



Reading Group Gold

The Keeper's Son

by Homer Hickam

Introduction to *The Keeper's Son*

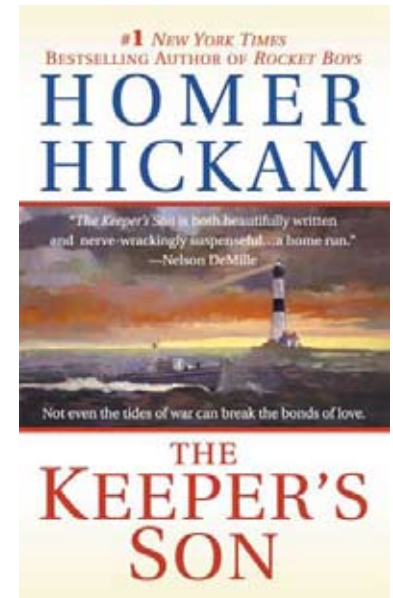
In 1941, Killakeet Island of the wind-swept Outer Banks of North Carolina is home to a tiny, peaceful population of fishermen, clam stompers, oyster rakers, and a few lonely sailors of the Coast Guard. Dominating the glorious, raw beauty of the little island is the majestic Killakeet Lighthouse, which for generations has been the responsibility of one family, the Thurlows.

However, Josh Thurlow, the Keeper's son, has forsworn his heritage to become the commander of the Maudie Jane, a small Coast Guard patrol boat operating off Killakeet. Josh is still tortured by guilt, seventeen years after losing his baby brother at sea. Then his life is complicated by the arrival of the beautiful Dosie Crossan, who has journeyed to lonely Killakeet to escape the outside world and perhaps find a purpose in life. While Josh's heart is stirred by the often-vexing Dosie, he continues his search for his brother, even after a wolfpack of German U-boats arrives to soak the island's beaches with blood and oil.

One of the U-boats is captained by Otto Krebs, a famed and ruthless undersea warrior. Krebs, a man also scarred by lost love, comes to Killakeet, however, with more than torpedoes and plans for war: He may also have the answer to the mystery that haunts Josh Thurlow. *The Keeper's Son* is a rousing, romantic tale of the power of the human heart forever searching for redemption.

Praise for *The Keeper's Son*

"A gutsy Coast Guard officer battles German submarines and 17 years of unfettered guilt on the North Carolina coast in 1941 and 1942 in this high adventure yarn. Hickam, the author of the memoir *Rocket Boys* (which was turned into the film *October Sky*), knows a great deal about submarine warfare in WWII, as evidenced by his 1989 nonfiction naval history, *Torpedo Junction*. This is the first novel of a planned series about rough and tumble Coast Guard Lt. Josh Thurlow and his unusual patrol boat crew during WWII. Josh, 31, is a career officer assigned to Killakeet Island, along North Carolina's treacherous Outer Banks. Both he and his father-the keeper of the Killakeet Lighthouse-are haunted by the loss at sea and presumed death of Josh's two-year-old baby brother 17 years earlier. Shaken from his brooding by the appearance of German U-boats, Josh must try to protect the merchant ships torpedoed every night offshore. His patrol boat is small and ill-equipped, and his crew is a wacky group of casual islanders who aren't sure they really want to fight anybody. A talented U-boat commander named Krebs becomes Josh's honored enemy, but another U-boat skipper is a far more ruthless and dangerous adversary. Josh must fight both, as well



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as his suspicions that his little brother may not be dead after all; the reappearance of a childhood sweetheart leavens the mix. Hickam provides a vivid and convincing portrayal of life under the sea in a U-boat, as well as on the surface in a fragile patrol boat. Well-crafted characters, gripping naval warfare and colorful island life come together in this dynamic and exciting tale. Agents, Frank Weimann and Mickey Freiberg. (Oct.) Forecast: The success of the *Rocket Boys* trilogy should help launch this new series, as should an extensive author tour-Hickam is a practiced speaker.” -*Publisher's Weekly* 8/03

“In the best tradition of sea sagas, *The Keeper's Son* is both beautifully written and nerve-wrackingly suspenseful. Homer Hickam is a master at creating atmosphere out of words, evoking time and place so that the reader becomes nostalgic for Mr. Hickam's world. Homer Hickam's foray into fiction is a home run.” -Nelson DeMille

“With this book, Homer Hickam expands his range, as never before, into the realm of fiction, and the result is a compelling novel of war, romance, haunting guilt, and victory. *The Keeper's Son* brings alive a special place and time, the Outer Banks of North Carolina before and during World War II, and the culture of fishermen, wreckers, surf men, and lighthouse keepers. It also gives the German side in a mirroring, parallel story that connects in a thrilling climax, revealing family secrets and conflicting loyalties. With a wealth of technical and historical detail, this is a story about learning to forgive ourselves and learning to accept the gifts of life and love.” -Robert Morgan, bestselling author of *Gap Creek* and *Brave Enemies*

“Homer Hickam is the best natural storyteller I've read in years.” -Stephen Coonts

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. How would you describe this book? Would you call it a man's book or a woman's book?
2. Can a single incident like Josh losing Jacob define the rest of a person's life? Josh is an intelligent man, why do you think he continues to search for Jacob 17 years later?
3. As you read this novel, did you begin to feel as if you knew the people involved? Do you think you'd have been happy to live on Killakeet? What characteristics are distinctive about the islanders? How has the island shaped them? Did you like them?
4. Caught up in the interesting life of the people of Killakeet, we suddenly find ourselves on board a German submarine in Chapter 3. Was that a shock? Did it keep you interested to follow both stories and wonder how they were going to intersect?
5. What do you think Krebs liked about being a U-boat captain? Were Krebs and Max a good commanding team? Why do you think Germans like Krebs and Max and the young men on board the U-boats who were not Nazis fought so hard for their country?
6. Is Josh a good commander to the men on the Maudie Jane? Does he lead by example or by fear? Do the Maudie Janes become better people as well as sailors under his leadership?



