

**2015 School, Community Read or Reading Group "Toolbox"
for *Rocket Boys/October Sky* by Homer Hickam**



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Numerous other essays, articles, Q&A's, interviews and photos are available from the author to enhance the reading of his books.

Classroom material is available. Interviews and author appearances may be arranged. Please contact Linda Hickam at LTHickam@homerhickam.com.

COMMENTARY

The #1 New York Times best-selling memoir, *Rocket Boys/October Sky*, is the true story of Homer "Sonny" Hickam, Jr., a boy from the mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. The movie name *October Sky* is an anagram of the book name *Rocket Boys* - the same letters, just moved around. Note: When the paperback came out at the same time as the movie, it was also titled *October Sky*.

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.

There are few "small-town boy makes good" stories that have resonated so profoundly as Homer Hickam's best-selling memoirs that began with *Rocket Boys/October Sky*. Homer's story of growing up in Coalwood, West Virginia, a town where everything was dying except his dreams, became an instant

classic, inspiring millions to follow his example and better their lives through hard work, perseverance, and joyful enthusiasm. This acclaimed book was selected one of the New York Times Great Books of 1998 and was nominated by the National Book Critics Circle as Best Biography of 1998.

The phenomenon of Homer's "Coalwood series" continues to grow. The follow-up memoirs, *The Coalwood Way* and *Sky of Stone* are national bestsellers too. *We Are Not Afraid* contains wisdom from Coalwood about how not to live in fear. There is Hollywood interest in several more of Homer's now eighteen books.

Although adult-level books, school systems across the country study Hickam's four Coalwood books in over 400 classrooms, from 5th grade through college, and even in foreign countries. Reading groups and community-wide reads have now discovered *Rocket Boys/October Sky* in particular and have reported that it has been their favorite read yet. This book is being called a classic. It offers readers, including parents and teaching professionals, 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.

Homer's inspirational/self help book called *We Are Not Afraid: Strength and Courage from the Town That Inspired the #1 Bestseller and Award-Winning Movie October Sky* was published in early 2002 in reaction to 9/11 and is a wonderful companion piece to the Coalwood books. Homer felt it was his patriotic duty to write about how the people in Coalwood had strength and courage in the face of peril and to show how we can perhaps learn to be more like them to defeat fear and dread, especially now.

His memoirs has even breathed life back into his old stomping grounds. Neighboring Coalwood, Beckley, WV now holds an annual Rocket Boys Festival every fall on the first Saturday of October with all the Rocket Boys attending. Thousands of people from around the world attend this event. NASA has joined in by providing Coalwood an exact scale model of the space shuttle which now stands proudly near the Rocket Boys' old Cape Coalwood launch range, a testament to the power of dreams over

adversity.

One of the more powerful themes of Homer's memoir series is the relationship he had with his father. He has heard from so many readers that he has recounted exactly what it was like to have a father who was cold and distant. It is endemic to a generation of children whose parents came out of the Great Depression and World War II. Homer's handling of his father is obviously suffused with respect, admiration, and love. In so many ways, his is a healing story to these now adult children of "The Greatest Generation."

Another powerful thematic current rippling through Homer's Coalwood series is simply the tale of life in an insulated small town where so much is hidden beneath the surface. So many of Homer's readers tell him that once they start reading one of the memoirs, they feel as if they're a citizen of Coalwood, part of its everyday life. They also tell him how they wish the books would go on and on forever. He is honored to receive daily fan mail telling him how his stories of Coalwood have changed lives. Little Coalwood seems to have many good lessons still for those of us who live in today's crowded, busy world.

BIOGRAPHY/BIBLIOGRAPHY

Homer Hickam has been a writer since the third grade when his teacher told him "Some day, Sonny, you'll make your living as a writer." He determined that if that was so, he'd begin right away by publishing his own newspaper. Even though he was only seven years old at the time and living in a small coal mining town in West Virginia.

Writing, however, continued to his passion throughout life. There was, however, a slight deviation when he also decided he wanted to be an engineer. This he did, even eventually working for NASA, though he continued to write on the side. Today, he is the author of seventeen books, all best-sellers, including the internationally acclaimed memoir *Rocket Boys* which was made into the award winning film *October Sky*.

Life these days is exciting for Homer Hickam. He vigorously pursues his hobby of amateur paleontology, otherwise known as dinosaur bone-

hunting. He is an accomplished scuba diver and a retired instructor. His third grade teacher was right. He makes his living as a writer and he'd have it no other way.

