Guided Practice – Excerpt 1 + Questions

Rocketboys Excerpts for Character Point of View Lesson

Homer H. Hickam

Excerpt 1

Because he was so dedicated to the Captain and the company, I saw little of my father while I was growing up. He was always at the mine, or sleeping prior to going to the mine, or resting after getting back. In 1950, when he was thirty-eight years old, he developed cancer of the colon. At the time, he was working double shifts, leading a section deep inside the mine charged with cutting though a massive rock header. Behind the dense sandstone of the header, the Captain believed, was a vast, undiscovered coal seam. Nothing was more important to y father than to get through the header and proved the Captain right. After months of ignoring the bloody symptoms of his cancer, Dad finally passed out in the mine. His men had to carry him out. It was the Captain, not my mother, who rode with him in the ambulance to the hospital in Welch. There the doctors gave him little chance for survival. While Mom waited in the Stevens Clinic waiting room, the Captain was allowed to watch the operation. After a long piece of his intestine was removed, Dad confounded everybody by going back to work in a month. Another month later, drenched in rock dust and sweat, his section punched through the header into the softest, blackest, purest coal anyone had ever seen. There was no celebration. Dad came home, showered and scrubbed himself clean, and went to bed for two days. Then he got up and went back to work again.

There were at least a few times the family was all together. When I was little, Saturday nights were reserved for us to journey over to the county seat of Welch, seven miles and a mountain away from Coalwood. Welch was a bustling little commercial town wet down by the Tug Fork River, its tilted streets filled with throngs of miners and their families come to shop. Women went from store to store with children in their arms or hanging from their hands, while their men, often still in mine coveralls and helmets, lagged behind to talk about mining and high-school football with their fellows. While Mom and Dad visited the stores, Jim and I were deposited at the Pocahontas Theater to watch cowboy movies and adventure serials with hundreds of other miners’ kids. Jim would never talk to any of the others, but I always did, finding out where the boy or girl who sat next to me was from. It always seemed exciting to me when I met somebody from exotic places like Keystone or Iaeger, mining towns on the other side of the county. By the time I had visited and then watched a serial and a double feature and then been retrieved by my parents to walk around Welch to finish up Mom’s shopping, I was exhausted. I almost always fell sound asleep on the ride home in the backseat of the car. When we got back to Coalwood, Dad would lift me over his shoulder and carry me to bed. Sometimes even when I wasn’t asleep I pretended to be, just to know his touch.

Partner Work

Questions for Excerpt 1:

1. List all the characters in this excerpt.

2. Who is the character telling the story? What do you know about him?

3. Use evidence from the story to describe Homer’s father.

4. Why does Homer pretend to be asleep at the end of the excerpt? Why do you think he does this?

5. What is Homer’s point of view concerning his father? Is it positive or negative? Why?

6. Do you think Homer would change how much time his father spends at the mine? Justify your answer.

7. How would the story be different if Homer’s dad told this story?

How would he describe working in the mine and going back to work after surgery?