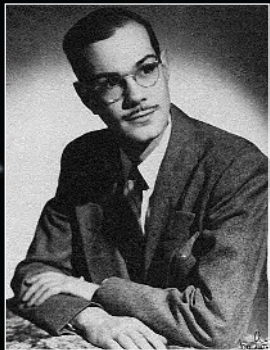


The sadness of star voyagers

In Holywell Cemetery, just behind St Cross Church near Longwall Street in central Oxford, lies a little visited grave. It is the final resting place of the science fiction writer James Blish, whose writing credits include the celebrated *Cities in Flight* series.

In these four epic books are chronicled the adventures of the citizens of planet Earth as they set forth to colonise the galaxy in cities that have been converted to spacecraft using massive antigravity generators known as 'spindizzies'.

Blish (pictured below) had come from the United States to live and write in the environs of Oxford because he loved its restless intellectual atmosphere.



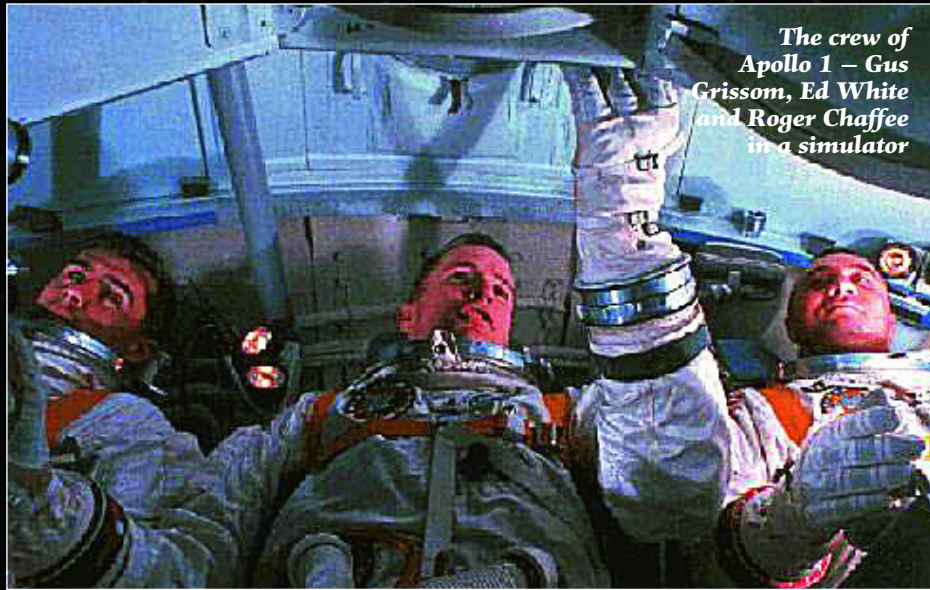
He was also a pragmatist and supplemented his income by writing the first novelisations of episodes of the *Star Trek* TV series (the classic series with William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy and DeForest Kelley) then being filmed in Hollywood.

They were, as he put it modestly, 'his bread and butter' But in the same year that Blish began writing these novelisations of a future space navy the real efforts to put a man on the moon almost disintegrated in a terrible tragedy

A few miles to the east of the teeming bustle of the Kennedy Visitor's centre at Cape Canaveral is a little visited part of American space history. Here the Atlantic breeze sighs among the stunted palms and the palmetto grass and whines mournfully through the twisted steel gridwork of abandoned, skeletal launch gantries.

It is Pad 34, site of one of the first – and worst – disasters in space history, for it was here, 46 years ago, on the 27 January 1967 that astronauts Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee lost their lives when fire swept through the capsule of Apollo 1 – and in a matter of seconds killed all three astronauts.

The cause was later traced to faulty insulation around a wire that sparked and ignited the contents of the capsule which had been pressured in an atmosphere of pure oxygen. In such an environment ordinary materials burn with blow-torch intensity.



The crew of Apollo 1 – Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee in a simulator

Author and scientist Richard Corfield reflects on the fact and fiction of mankind's bid to explore the final frontier



The official NASA photo of the crew of the space shuttle Challenger mission 51L. All seven members of the crew were killed when the shuttle exploded during launch in January, 1986. From front left, are: astronauts Michael J. Smith, Francis R. (Dick) Scobee, and Ronald E. McNair. Rear left are: Ellison Onizuka, Christa McAuliffe, Gregory Jarvis and Judith Resnik

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