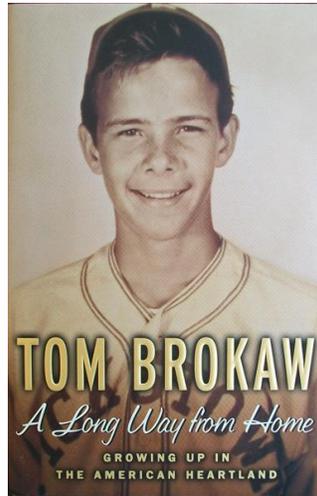


About the Book



Tom Brokaw. *A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the American Heartland*. New York: Random House, 2002.

Synopsis

Brokaw, long-time NBC Nightly News anchor, narrates the story of his boyhood in Bristol, Igloo, Pickstown, Yankton, and Vermillion up to the time of his graduation from college in 1962. In the process of learning about an “All-American boy” who was athletic, popular, smart but not always studious, ambitious, and active, the reader also discovers a great deal about the context of small-town South Dakota during a hugely important transitional period — post-World War II America.

Summary of the Book

American autobiographies possess a long and distinguished lineage. Some of these efforts are franker and more revealing than others; most tend toward self-justification and putting conventional spins on reality. In *A Long Way from Home: Growing Up in the American Heartland*, Tom Brokaw, a small-town boy from South Dakota, writes a more interesting memoir than most, if only because we know that the story he tells will eventually find him in the anchor booth at NBC Nightly News at a salary of millions of dollars each year.

The reader would like to learn how he got there, and there are clues here regarding the man’s native intelligence, ample ambition, and instinct for the main chance. The narrative carries him to 1962, when, at age twenty-two, he headed off to his first permanent job in the newsroom of KMTV, the NBC affiliate in Omaha. He had just graduated from the University of South Dakota and married high school classmate Meredith Ault. He was a lucky and promising fellow, but there was little apparent in his story up to that point to indicate that in less than two decades he would emerge as one of the most prominent TV journalists in America. This tale, in Brokaw’s own words, is rather “an attempt to document the manner in which I was raised in the America of the post World War II

years.” In writing it, he wants to “express my gratitude to the people who raised me, and to the character of life in the American heartland from which I have drawn so much.”

Brokaw’s talent as a wordsmith shines through in this engaging and informative excursion into life in small-town South Dakota during the forties and fifties. It was a time of remarkable change and development during which the impact of American popular culture increasingly was felt in a state that was rapidly losing its sense of remoteness. Although it was not obvious to him as he was growing up and attending school, South Dakota’s small towns were beginning to undergo wrenching transformations that would witness most of them losing population, stores on Main Street closing, and the economic functions of the smaller towns being taken over by the larger towns. That was not at all apparent to young Tom, first, in the recently established town of Pickstown on the Missouri River, where his father worked on the construction of the massive Fort Randall Dam. With its winding streets, brand new school, stores, churches, and homes, Pickstown seemed a model of the type of new suburban developments that were springing up all over the United States during the years after World War II.

Later, after moving to the much larger town of Yankton before his sophomore year in high school, Tom would have a much larger school in which he could hone his competitive skills on the basketball court and football field, in student government meetings, and on the dance floors. Gifted with intelligence, good looks, charm, and self-confidence, the young man epitomized the type of popular, talented, and seemingly effortless student that shows up in everyone’s high school yearbook as “most likely to succeed” — the one that every boy wants to be friends with, every girl wants to date, and all the mothers in town want for a son-in-law. Brokaw is not too falsely modest to omit from the story his string of personal successes: starting guard on the varsity basketball team, lead role in the all-school play, class and student-body president, Boys State governor, pal of Governor Joe Foss, and, perhaps most impressive to many readers, someone who hung out with college frat boys while still attending high school. But despite the “good boy” reputation he had acquired as a youngster, he doesn’t hesitate to talk about his faults, including excessive self-regard, reckless behavior (in pre-drug days, this consisted of drinking beer, skipping class assignments, and failing to show up for play rehearsals), and general lack of purpose. He disappointed not only his parents, teachers, classmates, and would-be girlfriend (Meredith, before he mended his ways, leading her to change her mind about him); he disappointed himself.

As all good stories must (at least, stories about successful people), this one pictures him turning around, straightening up, and finally getting back on track. The conversion didn’t happen overnight, however. There were several false starts, first during his freshman year spent at the University of Iowa, and later back in Vermillion at the University of South Dakota. Brokaw identifies the crucial turning point as a conversation he had with political science professor William Farber, who told him he ought to drop out of college until he got his head on straight and decided what he wanted to do with his life. It took a bolt from the blue like that to force the brash young man to realize that success would not be handed

to him on a silver platter. The episode strikes one as interesting and plausible, but the reader is left wondering whether maybe there's more to the story than the author reveals.

Beyond learning about Brokaw — the boy turned man — we also are presented much to consider regarding the environment in which he grew up: small-town South Dakota during the post World War II period. Every state resident reading this book will — consciously or unconsciously — match his or her own experience against Brokaw's as he describes it in these pages. Family relations, life in the household, school days, bb guns, outdoor life, collecting rocks and fossils, hunting and fishing, a profusion of sports, pool hall forays, trips to faraway places, the arrival of television, odd jobs, mowing lawns, Boy Scouts, pursuing girls, the rise of rock 'n' roll, stints at local radio stations — these are the things that occupied the thoughts and actions of a typical, All-American boy going through grade school, high school, and college. Only sporadically do we get a notion that there was a world outside — civil rights on the rise, the Cold War stewing, and nearby Indians. But this is a schoolboy memoir, not a comprehensive history of the era. History emerges here, but as seen through the eyes of a not all that untypical schoolboy.

This young man, however, will take the talents and ambitions conferred upon him, grasp at opportunities offered him, and rise up the Horatio Alger ladder of success that sixties and seventies America offered him to become one of the most respected and admired television journalists in the country. We can be grateful that he took the time to turn his gaze for a moment upon his own childhood, for this book illuminates in perceptive and revealing fashion what it might have been like for any schoolboy to have grown up during this period of time in this little piece of the Heartland.

<http://retrobookshop.com>

Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).

<http://library.sd.gov/PROG/sdbookbag/index.aspx>