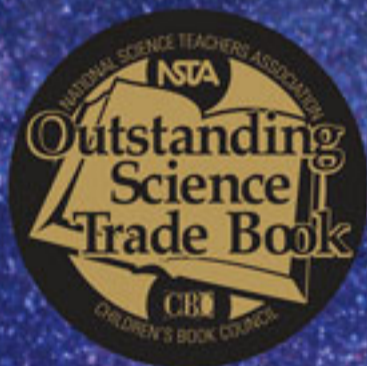
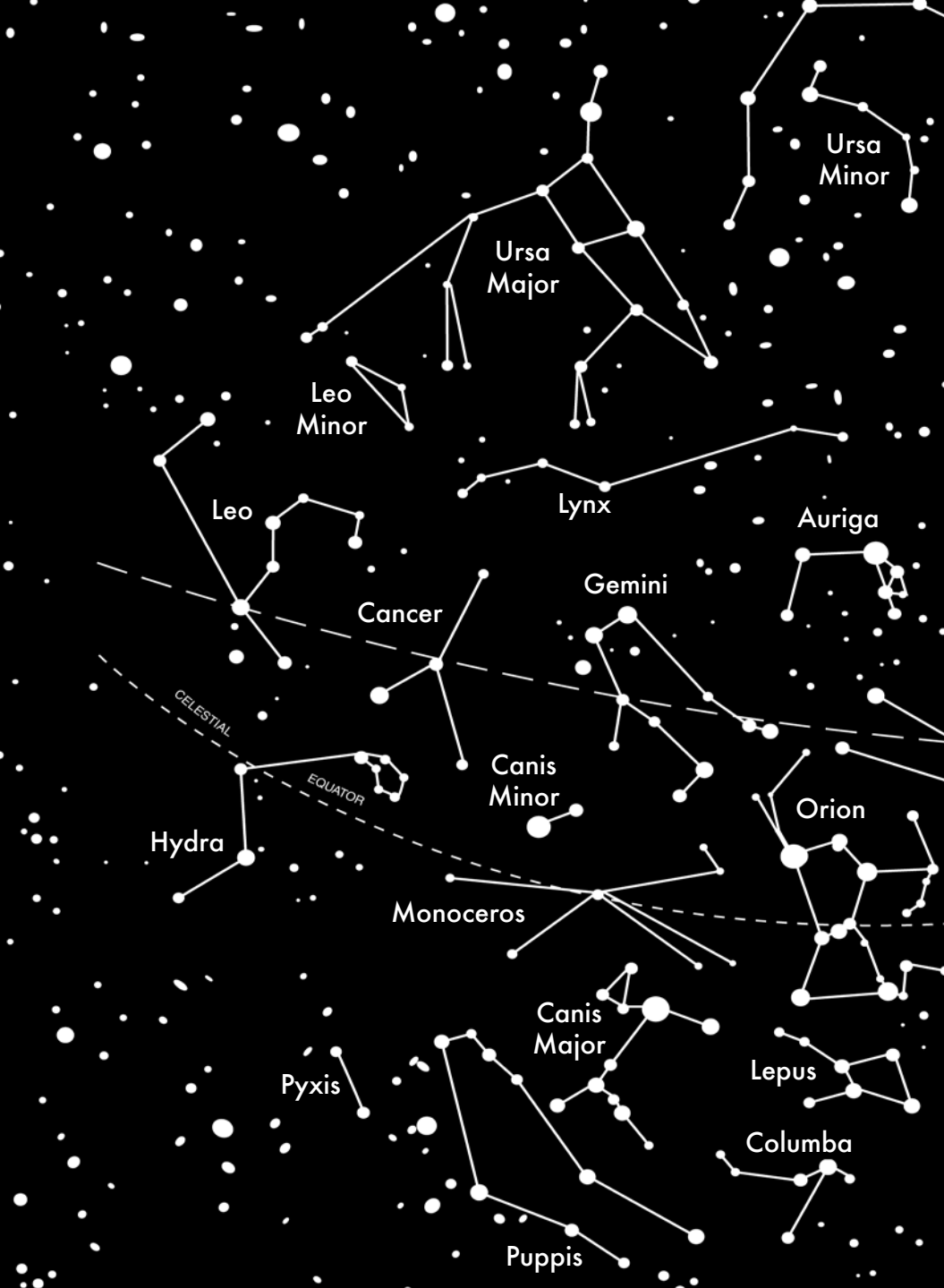


