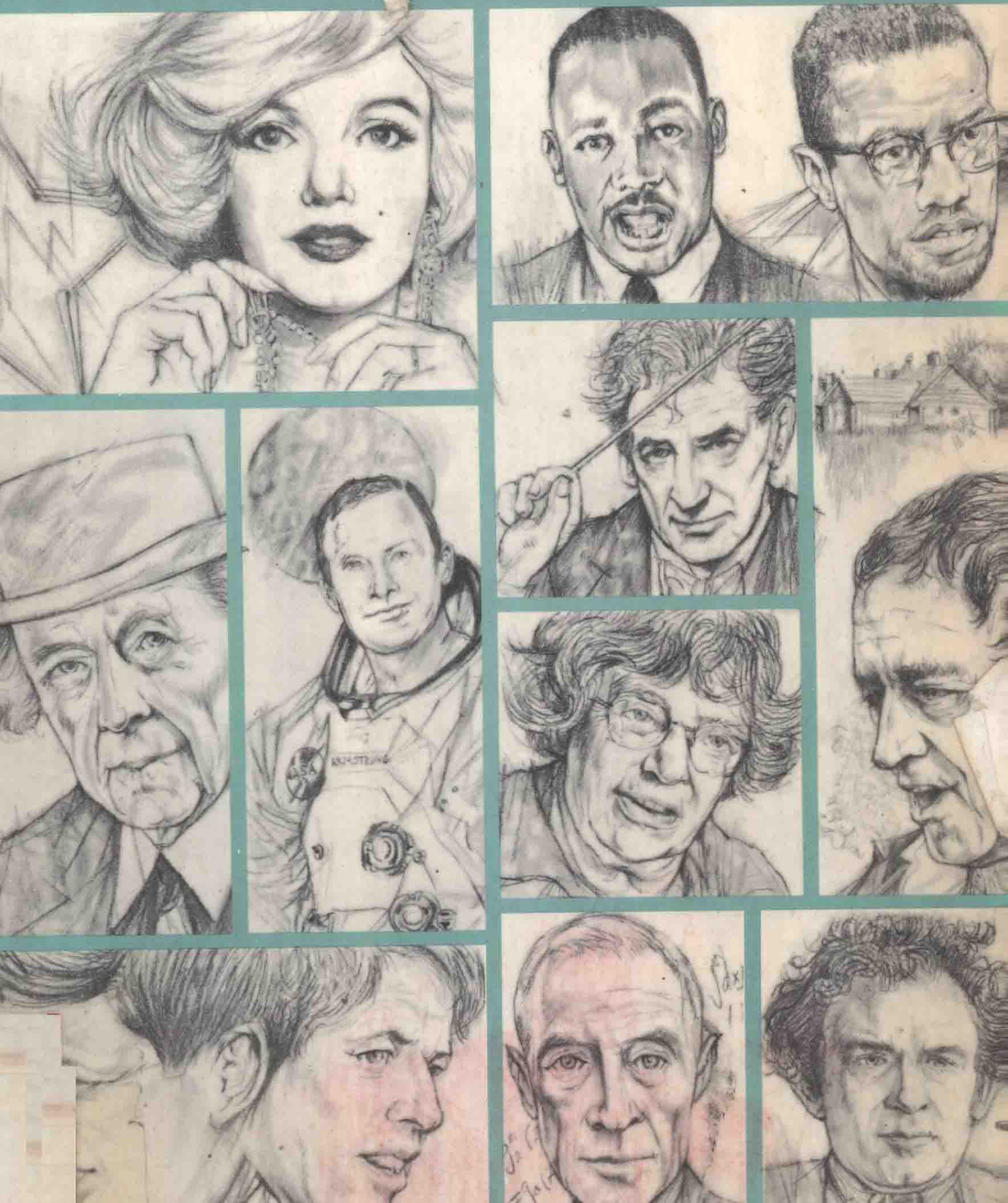
Modern American Profiles

Lucette Rollet Kenan



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Modern American Profiles

Preface

This group of *Modern American Profiles* is intended for students who would like to improve their proficiency in reading English. The primary objective of the book is to provide material of real interest that can be read with ease and pleasure. Each of its ten chapters offers one or more informal portraits of prominent Americans who represent a broad spectrum of backgrounds, interests, and accomplishments—scientists and black leaders, entertainers and artists, a writer, an astronaut, and the members of a famous political family—all contemporary, significant, and exciting, and almost all controversial.

