



The Map of My Dead Pilots: The Dangerous Game of Flying in Alaska

Colleen Mondor

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Northern Exposure meets *Air America* in this expose of the daily life and death insanity of commercial flying in Alaska.

The Map of My Dead Pilots is about flying, pilots, and Alaska, and, more specifically, about those pilots who take death-defying risks in the Last Frontier and sometimes pay the price. Colleen Mondor spent four years running dispatch operations for a Fairbanks-based commuter and charter airline—and she knows all too well the gap between the romance and reality of small plane piloting in the wildest territory of the United States. From overloaded aircraft to wings covered in ice, from flying sled dogs and dead bodies, piloting in Alaska is about living hard and working harder. What Mondor witnessed day to day would make anyone's hair stand on end.

Ultimately, it is the pilots themselves; laced with ice and whiskey, death and camaraderie, silence and engine roar—who capture her imagination. In fine detail, Mondor reveals the technical side of flying, the history of Alaskan aviation, and a world that demands a close communion with extreme physical danger and emotional toughness. *The Map of My Dead Pilots* is an engrossing narrative whose gritty, no-holds-barred style is reminiscent of the works of Ken Kesey and Tim O'Brien.

The Map of My Dead Pilots: The Dangerous Game of Flying in Alaska Details

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From Reader Review The Map of My Dead Pilots: The Dangerous Game of Flying in Alaska for online ebook

Virginia says

I don't remember where I heard about this book – maybe from Goodreads? Maybe from an article somewhere else on the internet. But I am so glad I read this because it really resonated with me – it's about aviation in Alaska, superficially, but more importantly it's about life. I, for one, am not familiar with aviation in the slightest, but it didn't matter, reading this.

I loved the writing in this book. I think the essay format was perfect for telling these stories.

I also loved the stories – the pseudonyms got a little confusing (Tony Sam Scott Frank Bob etc) – especially since it was obvious that every one of these people was living larger than life in the author's mind, bland and interchangeable pseudonyms did not do them all justice.

What I most want to know is how the author got this book published without drawing down the legal wrath of, well, anyone. Did she time this specifically for after the Company went out of business, or did they go out of business because of stories like this? Or for some other reason entirely? This sort of tell-all style has gotten more than one person fired or sued, and I am sure there were a number of people who were not pleased that all the blatantly illegal details of how the business was run that are shared in this were made public. Especially since many of the deaths of the titular pilots in question were directly or indirectly caused by Company policies or procedures.

Michael says

I wanted to read this book because my father had been a bush pilot in Alaska during the late-1940s and early-1950s. The book is not a blow by blow history of aviation in Alaska, and in some ways that was a bit of a disappointment. However, I found myself drawn in chapter by chapter to what really amounts to a sort of *The Things We Carried* for Alaskan bush pilots. Instead of a straight-forward narrative, the book is more a memoir of the author's time spent working in the operations office for an aviation company in Alaska during the 1990s. Mixing her own personal stories of working with the company, doing graduate work on the causes of airplane crashes in Alaska, the death of her father, and dealing with deaths of so many of the pilots with whom she worked, Mondor creates a world in which the "truth" about crashes, and near-misses, and other tragic (and sometimes comic) episodes associated with flying in Alaska is constantly changing. Like Tim O'Brien she deals extensively with how her "troops"--the pilots--told and retold stories to try and figure out what went wrong, what they might have done differently, who or what was to blame. I would have rated it higher except for the fact that there is a tremendous amount of repetition, not just in telling the same stories again and again, but in the exact same language used over and over again. It sometimes seems like "filler." Nevertheless, I'm glad I read it, if just for the last few chapters dealing with one of the pilots, his return back to his family in Ohio, and his efforts to get them to try and understand what he went through while participating in one of the most romanticized, and particularly deadly, vocations in the world.

