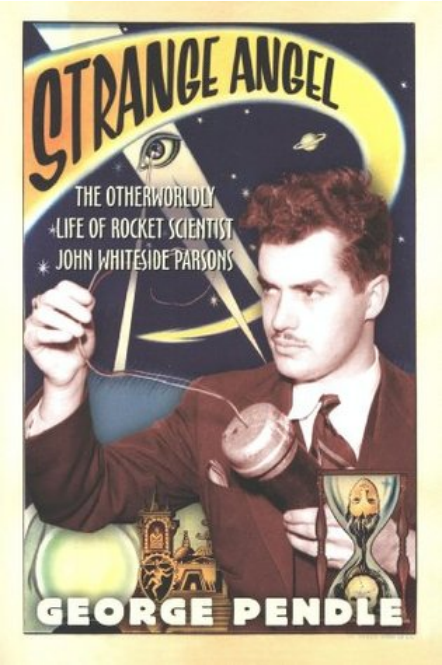

Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons

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Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons George Pendle *Brilliant Rocket Scientist Killed in Explosion* screamed the front-page headline of the Los Angeles Times on June 18, 1952. John Parsons, a maverick rocketeer whose work had helped transform the rocket from a derided sci-fi plotline into a reality, was at first mourned as a tragically young victim of mishandled chemicals. But as reporters dug deeper a shocking story emerged – Parsons had been performing occult rites and summoning spirits as a follower of Aleister Crowley – and he was promptly written off as an embarrassment to science.

George Pendle tells Parsons's extraordinary life story. Fueled from childhood by dreams of space flight, Parsons was a crucial innovator during rocketry's birth. But his visionary imagination also led him into the occult community thriving in 1930s Los Angeles, and when fantasy's pull became stronger than reality, he lost both his work and his wife. Parsons was just emerging from his personal underworld when he died at age thirty-seven. In *Strange Angel*, Pendle recovers a fascinating life and explores the unruly consequences of genius.

Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons Details

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From Reader Review Strange Angel: The Otherworldly Life of Rocket Scientist John Whiteside Parsons for online ebook

Carrie says

I kind of love this book but can't seem to finish it. It's been on my bedside table for over a year. I think maybe I love the story of Parsons' life, but am not thrilled with the way it was written. The beginning drags on with too much background about his parents and the area where they lived. It was cool to learn that he was neighbors with the Busch family and could see the original Busch gardens. But the really interesting part comes when John grows up. He a) becomes a pioneer in the field of rocket science and b) becomes best buds with Aleister Crowley and joins his crazy occult religion, Thelema. I was particularly amused by the scene in which Parsons and a group of Thelemites move into an old mansion in his parents' old hood... Much like my college housemate experience, there's always one woman who gets stuck doing most of the chores while someone else thinks they can get away with just doing the astrological chart readings for the household.

UPDATE: Finally finished it this morning, just in time to discuss with my book club. The best parts are at the end so if you pick this up, make sure you finish! For those who want the quick and dirty summary of Parsons' life, it goes like this:

Jack grows up a rich boy in California. He gets really into explosives and becomes a pioneer in rocket science, despite not having a college education. He and his best friend Ed Forman and some guys from Caltech form the Suicide Squad (an early rocket study group), and go on to found Aerojet and the NASA Jet Propulsion Lab. He gets married to a chick named Helen, then hooks up with her teenage sister Betty. Pawns Helen off on another guy he met through the OTO (the Thelemite lodge practicing the teachings of Aleister Crowley, a.k.a. the Great Beast, a.k.a. the Wickedest Man in the World). Parsons becomes secretary of the OTO and buys a house for them. Wild parties ensue. Everyone has lots of sex. Then the house becomes open to some non-Thelemites but they still have to be eccentric to get a room... One of them was Nilsen Himmel, the reporter who covered the Black Dahlia murders. Science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard also moves into the house, and steals Jack's girlfriend Betty. Jack gets jealous but also really likes Hubbard. He starts performing lots of black magic and Aleister Crowley is like, "Cool it on the black magic. You're making me look bad." And Jack's like, "OK, but first let my masturbate constantly for 40 days on pieces of paper to summon my elemental mate... Oh good, there she is. Hi Candy, would you like to get married?" Then he loses his top secret government clearance, not for performing black magic or for being a terrible risk taker, but because he's been known to associate with Communists. And Candy leaves him for a stint in Mexico, but comes back. He gets his clearance back, too, and goes to work for an explosives company owned by Howard Hughes, but the company and the FBI frown on it when he copies some documents to share pricing info with Israel. After L. Ron Hubbard marries Betty and founds Scientology, Jack founds his own religion he calls "the Witchcraft." Then he gets a rush order for some special effects explosives that he mixes up in his house just before he's supposed to go on a Mexican vacation with Candy, but he never goes because he dies in an explosion. He only lives to be 30-something, and never lives to see the part of the moon named after him.

