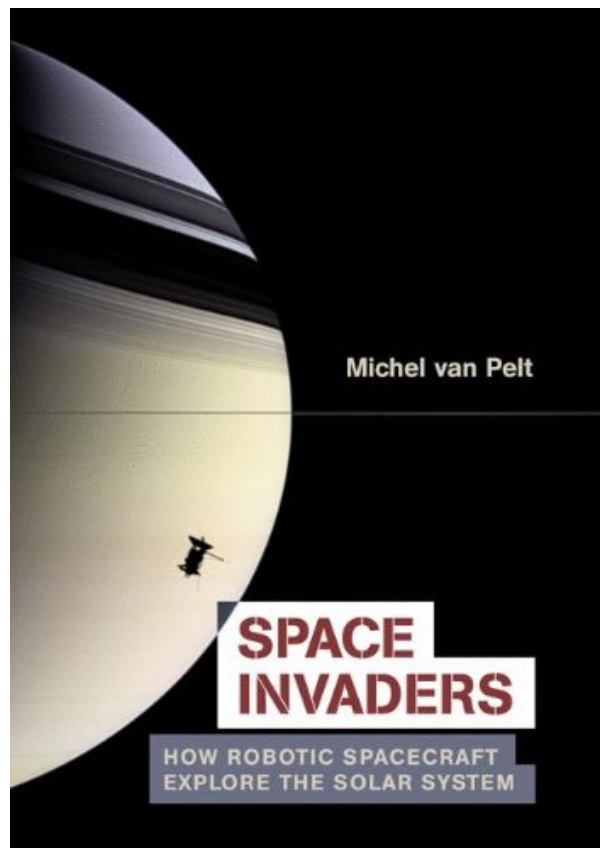
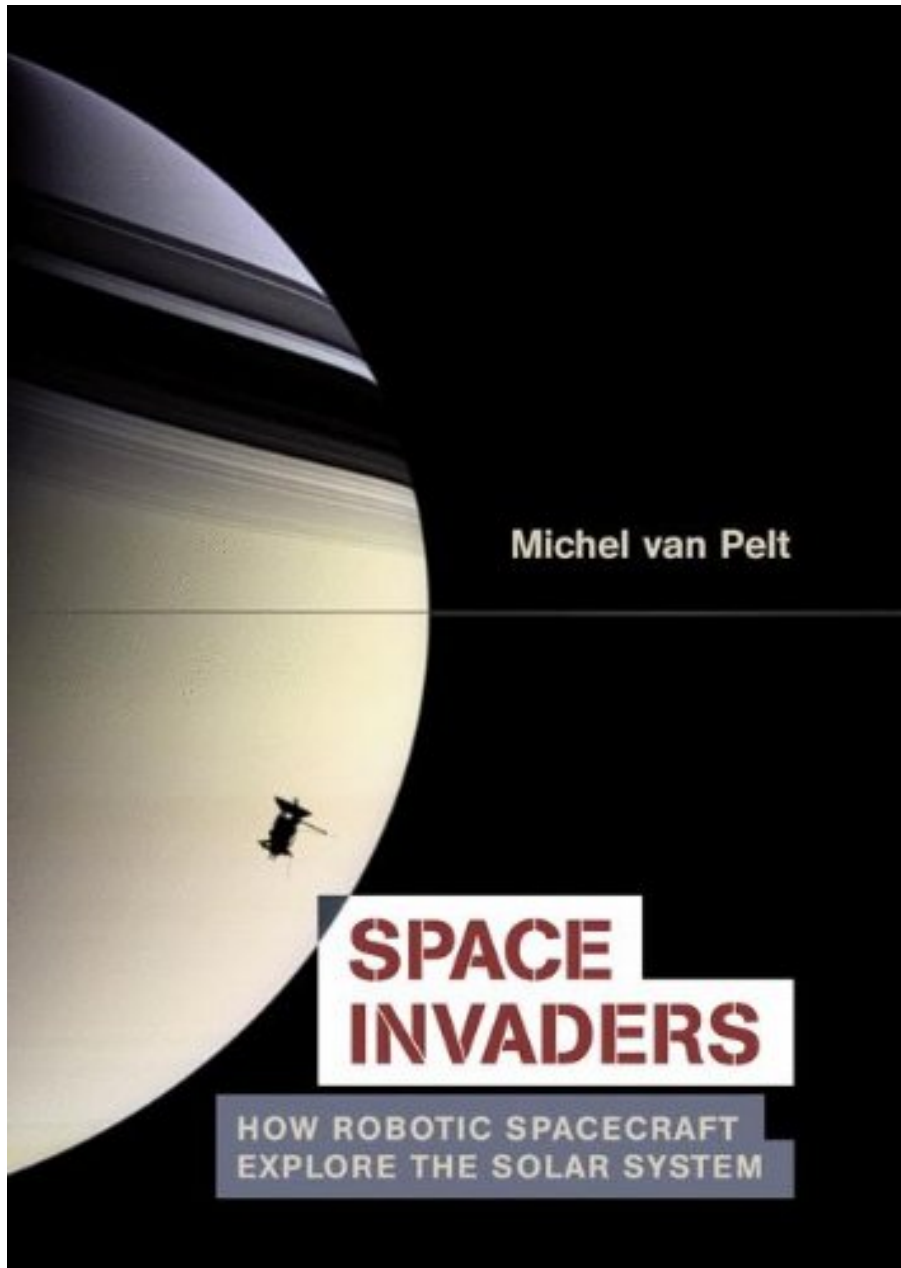


