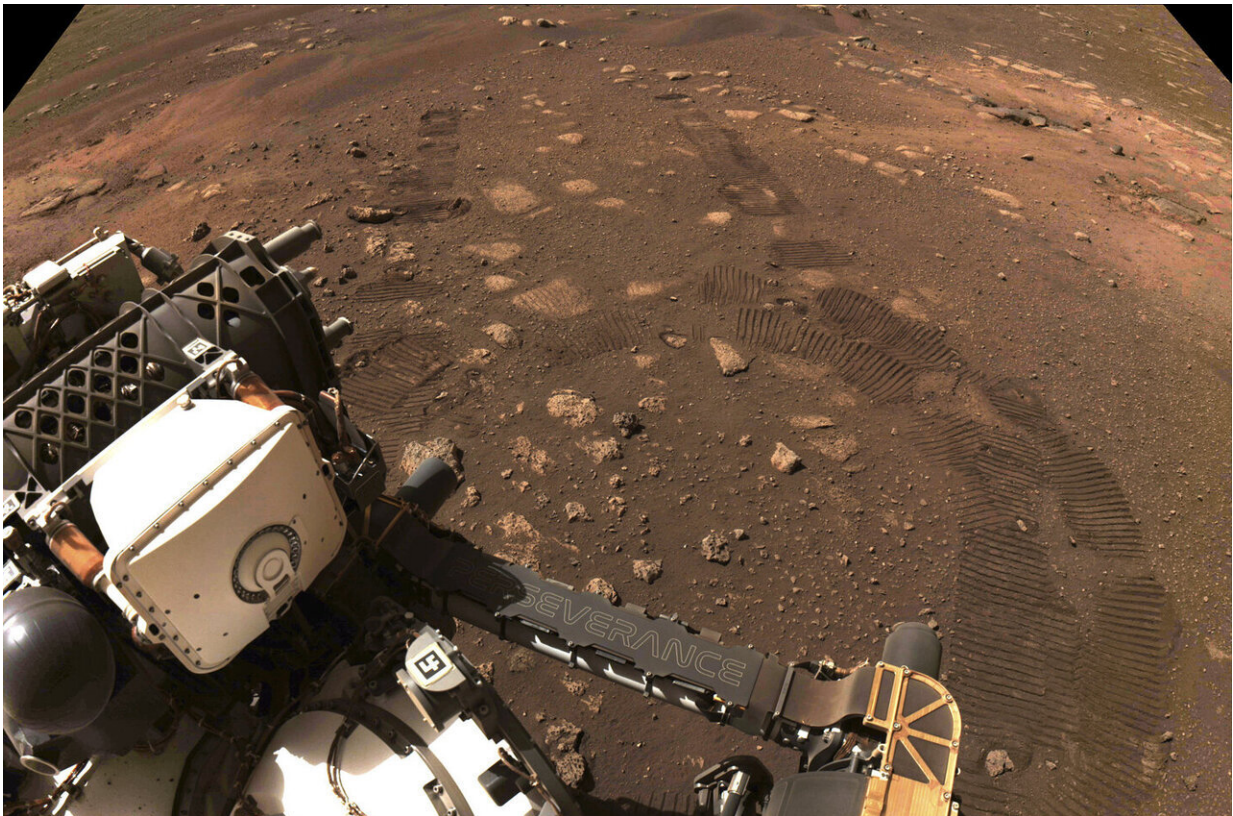


# NASA's new Mars rover hits dusty red road, 1st trip 21 feet

March 6 2021, by Marcia Dunn

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This photo made available by NASA was taken during the first drive of the Perseverance rover on Mars on Thursday, March 4, 2021. Perseverance landed on Feb. 18, 2021. (NASA/JPL-Caltech via AP)

NASA's newest Mars rover hit the dusty red road this week, putting 21 feet on the odometer in its first test drive.

The Perseverance [rover](#) ventured from its landing position Thursday, two weeks after setting down on the red planet to seek signs of past life.

The roundabout, back and forth drive lasted just 33 minutes and went so well that more driving was on tap Friday and Saturday for the the six-wheeled rover.

"This is really the start of our journey here," said Rich Rieber, the NASA engineer who plotted the route. "This is going to be like the Odyssey, adventures along the way, hopefully no Cyclops, and I'm sure there will be stories aplenty written about it."

In its first drive, Perseverance went forward 13 feet (4 meters), took a 150-degree left turn, then backed up 8 feet (2.5 meters). During a news conference Friday, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, shared photos of its tracks over and around small rocks.