The style of *Modern American Profiles* is the lively modern English the reader is likely to encounter in American newspapers and periodicals and in everyday conversation. Colorful words, constructions, and colloquialisms found in contemporary English appear in the text, with explanatory glosses and notes. In most cases these terms are used in the vocabulary and grammar exercises following each profile and reappear in later chapters. Although the writing has been kept simple enough throughout to be easily understood by anyone with a moderate command of English, students are encouraged to sharpen their facility with the language: as the book progresses, the style and vocabulary become increasingly difficult.

Flexibility has been a major goal of the book. Depending on the format of the course, the competence of the students, and the time available to them, the profiles can be used for short or long assignments. They can be read aloud or silently in class, or, for instructors who wish to emphasize conversation, they can be assigned as outside reading to be discussed in class. Parts of the text can serve as a basis for dictation or as material

for student writing. Although the important people and events mentioned in the profiles have been identified in footnotes and glosses, students who have access to a reference library can research these topics and perhaps make oral presentations or write short papers on their findings.

In the interest of flexibility, each profile is divided into two or three units of five to seven pages each. Following the profile, a series of exercises has been provided for each separate unit to test students' comprehension and to help them expand their vocabulary and gain familiarity with sentence structure. Each group of exercises ends with a list of suggested topics for discussion that can be used partially or even totally for written assignments. The list is not meant to be exhaustive; instructors and students may choose to develop some of the suggested topics further or to discuss others of their own.

In any event, it is recommended that students be encouraged to ask questions, to comment, to criticize—in short, to discuss freely the personalities and fields of activity presented in the profiles. In this way students can not only improve their proficiency in reading and in expressing themselves but broaden their knowledge of important contemporary figures, problems, and events in the United States.

L. R. K.

Contents

Neil Alden Armstrong

Born August 5, 1930
In Wapakoneta, Ohio

On July 16, 1969, Apollo XI was launched° at Cape Kennedy Space Center, Florida. It was carrying three men: Neil Armstrong, the commander of the flight, who would be the first man to walk on the moon; Edwin (Buzz) Aldrin, who would follow him there; and Michael Collins, who would have to wait for his companions in the space ship without landing at all. Without any doubt, this was a great date in the history of mankind. Millions of people all over the world were following the event; three thousand journalists were covering it in dozens of languages, doing their best to provide the public with learned scientific details, enthusiastic comments, and exciting stories about the three human stars of the adventure.

set in motion

Many reporters and writers met with the astronauts before the trip; but those who interviewed Neil Armstrong emerged° from the experience puzzled and sometimes annoyed. Not that he had been unpleasant or impatient. Not at all. Talking to the press is part of an astronaut's job, just like flying T-38 jets to keep the reflexes° sharp, or learning what kind of snakes to eat if you are ever lost in Borneo. It is a duty, and Neil Armstrong is not the kind of man who neglects his duties.

came out of

automatic reactions

What was it, then, that bothered the reporters? Here was their man, who soon would be the first human being to disturb the lunar° dust—or sink in it; our Hero, our Pride, our Explorer, the Pioneer of the Technological Age, ready to launch into space with all the dreams and fears of humanity:

of the moon

"Mr. Armstrong, becoming an astronaut must have given you a great joy?

—I was already a test pilot for NASA. To me it was simply being transferred from one office to another.

—Do you mean you don't have a taste for adventure?

—For heaven's sake, I hate danger. Danger is the most annoying aspect of our job. . . . How can a simple technological fact be turned into an adventure?

—But I suppose you would be sorry not to go up?

—Yes, but I would not get sick about it. I don't understand those who get so anxious to be first. It's all nonsense, just romanticism unworthy of our rational age.

—I know somebody who would go up even if he knew that he would not come back. . . .

—He is a child, not an adult. I would not agree to go up if I thought I might not come back. Unless it were technically necessary. Testing a jet is dangerous but technically necessary. Dying in space or on the moon is not necessary, and so if I had to choose, I'd choose death while testing a jet. Wouldn't you?

—No, I'd choose to die on the moon; at least I would have seen it. . . .

—Nonsense! If it were a matter of staying there for a year or two, perhaps . . . no, no; it would be too high a price to pay. Because it is senseless! I'd better say goodbye now. I have to go into the centrifuge.[1]

—I don't envy you, Mr. Armstrong.

