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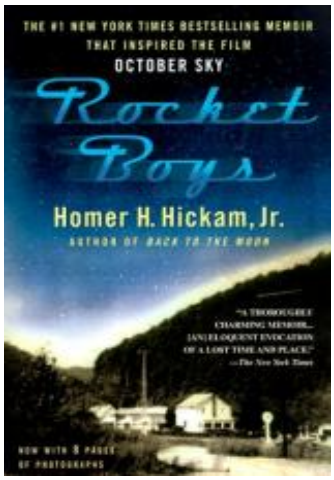
# Rocket Boys

by Homer Hickam




## About the Book

The #1 New York Times bestselling memoir *Rocket Boys/October Sky* is the true story of Homer "Sonny" Hickam, Jr., a boy from the mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. In 1957, when Sonny was just 14 years old, Sputnik raced across the Appalachian sky. It left in its wake one boy's desire to join the space race, a dream that he ardently pursued with the help (and sometimes hindrance) of the people in the unique little town of his youth.

*Rocket Boys/October Sky* offers readers --- including parents, teaching professionals, school administrators, and childcare-givers --- a way to teach and foster the concepts of hope, passion, confidence, self-realization, and the power of following a dream. The book reminds all of us that to simply dream is not enough. We should live our dreams, too.

*Rocket Boys* was the basis for the major motion picture *October Sky* from Universal Studios.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** As you read this memoir, did you begin to feel as if you knew the people involved? Did you like them? Do you think you'd have been happy to live in Coalwood in the late 1950's? If you had, what position in it would you have wanted? Coal miner? Foreman? Teacher? Housewife? Preacher? Doctor? Rocket Boy or Girl? Football Star? Commentary: Coalwood had a distinct role for each person who lived there. In order to live in the town, it was required that the head of the household work for the mine in some capacity. The exceptions to this were the teachers at the Coalwood School. Even the preachers were company men!

**2.** Was this memoir similar in its construction with others that you've read? What do you think of the memoir genre? Do you think it might be difficult to write a memoir that is interesting to readers? A memoir is, as its title implies, a memory of long-ago events. To write *Rocket Boys/October Sky*, Homer had to dig very deep into his soul to bring back moments that he hadn't thought about for a very long time. He has a great sense of drama and believes that all of his books should

be entertaining page-turners. This required even more work during the creation of the book since each "real" event had to be written in such a way it was interesting and stimulating and fit within an overall pattern. Homer realized early on into writing the book that to simply write down the sequential reality of rocket launches, incidents at the mine, the comings and goings of his friends, his parents, and other Coalwood citizens was not the best way to reveal the truths of the story. To bring Coalwood alive required careful crafting including, in some isolated cases, composite characters. Homer now regrets that he insisted on adding an "Author's Note" in this book concerning the "liberties" he took in telling the story because some reviewers took that to mean he'd not told the truth. In his note in the follow-up memoir, *The Coalwood Way*, he wrote: "Memoirs are tough things to write. How can you remember what somebody said or did forty years ago? I don't have an answer. All I know is I do. I've changed a few names and disguised some other folks to protect them but, otherwise, this is pretty much the way it happened, I swan." We suggest a discussion of the current popularity of reading memoirs. Also see www.homerhickam.com and go to "The Rocket Boys" and "Coalwood" buttons for photos and biographies of the real people in the book.

**3.** How would you describe this book? Would you call is a man's book or a woman's book? Were you fearful it might be too technical? Is it just a story of a boy with a dream or the story of a small mining town? Or is it something grander and deeper? Homer has always said he used the rockets as a metaphor to tell the true story of life in the coalfields of West Virginia but he also had something else in mind, a weaving of many allegorical themes that begin loosely connected but are gradually wound tighter and tighter until they become as one. Can you spot those themes? Homer gets lots of glowing fan mail from "reluctant readers" who had the book recommended to them, but thought they wouldn't be interested, then they stayed up all night reading it.

