

# BookFilter: Homer Hickam, The Author Whose Story Inspired "October Sky," Soars Again

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### CARRYING ALBERT HOME

By Homer Hickam

\$25.99; William Morrow

Best-selling [author Homer Hickam](#) has enjoyed a varied and acclaimed career, ranging from decorated Vietnam veteran to scuba instructor to working as an aerospace engineer at NASA where he contributed to spacecraft design and crew training. Hickam even had a satisfying creative outlet in a stream of magazine articles capped by an honest-to-goodness military history hit about U-boats attacking the US coast during World War II. Called *Torpedo Junction*, it was published by the Naval Institute Press (the first home of Tom Clancy), got great reviews and is still in print today.

But all that is dwarfed by the Cinderella story of his first memoir. It began as an article commissioned by the relatively obscure *Air & Space/Smithsonian* magazine in 1995. Hickam talked about growing up as a kid in coal mining country and how Sputnik inspired he and his friends to start shooting off rockets with gleeful abandon and scientific rigor, scoring a top prize at the national science fair when kids from coal mining towns never even went to science fairs. It was sweet, nostalgic with a "Rocky" flair and people went nuts. Hickam was besieged almost immediately by both publishers and Hollywood. Interest was so intense the movie based on his book was being filmed even before the book was finished! (Final galleys actually inspired changes to the film on the set as they incorporated more and more of the actual memoir the movie was supposedly based on.)

Starring a young Jake Gyllenhaal (not to mention Chris Cooper and Laura Dern), the film *October Sky* was critically acclaimed and a modest box office success that has become a genuine classic family film. It wasn't exactly the book (How could it be? The book hadn't even been finished when the script was written) but it was darn good. But before it came out, the book (which came out as *Rocket Boys*) was an even bigger hit. It enjoyed massive critical acclaim, sold a ton and has become a staple on reading lists for high schools, colleges, libraries, community read-alongs and book clubs ever since. Hickam published two more memoirs in his *Coalwood* trilogy, both also enjoying strong reviews if not the same eye-popping sales. (And why they haven't been adapted into movies or a TV show remains a mystery.) You'll even find two competing musical versions of his memoir in various stages of development.

That success allowed Hickam to retire and devote himself to writing, his first passion. He's published about 18 books, everything from nonfiction to young adult novels set on the moon, memoirs like *The Coalwood Way*, science-based thrillers, archeology themed mysteries and three very good novels about the exploits of heroic Coast Guard veteran Josh Thurlow during World War II.

Has any of it hit the heights like *Rocket Boys*? No, though few books ever do. As Hickam says about the unlikely and spectacular success of that work, he "caught lightning in a bottle." Well, he may have done it again.

[Carrying Albert Home](#) is a novel, sort of, though it's inspired by his childhood just like his best work. Long before he was born, his parents took a road trip down to Florida. It was supposed to last weeks but lasted months. The tales would dribble out and get taller and taller every time. "You didn't know your mother was a union

organizer?" Homer's dad would ask, and then proceed to spin a yarn about what happened on that trip.

If Sonny (as Homer Jr. was called) acted in a school play, his mom might mention she once worked on a Tarzan movie. And when an episode of Davy Crockett played on TV, Elsie also mentioned she knew actor Buddy Ebsen. He was her first romance and maybe her last. It was Buddy that gave Elsie Albert the Alligator as a wedding gift. And that road trip during the Great Depression was all about returning Albert to the swamps of Florida where he belonged. Alligator? "Didn't I ever tell you about Albert?"

Now finally, Hickam has taken the genuine stories, the fanciful additions (including rum runners, bank robbers, John Steinbeck AND Ernest Hemingway to name a few) and spun a tale that imagines his parents as young and in love, free for a few weeks from the responsibility of life working at a coal mine and exploring all the possibilities life has to offer...the possibilities that slip away once children and a job lock you into place.

[Carrying Albert Home](#) is not simply Hickam returning to the source of his greatest work: it mines the same vein but hits a new mother lode of humor and poignancy. It also places his parents center stage, a gift almost no child can manage in their mind. I talked with Hickam at his home in Huntsville, Alabama a few weeks before [the novel](#) was set to hit stores. He was generous with his time, pleased as punch with a book he believes is his strongest since those memoirs and might just take off for the sky the way those rockets did in West Virginia all those years ago.

### **ON MEETING HARPER LEE AND THE CURSE OF WRITING A CLASSIC**

Here's Hickam talking about meeting Harper Lee briefly when he visited her town. Aware of the overwhelming success of *Rocket Boys* (and the movie *October Sky*), Lee warned him about the curse of writing a classic.

### **ON TELLING HIS PARENTS' LOVE STORY AND GIVING HIS DAD A MOMENT IN THE SUN**

Hickam's father shouldered tremendous responsibility when overseeing a coal mine. He was pressured on one side to keep the coal flowing and meet ever higher quotas while always focused with determination on keeping men safe from the ever-present danger of injury and death. While Hickam's parents had a love the author never doubted, he also knew they rarely agreed on just about anything. With [Carrying Albert Home](#), he was able to show them as young and in love, to tell the story of love that their road trip cemented. Plus, with a little authorial license, Hickam could give his dad a moment in the sun, to see what might have been if he'd chosen a different path in life whether it was working in sunny Florida or pursuing a career in baseball.

### **ON HIS BREAKTHROUGH SUCCESS AS A WRITER...IN THE THIRD GRADE**

If you've only seen the movie *October Sky* or read the book *Rocket Boys*, you might be surprised to hear that NASA, NASA, NASA was not the burning ambition of Homer Hickam Jr. In fact, it's always been writing. Probably the proudest day of his life -- and certainly the moment that pleased his mother the most -- was the first time Hickam held in his hands a copy of *Torpedo Junction* (that work of military history that was his first published book). Indeed, teachers and librarians fed the voracious Hickam a steady stream of books and he knew he wanted to write one of his own ever since a fateful class assignment in the third grade.

Oh and when they turn [Carrying Albert Home](#) into a movie (and they will), here's a great idea for casting: Jake Gyllenhaal. Now he's old enough to play the father of the character he played at 16, especially since Homer Sr. is supposed to be stoic, strong, maybe a little cowed by love but handsome enough to be a film star. Plus, after a string of dark movies, Gyllenhaal could use a switch to the light romantic tone this comic tale calls for.

You can [watch the entire interview at BookFilter](#). Just click on the video on the front page.

Learn more [about Carrying Albert Home here](#). You'll find a full review and quick links to buy it from all the top retailers.