



Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot

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A poetic and nuanced exploration of the human experience of flight that reminds us of the full imaginative weight of our most ordinary journeys—and reawakens our capacity to be amazed.

The twenty-first century has relegated airplane flight—a once remarkable feat of human ingenuity—to the realm of the mundane. Mark Vanhoenacker, a 747 pilot who left academia and a career in the business world to pursue his childhood dream of flight, asks us to reimagine what we—both as pilots and as passengers—are actually doing when we enter the world between departure and discovery. In a seamless fusion of history, politics, geography, meteorology, ecology, family, and physics, Vanhoenacker vaults across geographical and cultural boundaries; above mountains, oceans, and deserts; through snow, wind, and rain, renewing a simultaneously humbling and almost superhuman activity that affords us unparalleled perspectives on the planet we inhabit and the communities we form.

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From Reader Review Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot for online ebook

Beth says

For this review, I am posting almost exactly what I emailed to the author, for the book was an exact fit for me to read; it matched my interests.

"With this book you have gripped my soul! Despite current efforts by government to ensure my safety with discomfort and airlines to squeeze me into a small seat and keep me locked there for hours, I still love to fly. Transportation is my heritage.

A grandfather worked for and developed a brake for the B & O Railroad. My father was a sea captain who got promoted ashore to orchestrate what got loaded in United States Lines ships in what order and which ships would go where in what order.

I earned my pilot's license in my 20s and felt a similar thrill when I passed a scuba test in my mid-60s. Now 79, I revel in the memories of visits to 60+ countries.

When you write of Cape Town, Hong Kong or Buenos Aires, my mind conjures visions of events and peoples met.

The language in this book eloquently provides new synapses for my brain: Combinations and reflections that open out new pathways of thought.

Having lived on the Chesapeake Bay and within a block of the Long Island Sound, the chapter on 'Water' resounds in my inner being the most. But then, so does the one on 'Lift' that give the understanding of incredulousness of wanting to be able to fly.

Above all, this book gives me the pilot perspective and language that I would not get elsewhere or on my own. I am grateful for the new terms in my vocabulary, especially 'Place Lag'.

Discussion of maps and beacons opened thought of ancient maps, 'google' maps, sea charts, AAA road maps and the National Geographic World map where I have posted dots for places I have been by ship, plane, bus, car and Train.

This is a book to reread when relaxed sufficiently to let thoughts go into the sky, a different sort of skyfaring.

I would so like to meet Mark Vanhoenacker. He is erudite but practical, learned but able. His allusions to authors and books co-exist with his physical flying skills and his ability to let us into his mind as it reveals an uncanny ability to see things a new way and describe the thought to others.

Who else has ever called our attention to the smells of cities? Who else in talking of airplane delays has mentioned not only ice and fog but also animals on a runway, thereby reminding me of safari guides chasing impala off dirt runways so that we could land or take off?

This book means more to me than the pas 250 or so books read in the past few years!"

Penny says

I love to travel - and I have a daughter who lives on another Continent to me, so I fly frequently. However, for some reason that I've not quite worked out, flying scares me witless. The day before the flight my stomach starts its familiar sensation of knots and twists, and as we drive to the airport I feel nervous and

fearful.

Once on the plane I do actually feel a little better, although I have hinted to my husband that I'd probably feel a whole load better if we were in Business Class! But he reckons I grip his hand on take off and landing far harder than I ever did in childbirth (and I'm busy braking with my feet too).

So, has this lovely book by Mark Vanhoenacker made me feel any better about the whole caboodle? Well, yes I really do think it has. He certainly didn't bog me down with the mechanics of it all - I could follow pretty much all he said in that respect.

What I loved was the sense of wonder even a seasoned pilot feels about what he sees and where he travels. He's a thoughtful, slightly dreaming man and I loved the way his imagination literally took flight. I'd even be brave enough to sit in the cockpit with him!

I completely understood the chapter on 'place lag' - the adjustment I so often have to make between having an early breakfast in my very quiet North Yorkshire village, driving to the airport, and then having dinner across the world the same day in, say, Florida. This never ceases to amaze me and makes flying worth it a thousand times over.

Most of all though, this book has helped me see that a long flight is not something simply to be endured, but instead it is all rather wonderful!

Douglas says

I used to be deathly afraid of flying. Once on a flight from Dallas to Amarillo, the pilot left the cockpit and leaned over my seat to look at the wings. He said there was a problem with the hydraulics system and that we may have trouble landing. We buzzed the control tower to make sure our landing gear was engaged and couldn't help notice the fire trucks and ambulances lined up on the runway. Even the news trucks had time to get there. After about an hour of terror, circling the sky unsure if we had our wheels locked down, we landed uneventfully.

