Homer Hickam
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Homer Hadley Hickam, Jr. (born February 19, 1943) is an American author, Vietnam veteran, and a former NASA engineer. His autobiographical novel October Sky: A Memoir, a No. 1 New York Times Best Seller, is studied in many American and international school systems, and was the basis for the 1999 film October Sky. Hickam has also written a number of best-selling memoirs and novels including the "Josh Thurlow" historical fiction novels. His books have been translated into several languages.

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Early life and education

Homer H. Hickam, Jr. is the second son of Homer, Sr. and Elsie Gardener Hickam (née Lavender).[1][2] He was raised in the family home located in Coalwood, West Virginia and graduated from Big Creek High School in 1960. While there, he and a group of boys (Roy Lee Cook, Sherman, O'Dell, Billy and Quentin Wilson) started building rockets, calling themselves "The Big Creek Missile Agency" (BCMA). After working on finding the best way to build rockets, they took their designs to the 1960 National Science Fair, where the BCMA won a gold and silver medal in the area of propulsion.

Following high school, Hickam attended and graduated from Virginia Tech in 1964 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Engineering.[3] During his time at Virginia Tech, he designed a cannon to be fired at games and during the school's cadet corps functions. The cannon was cast out of brass that had
been collected from cadet belt buckles and caps, and scrap he got from his father, the superintendent of the coal mine in Coalwood. Named "The Skipper", in honor of President John F. Kennedy, the cannon has become an icon for the Virginia Tech Hokies. The original cannon was retired after being replaced by a second cannon, "Skipper II". The second cannon was cast to carry on the tradition at Virginia Tech with original "Skipper" now kept at the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets Museum.

Career

U.S. Army and NASA

A United States Army veteran, Hickam served as a First Lieutenant in the Fourth Infantry Division from 1967 to 1968 during the Vietnam War. He was awarded the Army Commendation Medal and a Bronze Star Medal. In total, Hickam served six years on active duty, being discharged from the Army honorably at the rank of Captain in 1971.

Following his separation from the service, Hickam worked as an engineer for the United States Army Aviation and Missile Command from 1971 to 1978, assigned to Huntsville. Between 1978 and 1981, he was an engineer for the 7th Army Training Command in Germany. After returning to the United States in 1981, Hickam was employed by National Aeronautics and Space Administration at Marshall Space Flight Center as an aerospace engineer. During his NASA career, Hickam worked in spacecraft design and crew training. His specialties at NASA included training astronauts in regard to science payloads and extra-vehicular activities (EVA). Additionally, Hickam trained astronaut crews for numerous Spacelab and Space Shuttle missions, including the Hubble Space Telescope deployment mission, the first two Hubble repair missions, Spacelab-J (with the first Japanese astronauts), and the Solar Max repair mission. Prior to his retirement from NASA in 1998, Hickam was the Payload Training Manager for the International Space Station Program.

Literary career

Homer Hickam began writing in 1969 after returning from serving in the Vietnam War. His first writings were magazine stories about scuba diving and his time as a scuba instructor. Then, having dived in many of the wrecks involved, he wrote about the battle against the U-boats along the American east coast during World War II. This resulted in his first book, Torpedo Junction (1989), a military history best-seller published in 1989 by the Naval Institute Press.

In 1998, Delacorte Press published Hickam's second book, Rocket Boys, the story of his life as the son of a coal miner in Coalwood, West Virginia. Rocket Boys has since been translated into numerous languages and released as an audiobook and electronic book. Among its many honors, it was selected by The New York Times as one of its "Great Books of 1998" and was an alternate "Book-of-the-Month" selection for both the Literary Guild and the Book of the Month Club. Rocket Boys was also nominated by the National Book Critics Circle as Best Biography of 1998. In February 1999, Universal Studios released its critically acclaimed film October Sky, based on Rocket Boys (The title "October Sky" is an anagram of "Rocket Boys"). In an interview, Hickam has said of the movie that it was "fine for what it is, a low-budget feel-good movie, but sadly missed the best parts of my memoir. Still, the world needs feel-good movies and it has done a good job of encouraging young people to go after their dreams."

He has since co-written a musical play titled Rocket Boys the Musical which, according to press reports, tells a story closer to the one in his book.

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Hickam's first fiction novel was *Back to the Moon* (1999) which was simultaneously released as a hardcover, audiobook, and eBook. It has also been translated into Chinese. To date, *Back to the Moon* is Hickam's only novel specifically about space. It is a techno-thriller and a romantic novel, telling the story of a team of "spacejackers" who commandeer a shuttle.

*The Coalwood Way*, a memoir of Hickam's hometown, was published a year later by Delacorte Press, and is referred to by Hickam as "not a sequel but an equal". His third Coalwood memoir, a true sequel, was published in October 2001. It is titled *Sky of Stone*. His final book about Coalwood was published in 2002, a self-help/inspirational tome titled *We Are Not Afraid: Strength and Courage from the Town That Inspired the #1 Bestseller and Award-Winning Movie October Sky*.


He also published a Young Adult Science Fiction thriller trilogy set on the moon which is known as the Helium-3 series. It included the titles *Crater*, *Crescent*, and *The Lunar Rescue Company*.

In 2015, Wm Morrow/HarperCollins published his best-selling *Carrying Albert Home: A somewhat true story of a man, his wife, and her alligator*. "Albert" has been published in 17 languages and has won many awards.

**Honors**

In 1984, Hickam was presented with Alabama's Distinguished Service Award for heroism shown during a rescue effort of the crew and passengers of a sunken paddleboat in the Tennessee River. Because of this award, Hickam was honored in 1996 by the United States Olympic Committee to carry the Olympic Torch through Huntsville, Alabama, on its way to Atlanta.

In 1999, the governor of West Virginia issued a proclamation in honor of Hickam for his support of his home state and his distinguished career as both an engineer and author and declared an annual "Rocket Boys Day".

In 2000, the Virginia Tech junior class selected Hickam as the namesake for the Virginia Tech class of 2002 ring collection, the *Homer Hickam Collection*. [5]

In 2007, Hickam was awarded an honorary doctorate in Literature from Marshall University. That same year, he received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Virginia Tech.

In 2013, Hickam won the Clarence Cason Award from the University of Alabama for his non-fiction writing.

**Books**

**Coalwood series**

- We Are Not Afraid (ISBN 0-7573-0012-X)
- Carrying Albert Home (ISBN 9780062325891)

**Josh Thurlow series**

- The Keeper's Son (ISBN 0-312-30189-8)

**Others**

- Red Helmet (ISBN 1-59554-214-0)
- Torpedo Junction (ISBN 1-55750-362-1)
- The Dinosaur Hunter (ISBN 0-312-38378-9)

**References**

3. Homer Hickam Biography | homerhickam.com (http://www.homerhickam.com/about/bio.shtml)

**Further reading**

- "We Know Our History (pride in knowing who you are)". Publishers' Weekly, Jan. 14, 2002. 249(2), S1.

**External links**
Homer H. Hickam, Jr., at the Internet Movie Database


Categories: People from McDowell County, West Virginia | Virginia Tech alumni | Writers from West Virginia | American aerospace engineers | Appalachian writers | NASA people | Space advocates | 20th-century American novelists | 21st-century American novelists | American male novelists | American science fiction writers | American military personnel of the Vietnam War | 1943 births | Living people | Recipients of the Bronze Star Medal | Engineers from West Virginia | Military personnel from West Virginia | United States Army officers

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