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7. Krebs is supposed to be the enemy. Does the change in him after falling in love with and then losing Miriam seem believable? Do we end up liking him, or even pitying him?
8. Josh has some trouble understanding his father's relationships with women. Why does Josh think he doesn't need this and feel his father weaker for his wanting it? Does this attitude temper his relationship with Dosie?
9. Headstrong Dosie has her own problems and has been burned in other love relationships. Is she likable? Is she too much the romantic for Josh? How are Dosie and Josh different? How are they alike? Do they really love each other and is there any chance for them as a couple?
10. Homer's editor found Purdy the pelican one of his favorite characters in the book. Pets and animals are often featured in Hickam books and here we have Marvin, Genie, and the wild ponies too. Do they add to the flavor of the story?
11. Homer introduces a major character, cowboy Rex Stewart, in Chapter 24, a risky thing to do so late in a book. Does it work? Are you interested in Rex and does bringing an outsider to the island add to the story?
12. Preacher's God is a cruel one. Did you understand Preacher's conflict between his faith and the reality of the war he sees? Did he die at peace with this or still shaken by it?
13. Why did Krebs take the risk of contacting the Maudie Jane about looking for his overboard sailors? Did enemies Thurlow and Krebs have some respect for each other? In a different time and situation, could they have ever been friends?
14. The ending of the book lets the reader make some of their own decisions about what happened. A major theme throughout the book is that on Killakeet, the sea will eventually answer all questions. Did it? Did the comparison of the beach glass in Miriam's cross show Dosie proof that Harro is Jacob? Does it matter if he is or not? Do you think Dosie and Josh stayed together, or married?
15. In the Historical Note at the end, the author explains that although it is fiction, the book is very realistically based on his research and anecdotal information obtained while writing his first book *Torpedo Junction* and also scuba diving on the sunken wrecks and submarines along the Outer Banks. The battle he wrote about in *Torpedo Junction* was, in fact, one of the greatest and longest battles of the war, yet was virtually unknown. Did you know about this terrible part of WWII before this book?
16. The government's war records of this nine-month period were classified "Secret" until they were declassified in the 1975 Freedom of Information Act. Homer Hickam was one of the first people to study them. The author does not know why they were classified for so long. Was it perhaps because officials were ashamed we did not defend that area properly and lost so many lives unnecessarily? What do you think? For detailed information, read Hickam's 1989 nonfiction naval history, "*Torpedo Junction*" ISBN 0-440-21027-5.



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Author Biography

Homer Hickam is the author of six previous books, most notably the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Rocket Boys*, which was made into the acclaimed movie *October Sky*. He is a Vietnam veteran, a scuba instructor, a retired rocket scientist, and an amateur paleontologist. More than anything else, he loves to write. He and his wife, Linda, and their three cats divide their time between homes in the Virgin Islands and Huntsville, Alabama.

An Interview With Homer Hickam

Homer Hickam has made a career of writing about small towns, especially the small town of Coalwood, West Virginia. His memoirs *Rocket Boys* (aka *October Sky*), *The Coalwood Way*, and *Sky of Stone* were heart-tugging, and dramatic stories of growing up in a small 1950's coal camp deep in the heart of Appalachia. Now, with his latest novel, his seventh, Homer is once more writing about a small town but one set on the lonely island of Killakeet "south of Hatteras, north of Lookout," a place of "fishermen, clam-stompers, oyster-rakers, Coastguardsmen, and lighthouse keepers" along the legendary Outer Banks of North Carolina. *The Keeper's Son*, Homer's first of a planned trilogy of novels about a Coast Guard captain named Josh Thurlow and his family during the years of World War II, is a book with lovable and believable characters, a great page-turning plot, and a romantic, sweeping setting like none other.

Why does a popular author known mostly for writing memoirs about his life growing up in West Virginia turn to the writing of fiction? Homer answers that question this way: "I savor the flexibility in fiction to create colorful, sometimes larger-than-life characters who will still ring true and fascinate my readers. It's always been my belief that it isn't plot or setting that makes for the good story, but people, and I think my readers are going to enjoy reading about the people of Killakeet Island, not to mention the marauding U-boaters. I also think that they're going to love the romantic setting of this book and it's got a heckuva plot, too!"

"I write all my books for the primary purpose of entertaining my readers," Homer says, "but I also want them to learn something, too. With *The Keeper's Son*, besides working very hard to write a page-turner, I wanted to bring back to life a time when our country was under attack by outside and nearly incomprehensible forces, very much as we are today. Not too many people know it but there was a huge and terribly bloody battle along the eastern shore of the United States in 1942. Over 400 of our ships were sunk by U-boats and there were also landings made up and down the coast. When I researched my first book, *Torpedo Junction*, a history of that battle, I kept hearing from folks who lived on one or the other islands of the Outer Banks during that era. They told me stories of Germans landing on the islands with mayhem in mind. According to these stories, the island people fought back and drove them off. Although I could never document it, there was a ring of truth to the stories. The people of the Outer Banks, owing to their natural isolation, have a history of taking their affairs into their own hands, including the defense of their islands."

Visit Homer Hickam's official website at www.homerhickam.com.