Savannah says

Living as I do in a village accessible only by air and water and in a winter of weather as vicious as this, I am finding a deep desire to also add to this review the tag "horror." Or maybe "thriller." Because this is the world we here live in, dependent upon these pilots and companies, and it's damned scary. Don't believe for a moment that the author is exaggerating. Anything. Because just as the pilots make a (sometimes unfounded) leap of faith that they'll complete any given trip, so do we as passengers make that same bafflingly unsensible decision. Who hasn't gotten on a flight because they *needed* to get somewhere, even though, really, it would have been much safer to have stayed at home? Or listened to a pilot on a windy day go "piece of cake" when that bravado did nothing to reassure and only made the hapless passengers worry all the more?

Nick says

The Map of My Dead Pilots was a very good book. It was a little shocking how nonchalant the author is about death, but once you start reading you understand why. Mondor paints a very engaging picture of Alaskan flying that really illustrates that flying in Alaska is not what TV paints it to be. It will leave you burnt out, hating humanity or dead. Or all three. It's one of the bleaker books I've ever read, but there's an undercurrent of camaraderie that sweeps you away.

Richard says

As a pilot, the book reads like the accident reports we review to remind us what not to do. Flying is an unforgiving thing and the conditions in Alaska offer more challenges than many pilots would ever want. My reservation with this memoir is on its persistent litany of death caused by pilots making a series of bad decisions. The reality of flying is that most pilots make good decisions. Otherwise the crash numbers would be huge-- and they're not. Even in Alaska, most pilots make good choices. I would guess the company mentioned in the book went out of business because they got the bejesus sued out of them. I think the adage holds true: there are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are very few old, bold pilots.

ExLibris_Kate says

I live in a world that revolves around aviation, so I was very excited to read this memoir. Piloting a charter plane in Alaska means you are flying in what can be harsh conditions. It also means flying by sight, unusual cargo (everything from dogs to dead bodies) and it can mean some pretty risky situations for the pilot and the crew. I was immediately drawn into the book by Colleen Mondor's writing style; it is straightforward but the feelings she had for the people and the place really came through. You get an opportunity to look into a unique way of life and see all that is beautiful and awful about the pilots, what brought them to Alaska, and how they ended up flying these planes.

One aspect that I find very appealing is that you don't have to be an aviation buff to enjoy this book. The experiences of the pilots go beyond simply flying and are full of adventure, sorrow, laughter and even death.

It is a way of life for them. Many of the stories stayed with me, but one in particular, about a young girl who was overdosing, left me shaking my head. (I won't spoil the story, but it wasn't what I expected at all.) When I finished reading this book, I had to remind myself that this was actually about real people and that these people, or those like them, are still flying and some are still not making it back. It is a world that is very different from my comfortable suburban existence, which made it all the more fascinating to me. This is a wonderful book and I can think of several people on my list who will find it in their stocking this Christmas.

Jenny Brown says

This book started off really well, but I wouldn't have missed anything if I'd stopped reading halfway through, because so much of the rest of the book just droned on repeating information we'd already learned in the first half.

The actual subject matter of this book is important and of great interest. And the author's voice in the first half of the story is well-crafted and appropriate.

But she ruined things as the story went on by adopting an affected literary style that she couldn't pull off. Telling her story straight and making it BE a story, would have helped a lot. As it was I felt like she had a long magazine article that she padded out to book length.

I'd also have liked to read more facts to back up the strong points she's making about how unsafe aviation is in Alaska. As it is, her argument is based only on quotes from people he tells us in the beginning are composite, i.e. invented, characters. This doesn't protect her from lawsuits and it does erode her credibility. In the same way, she and never reveals the name of "The Company" about which she makes such serious allegations. This greatly weakens her argument.

As her story peters out and we realize we aren't going to learn anything more about her subject matter, she pads the book out more with digressions about her father's death, which as painful as it might have been to her, has no real place in a story about aviation in Alaska.