# **SPACE INVADERS: HOW ROBOTIC SPACECRAFT EXPLORE THE SOLAR SYSTEM BY MICHEL VAN PELT**



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The long arms of Man

By Y. Juhani Westman

In the beginning half a century ago there was a real dichotomy between the perception of "manned" and "unmanned" missions. These days the difference stands between "planned", i.e. mostly imagined, manned multibillion missions with men on, say Mars, and the multihundred million real missions where you have spacecraft and instruments out among the planets, moons, comets, asteroids and whatnot, with their hardworking crews in the Mission Controls here on Earth. We invade the Solar Systems with programmable senses aboard the spacecrafts, tied to our perception with unseen electronic nerve connections. The Solar System unfolded, since the beginnings half a century ago, as a collection of much more hostile places than could be imagined during those decades when space technology was born and developed. Fortunately the technology of guidance and control, needed by process industry as well as by ballistic missiles could be adapted to spacecrafts.

Crafts in space - crew on the ground. Thus man is not put at risk, and through the years there has been a plethora of mishaps fatal to the craft, mostly only embarrassing for their crews and patrons. Most of the places visited by our spacecraft would be very difficult environments for man, and some of them would be positively lethal. To this day almost all - with a few exceptions - of the invaders were sent out on one-way missions. Michel van Pelt has done us all a great service in describing in layman's language how all this came to be. He also describes how the "old" Solar System gradually is superseded by a new, more complete understanding of how the diversity of worlds still underline the commonality of the physical laws governing their evolution. Thus we gain a clearer understanding also of our own place in the scheme of things.

There has been a lot going on between the first Lunas and Pioneers of the nineteen fifties and the Cassini-Huygens, Deep Space, SMART-1 and Messenger of today, it takes an exposition as "Space Invaders" to give the full scope of our "robotic" exploration, which, of course, will be going on for the foreseeable future. If anything, there should be lots of excitement still ahead.

To explain the "how" and the "when" of all this, in a volume of some 300 pages, including glossary and index, is a tall order for anyone. van Pelt has accepted the challenge and comes through with flying colours. All the salient points get covered, in a lucid prose. During the reading the "why's" of it all unfold, bit by bit. I thoroughly enjoyed this book.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

An enjoyable read

By MATHIEW

This book's about unmanned spacecraft (is there any "manned" spacecraft aside from Apollo anyway? orbiters don't count!). But in a very generic way. So much, that along the first chapters the author says a couple of times "sometimes the rovers are built this way, some other times they are built this other way", giving the impression there are a thousand rovers out there or in production. It would have been easier to exemplify with real rovers. This pattern of extreme generalization is repeated too much to my taste for a field where the number of samples (spacecraft) is very limited. Also, I was expecting to have detailed information and accountings on most spaceprobes, if not all: their scientific achievements, goals, detailed numbers. But this book is not a historical account (and I admit it's my fault to have expected that, not the author's). Rather, as the very adequate subtitle points out, it's about "how robotic spacecraft explore the solar system". And on this last statement, this book very much succeeds and it's a pleasure to follow. It begins by "dissecting" an imaginary generic space probe and explaining what each subsystem is for, and its possible variations/configurations according to mission needs (I was astonished to learn the dangers behind the radioisotope thermal generators -RTGs- and that any single technician is allowed to work on them for just 2 minutes in his entire life!).

Later on the book, the author takes us on a tour following the route of a spacecraft on the ground, from building, testing, adding instruments, and all the way through launch. Finally, he chooses a couple of missions he considers adequate examples and takes us through a detailed account of them (but just on a couple, remember this is no history book!). I particularly enjoyed the account of the Huygens probe on its ride into Titan, and the very interesting details on Ulysses. No surprise the author is an ESA guy!

The last chapter is a speculation on what awaits us in the future of spacecraft --but an insider's, well funded speculation.

All in all, and despite not being exactly what I was originally looking for, I enjoyed the book very much, as well as the fun that the author adds here and there. Summarizing, if you're looking for the nits and bits of classic missions such as the Voyagers, Vikings, etc., look elsewhere. If you want details onto how these things work in general, then you're on target.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Nice robotic space summary

By Craig B. Clark

The book was an interesting narrative of the history of robotics in space. Summary of a number of missions and how robotics has made space exploration possible.

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