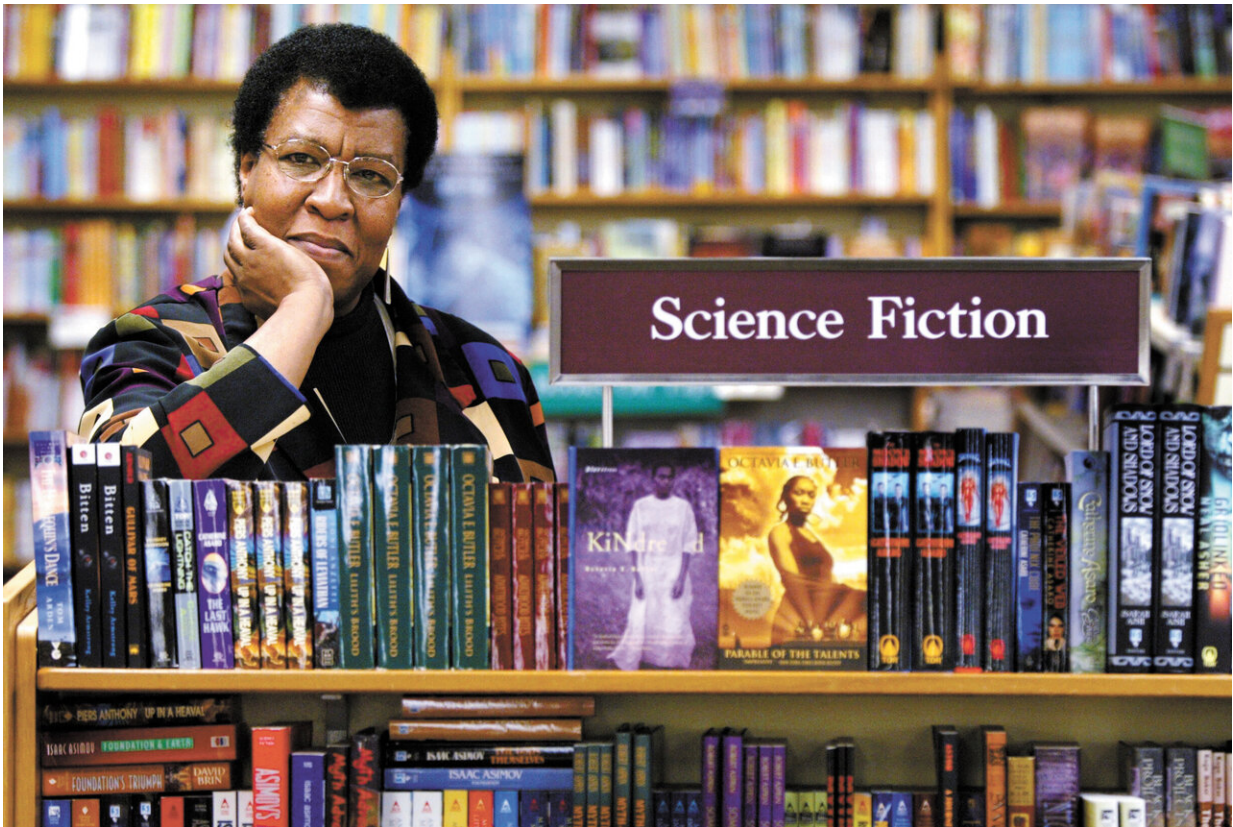
"I don't think I've ever been happier to see wheel tracks and I've seen a lot of them," said engineer Anais Zarifian.

Flight controllers are still checking all of Perseverance's systems. So far, everything is looking good. The rover's 7-foot (2-meter) robot arm, for instance, flexed its muscles for the first time Tuesday.

Before the car-size rover can head for an ancient river delta to collect rocks for eventual return to Earth, it must drop its so-called protective "belly pan" and release an experimental helicopter named Ingenuity.

As it turns out, Perseverance landed right on the edge of a potential helicopter landing strip—a nice, flat spot, according to Rieber. So the plan is to drive out of this landing strip, ditch the pan, then return for Ingenuity's highly anticipated [test flight](#). All this should be accomplished by late spring.





In this Feb. 4, 2004 file photo, science fiction writer Octavia Butler poses for a portrait near some of her novels at University Book Store in Seattle, Wash. On Friday, March 5, 2021, scientists announced that they've named the touchdown site of the Perseverance Mars rover in honor of the late writer, who grew up next door to the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena. She was one of the first African Americans to receive mainstream attention for science fiction. (Joshua Trujillo/seattlepi.com via AP)

Scientists are debating whether to take the smoother route to get to the nearby delta or a possibly tougher way with intriguing remnants from that once-watery time 3 billion to 4 billion years ago.

Perseverance—NASA's biggest and most elaborate rover yet—became

the ninth U.S. spacecraft to successfully land on Mars on Feb. 18. China hopes to land its smaller rover—currently orbiting the red planet—in another few months.

NASA scientists, meanwhile, announced Friday that they've named Perseverance's touchdown site in honor of the late science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, who grew up next door to JPL in Pasadena. She was one of the first African Americans to receive mainstream attention for science fiction. Her works included "Bloodchild and Other Stories" and "Parable of the Sower."

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