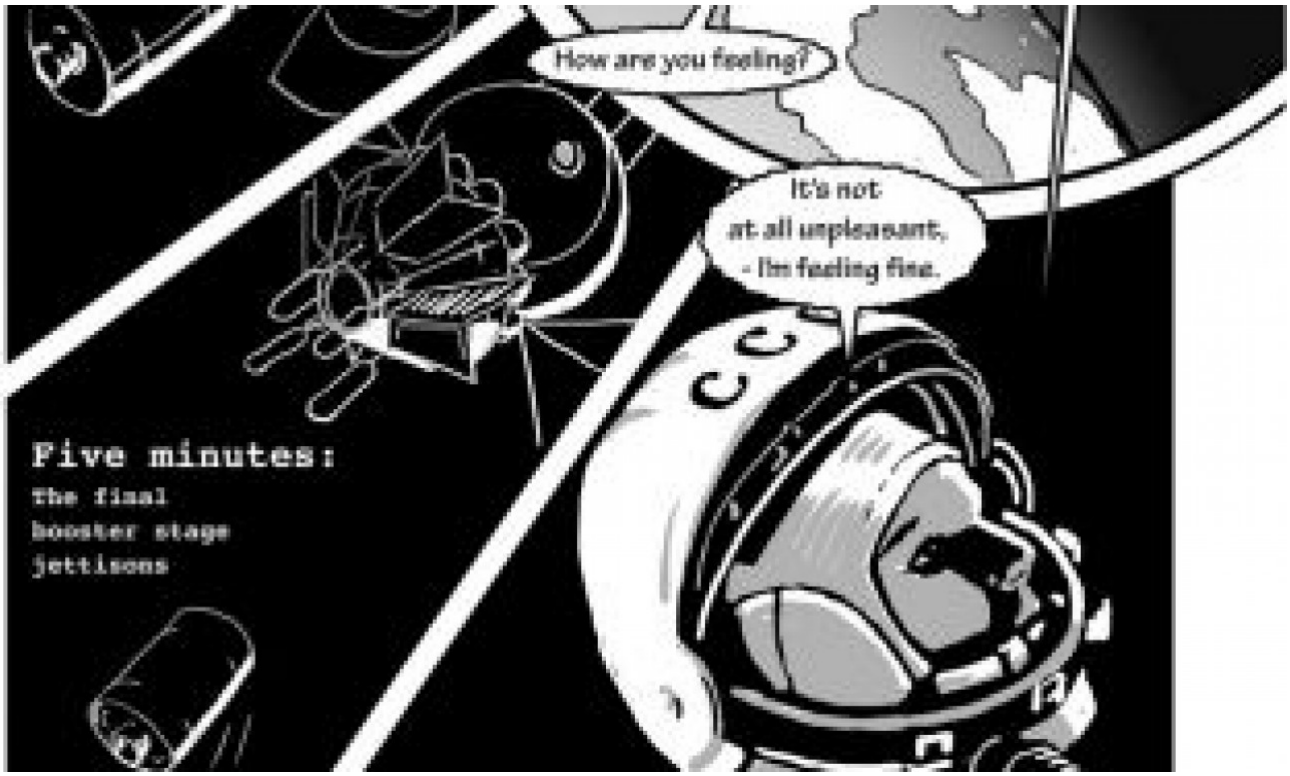
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Gagarin Blasts Off Comic Book-Style

By Nick Dowson

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Sample pages from “Yuri’s Day,” a 64-page British graphic novel that tells the story of man’s first flight into space 50 years ago on April 12, 1961.

Russia will celebrate the 50th anniversary of Yury Gagarin becoming the first man in space in April this year. To mark the anniversary, a British graphic novel titled "Yuri's Day" has been released, telling the story of that famous flight.

Author Piers Bizony said he wanted a real character rather than a comic book superhero for the 64-page graphic novel.

"You can have supermen, but they don't have the frailties of human beings, they don't have to be brave," Bizony said. "Gagarin had to be brave to go up there, and he had to be brave when he came down to deal with the crowds, the adulation and all the interest in him."

The book not only follows Gagarin but also Yury Korolev, the Soviet rocket engineer and father of Russian space flight, including the years he spent in a gulag.

"Yuri's Day" is not the first graphic novel to deal with the Soviet space industry. Four years ago, Nick Abadzis' "Laika," about the first animal in space, coincided with the 50th anniversary of that space launch and received very good reviews.

"I love the idea of a book like this," Abadzis said. "Korolev in particular is a personal hero of mine. He is, I believe, the individual who should be credited with beginning the space race and kick-starting the modern age of technology."

Bizony came to Russia to do research for the book and says all the book is fact-based. He is the author of "2001: Filming the Future," about the making of Stanley Kubrick's film "2001: A Space Odyssey."

For "Yuri's Day," he collaborated with designer Peter Hodkinson, who has designed a variety of materials for the public understanding of science in Britain, and the illustrator Andrew King.

The book has been well received.

"A fascinating snapshot of the space race from Russia's point of view — the script gives you a lot to think about. The mix of text and comic strip pages is intriguing — I think it works in this context," said John Freeman, editor of the British comics web site Downthetubes.net. "What lets the project down, in my opinion, is the lettering — the balloons are too large and characterless."

A Russian translation of the novel will appear, Bizony said, but Russian comic artist Dasha Konopatova was not overly impressed with the book. "There is an absence of an author's style, the book won't be popular. The designer of the cover is good, a few of the characters maybe, but in general the graphics lose out, it doesn't catch your attention," she said.

"Yuri's Day" can be ordered at www.yuri-gagarin.com for £9.99 plus postage and packaging.

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