Reading it I came away with the feeling that she'd taken what was the beginning of a decent novel about pilots in Alaska and melded it with a bunch of exercises written for a college "creative writing" class. She says her agent talked her out of writing the novel. My advice, ditch the agent. This would have worked a lot better as a novel.

Elisabeth says

Absolutely fascinating! I just wanted more and more of the stories of the dangers and strangeness these pilots and Colleen faced, working for "the Company". I did have trouble remembering who was who, but I don't think it mattered. I more or less substituted "this guy I knew" for Sam and Tony and Bryce et al. Because it was less about the people and more about the experience.

I really like what another reviewer wrote about this being about telling stories. It is. Stories, memories... What do we know, what can we know? What changes, what is lost? What elements surprise us? What elements explain us? What elements bring us comfort or fear. How many versions of a story are there? who

tells it best? It's the art of oral story telling captured and dissected in print and in narrative form.

Well done, Colleen. I really enjoyed this book.

My cousin wrote this book. I can't wait to read it!!!

Brooks says

Wow, I could not put down this book. It reminded me of the book, "The Things they carried" in that it has many of the same themes. But instead of war, this was bush flying in Alaska. Like war, there was the death of too many friends. And the death was always close at hand and almost random. It is also how tragic experiences still victimize those that had no physical wounds. But it also celebrates the friendships and black comedy from those experiences. I thought back to a time when I worked overseas at a small school in the middle of a giant slum. The friendship were intense, but also the laughs. Because when it is really terrible, all you can do is laugh. You are so glad to leave, but then realize you miss the close friendships that adversity brings.

Does Alaska attract the riskiest pilots or does flying in Alaska push pilots to take too many risks? Mondor seems to think the later.

Maureen E says

I've been reading Colleen Mondor's blog for awhile and her book sounded interesting. Then I saw that one of my libraries had bought it, so I put it on hold. And here we are.

The Map of My Dead Pilots is an account of the author's years working at an Alaskan aviation company. It's a fascinating book, lying somewhere between a nonfiction essay--which is to say an fact-based narrative about Alaskan flying--and a memoir. Mondor places herself in the middle of the group, but she herself worked in Ops, not as a pilot. So she is at once involved and an observer. It's a book about flying in Alaska, with fascinating and horrifying details of the conditions and life. It's full of stories both funny and tragic. Sometimes these are the same stories.

She also weaves the different stories together, particularly the deaths of her friends Luke and Bryce, and the end of her father's life. The book begins with the statement that Bryce's death changed everything for those working at the Company, but it's only slowly that the details of Bryce's death are revealed. And throughout the book, Mondor grapples with the why of these three main events. Why did Luke die? Why did Bryce? Why did her father? It's a book about searching for impossible answers.

It's also about the stories we tell ourselves. In one chapter, Mondor gives several possible versions of Bryce's death as created by one of his fellow pilots. Each one is a cohesive narrative, each one emphasizes a different side of the possibilities, gives a different answer to the why. None of them are wrong, but none of them can be said to be true either. The group cannot answer the why of Bryce's death, but they can create their own

narratives and they can create them as a group.

Because of all of this, I was left with an unsettling feeling of wondering, not exactly how much of this book is true, but how much is seen through a lens. This is, of course, true of all books, fiction and non-fiction, but Mondor seems to invite this question, to require it, almost.

It's strongly narrative as, I would argue, most good fiction is, but never loses sight of fact that these are real people whose lives have been changed and altered by the experience.

I did wish that we had returned to the Alaskan part just at the very end, but that's a very minor complaint. All in all, this is one of the best non-fiction books I've ever read and I highly recommend it to anyone who's interested in the subject, or just in stories and how we tell them. One minor caveat: there is a lot of swearing. I'm able to read past most of it, but I know others aren't.

Book source: public library

Book information: Lyons Press, 2011; non-fiction, adult but could be a great cross-over for the right teen

Mother Reader's review, with an interview and links

Melki says

"Get God or get drunk, either way you're still flying tomorrow."