—Yes, it is unpleasant. Perhaps the thing I hate most. But it is necessary. . . ."[2]

And so it went. No wonder many reporters found him depressing. Besides, it seemed impossible to sell him to the public. How do you make a folk hero of a man who is unwilling to play the part; who stubbornly defends his privacy, does not answer personal questions, refuses to make any philosophic or poetic declaration about his mission, and does not even kiss his wife for the cameras, as a good folk hero should? He seemed determined to look as uninteresting as he could. And yet he aroused his visitors' curiosity. There was a disturbing intensity° in that stiff Boy Scout with the lopsided° smile and the wary° blue eyes, so shy at thirty-nine that he blushed and stammered° when forced to speak in public. Norman Mailer, who was observing the launching of Apollo XI for *Life* magazine, wrote uncomfortably that Armstrong "was just not like other men. He was a presence in the room, a spirit as much as a man . . . extraordinarily remote,° with something particularly innocent or faintly sinister° in the gentle remote air. He was in communication with strings° in the Universe that others did not think to play."

depth; strength of feeling / crooked

cautious

spoke haltingly

seeming far away

bad, evil

here, of a musical instrument *(fig.)*

If this description seems fanciful, it fits well nonetheless. Neil Armstrong is indeed a remote man, partly because he wants to keep himself beyond the reach of curious strangers,

[1]A machine to accustom the astronauts to the stress of acceleration.
[2]Interview with Neil Armstrong by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci.

and partly because he has been "in communication with the Universe" for most of his life. He was only two years old when his father took him to the Cleveland airport to watch some air races. Four years later Stephen Armstrong gave his small son his first ride in an old twin-engine plane. It can be said that Neil never really came back from that ride. Nothing afterward excited him as much as flight and aircraft. He read all he could find on the subject, collected information on the characteristics and performance of all types of planes, built models, and learned to fly before he even thought of driving a car. As a pilot, his favorite way of relaxing from testing jets was to go soaring° in a glider,° and gliding is still his only sport.

flying high

a plane without an engine, carried by air currents

It is difficult to believe that a man with such a passion could have remained as cool as Armstrong appeared during the last days before takeoff.° But it would have been out of character° for him to show his true feelings. He never does; he never talks about himself—never talks at all if he can help it. Even at home he protects his peace and privacy behind a wall of silence. "Silence," says his wife, "is a Neil Armstrong answer. The word *no* is an argument."° His two sons complain that he never answers their questions, and his friends admit that they have no hope of ever knowing exactly what he thinks. But all agree that he is a pleasant, undemanding man, incredibly° patient and easy to live with—as long as you do not insist on conversation.

launching/out

. . . not like him

quarrel; discussion

unbelievably

From all reports, he is a good family man, a good companion, a good citizen, a good man altogether. And why not? In Wapakoneta, where he comes from, there is no disgrace in trying to be good, to think straight, to obey the rules. People there work hard and admire economy and modesty. But they are not timid° souls. They have never been afraid to go into unknown territory to clear new farms or to reach new frontiers. They would not hesitate to explore another planet, given the chance. So it was not extraordinary for Neil Armstrong to practice the old-fashioned American virtues while pursuing° his own dream and to find his balance, so to speak, with one foot in the grassroots° of America and the other one in science fiction.

easily afraid

following

in . . . among the ordinary people *(fig.)*

With its seven thousand inhabitants, Wapakoneta, Ohio, is a typical, small American town—friendly, sensible, busy. "People in this community," explained Armstrong to a journalist, "believed that it was important to do a useful job

and to do it well." Since his father's job (checking the records of state agencies) kept the family moving every year, Neil did not actually grow up in Wapakoneta, but in other small towns similar to it. The Armstrongs came back to their home town when Neil was in high school.

The three Armstrong children were brought up strictly but lovingly by their mother, a serious woman with a fondness for books and music. Neil soon shared her tastes. He was the best-read° young man in first grade, and he has never stopped reading since. He loves music, any kind of music from popular to classical; he played the horn in the school band, is still an acceptable pianist, and when he is in a relaxed mood he will sometimes play funny duets° with his wife to entertain his friends.

who has read the most

pieces of music for two players or singers

"I am afraid that I did a lot of ordinary things in my youth," he said to the newsmen covering° Apollo XI. And it is true that he was a very normal boy with ordinary friends and activities. But those activities did not hold his interest as much as they could have. He did become a Boy Scout like his pals; but he did not bother to work for his Eagle Scout badge[3] until he was in college. He did not care for sports and still does not. In Houston, among the astronauts, he was to make himself conspicuous° by refusing to do the push-ups,° the jogging,° and the other exercises so dear to his colleagues.° A man has only so many heartbeats in his lifetime, he thinks, and he does not intend to waste his on gymnastics.° As a boy, Neil could be persuaded to play ball, if only to please his friends. But he did not stay on the field any longer than he had to. He was much happier in his cluttered° room full of technical magazines and adventure books, with airplane models dangling° from the ceiling. He could go to the basement of his house where his mother had let him build a wind tunnel.[4] Often he would run to his neighbor's telescope and look into the sky for a long time. He may have allowed himself to daydream° a bit; at least he did have a recurring° nighttime dream of being able to hover° above the ground by holding his breath. He tried it once when awake with disappointing results.

reporting on

easily noticed, attracting attention/ a type of physical exercise / slow run

co-workers

physical exercises

overcrowded

hanging down

imagine situations

repeated regularly/float

Neil did well in school, as could be expected from a young man with a purpose; luckily, he shone in subjects that were

[3]A special pin showing the highest rank of Boy Scout.