ROCKET MAN

*The Mercury Adventure of **John Glenn***

RUTH ASHBY





Ursa
Minor

Ursa
Major

Leo
Minor

Leo

Lynx

Auriga

Cancer

Gemini

CELESTIAL
EQUATOR

EQUATOR

Canis
Minor

Hydra

Orion

Monoceros

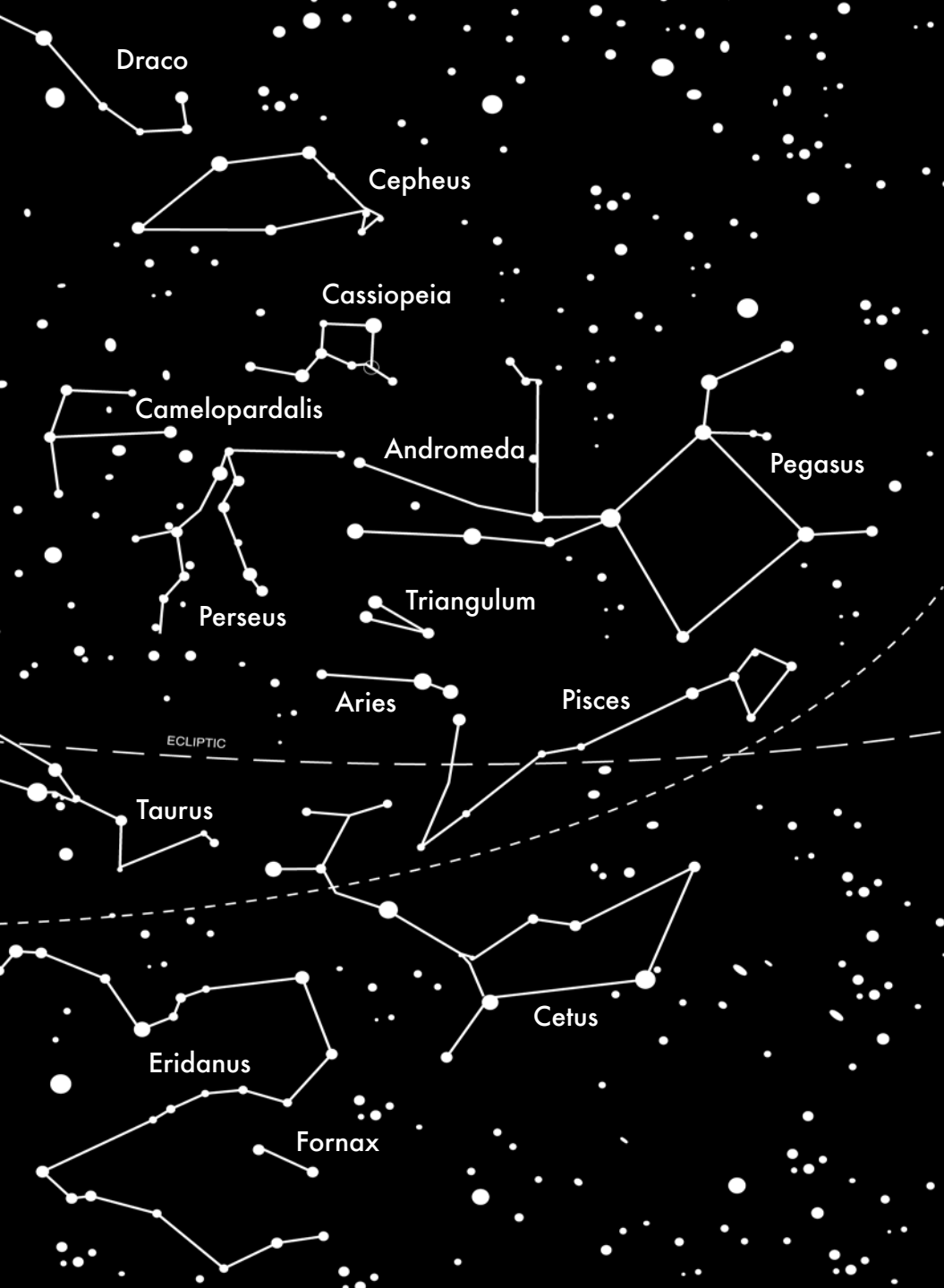
Canis
Major

Lepus

Pyxis

Columba

Puppis



Draco

Cepheus

Cassiopeia

Camelopardalis

Andromeda

Pegasus

Perseus

Triangulum

Aries

Pisces

ECLIPTIC

Taurus

Cetus

Eridanus

Fornax

ROCKET MAN



***In memory of my father,
Bud Ashby***

—R. A.



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ROCKET MAN

The Mercury Adventure of John Glenn

RUTH ASHBY



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ATLANTA

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Author's Note

John Glenn was my childhood hero. I still remember sitting in my elementary school cafeteria to watch his Mercury flight on the school's one black-and-white TV. Glenn's reentry into the atmosphere was edge-of-the-seat suspenseful, since the TV audience knew before he did that the heat shield might be down. I loved Glenn because of his courage and daring but also because he reminded me of my father—another bald, handsome ex-Marine who had fought in the South Pacific and was nicknamed “Bud.” To this day I cannot see Glenn's picture without thinking of my dad.

To write this book, I relied primarily on John Glenn's own memoir, the astronauts' collective account, *We Seven*, and a transcript of the actual *Friendship 7* flight. I took dialogue verbatim from the transcript and, in a few instances, from Glenn's book as well. One of the best accounts of the Mercury Project is Tom Wolfe's brilliant book, *The Right Stuff*. It was made into an excellent movie that older children as well as adults can enjoy.