Another time, I was on the last flight out before a massive thunderstorm hit Minneapolis. The storm system had produced a tornado that destroyed the town of Greensburg, KS the day before. We took off and flew sideways for a good solid minute before the pilot was able to gain control of the plane again. A solid minute flying sideways.

I once flew in a prop plane from Zambia to Botswana with cracked windows as the pilots used iPads to navigate and meticulously scanned the horizon for other planes. Maybe that's normal for some, but I'm not a prop plane kind of guy.

I say I used to be afraid because I'm not anymore. Crazy as it seems, each of these experiences worked to subdue my fear, and my terror is now in the past. What each of these terrors have in common is that I survived without a scrape. Call it immersion therapy or flooding, all I know is that I saw my fears up close and personal, then I walked right past them onto the other side. Visiting hours over, I descended the steps of the museum, the fear of flight hanging like a prosaic watercolor in the gallery of the past. Nearly forgotten, in fact.

Reading Mark Vanhoenacker's Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot opened up a new chapter for me. The idea of actually enjoying flight. Written almost as a prose poem, Vanhoenacker, a 747 pilot, allows the passenger to enter the cockpit of a pilot's mind. And not just any pilot's mind, but the the mind of someone who passionately and wondrously loves their profession.

If the cover evokes a canvas, his words and sentences are the brushstrokes. I've had the privilege of traveling

globally and Vanhoenacker's definition and coining of the term "place lag" was revelatory for me, "the imaginative drag that results from our jet-age displacements over every kind of distance; from the inability of our deep old sense of place to keep up with our airplanes." If you've ever had your morning coffee in San Francisco and then afternoon tea in Hong Kong in the same 24-hour period or eaten from a box of Turkish Delights in Dubai and then shared them with your family in Dallas hours later, you'll recognize this phenomenon.

With this book, Vanhoenacker opened my eyes to another dimension of flight. Beyond the unknown, beyond the fear, past the overcoming, there is a place of awe and beauty above the clouds and below from the vantage point of a bird in flight. After all, flight is really just lift, place, wayfinding, machine, air, water, encounter, night, and return. These are not just pacifying words, they are also like images of the statuesque that happen to also be the very sustenance of life.

James R Jackson III says

A successful book

I always wondered what it would be like to live that life, with its outrageous geographical shifts and big machines instead of my life of one drug store and elegant sail planes. I think I have an inkling thanks to this interesting subjects and elegant prose. Thanks for the good read.

Paul says

I have flown domestic, short haul and long haul flights in everything from cattle class to Upper Class and as a form of transport it is a little bit dull. Flying is seen as mundane now and love it or hate it, you cannot deny that modern air travel is the thing that has opened up the world up. It is one of the safest forms of transport ever invented too, making travelling to destinations far and wide, safe, easy and painless.

In this eloquent book, Vanhoenacker tells us just what it is like to be a commercial pilot in this modern age. The plane that he is trained to fly is the classic 380 ton Boeing 747. He tells about crossing oceans and continents, night flying and the delights of spending time in different destinations on each day of the week. He loved flying from an early age, but it was only after he graduated and ended up travelling the world as a management consultant that he started to re-consider his career choice, wondering if he could be a pilot. He took the plunge, retrained and realised his dream of becoming a pilot.

I really enjoyed this book, he writes in a calm measured way, as you'd expect and hope for, from a pilot. What comes across most is that he has never lost the sense of wonder in flying. You hear of him as a small boy being completely entranced by it and he still is now, from the magical scenes of the Northern Lights to the history behind the names of beacons that they track across the world. He takes pleasure in the names of winds and clouds, night flying with only the stars for company and reassurance in the skills of the engineers that enable him to fly. I like the way that he focuses the chapters on a particular aspect of flying; Water, Place, Air, Night and Machine; all different perspectives of the same journey.

The writing is a breath of fresh air; it is adept and detailed without feeling complicated. When he is flying across the oceans you see the curve of the earth as he does and sense the ice on the wings as they descend into world famous cities. A beautifully written book, even one for those who don't like flying. 4.5 stars

Amy says

This book was a lovely meditation on flight and travel, written by a pilot who experiences these phenomena differently from most other people. Mark Vanhoenacker is clearly a well-read, thoughtful person with an ear for the poetic. He also included lots of interesting technical information about air travel that I am glad to know.

Why only two stars then? Frankly, I think only a person who shares the same level of passion as Mr. Vanhoenacker for the skies will find herself fully absorbed in the book. There was no narrative per se, no story to catch me up and make me lose track of time. The individual meditations on flight were charming, but I could easily have read them as a series of essays or magazine articles over months or years as a single book.

I debated giving this more stars for the beauty of its writing and the introspection of its author, but I also felt that the lower rating was more honest to my experience reading the book. If you love flights, either in the literal sense or the fantastical, you may find this book far more engrossing than I did. I hope you do because even having not cared for it, I can recognize that Vonhoenacker wrote a lovely book.