Homer is married to Linda Terry Hickam, an artist and his first editor and assistant. They have beloved furchildren cats and share time between homes in Huntsville, Alabama, which, appropriately enough as a major NASA propulsion center, known as Rocket City USA, and St. John, USVI. See www.homerhickam.com, <http://homerhickamblog.blogspot.com/> and on Facebook, Homer Hickam Official Page

BOOKS

- * *Carrying Albert Home*, October 2015
- * *Crater Trueblood and the Lunar Rescue Company*, June 2014
- * *From Rocket Boys to October Sky*, Kindle Single and print copy 2013
- * *Crescent* (a Helium-3 series) June 2013
- * *Paco: The Cat Who Meowed in Space*, Kindle Single 2012
- * *Crater* (a Helium-3 series) 2012
- * *The Dinosaur Hunter*, 2010
- * *My Dream of Stars* (with Anoushe Ansari) 2010
- * *Red Helmet*, 2008
- * *The Far Reaches*, 2007
- * *The Ambassador's Son*, 2005
- * *The Keeper's Son*, 2003
- * *We Are Not Afraid*, 2002
- * *Sky of Stone*, 2001
- * *The Coalwood Way*, 2000
- * *Back To The Moon*, 1999
- * *Rocket Boys/October Sky*, 1998
- * *Torpedo Junction*, 1989

ROCKET BOYS/OCTOBER SKY ISBN INFORMATION

- * *ROCKET BOYS* by Homer Hickam (hardcover)
ISBN: 0-385-33320-X
Delacorte Press (Random House) \$23.95 368 pages

* Trade paperback, *ROCKET BOYS* (includes 8 pages of photographs)
ISBN: 0-385-33321-8 \$12.95 384 pages

* *OCTOBER SKY* (paperback with 8 pages of photographs)
ISBN: 0-440-23550-2 \$6.99 448 pages

* Unabridged audio *ROCKET BOYS*

http://www.recordedbooks.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=rb.show_prod&book_id=79262

Other editions include large print and Nook, eBook, as well as Spanish, Dutch, German, Chinese (2), Japanese, Korean, Italian, Vietnamese, French. It has been abridged by Readers Digest Condensed Books if it can be found and is appropriate for young readers. Otherwise rated advanced 8th grade.

READING GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Hickam Commentary on each is below. Page numbers cited refer to the *October Sky* paperback)

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?
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?
3. How would you describe this book? Would you call it 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?
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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?

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?"

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.

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?

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?

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?

BRIEF COMMENTARY ON EACH QUESTION FROM THE AUTHOR

1. 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. Commentary: 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. I have written a companion book that gives "the rest of the story" of how the book and movie came to be, called *From Rocket Boys to October Sky*.

3. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: This is one of those underlying themes to the book, that destiny is one of life's grandest mysteries.

12. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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. Commentary: 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 a nearby town sponsors an annual Rocket Boys Festival. Tourists visit Coalwood every month and the people there take great delight in showing them all the sites in the book. Please see our SHOP button on www.homerhickam.com for autographed personalized books and other gift ideas.

15. Commentary: 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. 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.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

May 2002

1. What made the people of Coalwood so important as to include them in your memoir? What kind of impact did they have on you?

There are three "memoirs," or what I call "novoirs," short for "novel-memoirs." They are *Rocket Boys*, *The Coalwood Way*, and *Sky of Stone*. Each tells a story of my life as a teen-ager in the little coal town of Coalwood, West Virginia. The first of the trilogy, *Rocket Boys*, is best-known since the film *October Sky* was based on it. The trilogy was followed by the inspirational book, *We Are Not Afraid*. *We Are Not Afraid* is a series of short anecdotes about Coalwood, the good life there, and how the people of Coalwood taught me and the other boys and girls of that town to excel, and

to be unafraid of life. I don't have much interest in writing a pure memoir of my life, that is from birth to present-day. For instance, it is extremely doubtful that I'll ever write of my days working for NASA. Although it was a productive period in my life, nothing will ever be so intensely interesting to me as my years as a Coalwood boy. It was my intention with my novels to bring Coalwood and its people alive again, and to tell stories of adventure and good humor and deep tragedy in a unique setting.