Lea says

I wish I liked this book more -- it's got so many elements that I love in a book, & it's well researched & well written. Reading this book made me realize how little I really knew about the development of rockets, life in the U.S. during the 1920s through the 1940s, occult beliefs & practices . . . the list goes on & on. At the end

of it all, though, this is a heartbreaking story of a very sad man. Jack Parsons seems doomed almost from birth, & it's really a testament to his tenacity & perseverance that he achieved as much as he did. Unfortunately, his life seems to be a constant case of "one step forward, two steps back", & although much if his misfortune can be traced to his own character flaws, it's still very difficult to read this litany of failure, poor judgement, & missed opportunities -- especially in light of Parsons' apparent charisma, intelligence & good looks.

Kirk Smith says

Just T.M.I in general. I grew up rocketeering firing Estes model rockets. That still was not enough to keep me from wishing this was a short story. Parson's story is admittedly fascinating! You WILL become an expert on: Jack Parsons, Pasadena, the history of rocketry, solid propellants, liquid propellants, chemistry, Caltech between 1936-1946, the first military authorized rocket research, science fiction clubs and societies, explosions, the founding of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, that old charlatan Crowley, and the domineering L.Ron Hubbard. And much, much more.... Rated high because the research was so extensive and the glut of information overwhelming.

Kevin Kormylo says

Most over the top biography I have ever read. It would make for an excellent film except no one would ever believe that the events described in this book could have actually happened.

CD says

A wide reaching and meandering attempt at an ambitious biography.

George Pendle, the author, came across an obvious choice for a fascinating story, but flounders in trying to pick and choose among the various story lines to pursue in this biography of J.W. Parsons.

The cast of characters reads like a Who's Who of famous, near-famous, and just wannabees set in the turbulent Depression/War Era of greater Los Angeles, California. From the soon to be famous sci-fi writers such as Heinlein and de Camp to the grand bogeyman of the recent past, Aleister Crowley, a half a dozen or more figures populate the story. Even L. Ron Hubbard of Dianetics fame and other later-greater fame, appears in a pivotal role. Then throw in the scientists responsible for the formation of Caltech and the Jet Propulsion Labs and you have a book in your hands that probably should run to a 1000 pages or more. Elronn would have cranked this tale out in one mad weekend in his heyday!

This formative Southern California cultural period shaped and spat out a lot of notables and of course left wreckage. Some of the damage, such as Parsons, was literal. From religious/cultic/free love excesses, to the minds of inventors not understood by 'real' scientist this story is strewn with broken lives and dreams. A few walk across the ashes and rise to the top while others just flee. Great material possibility ranging from the ended of the Gilded Age, through the Depression and right on into darkest Cold War America but not full developed.

Parsons as the inventor of modern solid rocket fuel deserves better representation in the annals of history, however this book only scratches the surface. A lot of scratches, a lot of surface, but not enough deeper work. The authors extensive notes about contacts may indicate that really isn't that much detail available. Too bad as the central role that several otherwise unknown characters played in the life of some important or about to be important people needs as much documentation and historical inclusion as can be mustered.

A rambling read that can bog down. I felt that the story was still incomplete and maybe someone else will find a new or choose a different hook to retell this story.

Peter Landau says

Who knew rocketry was thought of as a pseudoscience by the academics as recently as a century ago? Not me. I don't think much about rocket science, though I do appreciate a nice phallic symbol in my pulp sci-fi. There's rocket science and pulp sci-fi in George Pendle's STRANGE ANGEL, a biography of John Whiteside Parsons, an inventor of a rocket fuel still in use today for space travel. This unaccredited weirdo intersected with others oddballs of the time and place, that being the first half of the last century and Southern California. There's some pleasant historic sketches of Pasadena and a parade of scientists, sci-fi writers occultists, such as L. Ron Hubbard all knotted into the birth of the aerospace industry. Sex, black magic and dangerous explosions are a volatile mixture and a nice lens with which to view the historic times from the Depression to WW II and into the red scare. It makes me want to learn more about nuts like Hubbard and Aleister Crowley.

David Lomax says

I grew up near JPL (the Jet Propulsion Laboratory) in Pasadena and heard a few of the stories about John Parsons, about the way he was a "Satanist," and how his obsession eventually cost him his life.