Joel says

I've always loved flying, but after reading this soaring work, I know much more about why I love to fly. The unexamined life is not worth living, according to Socrates, and in this narrative, a pilot's sense of appreciation and wonder are steeped with the same awe as a philosopher's poetry. This is transcendent stuff - reflections ranging from the wonders of mechanical tuning to the puzzling beauty of sand crossing continents on the shoes of travelers, lessons in history and art from a master craftsman of flight, allegories that touch on the expansive joy of mortality beholding its place in the world. I couldn't put the book down. (I also got the audio version and listened to it on a road trip. These words were meant to be heard.)

Skyfaring is a first class journey into the pinnacle of a beautifully examined life, and what better guide to have than a pilot.

Ankit says

Every once a while it's good to read a non-fiction book. At times it shows us the world as it is rather than adding a spoon of fiction and cover it with a story. Every life around us is a story. There is a story in each one of us, waiting to be told and waiting to be heard.

I was browsing through The New York Times book reviews section when a particular book about flying and pilots caught my attention. There have been so many books about pilots and their love for flying then what makes this book stands out from the rest of them?

The answers were hidden in the pages, in the words of the author who beautifully describes his passion for the job, his love for flying and how he visualises everything with respect to flying and time Zones. I particularly loved the concept of place lag and how beautiful it is know that this world, even though a big

mass of land, is still such a small place. Please read this book because I got answers for most of my curiosities and also saw the world from the eyes and mind of a person who usually spends his time at a cruising altitude of 30,000 ft.

Roberto Macias says

While wondering what review to write, I went through those of other readers to get the proverbial juices flowing. I think you can grab a bit from every review to get a picture:

I wasn't particularly happy with the overly metaphysical tone in some of the descriptions, but I don't think it's "overdone", it sets the tone and gives you a perspective of how Mr. Vanhoemacker perceives being a pilot.

On the technical side, well yes, the explanations don't get overly technical, they sometimes fall a bit short, and the Author might sometimes explain things that for me (admittedly an engineer) seem obvious.

Of course the book won't and can't appeal to everyone, but on the one thing this book succeeds in is providing you a different perspective, a different view of the world, and getting to listen to somebody's lifestyle. For me it was a particular pleasure to read about someone who so thoroughly enjoys and wonders at his everyday job, who really loves it. Given that I love my job, reading about someone else loving a different profession is really refreshing.

Furthermore, while far from the pilot's level of detachment from a "home" in the traditional sense, I've had a rather peripatetic life, and at times feel like what I'm living is somehow a postcard. When I return to the city I live after weeks away, or when I visit my hometown, I feel as if I weren't there. In this particular sense I sometimes identified myself with Mr. Vanhoemacker, thus making it more enjoyable to read him.

All in all, I strongly recommend the book, while it does get a bit tedious at some points, reading about how somebody else experiences life and how a pilot views flying is certainly worth it, and it is bound to expand your own horizons, even if you disagree with his particular way of describing the experience.

Rob says

Excellent read - got me daydreaming

This book did an excellent job combining the emotional pleasure of flying with the techniques. Fun read that will have me daydreaming and thinking on my trips.

Dan Croft says

The dust jacket of this book and the reviews on the back cover extensively use the word poetic to describe this book. This is accurate and I can't think of how I could write a review of this book without using the word poetic to describe it. At its core, it is a book about the tales of a 747 first officer as he flies literally around the globe. However, even people without any particular interest in aviation may find this book appealing. If elaborate prose and a complex vocabulary is not your thing then this book is definitely not for you. If I were to read this book again from the start I would do so on a Kindle, as nearly every paragraph has a word in

which I was not familiar. That said, the book blend technical facts about flying one of the most complex pieces of machinery in existence with a very personal and sensitive description about the places and images in which he so frequently visits. The various chapters of the book (Machine, Air, Night, Water) are intentionally broad and are really good conduits to describe some of the more unique experiences that the author's profession affords. Because the prose is so complex and the story line ebbs and flows so much, even after so recently finishing the book it's kind of difficult to recall all of the (many) specific factoids scattered throughout in the book. However, the book does leave more of a feeling, even if the specific facts are hard to recall. For anyone thinking about reading this book I'd suggest checking out one of the author's magazine articles that you can find online (he writes aviation pieces for several well known magazines). If you like his writing style then, by all means, check out the book. If you find this style too indirect and difficult too follow I would advise against this book. But in my estimation, this was one of the better books I've read this year.

Petra X says

This book fails, but only just, on every single element. It's really sad. There were so many ways it could have succeeded and been a fabulously interesting book, but instead, the author just holds back.

He doesn't hold back in his writing, this is the exception. And it's a shame. He attempts a poetic, almost visionary kind of prose. If you have something somewhat metaphysical to say, it will come through without it being hammered home with a label that says, "Spiritual Writing of a Beautiful Experience". Some people like this though.