2. Were you pleased with the movie adaptation of *Rocket Boys*? How involved were you able to be in the process?

I was pleased with some aspects of the film, displeased with others, not that Universal Studios gave a hoot one way or the other. I believe the book *Rocket Boys* is a far richer and deeper story than the film *October Sky*. The first paragraph of the book sets forth the threads of the real story, of the conflict between my parents as to how my brother and I would live our lives, of the battle between elements of the town as to its direction, of how a girl, pure at least in spirit, can cure a broken heart on a single night, and the quest for the great secret at the core of a rocket. The movie sets up a mythical science fair scholarship, and suggests we boys built our rockets to gain it. It makes for an inspiring movie but it was not really the story of Coalwood and its Rocket Boys. I was much involved with the making of the movie in terms of being on set as a technical advisor. Unfortunately, I had no say in the screenplay. The first script was so awful, it made me ill. I still can't read it without feeling sick. Fortunately, the director of the film rewrote much of it during filming, using the book as a guide. That saved it. I have written a companion book that gives "the rest of the story" of how the book and movie came to be, called *From Rocket Boys to October Sky*. I hope you enjoy this behind the scenes look at this story.

3. Did you imagine when you retired from NASA that your writing career would take off the way that it has?

I always believed I would find my audience but wasn't sure when that might happen. It was my good fortune that I found it just as I was leaving NASA at 55 years of age and 30 years federal service. It had always been my plan to

retire then, no matter what the situation.

4. What kind of writing is your favorite - memoir, historical, fiction? And why?

I love writing in any form. Writing is my greatest passion. There are many things in life I could live without, but I have to write. I didn't realize that until I came back from Vietnam in 1968. There was a great void in my life. I realized it was my need to write and so I began a long free-lance career while working as an engineer.

5. What kind of a writer do you want to be known as?

A good one! I am most pleased when the word-of-mouth commentary on my books is that they are page-turners. I work hard to make them so.

6. What led you to write the self-help book, *We Are Not Afraid*?

One of the side-benefits of my writing career is that I am one of the most requested speakers in the country. After the September 11 terrorist attacks, I began to speak on how the people of my home town lived lives of dignity even during the toughest of times, and how they taught me hard but true lessons of strength and courage. My remarks were nearly always followed by standing ovations. Clearly, I was touching a chord in my audiences. After seeing one my speeches on C-SPAN, Health Communications, Inc. (the publisher of the Chicken Soup for the Soul books) called and asked me to expand on my speech and write a book based on the wisdom of Coalwood. At first, I hesitated. After all, I am not a philosopher. I have no academic degrees in either psychology, or sociology, or any other kind of -ology. But after giving it some thought, I decided the publisher was right, that people today could use the wisdom of a wise and steady and strong people who tested their approach to life during good times and bad. That is why I agreed to write *We Are Not Afraid*, a book that is meant to address what I call long-term fear or the habit of being afraid.

7. What do you hope to accomplish in your writing?

To tell good, entertaining stories that will stick with my readers.

8. Tell me something your readers doesn't know about you.

That I groan every time I go into a book store and find my Coalwood "novoirs" stuck on the History or Biography shelves! I'd prefer them to be in Fiction even though they are based on the truth. The best novels always are. By placing my novoirs in History or Biography, they get lost.

9. Will you ever leave Huntsville, Alabama? Is it hard to live a "normal" life there now that you have reached such success? How are you treated by the community at large?

I love Huntsville and its people. After all, I've lived here, off and on, for over thirty years. I don't see leaving, although my wife and I bought a home in the US Virgin Islands. Eventually, we could end up splitting our time between here and there. One nice thing about Huntsville is that people here tend to leave me alone. They knew me before all this happened and are pretty much unimpressed!

10. How important has your wife Linda been to your success? Is she still your editing assistant?

As an author's assistant (and wife), Linda has been a critically important element to my success. I couldn't get along with out her. She handles the web site, most of the mail, the taxes, the speech agent, and also is my first reader. Since she reads so much, I am careful to listen to her comments on my work. She's generally right, especially when I get off into the weeds with my stories.

11. Can we expect other books from Coalwood?

Actually yes, surprising even me! I am just finished writing a book about my parents, set in 1935. My mom had a pet alligator names Albert, a wedding gift. . . It is called *Carrying Albert Home* and will be published October, 2015.

12. What accomplishment are you the most proud of?

Although it's a prime West Virginia sin to get yourself "puffed up" and proud, I do feel a sense of accomplishment that my books have brought my little town of Coalwood back to life again, at least in the minds of millions of readers.

13. What do you love so much about writing?

I love creating an intriguing story from nothing but a thought or memory. It's fascinating to me to see it all fall into place.

14. Is there anything I haven't asked that you want to tell me about?

After the movie was shown on ABC-TV a few weeks ago, I received an e-mail from someone who asked me what my "ethnic background" was. I replied "American."