Sleep in. Meet Buzz Aldrin for brunch. Head over to Jet Propulsion Lab and watch them control the Curiosity Mars rover. Dinner with the writing staff of *Doctor Who*.

Q) How did you feel when your original, self-published version of THE MARTIAN became a phenomenon online? Were you expecting the overwhelmingly positive reception the book received?

A) I had no idea it was going to do so well. The story had been available for free on my website for months and I assumed anyone who wanted to read it had already read it. A few readers had requested I post a Kindle version because it's easier to download that way. So I went ahead and did it, setting the price to the minimum Amazon would allow. As it sold more and more copies I just watched in awe.

Q) Film rights to THE MARTIAN were sold to writer-producer Simon Kinberg (*Mr. & Mrs. Smith, Sherlock Holmes, X-Men: First Class*). What was your first reaction? Who should play the part of Mark Watney?

A) Of course I'm thrilled to have a movie in the works. The movie deal and print publishing deal came within a week of each other, so I was a little shell-shocked. In fact, it was such a sudden launch into the big leagues that I literally had a difficult time believing it. I actually worried it could all be an elaborate scam. So I guess that was my first reaction: "Is this really happening!?" As for who could play Watney, I think some good candidates would be Aaron Paul and Chris Evans.

Q) What's next for you?

A) I have a few irons in the fire. There's a long-running sci-fi story I've been poking at here and there for a while. Though based on the response from *The Martian*, I might go with a different story idea I have in mind: a "science-crime" novel. Lots of problem-solving as technically savvy criminals match wits with an equally savvy FBI agent trying to track them down.

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