




The Last Pilot Reading Group Guide

Set against the backdrop of one of the most emotionally charged periods in American history, *The Last Pilot* begins in the bone-dry Mojave Desert during the late 1940s, where US Air Force test pilots are racing to break the sound barrier. Among the exalted few is Jim Harrison: dedicated to his wife, Grace, and their baby daughter.

By the 1960s, the space race is underway and Harrison and his colleagues are offered a place in history as the world's first astronauts. But when his young family is thrown into crisis, Jim is faced with a decision that will affect the course of the rest of his life – whether to accept his ticket to the moon and at what cost.

With echoes of Raymond Carver as well as Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, *The Last Pilot* re-ignites the thrill and excitement of the space race through the story of one man's courage in the face of unthinkable loss.

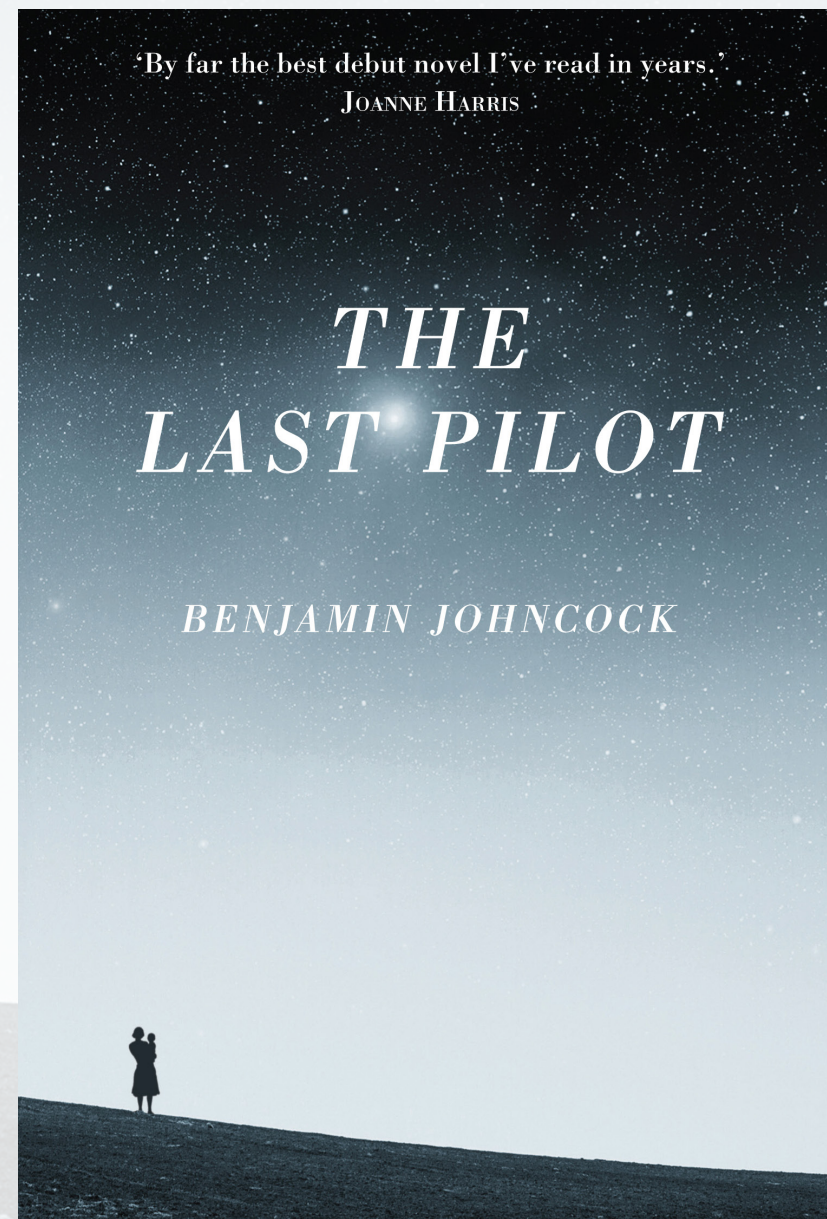
A small, light-colored silhouette of a family (a man, a woman, and a child) is positioned to the left of the quote.

'A first-rate novel by a major new talent'
– Spectator

'Nostalgic and heart-rending... the effect is super charged Hemingway at 70,000 feet.'
– Washington Post

'An impressive debut... a marvellous, emotionally powerful novel.'
– Publisher's Weekly

'This clever fusion of fact and fiction, combined with a sparse writing style, is a Great American Novel – written by a Brit.'
– Times Higher Education



1. What effect does the vast, empty landscape of the Mojave Desert have on the test pilots?
2. When a fellow pilot dies, the men refer to it as 'augering in'. How does living with the daily threat of death affect them all?
3. Pancho's bar plays a central role in life at Muroc. How is Pancho different from the other women in the novel?
4. How does *The Last Pilot* challenge gender stereotypes of the period?
5. What do Grace and the other pilot's wives sacrifice, if anything, by marrying into the US Air Force? Do you envy them or feel sorry for them?
6. Does it change your reading experience to know that some of the characters in the novel were real life people?
7. How important is it to you that the novel is framed by historical events? Do you prefer fiction based on true stories?
8. When Florence is diagnosed with a brain tumour, Ridley refers to it as a 'little, uh, situation'. Why do the pilots find it so hard to talk about reality and pain?
9. What role, if any, does faith play in the novel; both religious and spiritual/ephemeral?
10. How does fatherhood change Jim?
11. Do you think Jim faces up to the reality of Florence's illness before she dies?
12. After watching John Glenn become the first man to orbit the earth, Jim goes upstairs to find Grace crying and he momentarily loses control of his emotions (p.175). How significant is this scene and how does it foreshadow subsequent events?
13. How do the wives of the New Nine Gemini pilots support each other and their husbands once they arrive in Houston?
14. Do you think Jim is wrong to give Grace no choice about going to Houston?
15. When Jim tells Grace that the space program is more important than her, does he mean it? How did it make you feel about him?
16. The pilots and their families were expected overnight to become role models for the American public. What effect did this have? Can you think of an equivalent today?
17. Is NASA, and Jim's training, responsible for his breakdown or do they in fact save him?
18. Does Jim's breakdown make him weaker than the other astronauts in training?
19. Is Jim a hero?
20. How has the iconic figure of the astronaut changed since the 1950s and 1960s?
21. The Space Race shaped a generation of men and women in America. How does Benjamin Johncock present an alternative perspective on the era?