**4.** Do you think Homer Senior and Elsie love each other? What is the principle cause of their conflicts? What is the importance of the mural Elsie is painting in the kitchen? Why is Homer Junior called "Sonny" in the book? Why did his teachers insist on calling him by that nickname rather than the one his mother wanted? Homer dropped his nickname "Sonny" when he served as an Army Lieutenant in Vietnam. It felt very strange to him to be called by this name at first. He says when people called him "Homer," he kept looking over his shoulder for his father!

**5.** How would you describe Sonny's father? Why does Homer Senior take Sonny into the mine, risking Elsie's wrath? Why does he arrange for rocket materials when he seems so antagonistic to the rocket building? How does the conflict between his mom and dad motivate Sonny? Why was Geneva Eggers so important in Sonny's understanding of his father? Homer believes that this book is in reality his father's book. It rests on the bedrock of Homer Senior's strong, deep beliefs in the town and its everlasting "industrial symphony."

**6.** In the first paragraph of the book, Homer writes that his hometown was "at war with itself over its children." What does this mean? Many young readers write Homer that they are upset that their parents are trying to steer them towards a career or life that they don't want. It's an interesting situation as it seems to occur in every generation all across the world. Coalwood, then, is a microcosm of this tendency. Yet, the Rocket Boys knew that they and nearly all the children of Coalwood were the "designated refugees," destined to leave the town of their youth. Standing nearly alone against this tide was Homer Senior who believed in the town and knew it would die if its children left.

**7.** All the women in Coalwood are shown to be strong women, a trait they must have to say goodbye daily to their husbands and sons who work in the dangerous mine and may not return that night. Although most of the women of Coalwood make the best of their lot, they want a better life for their children. How can they help this to happen? Are

they feminists before the term existed? How about the teachers called "The Great Six?" What's their role in Coalwood? What is your opinion of Elsie, Sonny's mother? Is she too harsh with her husband in her attempt to better her life and that of her sons? And Miss Riley? What did it say about her when she stood up for the Rocket Boys against the feared principal, Mr. Turner? It was a disappointment to Homer that the movie October Sky portrayed the women as rather weak when he believes they were the strongest people in the story.

**8.** Is this a universal story? Could it be set in other times or is it specific to Coalwood and West Virginia in the late 50's? The book has been translated into eight languages and people from all over the world say Homer "told their story" yet they have never held a rocket or even seen a coal mine! The book is dedicated "To Mom and Dad and the people of Coalwood." Why do you think Homer made that dedication? Homer never knows who's going to show up in his autograph lines to tell him how much they enjoyed this book. They vary from astronauts to coal miners to just about everybody, young and old.

**9.** Many schools from fifth grade to college are studying Rocket Boys/October Sky in their classrooms, including English, math, and science classes. That makes it a pretty unique book! This is an adult book but it is told from a young man's point of view. Why do you think teachers are picking this book to study and why are they writing Homer that they think it was their most popular class read ever, sparking the most thoughtful discussion? Homer is always pleased when teachers and students write and tell him how much they enjoyed studying his book(s). But he is always astonished and a bit chagrined when an English class writes and says how much they loved "the movie!"

**10.** This story is also about the rewards and costs of nonconformity. Who conforms, who doesn't and what is the consequence of their actions? Is that a problem today and can this story help those who tend to go against the expected norms? How was Quentin a nonconformist? How about the other boys? Homer believes the Rocket Boys are still "dangerous" when they get together. There's something about their mix of personalities that is a bit volatile! They do miss Sherman, though. He was a soothing influence to their passionate personalities!

**11.** In Chapter 22, Mr. Turner, the Big Creek High School principal, wryly tells Sonny, "In the queer mass of human destiny, the determining factor has always been luck." But in Chapter 26, Homer writes, "There's a plan. If you are willing to fight hard enough, you can make it detour for a while, but you're still going to end up where God wants you to be." Are these quotations about human fate really in conflict with each other? How do they apply to the story? This is one of those underlying themes to the book, that destiny is one of life's grandest mysteries.

