



Strange Angel

The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist
John Whiteside Parsons

by George Pendle
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In a recent Spiegel-magazine article about the notorious German film maker Rainer Werner Fassbinder it was asked whether artists need toxic influence and would they still be good human beings.

Reading the book about Jack Parsons one could ask whether ingenious people need toxic chaos and transcendental obsession to be extraordinary creative.

The painstakingly researched book by George Pendle is a page turner – not only for technically interested readers and friends of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, but it renders also a panoramic social view of the world between the two wars, in particular the society in the USA, in California, Los Angeles and Pasadena, telling the story of the trendsetting, secretive and strange developments in the Arroyo Seco.

The story begins with Jack's parents having moved to California from Massachusetts to L.A. in 1913, a couple of months before Jack Whiteside Parsons was born on October 2, 1914 in the Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles. His mother Ruth got divorced soon afterwards. Ruth's parents Walter and Carrie Whiteside moved to California to be with Jack and their daughter, using their wealth to buy an upscale house on Orange Grove Avenue in Pasadena—known locally as "Millionaire's Mile"—where they could live together.

This was the start of a wild ride for Jack and his school-buddy "Ed" Edward Forman involving prominent and not so prominent names like Hugo Gernsberg (Amazing Stories), H.P. Lovecraft, the L.A. Science Fiction Lodge (LASFL), Ray Bradbury and Robert A. Heinlein, they also had brief encounter with communism, participating in discussions with Sidney Weinbaum and friends living also in Pasadena.

Attracted by a public presentation given by BOLLAY, a Karman assistant, on the Eugen Saenger rocket motor experiments, Parsons and Forman "wandered into this enclave of scientific brilliance", the California Institute of Technology (CIT or Caltech) and its associated Guggenheim Aeronautical Laboratory California Institute of Technology (GALCIT) by chance.

The chief of the GALCIT wind-tunnel for aeronautical testing, Clark Millikan – professor and son of Nobel Prize winner Robert Millikan - declined their application, but GALCIT's director Theodor von Karman, triggered by one of his graduate students Frank Malina, supported their request and allowed them to use GALCIT facilities after hours but without pay nor any funding. Even contacts with the secretive Robert Goddard were established.

Initial tests were carried out by Caltech graduate students Frank Malina, William A. BOLLAY, Carlos C. Wood, Apollo M. O. Smith and, along with Jack Parsons and Edward S. Forman and Weld Arnold as photographer. Joined by another rocket enthusiast, Hsue-Shen Tsien, a Chinese Caltech student, the group became known as "suicide squad" because of spectacular explosions caused by them on- and off-campus.

Years later Jack got into a fateful and long lasting association with English sect leader and "Great Priest" Aleister Crowley ("love is the law"), the founder of the O.T.O (Ordo Templi Orientis) cult. Of course his disappointing association with L. Ron Hubbard is not forgotten to be mentioned as well.

The inventions and breakthroughs Jack Parsons and his group made for "rocketry" and their impacts on the military during the war, on industry and spaceflight in general and in particular with respect to the creation of JPL are described and explained in detail.

Jack Parsons invented the first rocket engine to use a cast-able, composite rocket propellant, and pioneered the advancement of both liquid-fuel and solid-fuel rockets.

During his entire lifetime Jack Parsons traveled into new hemispheres by whatever means at his disposal. In memory of his indomitable urge to look behind things, a crater on the far side of the Moon was named in his honor - forever turned away from earth, looking at eternity.

I highly recommend this book - your horizon will be broadened by lessons in technical history, social behavior, human vanity, obsession and engagement, leading to immense success, pathetic, tragic, and devastating moments.

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