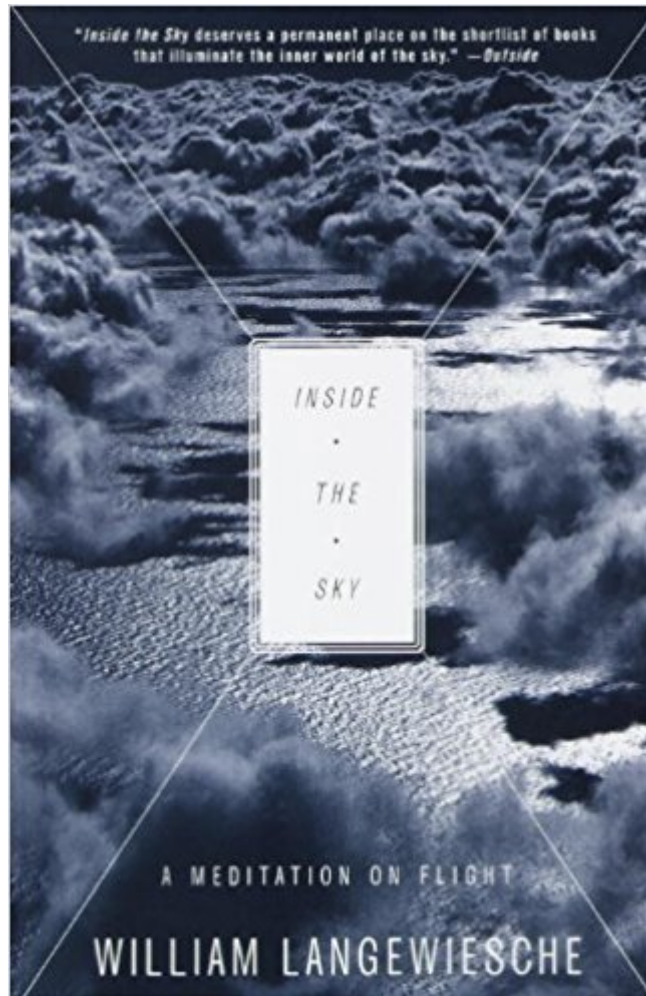




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# Inside The Sky: A Meditation On Flight



## Synopsis

William Langewiesche's life has been deeply intertwined with the idea and act of flying. Fifty years ago his father, a test pilot, wrote *Stick and Rudder*, a text still considered by many to be the bible of aerial navigation. Langewiesche himself learned to fly while still a child. Now he shares his pilot's-eye view of flight with those of us who take flight for granted--exploring the inner world of a sky that remains as exotic and revealing as the most foreign destination. Langewiesche tells us how flight happens--what the pilot sees, thinks, and feels. His description is not merely about speed and conquest. It takes the form of a deliberate climb, leading at low altitude first over a new view of a home, and then higher, into the solitude of the cockpit, through violent storms and ocean nights, and on to unexpected places in the mind. In Langewiesche's hands it becomes clear, at the close of this first century of flight, how profoundly our vision has been altered by our liberation from the ground. And we understand how, when we look around, we may find ourselves reflected in the grace and turbulence of a human sky.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

William Langewiesche seems drawn to those vast, open landscapes that challenge both body and soul. In *Sahara Unveiled*, he traversed the length of that inhospitable desert from Algiers to Timbuktu, along the way limning an intimate portrait of the environment and the people who inhabit it. In *Inside the Sky* Langewiesche meditates on a different wilderness as he explores the ramifications of flight. "Mechanical wings allow us to fly," he writes, "but it is with our minds that we

make the sky ours." And it is chiefly flight's workings on our perceptions and our imagination that interests Langewiesche. "Flying at its best is a way of thinking.... It lets us see ourselves in context, as creatures struggling through life on the face of a planet, not separate from nature, but its most expressive agents. It lets us see that our struggles form patterns on the land, that these patterns repeat to an extent which before we had not known, and that there is a sense to them." Flying has, in fact, changed humankind's perception of itself. Discussing the borderlands along the Rio Grande, Langewiesche points out that from the air it is impossible to disregard the great differences in wealth and environment between Mexico and the United States: "The narrowness of the view is a problem particular to the ground. Few tourists ever went to Presidio, but those who did often got the astonishing impression that the border there hardly existed. Residents, too, because they freely forded the river, could share that illusion. But from the air the view always widens.... What the ordinary aerial view really shows is exactly the opposite of a unified world." Langewiesche writes eloquently and at length about flight's influence on politics, environmentalism, culture, and human psychology, punctuating these musings with fascinating accounts of real people--everyone from Otto Lilienthal, a 19th-century German engineer who died while testing a hang glider, to Walton Little, a computer engineer and private pilot who happened to be an eyewitness to the 1996 ValuJet air disaster. Bad weather, crowded airports, plane crashes, and the physics of flying all form part of the tapestry as Langewiesche weaves history, science, philosophy, and his own experiences as a pilot into this tough, tender paean to the miracle of flight. --Alix Wilber --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The son of a pilot who wrote a classic book on aerial navigation, Langewiesche spent much of his childhood in the passenger seats of his father's and friends' aircraft, contemplating the process of flight and gazing at the landscape below. A cockpit prodigy who flew solo at 14, Langewiesche has been both a professional pilot and an author (*Sahara Unveiled*), and is also a foreign correspondent for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Writing with poetic authority, he uses this "meditation" to unfold, partially, the mysteries of flight, and to recommend flight as a metaphor for understanding elements of the human condition. Occasionally, the metaphor seems only tangentially connected to the subject, though overall this is an enlightening, often riveting work. What happens to an aircraft and its contents during a turn will surely prompt many an amateur physics experiment aboard commercial airliners. A familiar and curious effect of flight, in which passengers and pilots lose their senses of gravity and direction, is explored in its most tragic form, as in the case of a 1978 Air India flight from Bombay to Dubai, whose pilot, a 22-year veteran, flew "a perfectly good airplane into the water." In