When Alaska Senator Ted Stevens died in an airplane crash in 2010, I remember an NPR commentator citing a statistic about the absurdly high number of plane crashes that occur in that state each year. I was blown away by the figure, but wouldn't you know - I can't find it. (Curse you, Google! You've never let me down before!)

I did find this:

*During 1990-2009 there were 1,615 commuter and air taxi crashes in the United States. Commuter and air taxi crashes in Alaska accounted for more than one-third of all commuter and air taxi crashes in the U.S., and approximately 20% of the fatal crashes and deaths.**

At the time, all I could think was **why?** Why is flying in Alaska such a risky undertaking?

In the largest state in the union, roads are scarce, and settlements are scattered. Air travel is as common to residents as taking a cab or bus would be to city dwellers. There are people waiting on delivery of food and medical supplies. And always, no matter what the weather, the mail must get through.

Mondor's book does answer some questions about the frequency of Alaska air crashes. It seems to boil down to the fact that time is money. Pilots who arrive on time have a better chance of getting plum assignments, more hours in the air and even a shot at flying for the airlines in the lower 48. They fly carrying too much weight and often miscalculate their fuel supply. Their cargo can include everything from sports teams, to corpses to growling, yapping sled dogs packed three to a crate. The job does seem to attract more than its share of daredevils.

And then, there's the weather . . .

Poor visibility, blowing snow, ice on the wings. Mountains rise out of nowhere. Flying blind is an all-too-frequent possibility.

I guess the real question is not why, but instead, why aren't there *more* crashes?

The book is something of an odd memoir in that most of the stories are told by pilots other than Mondor. Her style is not particularly engaging and having several different pilots weigh in on why one of their own crashed quickly becomes monotonous. Serious aviation buffs may find this book fascinating, but there's not much here to hold the interest of the average reader.

Still, she brings up one good point that I'll be thinking about for some time to come:

Was he just crazy and that's why he liked flying in Alaska, or was it flying in Alaska that made him that way?

* - <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/aviat...>

Susan Paxton says

Very episodic - the author is primarily an essayist and it shows. Often moving, sometimes irritating - Alaska is a giant welfare state supported by our taxes and special lax regulations. Pilots and those interested in aviation will find it a good if spotty read.

Kelsey Burnette says

Haven't finished this most excellent memoir yet, but I just came across the quote that so far captures the book for me: "Was he just crazy and that's why he liked flying in Alaska, or was it flying in Alaska that made him that way?"

If you are a pilot or if you are interested in flying or if you live in or otherwise have a thing for Alaska or if you just like a thought-provoking, amusing, and well-written memoir...this book is for you!

The chapter called "The Dead Body Contract" is also one that will stick with me (for better or more likely worse). Truth is definitely stranger and sicker than fiction. Wow.

Deborah says

This is very interesting, maybe a little scary if you have to fly in Alaska.

When we were in Alaska we flew in a small plane from Talkeetna and landed on a glacier. It was lots of fun. We almost didn't get to go because of the weather. They kept saying maybe, and keep checking back.

It snowed a foot of snow on the mountain the night before and they said we couldn't land because if it was too soft we might not be able to take off from the glacier. They were so sure we weren't going to land that they sent a couple that had only paid for a sight-seeing flight option with us. And they didn't give us the glacier boots. I picked this company because they had the boots.

The pilot never said anything about landing, he just did it. I only realized we were landing when I saw our shadow on the snow. I was the first one off the plane after the pilot, when I sunk to my knees in snow, he said, "Oh, your feet might get wet."

Alison Gresik says

This memoir is deceptively simple at first, but through a lyrical, searching voice, circling at various heights over the same themes and events, Mondor builds to a powerful impact. You think this book is about the dangers of Alaskan flying when it's actually about story-telling and the elusive nature of truth and memories. The structure and tone of the book feel refreshingly original, and I'm grateful for Mondor's reverent observation of herself and the world of the pilots she came to know.
