

Rocket Boys / October Sky

by **Homer H. Hickam, Jr.**

About the Book

The #1 *New York Times* bestselling memoir that inspired the film *October Sky*, *Rocket Boys* is a uniquely American memoir — a powerful, luminous story of coming of age at the dawn of the 1960s, of a mother’s love and a father’s fears, of a group of young men who dreamed of launching rockets into outer space . . . and who made those dreams come true.

With the grace of a natural storyteller, NASA engineer Homer Hickam paints a warm, vivid portrait of the harsh West Virginia mining town of his youth, evoking a time of innocence and promise, when anything was possible, even in a company town that swallowed its men alive. A story of romance and loss, of growing up and getting out, Homer Hickam’s lush, lyrical memoir is a chronicle of triumph — at once exquisitely written and marvelously entertaining.

Praise for the Book

“A thoroughly charming memoir . . . [an] eloquent evocation of a lost time and place. . . . Mr. Hickam builds a story of overcoming obstacles worthy of Frank Capra, especially in its sweetness and honest sentimentality.”

— *The New York Times*

“Hickam has a great story to tell. . . . *Rocket Boys* will certainly strike a nostalgic chord in anyone who grew up during the early days of the space race, but its appeal goes beyond that. . . . Hickam’s recollections of small-town America in the last years of small-town America are so cinematic that even those of us who didn’t grow up there might imagine we did.”

— *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A stirring tale that offers something unusual these days . . . a message of hope in an age of cynicism. . . . Perhaps we all have something to learn from a half-dozen boys who dared to reject all limitations . . . and resolved to send dreams roaring to the sky.”

— *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

“Unforgettable . . . Unlike so many memoirs, this book brings to life more than one man’s experiences. It brings to life the lost town of Coalwood, W.Va.”

— *USA Today*

Courtesy of Bantam Dell Publishing Group

About the Author

Homer H(adley) Hickam, Jr.

American writer (1943–)

Updated : 06/17/2002

Known As: Hickam, Homer; Hickam, