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THOSE THAT MATTERED

By Barbara Angle

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Above ground, it's almost heaven. But when a West Virginia miner descends into the coal pits he's abandoned all hope of ever escaping, it approaches hell; with his cap light off, he "can stir the blackness with his hand." In her authoritatively vivid account of the coal miner's life, promising newcomer Barbara Angle shows the grim details: the "miners' black spittle, spewing coal-flecked mucous accumulated from years of working underground" for an "industry that has tried to kill us for the better part of a hundred years," where "the mutilation and death of its men is a way of life." So, too, its women. Granddaughter, daughter and sister of miners, Portia Crowe will become, like the other Crowes, stained black with coal dust when she escapes a bland marriage and ineffectual teaching career to labor in the mines and face that abomination compounded by the vicious sexual harassment of co-workers. Ms. Angle, who worked in the mines in the mid-1970s until she lost the use of her right arm, offers a chilling story midway between elegiac autobiography and muckraking exposé, whose minor flaws of bombast and structural slackness may result from her own painful proximity to her material. She's penned a book for those who, like Nietzsche, love only what a person has written with her blood.