—R. A.

Rocket Man

It was one-thirty in the morning, February 20, 1962. John Glenn was wide-awake in his bunk in the crew quarters at Cape Canaveral, Florida. Today was the day. He was finally going into space, after three years of training—and waiting.

It would all come down to the next few hours.

Ever since Glenn had been chosen as a Mercury astronaut in America's brand-new space program, his life had been on fast forward. He'd loved every minute of training, from the sessions in the flight simulator to the meetings with President John Kennedy.

The only thing he didn't like were the endless delays. Glenn's flight had already been canceled ten times, mostly on account of bad weather. Once he had even waited in the tiny space capsule for five hours, before

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Mission Control told him to get out and go home. But he refused to think about another delay now.

He began to go over flight procedures in his head, one more time.

Half an hour later the crew doctor, Dr. William Douglas, came in to see Glenn. The weather was iffy, Douglas reported. Maybe it would clear up. Maybe it wouldn't.

Glenn could only hope for the best. He got up and shaved and showered. Breakfast was a super-energy astronaut special: steak and eggs, toast with jelly, orange juice, and high grain cereal. Then the doctor gave him a quick exam.

"You're fit to go," Douglas said. He began sticking little metal biosensors onto Glenn's body. They would keep track of his heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature while he was in orbit.

Next came the pressure suit. Glenn put on the undergarment first, two layers of heavy mesh with metal coils sandwiched between them. Air flowing through the coils would control his temperature during the flight. Then he climbed into the silver suit and zipped up its thirteen zippers. He felt in a pocket for the five little American flags and the special pins he had designed picturing a space capsule circling the Earth.

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They would make good souvenirs of his flight, Glenn thought. He could give them to his two young children, and to the president.

As Glenn put on his silver boots, Douglas stuck the hose from the air supply tube into a fish tank. He figured that if the air was bad, the fish would sense it and react. Glenn, who always liked a good joke, decided to give the doctor a scare. He went over and peered into the tank.

“Hey, Bill,” he called out. “Did you know a couple of those fish are floating belly-up?”

“What?” Douglas exclaimed. He rushed over, expecting to find some dead fish. He grinned when he saw the fish swimming around happily. The doctor was glad to see that Glenn was in such good spirits. He shook the astronaut’s hand and wished him a good voyage.

Glenn stuck his white helmet on his head and took the transport van over to the launch pad. He stepped out onto a dramatic scene. It looked like a movie set, with floodlights playing on the towering Atlas missile. Glenn himself, in his shining silver suit, could have been a visitor from another planet. Today he would become a true astronaut, a sailor among the stars.

Glenn walked into the elevator and rode the six stories up to the capsule. Fellow astronaut Scott Carpenter,

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his backup for this mission, was waiting in the “white room” at the top. The room was sterile and dust free. Carpenter and the rest of the crew wore white jump suits and white paper caps on their heads. Glenn joked that it made them look like old-fashioned drugstore soda boys.

The crew would stuff him, feet first, into the capsule. The name *Friendship 7* had been painted in red and white on its side: friendship for world peace, seven for the seven Mercury astronauts. Glenn’s own children, Dave and Lyn, had picked out the name. He thought it was perfect.

By 6:06 A.M., Glenn was in the capsule. *Friendship 7* was tiny, just ten feet high and six feet wide at its base. Being inside felt like being crammed into a telephone booth, except that Glenn couldn’t turn around. The seat had been molded to his back and fit him like a great body glove. He was packed in so tightly he could barely move his fingers, let alone anything else.

The capsule was bolted shut. The countdown started. T minus 60 minutes.

Through his helmet headset, Glenn could hear the chatter at Mission Control. They were talking about the thickening clouds. The countdown clock stopped. Not again, he thought, thinking of all the other delays.

Rocket Man

A while later, the clouds thinned out. The countdown resumed.

Glenn looked out the periscope that gave him a view of the outside world. Far below him the waves broke on the Florida shore. Down the beach, way off in the distance, he could see the thousands of people who had come to watch his liftoff. Some had been there for a month, waiting out the delays. The whole country—the whole world—was eager for the moment John Glenn would be blasted into space.

But no one was more eager than Glenn!

T minus 35 minutes. Crew members filled up the rocket booster tanks with liquid oxygen, or *lox*. There were eighty tons of *lox* in the Atlas, kept at a temperature of 293 degrees below zero. The extreme cold made the metallic shell of the missile bend and shiver. Perched on top of the immense machine, Glenn could feel it shake and thump beneath him.

T minus 22 minutes. A rocket valve stuck. The countdown stopped, then began again.

T minus 6 minutes. Another holdup, and another fresh start.

Sixty seconds and counting. Across America, people edged closer to their black-and-white television sets and fixed their eyes on the screen.

Rocket Man

Glenn held his breath.

It was really going to happen. In a few moments, the great Atlas rocket would lift into the air, and *Friendship 7* would be shot into space. For the first time, the United States would have a man in orbit around the Earth. And John Glenn, small-town hero from New Concord, Ohio, would be that man.