

PICADOR

Reading Group Gold

The Last Pilot

by Benjamin Johncock

ABOUT THE BOOK

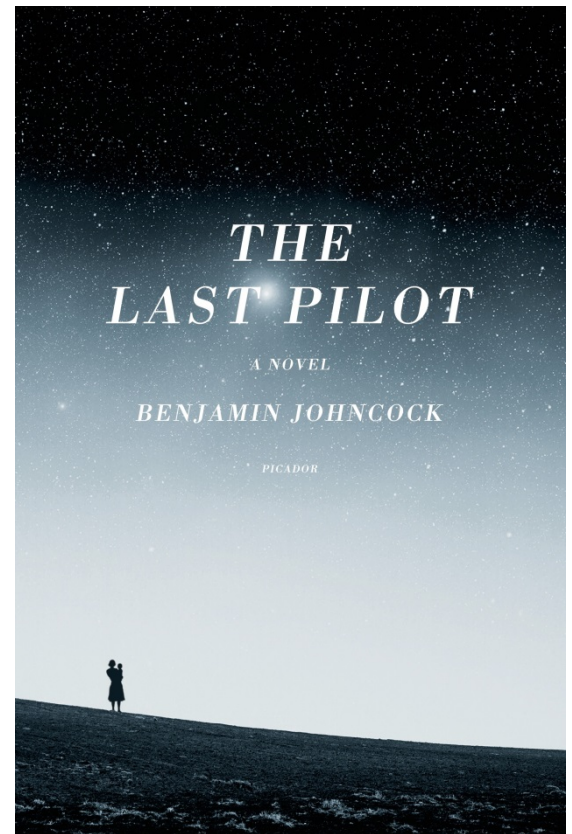
Jim Harrison is a test pilot in the United States Air Force, one of the exalted few. He spends his days cheating death in the skies above the Mojave Desert and his nights at his friend Pancho's bar, often with his wife, Grace. She and Harrison are secretly desperate for a child-and when, against all odds, Grace learns that she is pregnant, the two are overcome with joy.

While America becomes swept up in the fervor of the Space Race, Harrison turns his attention home, passing up the chance to become an astronaut to welcome his daughter, Florence, into the world. Together, he and Grace confront the thrills and challenges of raising a child head-on. Fatherhood is different than flying planes-less controlled, more anxious-however the pleasures of watching Florence grow are incomparable. But when his family is faced with a sudden and inexplicable tragedy, Harrison's instincts as a father and a pilot are put to test. As a pilot, he feels compelled to lead them through it-and as a father, he fears that he has fallen short.

The aftermath will haunt the Harrisons and strain their marriage as Jim struggles under the weight of his decisions. Beginning when the dust of the Second World War has only just begun to settle and rushing onward into the Sixties, Benjamin Johncock traces the path of this young couple as they are uprooted by events much larger than themselves. The turns the Harrisons take together are at once astonishing and recognizable; their journey, both frightening and full of hope. Set against the backdrop of one of the most emotionally charged periods in American history, *The Last Pilot* is a mesmerizing debut novel of loss and finding courage in the face of it from an extraordinary new talent.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Much of *The Last Pilot* takes place in the desert, and Benjamin Johncock provides readers with wonderful, atmospheric descriptions of the landscape. Why do you think he dedicates so much space to describing the land? And why was the Mojave Desert chosen as the site of the Air Corps flight tests?



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2. Near the beginning of the novel, Johncock gives us a scene of Pancho, Grace, and Glennis drinking at the Happy Bottom Club, listening to the broadcast of a dangerous flight test Glennis's husband, Chuck, is manning. Why does Johncock chose to gives us this scene from the women's perspective at the bar rather than the perspective of the men at the airfield?
3. Pancho is one of *The Last Pilot's* most colorful characters and is based on real-life figure, Florence Lowe "Pancho" Barnes. In what ways is Pancho a woman ahead of her time? And what is it about the Mojave Desert that seems to draw characters like her?
4. *The Last Pilot* takes place in the late 40s – late 60s, a time that predates the current technology that allows us to be in constant contact with one another. Grace is constantly worried about Jim because of the dangers of his profession, and at one point, she calls the base, frantic to know if Jim is OK. Jim reassures that he's fine and says, "Air Force pays my wage, trains me to wear the Blue Suit, but they don't do a damn thing to train the wife of a Blue Suitor." Do you think there is any way they could have "trained" the wives of these men? If so, what kind of training would have helped the women cope?
5. Why does Grace keep her visits with Reverend Irving a secret from Jim?
6. *The Last Pilot* is framed by real, historical events: the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Space Race. How does this historical context affect your reading of the novel? Are you drawn to novels that are based on true stories? If so, why?
7. Jim is listening to a radio broadcast of a press conference with America's first astronauts when the men are asked "for a show of hands of how many are confident that they will come back from outer space?" Do you think you would have been able to raise your hand? Would your opinion change if you were asked this question today?
8. After Florence is born, Jim begins to learn what it means to be a parent. Johncock writes, "Florence cried hard when hungry and it cut into him, not the volume, or the sound, but the need. And it came with no warning, on no schedule, and took priority over all else. He didn't like it." What was it about this situation that Jim didn't like?
9. When Jim, Florence, and Grace meet Annie for lunch, Anne tells them the story of the first time she had ice cream. What does this moment say about the relationship between taste and memory? Can you recall any similar experiences of your own?
10. Shortly after Florence is diagnosed with a brain tumor, Grace makes a call to Jim at the base to break the terrible news. After, Jim still insists on going through with his scheduled flight test even though Riley urges him to "call it a day." Why do you think Jim insists on going through with the flight test? What insights into Jim's character does this scene provide?

11. What did the figure of the astronaut represent during the 1950s and the 1960s? Has this changed? If so, how?
12. Do you think Jim would have made the decision to join NASA's lunar landing mission if Florence had lived?
13. During the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Grace asks Jim to stay with her instead of continuing to devote all of his time to the space program. When he refuses, she asks him if he thinks the program is more important than her, to which he replies, yes. Do you agree with Jim? Why or why not?
14. As Jim's mental state begins to unravel, he starts to believe that he killed Florence. What do you make of Jim's decision to give Dr. Lapitus the OK to proceed with the experimental treatment? Do you place any blame on Jim for Florence's death?
15. What perfect storm of circumstances brought on Jim's mental collapse? And why is it so essential for astronauts to be of sound body and mind?
16. The novel ends on Christmas Eve, 1968. Jim and Grace are watching a broadcast from the Apollo 8 mission whose crew is the first to see the entire Earth from space. Why do you think Johncock ends with this powerful image?

About the Author

Benjamin Johncock was born in England in 1978. His short stories have been published by *The Fiction Desk* and *The Junket*. He is the recipient of an Arts Council England grant and the American Literary Merit Award, and is a winner of Comma Press's National Short Story Day competition. He also writes for the *Guardian*. He lives in Norwich, England, with his wife, his daughter, and his son. *The Last Pilot* is his first novel.

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