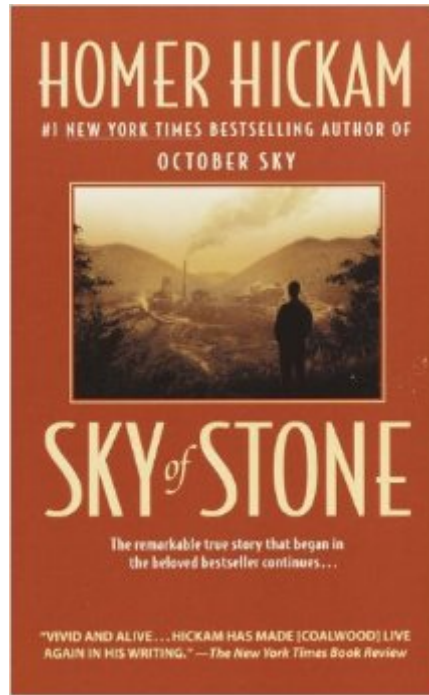


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Sky Of Stone: A Memoir



Synopsis

Homer Hickam won the praise of critics and the devotion of readers with his first two memoirs set in the hardscrabble mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. The New York Times crowned his first book, the #1 national bestseller *October Sky*, "an eloquent evocation ... a thoroughly charming memoir." And *People* called *The Coalwood Way*, Hickam's follow-up to *October Sky*, "a heartwarmer ... truly beautiful and haunting." Now Homer Hickam continues his extraordinary story with *Sky of Stone*, dazzling us with exquisite storytelling as he takes us back to that remarkable small town we first came to know and love in *October Sky*. In the summer of '61, Homer "Sonny" Hickam, a year of college behind him, was dreaming of sandy beaches and rocket ships. But before Sonny could reach the seaside fixer-upper where his mother was spending the summer, a telephone call sends him back to the place he thought he had escaped, the gritty coal-mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. There, Sonny's father, the mine's superintendent, has been accused of negligence in a man's death "and the townspeople are in conflict over the future of the town. Sonny's mother, Elsie, has commanded her son to spend the summer in Coalwood to support his father. But within hours, Sonny realizes two things: His father, always cool and distant with his second son, doesn't want him there ... and his parents' marriage has begun to unravel. For Sonny, so begins a summer of discovery "of love, betrayal, and most of all, of a brooding mystery that threatens to destroy his father and his town. Cut off from his college funds by his father, Sonny finds himself doing the unimaginable: taking a job as a track-laying man, "the toughest in the mine. Moving out to live among the miners, Sonny is soon dazzled by a beautiful older woman who wants to be the mine's first female engineer. And as the days of summer grow shorter, Sonny finds himself changing in surprising ways, taking the first real steps toward adulthood. But it's a journey he can make only by peering into the mysterious heart of Coalwood itself, and most of all, by unraveling the story of a man's death and a father's secret. In *Sky of Stone*, Homer Hickam looks down the corridors of his past with love, humor, and forgiveness, brilliantly evoking a close-knit community where everyone knows everything about each other's lives "except the things that matter most. *Sky of Stone* is a memoir that reads like a novel, mesmerizing us with rich language, narrative drive, and sheer storytelling genius.

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Customer Reviews

Through Homer Hickam's marvelous memoirs, readers have been transported to Coalwood, West Virginia, of the late 1950s - first in *ROCKET BOYS* (made into the film *OCTOBER SKY*), then *THE COALWOOD WAY*, and now *SKY OF STONE*. It's the summer of 1961. After his freshman year at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Homer wants to join his mother at her new house in Myrtle Beach, a coastal resort in South Carolina. But there's been a fatal accident back in the mine at Coalwood, and Homer's Dad, the mine superintendent, is under investigation by state and federal agencies. So, Mom tells Homer to go back home and keep his Dad company. And, as readers of the series know, Elsie Hickam is not one to trifle with. *SKY OF STONE* is, I think, certainly superior to *THE COALWOOD WAY*, and perhaps even to *ROCKET BOYS*. It's in this third volume that Homer emerges from adolescence. He comes to grips with his parents' increasing estrangement from each other, his father's emotional distance, the loss of beloved pets, and the primacy of his older brother in his father's affections. Then there's Homer's first serious crush, the object being Rita, a junior mining engineer several years his senior. Finally, to pay off damage done to his father's Buick, Homer defies both parents, joins the United Mine Workers of America, moves out of the family home, and goes to work in the coal mine as a summer job. (*SKY OF STONE* refers to the ceiling of solid rock over the mine's tunnels.) Homer's semi-dysfunctional family remains a source of reader sympathy. Over one weekend, young Hickam resides with the Likens family, the menfolk of which are going to improve their guest's softball skills. (Homer's been drafted by the union team that will play management on the Fourth of July.) At breakfast, Homer notices: "(Mrs.

During times of national crisis, it is all the more important for our nation to honor those heroes whose moral compass is true and whose voice reminds us of the unspoken, but genuine, values

which symbolize greatness. Call it the Coalwood way, label it steadfastness of purpose, name it resolute adherence to hard work and internal discipline -- whatever words you wish to describe the genuine virtues of Homer Hickam, your commentary will not miss the mark. "Sky of Stone," the third installment of Hickam's memoirs, is a brilliant book; its vibrant pages remind us of the galvanizing power of individual excellence and of how common people, striving to live coherent and decent lives, serve as genuine role models for a national community that cherishes the notion of individual responsibility, hard work, and shared moral values. "Sky of Stone" chronicles Homer Hickam's summer of 1961, one year after his graduation from high school and light years away from the gloriously innocent time of his adolescence, celebrated in "October Sky." This volume is a more somber, questioning memoir; it presents to us a terribly conflicted Homer, worried about his floundering studies at Virginia Tech, tormented about the apparent disintegration of his parents' marriage, and adrift in his own life, uncertain as to how he will attain his goal of helping put humans on the moon. Hopes for spending the summer on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean flounder when his mother orders him to return to Coalwood to provide assistance to his father, who is embroiled in an investigation which could cost him his job.

It's tempting to cast Homer Hickam as a rags-to-riches, self-made man. The son of a coal mine supervisor, he was raised in a rural West Virginia town with limited access to public education's most up-to-date resources. When, as a child, he experimented with designing and launching rockets (well before man had walked on the moon), he went up against the traditions of a community that had little use for original behavior. Inauspicious beginnings perhaps, but as an adult, Homer Hickam became an engineer for NASA and a best-selling writer. So it would have been easy for him to paint himself as an undiscovered diamond in an unforgiving coal town. But that's not the tenor of *Sky of Stone*, in which Hickam re-creates the events of a long-ago summer spent in his hometown of Coalwood following his freshman year in college. *Sky of Stone* is a follow-up to Hickam's two previous memoirs, *Rocket Boys* (which was made into the movie *October Sky*) and *The Coalwood Way*. In all three books, the author commemorates his hometown and its citizens with loving admiration. Homer's parents, though imperfect, are remembered for their humor, dedication and ingenuity. The author gives them full credit for insisting that he go to college and pursue his dreams. More surprisingly, Hickam portrays Coalwood not as a soul- and lung-destroying wasteland, but as the embodiment of the American dream. Coalwood's fine schools, decent houses and well-nourished families are sustained by the production of coal. That's what the town's mining families believed, and Hickam honors their strong sense of self-determination. The dark side to the

coal industry -- black lung, union quarrels, unequal opportunity for women -- rears its head in Hickam's reminiscences, as they did in Coalwood in 1961.

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