

The Martian author Andy Weir: 'I still doubt there's life on Mars'

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Seven years ago, Andy Weir's debut, self-published novel *The Martian* -- about an American astronaut who becomes stranded alone on Mars in the year 2035 -- left readers breathless as they imagined what life on the Red Planet must be like.

And last week, science and science fiction took one step closer towards one another. What did Weir think?

"It's a very cool breakthrough, but there are immediate questions about whether finding liquid water on Mars means any more than that. If there is life, how is it getting energy? And why haven't we seen evidence of it before?"

"Still, it is worth sending a probe down there, if only because a place with water is the most likely to have fossils of any previous life, but I wouldn't expect to find anything. Think about it: if you grab a fistful of earth anywhere on our planet, it's teeming with life of some kind. It gets everywhere and adapts. We've been sending probes to Mars for a long time, and so far...nothing. To me, it seems a sterile planet," he says.

"If we did find something, though, it would be the biggest news story of our lifetime. You'd see an immediate spike in funding for space exploration: right now, it isn't cost-effective to try and send someone to Mars, but when it is, a human geologist could do more work in a day than all the robots before it ever have. The difference between machines and someone thinking and making decisions is massive. There's no better robot than a scientist. And when it looks possible, of course there will be a race to be the first country to say, 'we did it first.'

"You'd soon also have an issue of how to access Mars without damaging the life on there (not an issue with the Moon), and very quickly see a mission to get a sample. After that, it would depend on whether the new life is a product of panspermia -- the theory that life on earth originated from chemical precursors in outer space -- or started as a second genesis. Both would be exciting. Above all, though, finding life on Earth and Mars, two planets in eight, would mean the rest of our solar system must be riddled with life.

"The sooner we can get middle class people going to space for once-in-a-lifetime holidays, the sooner we'll get a human on Mars. When will that happen? I think around 2050. I expect they'll find it's just a rock. But I'd love to be proven wrong..."

In 5-7 sentences, write a paragraph to explore the following ideas. They do not have to be in order.

- ***What was the scientific breakthrough referenced by Weir in the third paragraph?***
- ***Why is liquid water important?***
- ***What 4 reasons does Weir give that makes him believe Mars is a "sterile planet."***
- ***Do you believe we will find life on Mars? Why or why not?***