

This selection is a review of the book *Rocket Boys* by Homer H. Hickam Jr. Read the review and answer the questions that follow.

How Chasing a Star Structured a Boy's Life

by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt

In the fall of 1957, when the Soviet space satellite *Sputnik* passed over southern West Virginia one evening, it caught the dazzled eye of a 14-year-old resident of the tiny coal-mining town of Coalwood, one Homer H. Hickam Jr.

As Mr. Hickam, now a retired NASA engineer, recalls in his thoroughly charming memoir, *Rocket Boys*, the experience changed him forever. A small, nearsighted, bright and imaginative boy whose chief activities until that point had been reading science fiction and playing games with his pals, he at once knew Coalwood would be too small for his future.

His hero now became Dr. Wernher von Braun, whom he could imagine "high on a gantry, lying on his back like Michelangelo, working with a wrench on the fuel lines of one of his rockets." Here was his ticket out of the hills of West Virginia. Like Dr. von Braun, he would build himself a rocket.

Immediately he conferred with his gang.

"We'll need a countdown," one member said.

"How high will it fly?" wondered another.

"High," the rocketeer guessed.

"Don't blow yourself up," advised his mother.

In his first attempt at a launch, all he succeeded in

getting up in the air was his mother's precious rose-garden fence.

⑩ From these modest beginnings, Mr. Hickam builds a story of overcoming obstacles worthy of Frank Capra, especially in its sweetness and honest sentimentality. Mr. Hickam's father disapproved of his rocket activity the few times he even noticed it. As superintendent of the local coal mine and a staunch company man, he took a dim view of his son's need to bother the mineworkers for equipment and assistance. Besides, he preferred his older son, Jim, a hero in the town for his considerable football skills.

The author's mother, by contrast, devotedly backed him. She hated coal mining for daily endangering her husband and for giving him the beginning of black lung disease, and she saw her younger son's obsession with rockets as a way for him to escape the mining life. But her support added to the already bristling family tension, for which her older son blamed his younger brother and incited his football cronies to pick on him and call him sister. On top of all this, the girl the author had a crush on, while happy to be his friend, preferred football players for true romance.

In fact, so neatly arranged are the many hurdles that Mr. Hickam has to clear

that you begin to see what he means when he writes in an introductory note that he has "taken certain liberties in the telling of the story, particularly having to do with the precise sequence of events and who may have said what to whom." The only flaw of *Rocket Boys* is that its plot seems just a shade too well made even for a work of fiction, let alone a memoir.

⑬ The author's father, while respected, is mildly resented by the townspeople for his allegiance to the mine owners, and the author must sometimes pay for this, particularly for being the weaker, non-football-playing son. At the same time, the extremely close-knit community identifies with his attempt to escape the town's increasingly bleak-looking future. When, ironically, the local football program is suspended because of the author's father's overzealous support of the team, the people of Coalwood have further cause to switch their hero worship to the rocket boys.

Yet if Mr. Hickam's plotting seems here and there manipulated, what always ring true are his adventures in rocketry. Not knowing where to begin, he turned in desperation to "the class joke," one Quenton, an oddball loner who seemed to know everything and who was forever dreaming up quirky

ideas that in other hands would become inventions like Velcro and pantyhose.

Asked what makes a rocket, Quenton informed the author of Newton's third law of motion—that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction—and together with the author's gang they were off to the firing range. Before they were finished they had mastered the higher physics, engineering and mathematics of rocket propulsion, and they were shooting their creations miles into the air before an audience of hundreds.

At the climax of *Rocket Boys*, the author even recalls a dialogue about space he engaged in with no less than John F. Kennedy during his 1960 primary campaign in West Virginia. You realize

with a shock, as if awakening from what seemed like a dream, that all this actually happened.

Besides being a retired NASA engineer and a consultant on aerospace projects, Mr. Hickam is the author of a previous book, *Torpedo Junction*, and many articles for publications like *Smithsonian Air and Space* and *American History Illustrated*. But for all its unusualness as a scientific memoir, what is most effective about *Rocket Boys* is its eloquent evocation of a lost time and place.

At the end he writes: "Sometimes now, I wake at night, thinking I have heard the sound of my father's footsteps on the stairs, or the shuffling boots and low

murmur of the hoot-owl shift going to work. In that half-world between sleep and wakefulness, I can almost hear the ringing of a hammer on steel and the dry hiss of the arc welder at the little machine shop by the tippie. But it is only a trick of my imagination; nearly everything that I knew in Coalwood is gone."

"Nothing commemorates the site," he continues, "only rubble and faded signs in overgrown thickets where hundreds of men once toiled and sometimes died."

And now memorializing the site is his own touching memoir, which makes a dark and threatening place seem as golden as the dawn of a promising new life.

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1. What is the author's *main* purpose in writing this selection?
- A to provide an analysis of Hickam's struggles to become a scientist
 - B to discuss the merits and weaknesses of Hickam's book, *Rocket Boys*
 - C to emphasize the importance of family support for academic pursuits
 - D to increase awareness of the challenges faced by people living in mining towns
2. What does the book reviewer seem to appreciate *most* about *Rocket Boys*?
- A Hickam's ability to recreate the atmosphere of Coalwood
 - B Hickam's clear communication of complex scientific ideas
 - C Hickam's admission that some events may be out of order
 - D Hickam's honest description of his family relationships
3. Why is the reviewer critical of Hickam's book?
- A The conflicts Hickam faces are too neatly arranged to be realistic.
 - B The climax focuses on Hickam's meeting with John F. Kennedy.
 - C It begins with Hickam's fascination with the *Sputnik* satellite.
 - D It exaggerates the bleak existence of the coal miners in Coalwood.
4. In this sentence from paragraph 10, "From these modest beginnings, Mr. Hickam builds a story of overcoming obstacles worthy of Frank Capra, . . ." what does the word *modest* mean?
- A boring
 - B dramatic
 - C simple
 - D tragic

5. Why did the community of Coalwood begin to identify with Hickam?
- A They understood his need to pursue a future beyond Coalwood.
 - B They started to resent his father's allegiance to the mine owners.
 - C They also remembered the thrill of seeing the *Sputnik* satellite.
 - D They lost interest in the performance of the local football team.
6. According to the review, what caused *most* of the obstacles Hickam faced as he pursued his interest in rockets?
- A lack of equipment
 - B lack of knowledge
 - C his unusual friends
 - D his family situation
7. Which statement *best* describes the attitude of Hickam's mother toward his interest in rocket building?
- A She shared his enthusiasm after seeing the *Sputnik* satellite.
 - B She thought it was probably a safer activity than football.
 - C She hoped it would lead him to a better life than coal mining.
 - D She approved as long as he stayed away from her rose garden.
8. The reviewer's use of words such as *dazzled* (paragraph 1), *bright* (paragraph 2), *dim* (paragraph 10), and *bleak-looking* (paragraph 13) emphasizes which of the following?
- A the contrast between Hickam's family and school lives
 - B Hickam's admiration for scientists instead of mineworkers
 - C the tension between Hickam's brother and his parents
 - D Hickam's inspiration and determination in spite of his environment
9. Which statement *best* explains why *Rocket Boys* is classified as a memoir?
- A It describes memorable events that happened in the past.
 - B It focuses on highlights in the life of Hickam.
 - C It is Hickam's personal account of his own experiences.
 - D It is based on interviews with people who knew Hickam.

End of Set

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