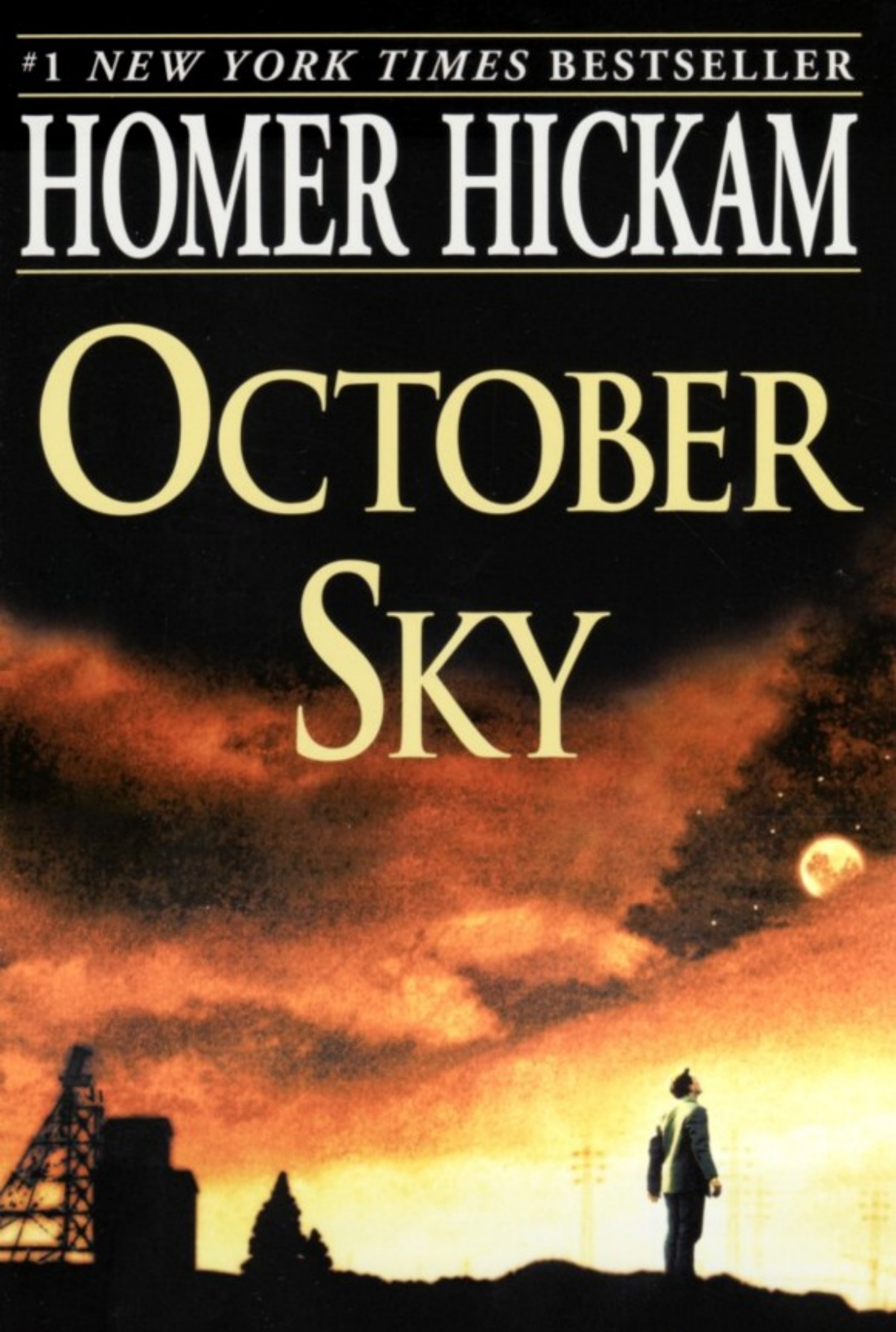
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

HOMER HICKAM

OCTOBER SKY



The true story that inspired the Universal Pictures film

Originally published as *Rocket Boys*

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Coalwood

UNTIL I BEGAN to build and launch rockets, I didn't know my hometown was at war with itself over its children and that my parents were locked in a kind of bloodless combat over how my brother and I would live our lives. I didn't know that if a girl broke your heart, another girl, virtuous at least in spirit, could mend it on the same night. And I didn't know that the enthalpy decrease in a converging passage could be transformed into jet kinetic energy if a divergent passage was added. The other boys discovered their own truths when we built our rockets, but those were mine.