Of course the realty behind the stories of the scientific prodigy were way more complicated than the salacious versions I heard. But George Pendle's book makes it clear that the truth of Parsons' life was just as fascinating.

Pendle is a writer for the London Times, which suggests the international fascination that the subject of his biography managed to capture in his short life. Somehow a scientist from the valley in Southern California had connections with other people in England that decades later, a critically acclaimed writer across the pond felt compelled to write a biography of him.

So why do so few people know who John Parsons is and what he accomplished? Probably because his life ended without him accomplishing close to what his brain and talent initially promised.

That Parsons was a genius is made perfectly clear in Pendle's wonderfully accessible and well researched book. Pendle also makes it clear that the fine line between genius and madness can be very thin. At first the notion is on the margins of Parsons life, probably in the same place many creative or scientific breakthroughs lurk. But then as Parsons' personal life and black magic obsessions begin to chase off the stage his solid breakthroughs in science, Pendle's book shines the spotlight on how the greatest of minds can sometimes become completely unhinged.

While reading this book I kept on wondering why Johnny Depp hadn't scooped up this story and put it in development. Get the guys who wrote "Ed Wood" and Tim Burton to direct and you have yet another strange character that will be part of Depp's menagerie of strange characters.

Even though the rise and fall of Parsons pretty much occurred in the 30s through the 50s, the story told in this book deals with issues that are completely relevant, or at least continue to fascinate, many of us today. The founding member of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, is depicted in the book because he was associated with Parson's dabbling in black magic. The events showcased in the book occur prior to Hubbard's creation of Scientology but hint at several events that might have had an impact on Hubbard's huge creation years later. For those skeptics of the religion who need more ammo, this book is a dream come true. The Hubbard that Pendle depicts is nothing more than a common flim-flam man, who tries to sail off into the sunset on a stolen boat and ends up possibly recycling Parson's obsessions into… a new way to get in touch with one's self-conscious.

One of the great things about Pendle's writing is that he does an excellent job of capturing the once thriving economy and culture of Southern California. It was during the 50s that SoCal began to symbolize the embodiment of the American dream. In Parson's time it was a middle-class community of newly arrived immigrants or transplanted Americans from other parts of the country. And the main life force of the economy revolved around aerospace, not entertainment (meaning the movie/TV industry or tourism for places like Disneyland).

It was a time when someone like Parsons could slip in the back door of a major industry and become an important player in a world otherwise populated by Ivy Leaguers and backed by government contracts or old money. Less than sixty years later that world is gone… probably never to come back ever again.

The way John Parson's exited this world was with a bang and there's no doubt he would have wanted to change his fate if he had a… second chance, which was a major part of the Southern California mystique… part of the American Dream. You came to America… to Hollywood/Southern California for a second chance no matter what had gone on before.

At least Parsons had a few years to grasp the dream that was once a real part of Southern California. If only he'd been able to see that the American Dream, especially the one that existed in Southern California, is one very small part reality, another larger part a mirage… enhanced by smoke, mirrors and sunshine. Parsons made the mistake that so many make who strike it rich here -- they believe it will last forever. For those of us now living here in 2011, the smoke has cleared and the mirrors are all cracked. Yes, the sunshine is still here, but the dream is gone and nobody wants to clean up the mess left behind… at least it's not advisable without first putting on 50 SPF strength sunblock.

S Suzanne says

I loved this book. I must confess I skimmed much of the detailed rocket stuff to get to more about the OTO, occultism, SCI-fi, and relationship zaniness.

Cries out to be series - I just find Parsons' story so compelling. But the material cries out for David Cronenberg or David Lynch...someone who can convey otherworldly and heightened states of reality.

Better than expected. Highly recommended for anyone interested in the occult in America. I want to know much more about the women of his life...my goodness, Betty and Candy are as explosive as the rocket chemicals, and his first wife I really feel for.

Another story for anyone who needs to hate L. Ron Hubbard, creator of America's anti-religion.

Poor Crowley was spinning in his grave to see what was achieved on a hollow and crass premise. As much in need of money as Crowley was, I doubt he would have wanted the money L. Ron Hubbard achieved if he had to follow those footsteps into Scientology. At least that is what I like to think.

The great beast gave us my favorite tarot pack for the ages...and his writings are much more poetic,if nothing else, than anything found in Scientology, which is a completely made-up scam by a sci-fi writer who needed bucks. I am fascinated by the intersection of the man who unified east and west in spirit and the man who took bad pulp and mashed it with some magickal idea to hook people.

