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## Finding a Good Read: Flying

A regular column to help you find a good read.

Do you ever dream you're flying? Some say it's about a desire for freedom and independence, control and confidence, a desire for escape and change.

### Stories of human flight

The human urge for flight goes back at least as far as the myth of Icarus who fell to his death when the sun melted his wax and feather wings. Since then there have been many documented attempts to fly with mechanical wings, balloons, gliders, airships and jetpacks.

The history of the twentieth century, in times of both war and peace, was in many ways defined by the invention of the airplane and later the spaceship. David McCullough's **The Wright Brothers** tells the story of Orville and Wilbur Wright who invented, built and flew the world's first successful airplane in 1903.

### Flying in Wartime

For historical accounts, try Juliet Gardiner, **The Blitz, The British Under Attack** or Harriet Salisbury, **The War on Our Doorstep, How the Blitz Changed the East End Forever**.

Donald L Miller's **Masters of the Air** tells the story of the elite American Eighth Army Force, Britain's Lancaster Bomber comrades, who flew bombing missions over Nazi Germany from British airbases. It's also just been released as a mini-series on Apple TV+.

Roald Dahl is more famous for books like *The Witches* and *The Twits* but **Going Solo** is his brilliant account of becoming an RAF pilot. For a French perspective try Antoine de Saint Exupéry's **Wind, Sand and Stars** or **Night Flight**.



Anyone who's seen **Apocalypse Now** remembers the terrifying scene of Vietnam combat helicopters attacking in formation to a blaring soundtrack of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*. In **Chickenhawk** Robert Mason tells the horrifying story of the war as seen by a low-flying helicopter.

Two of the best novels about pilots in war are **Slaughterhouse 5** by Kurt Vonnegut about the bombing of Dresden, and Joseph Heller's **Catch-22**, a satire about the madness of war that is both hilarious and horrifying. Len Deighton's **Bomber** is a novel that centres on the decision by Arthur

Harris ('Bomber' or 'Butcher' depending on your politics) to bomb civilian areas around Berlin during the Second World War.

Frederick Forsyth tells a more redemptive story in **The Shepherd**, about a post-war pilot who is guided back to base by a mysterious plane after engine failure. In 2023 the film was released with **John Travolta** as the mysterious pilot.

### Space flight

For a brilliant account of post-war rocket research and early test pilots, try Tom Wolfe's **The Right Stuff**, later made into a film with Tom Cruise. And sci fi is full of space flights, from Arthur C Clarke's **2001: A Space Odyssey** to Andy Weir's **Project Hail Mary**.



### Airplane disasters

There's no shortage of books and films about airplane disasters, both accidental and deliberate. In **Alive** Piers Paul Read tells the story of a plane crash in the remote Andes in 1974 and the heroism and horror the survivors endured. **Miracle on the Hudson** recounts what happened when an Airbus A320 with 150 passengers ran into a flock of geese and had to make an emergency landing on the Hudson River in New York. In 2016 the events were turned into **Sully**, a film with Tom Hanks.

9/11 has not prompted many films that focus directly on the planes and the towers. The exception is **United 93**, the story of the fourth hijacked plane in Pennsylvania and the attempt of passengers to wrest back control. Novels inspired by 9/11 include Don DeLillo's **Falling Man** and Mohsin Hamid's **The Reluctant Fundamentalist**. Curiously, the events of 2001 seem to have been anticipated in Tom Clancy's 1994 novel, **Debt of Honor**.

### Birds and Flight

Birds often embody the urge for freedom or healing, from the 1962 film **Birdman of Alcatraz** to Helen Macdonald's autobiographical **H is for Hawk**. Other powerful books include Barry Hines' **A Kestrel for a Knave**, Paul Gallico's classic **The Snow Goose** and Richard Bach's **Jonathan Livingston Seagull**.

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