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## More about the man, less about the moon

It's so flimsy," I thought as the Gemini astronauts in "First Man" were squeezed into a thimble-sized space capsule sitting on a rocket — their only protection as they are hurled 230,000 miles into the void of space.

As the men were inserted into the claustrophobic chamber, I flashed back to the scene in "The Wizard of Oz" where the charlatan wizard unhinges a door cut into the tin woodsman's metallic chest and hangs a soft red heart in his hollow innards, making him human.

Other man-on-the-moon movies — "The Right Stuff," "Apollo 13" and even "Hidden Figures" — are celebrations of American exceptionalism. The purpose of director Damien Chazelle's "First Man" is to show the many small steps that led to Neil Armstrong's giant leap and to capture the humanity of the capable, introspective engineer who became the first man to walk on the moon.

Chazelle ("La La Land") gives Armstrong (Ryan Gosling) a heart.

It's not easy. As with all heroes, the laurels are entwined with suffering and disappointment.

Armstrong lives in his head, where he soothes his restless mind by solving engineering problems. The dangers of his job as test pilot and astronaut force him to compartmentalize.

In 1961, Armstrong is not focused on his work, and everyone knows it. They don't quite trust him because his 2-year-old daughter Karen has a brain tumor and he's distracted by her situation.

Armstrong, who has built emotional walls thick enough to keep the shadow of his own death at bay, is helpless to solve the problem of his daughter's illness.



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Karen is the sentimental center of the movie. Without her, Armstrong is a tin man.

For a lead character, Armstrong has relatively few lines. Yet talk is unnecessary. Gosling's specialty is introversion. His withholding internality is suspenseful, not plodding. We learn all we need to know through Gosling's doleful eyes.

After Karen's death Armstrong is selected for the space program, and Chazelle methodically takes us through Armstrong's training and early space expeditions.

There's a gyroscopic simulator that whirls the astronaut trainees upside down and in every spherical direction. The nausea and disorientation are irrepressible.

But later, on a space-docking mission, as his capsule spins wildly out of control, this is the training that saves Armstrong's life.

Fellow moonwalker Buzz Aldrin (Corey Stoll), is portrayed as irritating, egoistic and churlish. Aldrin's the kind of guy who points out the fatal miscalculations of a fallen test pilot at the man's funeral and later crassly angles for a walk on the moon.

Claire Foy ("The Crown") plays Armstrong's wife, Janet, unfussy and unfluffed in her Mia Farrow haircut, as a no-nonsense Greatest Generation wife and mother, heir to the pioneer women of the 19th century. It's the kind of role in which one expects to find Frances McDormand.

Janet shows her mettle by storming NASA headquarters when the agency shuts off the squawk box she's been given to listen in on mission control. When the docking problem occurs, she wants to know in real time whether her husband will live or die.

Near the end of the movie, on the eve of Armstrong's flight to the moon, Janet confronts him as he plans to slip away from their sleeping sons without saying goodbye and demands he be the one who explains to the boys that their father may never return.

Chazelle is as exacting and methodical in his direction as Armstrong is in his engineering. The director pays precise, museum-quality attention to 1960s period detail: from the Charlie Brown-style pullovers worn by the men on family days to Walter Cronkite's static-infused delight as the lunar module settles on the moon's surface, to images of the looming blue marble that shines brightly in empty space.

Armstrong is first man not just because he was the first human to step on the moon, but because of his coolness under pressure and longevity in a vocation of death.

"First Man" puts us in the capsule with him to experience the hardship, danger and uncertainty of space travel and the toll on the astronauts' psyches and families.

Then it lifts us on a metaphor of new frontiers and conquest.