The author tries to tell us of how his experience is with flying, how it feels to be free and in the skies in a giant bird flying at hundreds of miles an hour and I am going, yes, yes, and ... And he changes the subject.

Then he explores the concept of place and home and how place is not just geographical, but a location in time, and again I'm paying attention, yes, yes, I see this and.. the author changes the subject.

There are the revelations of things that every pilot experiences but the passengers don't know about. Like how people miss the aurora borealis because it is at night and the pilot doesn't want to wake anyone so when he sees them he doesn't make an announcement. Well, should I fly to northern climes I will make a point of asking to be woken. This is all very interesting I am thinking, tell me more, and he does, just a few things. This could have been the most interesting part of the book, but the author is more concerned with his personal, more spiritual aspects of flying which are a bit boring really.

Everytime the author comes up with a new angle on flying or planes, place or time, he starts off interesting but it just peters out. I am sorry for that, I expected a lot more of this book.

3 stars. Well, 2.95, just missing the average.

Kenneth Iltz says

The author, Mark Vanhoenacker, flies a Boeing 747 for British Airways. I thought that if you are a pilot for an airline that you could fly any of its airplanes. Not the case. You are trained on a particular airplane and required to stay with it until you are trained on and move to another airplane. I also thought that pilots for an airline were part of a small club and that they knew each other. The author rarely encounters the same pilots on his flights.

Mr Vanhoenacker, fortunately for his readers, has lost none of his sense of wonder at the miracle of flight itself. The book is a beautifully observed collection of details, scenes, emotions and facts from the world above the world that pilots inhabit. I had doubts as to whether I would find a book about flying from a pilot's perspective to be all that interesting.

An example of what those of us sitting in the back of the plane don't realize: The pilots map of the world does not include cities, states, countries, rivers or even the boundary between land and the ocean. Instead, it only shows beacons, waypoints and airports. The world from the air is quite different from the world we know.

It is surprising that a 350 page book about piloting 747 airplanes can be so informative and interesting. Enjoy!

Yedhu says

Famous American writer and cartoonist, Theodor Seuss Geisel once said:

"You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams."

When I read *Skyfaring - The Journey with a Pilot*, I saw a man who set forth to accomplish his dream of flying despite the hurdles. In his late twenties, he started flight training, leaving his several years long career as a management consultant. The story of Mark Vanhoenacker is an inspiration for anybody who presuppose some dreams always remain as dreams.

"I'd be woken by an alarm in the 4 a.m. darkness of Helsinki or Warsaw or Bucharest or Istanbul, and there would be a brief bleary moment, in the hotel room whose shape and layout I'd already forgotten in the hours since I'd switched off the light, when I'd ask myself if I'd only been dreaming that I became a pilot."

The book, in simple terms, is a memoir where the author sketches his experiences through years of flying. It includes information to an extent; facts that everybody loves to learn about the airline industry. He has done it well without going deep into technical details. There are simple acts of caring, joy of finding new people, places, times, weather, cultures and occasionally the curiosity of a child who is amused by everything.

It was quite unexpected how I found out about the book. I came across this article, *In Flight - The New York Times*, written by Mark Vanhoenacker. Check this out if you need inspiration to start.

Read the book as a lover of fiction, because if you're just a fact seeker (who prefers only non-fiction books), you will end up with frequent longueurs and might get disappointed. The well crafted and lyrical narration shows the prowess of the /pilot/, who is a regular contributor to the *New York Times* and a columnist for *Slate*.

"We may be pleased by the still-glinting wings of an airliner high above us, leaving a contrail soaked in crimson light, while at street level the sun has already set. We see the plane we are not on, bound for a place we are not, in the last light of a day that has already left us."

Experiencing a story vicariously through an author is fascinating; it offers a vivid collection of ideas that transport the reader from a fictional setting to the reality that our world offers. Rarely do authors allow the readers to experience the beauty of dreams through reality.

Tony Fitzpatrick says

This is an extraordinary book - basically a 30 something British Airways 747 First Officer sharing his love of flying. It covers some of the science of flight, the geography, the emotional aspects of living "an international life" which is normal for all long haul pilots, and much of the author's response to what he sees from the air (land, sea, clouds, snow, man made stuff). It also covers some personal background - family, career choices, first impressions of airports and planes. On business and on holiday I have flown hundreds of times, and this book positioned some of the basic concepts I had missed as well as lots of interesting background on how airlines and airports do their job. The author has a real affection for the 747, its design, instruments and systems. I enjoyed his description of the audible warnings, especially the female voice ordering "DECIDE" when the plane gets to the last altitude before a aborted landing is possible. I even went on You Tube to find a recording of it. Well written and fun. Good find.