quiet prose whose steady meter helps build a sense of mounting terror, Langewiesche explains how the pilot managed to ignore working instruments while relying on a single faulty one. Elsewhere, an in-depth examination of the infamous demise of Valuejet Flight 592, which caught fire and plunged into the Everglades in 1996, presents an eloquent and powerful argument for re-regulation of the airline industry. Part exposé, part idyll, this is a meditation to savor. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

More about technology in general with some philosophy and flying war stories thrown in. Since his father literally "wrote the book" on flying in "Stick and Rudder," he has a hard act to follow. But, if you need a clear explanation of what happened to JFK, jr. (and why it will keep happening) the chapter "The Turn" is a must. And, if you want to know why our dependence on technology leads to inevitable accidents "Value Jet" summarizes an interesting and frightening theory. He's not John McPhee yet, but this is a valuable contribution.

Much like his *Sahara Unveiled*, the author here uses language beautifully but the book is written in a muted tone, also like *Sahara Unveiled*. It left me with the vague sense that he is angry.

Nonetheless, it will give the non-pilot some sense of the real experience of flight without a lot of new-age adjectives. It contains a long digression on the life of John Jackson by way of expanding on the theme that the orientation to the physical world is changed by its perception from the cockpit. But the digression is a real digression and drags on irrelevantly. His description of why no pilot can fly by the seat of his pants will surprise every non-pilot and is probably worth the price of admission.

I began my reading of this book with much anticipation, but quickly got lost in the second chapter, which seems totally removed from the rest of the book. While chapters on "storm flying" and description of fatal crashes such as ValueJet are fascinating, Langewiesche often launches into opinionated, rambling passages of little relevance to the rest of the story. Just as the pioneering pilots who had few tools to help them navigate, I could not get a sense for where he was trying to go, and felt disappointed at the end of the journey

The author seemed to be preoccupied with himself and his thesaurus.

Mr. Langewiesche is quite a brilliant gentleman. This book is both interesting and odd. I doubt that everyone would find this book to be an enjoyable read, though I did. Langewiesche takes off into

some unusual musings about life that were sort of interesting to me, but I believe others would find just odd. For what it's worth, I don't agree with some of what the author writes about pilots and air traffic controllers. At one point, he writes that pilots are not particularly well educated. I am not offended by that comment (even though I am a pilot), but I don't really believe it's particularly accurate. The vast majority of major airline pilots are college graduates and more than a few hold advanced degrees in various fields. However, I will say that few pilots are as smart as Langewiesche, so perhaps that is the standard to which he is judging his fellow airmen. The information about air traffic controllers and the strike of 1981 was too judgmental and didn't present all the facts of that difficult time. The author made it sound like the ATC specialists were just featherbedding and throwing their weight around. There is far more to the story than that. Read the letter that Ronald Reagan wrote to the Air Traffic Controllers when he was running for President and then research the way the government treated the controllers after Reagan was elected. I am also not fond of the amount of risk the author took while flying around the country in a Beechcraft Bonanza and experimenting with weather. Though I certainly admire his intellectual curiosity, I believe his judgement was a bit lacking. (Single-engine airplanes have no real de-icing equipment, though there are some exceptions to this such as the new Cirrus SR22s.) If he made this same trip today in a properly equipped Cirrus SR22, I would say the risk was worth the intellectual rewards. One last thing - Considering the wonderful insight the author has into flying in general and pilots in particular, I was hoping that he would have written much more about pilot attitudes. Professional pilots are very "can-do" types. This can be a good quality, but can also be dangerous when carried to the extreme. Many pilots have a very machismo attitude that can lead to real trouble in the cockpit. Some of the best stick and rudder pilots are some of the worst aviators (and I know I'll get lots of letters with this comment). Example: I have flown with some spectacularly talented pilots when it comes to how they physically handle the airplane, but some of these same pilots refuse to use a checklist. Not smart, and I'll take an average stick and rudder pilot who uses good common sense over the machismo type any day. Interestingly, I found that the bigger the airplane, the bigger the pilot's ego tends to get. Few (if any) will write about this phenomena, but I wish Langewiesche had. Thank you, Mr. Langewiesche, for a different and enjoyable read!

This lyrical collection of essays by an accomplished airman illuminates the pilot's soul as much as his environment. The essays on "The Turn" and the Air-India disaster are masterworks, not because they apply to the JFK Jr. tragedy but rather because they speak to the ever-changing relationship between pilots and their sky. The reader should not be discouraged by the first essay in the volume,

a meditation on perspective which probably is better read last. Rather, skip to others and absorb how the author's adopted home--the sky--has enveloped his predecessors, his contemporaries and himself. Other reviewers have compared William to his father, Wolfgang Langewiesche. The comparison is unfair to both men. "Inside the Sky" is no more a manual of flight than "Stick and Rudder" is a meditation on the topic. Readers, airmen or not, are the richer for the writings of father and son.

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