Jack Parsons was a conduit for the most influential cultists, scientists, and sci-fi writer of the time...and had many living in his house at the same time.

I want a time machine to go back and be there on one of the best party nights where the air rings with "IO, Pan!"

Brian Clegg says

This is a case of truth being stranger than fiction in all it’s glory – you really couldn’t make this one up. John Whiteside Parsons (his real first name was Marvel, but you can understand why he was called John or Jack from an early age) was that most euphemistic of people, a genuine rocket scientist. Yet it’s hard to imagine anyone further from the typical idea of the role – and George Pendle does a superb job of painting a picture of the very strange and confused life of this man.

In one sense it’s a typical American story of the triumph of individual ability over lack of formal academic training. Despite dropping out of his college degree very early on, Parsons went on to become a recognized expert in explosives, to inspire a team at Caltech to built experimental rockets, and to devise single handed the first usable solid fuel for rockets. Along the way, you’ll discover why the US experimental rocket facility is confusingly called the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. But that’s only the start.

For instance, Parsons didn’t exactly have the poor start in life you might expect from the story above. And much more importantly, there were two strands in his life that make the story particularly fascinating, each intertwined with his rocket science. First there was science fiction. Now it’s a bit more respectable, but back then it was considered pulp garbage – yet Parsons had a strong involvement in the SF community, and many of the well known names of the period appear in his story. Secondly, he was an avid member of Aleister Crowley’s bizarre cult, the OTO. This made for a very interesting social life, not to mention some complicated family relations.

The whole mix is fascinating. Parsons’ struggles to achieve a working rocket would make a good story in

their own right, but add in the science fiction, add in the strange religion and characters like L. Ron Hubbard – and finally, throw into the mix Parsons' horrendous death in an apparently accidental explosion at home… it's powerful stuff.

The only slight moan, and it is very slight – Pendle uses the common trick of opening with the most dramatic part of the story, in this case Parsons' death. Because of that, the book ends rather abruptly because it leads up to the dramatic moment, but doesn't actually mention it because that has already been done. But hey, who could resist that opening.

It's a cracker, that rarest of things a popular science book that's a page-turner too. What more can we say?

Charles Dee Mitchell says

I would like to write a review that does justice to the all-American weirdness of Parson's life but I am not sure how to go about it. So this is going to be very straightforward stuff.

In 1913, Parson's parents were among the thousands who moved to Southern California from the chilly Eastern seaboard in search of the good life. His father abandoned the family, but his mother's wealthy parents made the journey west to take care of their daughter and grandchild. Parsons grew up lonely and affluent in Pasadena until the crash of 1929 wiped out his grandfather's fortune. He was the brilliant kid who loved pulp fiction, literature, science, and magic. As he matured, he became a Hollywood-handsome, tall young man, although he looked more like the star of B Pictures than an A-lister. He was the classic autodidact who could never stick with school but became such an expert in rocket science that Cal Tech allowed him to use their facilities. No one was taking rocketry seriously at the time, but the experiments he conducted in solid rocket fuel eventually won him government contracts as America geared up for WW II. His eccentric band of misfits called themselves The Suicide Club and founded what became The Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Parsons saw little in the way of financial rewards. When he was more or less finagled out of his stock, he used the money to support his ardent devotion to the cause of the OTO, the Ordo Templi Orientis, also known at various times as the Agape Lodge and the Church of Thelema. ("Thelema" is Greek for "will.") This was the official organization established to promote the religion of the English occultist Aleister Crowley, to whose ideas Parson's was devoted. Since the Depression had destroyed Pasadena real estate values, Parsons was able to rent a spectacular 25 acre estate for $100 per month and establish a communal living situation for other Crowley-ites. They conducted the rituals, drank like fish, took drugs, and screwed around in accordance with their distant, aged, ailing and drug-addicted founder's injunction: Do what thou wilt be the whole of the law. Parson's had already separated from his wife of several years and taken up with her seventeen-year-old stepsister by the time he took charge of the OTO commune. His wife left him first for the OTO high priest Jack had supplanted but then ran off to Florida with L. Ron Hubbard. They talked Jack out of $30,000 they would use to buy cheap yachts that they would then sail back to California and sell for a nifty profit. Jack never saw that money again. As drugs, alcohol, and his practice of Enochian magic rituals made his behavior increasingly erratic, his isolation from the group and the world of rocketry intensified. His final love interest was a young, red-headed wild child artist who deserted him for a time but with whom he was at the end planning to take off with to Mexico for a new variation on the good life. His only income by this time was creating explosive special effects for the film industry. The day he was to leave for Mexico he was rushing through a final order for a film company. He never cared much for commonsense safety precautions and he blew himself up in his makeshift laboratory. It was 1952 and Jack was 38 years old. One final bizarre footnote. Upon learning of his death, his mother overdosed on nembutal.