**12.** Rocket Boys/October Sky is an excellent way to think about and discuss the many steps it takes to achieve a goal. Sonny's idea of building rockets starts as simply a dream, but then he brings in the other boys and even approaches Quentin, the school outcast. The Rocket Boys first look upon their rocket-building as interesting and fun but then it becomes a challenge to defy expectations. Only much later does the idea of entering the science fairs occur to them. Discuss the importance of incremental steps in your life. Do you believe an incremental approach has validity in all walks of life, academic and otherwise? Why does Quentin believe in the necessity of obtaining what he calls a "body of knowledge?" Homer now gives motivational speeches citing "Passion, Planning, and Perseverance" as the secret to a successful life. He stresses that planning in a sequential, incremental way is very important in reaching your dreams.

**13.** Miss Riley, the physics teacher, seems to regard education as a challenge and adventure. Sonny rises to meet the formidable task she sets before him. He writes, "I had discovered that learning something, no matter how complex,

wasn't hard when I had a reason to want to know it." (p. 168) That challenge is taken to the next level by Miss Riley when she gives him the book Principles of Guided Missile Design, saying, "All I've done is give you a book. You have to have the courage to learn what's inside it." (p. 232). Discuss Miss Riley's motivational techniques. In Sky of Stone, the third book in the "Coalwood trilogy," Sonny, home from college, promises Miss Riley he will "do his best." She sums up her philosophy to him in two words: "Do better."

**14.** When Sonny thinks of giving up rocketry altogether, Miss Riley tells him: "you've got to put all your hurt and anger aside so that you can do your job . . . Your job, Sonny, is to build your rockets." When Sonny asks why that's so important, she answers, "If for no other reason, because it honors you and this school."(p. 296). It's clear that she means it also honors Coalwood. Discuss the concept of civic pride. How do the Rocket Boys help the town? Why are they celebrated in the newspapers? In church? In the Big Store? By both sides of the unionization conflict? Why do so many attend their rocket launches? Is it just because the football team is on year-long suspension? Today, after a long period of decline, Coalwood lives again! Rolling up their sleeves, the people of the town have restored Cape Coalwood (the boy's old rocket range), and sponsor an annual October Sky Festival. Thousands of tourists visit Coalwood every month and the people there take great delight in showing them all the sites in the book. Please see our "Gifts" button on www.homerhickam.com for Rocket Boys shirts and other gift ideas. Proceeds go to the non-profit Cape Coalwood Restoration Association which was formed by the retired miners and their families still there.

**15.** Discuss the motivational aspects contained within this story. How did Sputnik motivate Sonny? Is his mother trying to be motivational after he blows up her rose garden fence with his first rocket ("I believe you can build a rocket. [Your father] doesn't. I want you to show him I'm right." (p. 52)) Early in his career as a rocket builder, Rocket Boy O'Dell says, "A rocket won't fly unless someone lights the fuse." (p. 105) How important is it to find motivation in all our endeavors? Would the boys have gotten to the science fair without being motivated by something larger than themselves? The movie presented the boys' motivation for building their rockets as gaining scholarships for college. In fact, there were never any scholarships offered at any of the Science Fairs they entered nor did they receive any. Still, despite the differences between the book and the movie, we recommend you see the film. It is wonderfully and artfully made and is very motivational. It might also be an interesting discussion to figure out why Hollywood felt the need to change the story.

**16.** The final chapter in the book (before the epilog) finishes with the launch of the last rocket of the Big Creek Missile Agency. Homer Senior is invited to launch this rocket. Why do you think this invitation was made? Why do you think he accepted? Commentary: Homer held back writing this scene until the very last although he wanted to write it more than any other. It was, he says, a gift to himself to finally write it down and savor that moment. This commentary and discussion questions were written by Linda Terry Hickam, assistant (and wife!) to Homer Hickam. Visit www.homerhickam.com for more information on all of Homer's books, the film "October Sky," the real Rocket Boys, teacher information and lesson plans, photographs, and much more.

## Author Bio

Homer Hickam is the bestselling and award-winning author of many books, including the #1 *New York Times* memoir ROCKET BOYS, which was adapted into the popular film OCTOBER SKY. A writer since grade school, he is also a Vietnam veteran, a former coal miner, a scuba instructor, an avid amateur paleontologist and a retired engineer. He lives in Alabama and the Virgin Islands.

## Critical Praise

"400 schools in Canada and the USA [are] using Hickam's autobiographical October Sky to teach lessons that go beyond typical classroom learning. "

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