[4]A structure in which the effects of different winds on model aircraft are studied.

right for his future career—mathematics and science. He still had time after school to play his horn in the band, to study calculus,° and to earn some money. Where he lived, children were encouraged to go to work at an early age—it was the natural thing to do. At seven Neil was mowing° the grass in the cemetery for ten cents an hour. Later he made as much as forty cents an hour working in local stores, making doughnuts in a bakery, or helping the mechanics at the local airfield. He saved all his earnings very patiently; it took a long time to collect the nine dollars that would pay for an hour of flying instruction. As soon as he had the money, Neil ran to the airport. On his sixteenth birthday—the first day it was legal—he received his pilot's license. If anything could have stopped him from becoming a flyer it would have been at that time, when another student pilot, a friend of his, was killed in his plane. But after two days in his room, Neil came out with his plans unchanged.

a branch of mathematics

cutting with a machine

Thanks to his good grades in high school, Neil received a scholarship from the Navy. Since the rules provided that he could choose a university instead of the Naval Academy, he selected Purdue, which was offering excellent courses in aeronautical engineering.° The Navy claimed him anyway, after a year and a half; it sent him first to Florida for pilot training and then to Korea, where the war had started. Armstrong was the youngest man in a jet squadron° attached to the carrier *Essex*. When the war ended, he was twenty-one years old; he had flown seventy-eight missions and had won three medals, as well as a reputation as a "hot"° pilot with a cool head. The cool head had saved his life twice: once he had managed to coax° his damaged jet back to the carrier; another time he had somehow flown long enough with a broken wing to reach friendly territory, where he was rescued promptly after parachuting to the ground. He has faced death many times since, without ever losing his poise.

the science of designing, making, and flying planes

jet . . . military unit of jet planes

here, very eager

persuade

During his leaves from Korea Neil discovered Japan, and he was so enchanted by its culture that he became positively eloquent° on the subject. Back in Purdue after his discharge from the Navy, he went so far as to write the lyrics and music for a "Japanese" variety show that was presented on campus. After that frivolous° affair, however, he went back to work seriously for his bachelor's degree—but not without keeping an eye on Janet Shearon, a physical education student with a fine figure and a passion for swimming. Better yet, she knew

speaking well and persuasively

not serious

something about planes, for her father had owned one. But even such remarkable qualities were not sufficient to hurry matters. It took Armstrong two years to ask Janet for a date. ("Neil never rushes into anything," she says.) They were eventually married in January 1956.

II

At the time of his marriage, Neil Armstrong had his master's degree and was already a test pilot for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) at Edwards Air Force Base in southern California. For several years—"the most fascinating years of my life!"—he tested all sorts of experimental aircraft, including the rocket-powered X-15, which could fly at over five thousand miles per hour at the edge of the atmosphere. The X-15 was used to study flight in a thin atmosphere, the effect of air resistance on high-speed planes, and other similar problems. "We were doing exciting, way-out° things," says Armstrong. "We were not just pilots; we were engineers and developers of programs, using planes merely as tools, the way an astronomer° uses a telescope." The main object of the research was to prepare men and machines for space travel, an adventure in which Armstrong was passionately eager to participate. He knew, of course, that somewhere in New Mexico a group of engineers were playing with rockets under the guidance° of German experts; but he could not take them seriously. As he saw it, space would be explored by winged aircraft. They needed only to be perfected, and he was devoting himself to perfecting them.

extraordinary, odd

scientist who studies the heavenly bodies

direction

While Neil was happily flying his machines, Janet was keeping house° in the wilderness. Typically, instead of settling near Edwards Air Force Base with the other pilots' families, the Armstrongs had preferred to buy a former ranger's° cabin, five thousand feet up in the mountains. Quite a home, Armstrong remembers fondly. It had no plumbing,° no electricity, and no hot water. But who cared about such small matters? The view was splendid, the privacy absolute, and, after all, Janet could let the sun warm up the baby's bath in the backyard. She did not risk upsetting any neighbors when she climbed on the roof with her binoculars° to watch her husband flash by, wagging° the tail of his plane at her. In the course of seven years, two

keeping . . . taking care of the household

man paid to guard an area

pipes carrying water and refuse

small telescope for both eyes / moving in greeting (a dog *wags* his tail)

children were born, and the plumbing was installed. Then it was time to move.