Coalwood, West Virginia, where I grew up, was built for the purpose of extracting the millions of tons of rich bituminous coal that lay beneath it. In 1957, when I was fourteen years old and first began to build my rockets, there were nearly two thousand people living in Coalwood. My father, Homer Hickam, was the mine superintendent, and our house was situated just a few hundred yards from the mine's entrance, a vertical shaft eight hundred feet deep. From the window of my bedroom, I could see the black steel tower that sat over the shaft and the comings and goings of the men who worked at the mine.

Another shaft, with railroad tracks leading up to it, was used to bring out the coal. The structure for lifting, sorting, and dumping the coal was called the tipple. Every weekday, and even on Saturday when times were good, I could watch the black coal cars rolling beneath the tipple to receive their massive loads and then smoke-spouting locomotives straining to pull them away. All through the day, the heavy thump of the locomotives' steam pistons thundered down our narrow valleys, the town shaking to the crescendo of grinding steel as the great trains accelerated. Clouds of coal dust rose from the open cars, invading everything, seeping through windows and creeping under doors. Throughout my childhood, when I raised my blanket in the morning, I saw a black, sparkling powder float off it. My socks were always black with coal dirt when I took my shoes off at night.

Our house, like every house in Coalwood, was company-owned. The company charged a small monthly rent, automatically deducted from the miners' pay. Some of the houses were tiny and single-storied, with only one or two bedrooms. Others were big two-story duplexes, built as boardinghouses for bachelor miners in the booming 1920's and later sectioned off as individual family dwellings during the Depression. Every five years, all the houses in Coalwood were painted a company white, which the blowing coal soon tinged gray. Usually in the spring, each family took it upon themselves to scrub the exterior of their house with hoses and brushes.

Each house in Coalwood had a fenced-off square of yard. My mother, having a larger yard than most to work with, planted a rose garden. She hauled in dirt from the mountains by the sackful, slung over her shoulder, and fertilized, watered, and manicured each bush with exceeding care. During the spring and summer, she was rewarded

with bushes filled with great blood-red blossoms as well as dainty pink and yellow buds, spatters of brave color against the dense green of the heavy forests that surrounded us and the gloom of the black and gray mine just up the road.

Our house was on a corner where the state highway turned east toward the mine. A company-paved road went the other way to the center of town. Main Street, as it was called, ran down a valley so narrow in places that a boy with a good arm could throw a rock from one side of it to the other. Every day for the three years before I went to high school, I got on my bicycle in the morning with a big white canvas bag strapped over my shoulder and delivered the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* down this valley, pedaling past the Coalwood School and the rows of houses that were set along a little creek and up on the sides of the facing mountains. A mile down Main was a large hollow in the mountains, formed where two creeks intersected. Here were the company offices and also the company church, a company hotel called the Club House, the post office building, which also housed the company doctor and the company dentist, and the main company store (which everybody called the Big Store). On an overlooking hill was the turreted mansion occupied by the company general superintendent, a man sent down by our owners in Ohio to keep an eye on their assets. Main Street continued westward between two mountains, leading to clusters of miners' houses we called Middletown and Frog Level. Two forks led up mountain hollows to the "colored" camps of Mudhole and Snakeroot. There the pavement ended, and rutted dirt roads began.

At the entrance to Mudhole was a tiny wooden church presided over by the Reverend "Little" Richard. He was dubbed "Little" because of his resemblance to the soul

"A thoroughly charming memoir...[An] eloquent evocation of a lost time and place."
—The New York Times

"A stirring tale that offers something unusual these days...a message of hope in an age of cynicism."
—The San Diego Union-Tribune

It was 1957, the year *Sputnik* raced across the Appalachian sky, and the small town of Coalwood, West Virginia, was slowly dying. Faced with an uncertain future, Homer Hickam nurtured a dream: to send rockets into outer space. The introspective son of the mine's superintendent and a mother determined to get him out of Coalwood forever, Homer fell in with a group of misfits who learned not only how to turn scraps of metal into sophisticated rockets but how to sustain their hope in a town that swallowed its men alive. As the boys began to light up the tarry skies with their flaming projectiles and dreams of glory, Coalwood, and the Hickams, would never be the same.

"A great read...One closes the book with an immense feeling of satisfaction."
—The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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US $7.99/ $11.99 CAN

ISBN 978-0-440-23550-7

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