

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock

This space scientist and TV presenter has never stopped reaching for the stars.

Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock has spent her life dreaming of going into space. She tells *Science+Nature* that it's "this crazy dream" that led to her becoming one of the UK's leading space scientists and a TV presenter on BBC Four's *The Sky at Night* and CBeebies' *Stargazing* programmes. Although her success is stellar, the journey has not been without its challenges.

Early life

Aderin-Pocock was born in 1968, a year before Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the Moon. Although she doesn't remember that happening, she says she grew up in a bubble of excitement about space and the Moon. As a child, she fell in love with the children's TV series *The Clangers*, which featured a family of pink alien puppets living on a small blue planet. "From the age of three, my dream was to travel from the Earth and then visit the Moon and then go out into the beyond and visit the Clangers." Her love of science started when she realised that it was science that sent people into space.

A life-changing moment

Despite her ambition, studying was not easy for Aderin-Pocock. She says she has dyslexia, which can make reading and writing difficult, although it doesn't affect a person's ability to process ideas. It wasn't diagnosed until much later in her life. "It was quite challenging," she says.

"I was told that space science and astronomy (the study of stars and space) would be too difficult for me, and perhaps I should find something else, but space has always been my goal."

Then, in science class, there was a moment that changed everything. Her teacher asked a question and Aderin-Pocock worked out the solution. When she put her hand up but no one else did, she thought she must be wrong – but the teacher encouraged her and she gave the correct answer. "I thought, my goodness, I can work things out," she says. From then on she threw herself into her studies and worked hard. She spent a lot of time studying in the library and with her father, who was also interested in science. She even went to classes at night school where she learned how to make her own telescope mirrors.

Hard work pays off

Aderin-Pocock did well in her GCSEs and A levels, then studied physics and mechanical engineering at university. Today, she works on some of the world's most important space projects, including the James Webb Space Telescope, a huge satellite observatory. Due to launch in 2021, it will be powerful enough to probe the furthest reaches of the visible universe.

In 2009, Aderin-Pocock was awarded an MBE for services to science and education – she says she wants more women to follow her path and study STEM subjects, particularly physics, chemistry, engineering and computer programming. When she started at university, only around 10 of the 200 first-year students were female, but she says things are now changing and more women are joining the science world. Anyone who wants to study sciences should follow their dream and do it.

Wonders of space

Even after many years, Aderin-Pocock is still an enthusiastic about space. "I love the Moon," she says. "My daughter and I sometimes howl at it." She is fascinated by Mars too, and says it is her favourite planet because it has so many mysteries. "It used to have water running over the surface and might have had life in the past, but something changed," she says. "I'd love a trip to Mars to investigate." She also says she thinks aliens probably exist, "There is so much we don't know and we are discovering things all the time.

Each new discovery is a delight and a wonder."

Dreams can come true

Aderin-Pocock hasn't been to space yet, but she has met the Clangers, in an episode where a "little Maggie puppet" went to space and landed on their planet. She hasn't given up hope of reaching space herself. She says that the dream she had as a child has taken her to heights she never thought she would reach, and driven her to overcome obstacles and hurdles she never thought she would conquer. "Believe in yourself and have a crazy dream," she says. "I may never get out into space, but by having a crazy dream you can achieve far more than you ever thought possible."



The Clangers.



Dr Maggie in her new book.

WIN!

You can win a signed copy of Maggie Aderin-Pocock's newest book, *Dr Maggie's Grand Tour of the Solar System*. "With this book we can use the power of our imaginations to make a journey that no human has made," she says. Send your name and address to scienceandnature@dennis.co.uk with the subject line GRAND TOUR. Three winners* will be chosen at random after the closing date of midnight on 10 October. See theweekjunior.co.uk/terms for rules.

LONG TRIP
Flying from the Moon to the Sun at the speed of an aeroplane would take around 20 years. Reaching Saturn would take about 170!