Pendle's book is an enjoyable tour of the buccaneer aspect of American science and the weirder side of the American dream. Albert Einstein, Robert Goddard, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein are just some of the figures who put in the occasional appearance along with the fading silent movie stars practicing sex magick rituals in the crumbling pergola on the grounds of OTO estate.

Was John Whiteside Parsons, christened, by the way with his father's first name Marvel, an American innocent, caught up with the excitement of a new science but flawed by his gullibility when it came to such a bullshit artist as Crowley and his American minions. I feel like that sentence should be followed by another option, but I don't know what it would be..

John Carter McKnight says

A mindboggling story of a different world, Los Angeles in the years before World War 2, when rocket science was confined to comic strips - and a tiny few dreamers blowing stuff up in Pasadena's Arroyo Seco. One such was John Parsons, not quite the blueblood he acted, but an intuitive autodidact with a penchant for blowing shit up.

Along the way he invented Jet-Assisted Takeoff, the modern solid fueled rocket, was instrumental in founding JPL and was a founder of Aerojet Corp. And Aleister Crowley's American temple head.

This biography perfectly captures the "frontier" era of innovation, in which a field is open only to those with unusual brilliance and sense of purpose - who are kicked to the curb as their field matures.

Parsons died in an explosion in his home - after his longtime girlfriend (sister to his wife, who'd taken up with the former head of Crowley's temple) ran off with, wait for it, L. Ron Hubbard. Parson's ceremonies and parties drew a strange who's who of wartime sci-fi writers, rocket scientists, Communists and experimenters with sex, drugs and religion - and no few who were all of the above.

An extraordinary time, an extraordinary man, and a damn good biography.

Susan says

Another quick vacation read--have been curious about the topic for a long time; Loren Cameron told me years ago his "Uncle Jack," the subject of this biography, so it was an unexpected pleasure to stumble across this book at City Lights. It's a great California Studies sort of book, about the social and intellectual connections between occultism, sexual libertinism, bohemian lifestyles, left wing politics and science fiction among the the people at Caltech who pretty much invented American rocketry. There were so many interesting threads to follow, many of them queer, several of them intersecting at Clinton's Cafeteria in Los Angeles, which got me all hot and bothered about some of the spatial studies stuff I've been reading for the past year or so. I'll say no more, read it for yourself, it's a trippy treat.

Meredith says

Dang. They don't make 'em like this anymore.

Self-taught polymath. Chemist, Rockateer, Founding member of JPL, Poet, Magician, total babe. And a snappy dresser to boot!

He may be an excellent example of "It's better to burn out than to fade away." His death was horrific. However, I just don't see him as having much of a future with the avalanche of troubles that kept on coming. The 1950's would have not have been kind to him. Where there is life there is hope, I suppose. But his life seemed to be totally falling apart. We'll never know.

Michael Burnam-Fink says

This book has to be history, because nobody could make up something so bizarre.

Scion of a wealthy Pasadena family, Parsons was one of the founding fathers of modern rocketry (JATO, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, castable fuels), despite a lack of formal training or credentials. At the same time as he was turning rocketry from a pursuit for cranks into a pillar of the Military-Industrial Complex, Parsons was deeply involved in black magic, and was the high priest of the a Crowleyite Satanic lodge, where wife-swapping and sex magic were performed with an every changing crew of Hollywood types, leftist radicals, and science-fiction freaks, including L. Ron Hubbard (yes, that L. Ron Hubbard).

Pendle charts Parsons' rise through the mirrored worlds of rocketry and magic, and then his tragic and sudden decline as his bizarre lifestyle proved incompatible with top secret research in the paranoid political climate of the late 40s, and a series of bad decisions (most involving L. Ron Hubbard) shattered his social circles and finances. Parsons' death in a mysterious explosive accident seems the only fitting end for this forgotten figure of spaceflight, and the 'occult Che Guevara'.

Randy says

I've been fascinated by Jack Parsons since first reading about him in Mark Frost's THE SECRET HISTORY OF TWIN PEAKS. George Pendle's SECRET ANGEL delivers a full payload of the true history of Parsons the pagan rocket man in this well-written and engaging book that fills in all the blanks and connects most of the dots. The basis for the CBS All Access series of the same name, Pendle's book can be read as a companion book to the show or as the excellent stand-alone biography it is.