The year was 1962. A Russian and an American had flown around the earth in rockets. Congress, suddenly anxious to send a man to the moon, had voted the necessary funds, and at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, work on the Gemini project was well under way.° Finally convinced that NASA was getting serious, Armstrong applied for training as an astronaut and was promptly accepted. He was to remain the only civilian pilot in the program. in process

Neil and Janet moved to a proper suburb of Houston, near the Center, and, for the first time since their marriage, adjusted to a conventional way of life. They followed the almost-military customs of the astronauts' community, submitted to interviews, and attended parties where Neil, too shy to thaw° easily, spent most of the time in a quiet corner. With his passion for privacy, his unlisted telephone number, his books, his music, his lonely gliding, Armstrong never impressed his fellow astronauts as the most sociable personality around. Janet fitted better. She met the wives, participated in their activities, and was properly seen in church on Sundays. Considering his upbringing, one assumes that Armstrong is a fine Christian. But he keeps his religious beliefs so much to himself that at one time he was suspected of being a Buddhist, perhaps because of his well-known admiration for Japan. Besides, he had built an Oriental-looking house for his family and installed a large Buddha in the living room. But he explained reasonably to an inquiring visitor that a true Buddhist house would have had the main beam painted red to frighten the evil spirits away. Apparently he should have painted his beam, for the house burned one night, and although he saved his children, he lost in the fire his precious collection of old *Air Trails* magazines. melt

To fill her lonely hours, Janet taught physical education and swimming. She had plenty of time to kill;° an astronaut is not home much. Like his colleagues, Armstrong had to travel often. He had to make publicity trips throughout the country—to the different companies that were building the parts of the spacecraft; to the launching Center at Cape Kennedy; to Arizona to study Meteor Crater[5] with geologists and to rehearse° the lunar landing on a "lunar landscape." There were splash-down° rehearsals in the Gulf of Mexico and survival time . . . free time practice falling into the sea

[5]A large hole in the earth caused by the falling of a fragment from space.

training in the desert. There were endless lectures on geology,° astronomy, lunography,° meteorology,° photography, television technics;° on the complicated equipment of the capsule° and on the anatomy° and manipulation° of the computers. There were hours and hours in the centrifuge and in the vacuum chamber[6]; hours flying helicopters and jets; hours in the simulator, an enormous contraption° where the sights, sounds, motions, and accidents of a space flight are simulated while instructors watch the reactions of the astronauts. The computers can produce seventeen hundred different "crises."°

science of rocks and terrains
study of the moon's surface/ science of atmosphere and weather
practical methods/ cabin of the spacecraft
structure / handling, working
queer-looking machine
dangerous moments

This hard training was meant to prepare the astronauts and their spacecraft for the demands of space exploration. Every piece of equipment was tested and retested; every stage of the operation was rehearsed many times. The previous missions had gradually smoothed the way. In the Mercury capsules (carrying one man) and in the Gemini capsules (carrying two men), the astronauts had accustomed themselves to live and work in zero gravity,° to walk in space, to recover packages launched separately, to link two spacecraft together. They had orbited, inspected, and photographed the moon. In May 1966, Apollo X had circled very close to the lunar surface. The only part of the Apollo XI expedition that had not been and could not be rehearsed was the takeoff of the Lunar Module (the LM) from the moon at the end of the mission. The LM itself had been tested many times; Armstrong almost lost his life during one of the tests. The machine went out of control, and he barely had time to jump off with his parachute seconds before the LM crashed in flames.

weightlessness

Danger—that "annoying aspect of the job"—was always present. All astronauts accepted it calmly, and Armstrong was, according to an English journalist, "the ultimate° in calm." He never panicked.° He had not panicked in Korea, in the crashing LM, or in the burning of his house, and he had even kept a clear head in Gemini 8 when a wild thruster[7] had made the capsule carrying him and David Scott tumble end over end. As the motion was increasing and the technicians in Houston were wondering if the astronauts would lose consciousness, Armstrong's quiet voice announced: "We consider the problem serious." Whereupon° he had pushed the button starting reentry° operations—the only move, it was calculated later,

highest level
was confused by fear
after which
coming back to earth

[6]A machine to accustom the astronauts to the lack of atmosphere.
[7]The part of the rocket engine that discharges gas, pushing the capsule ahead.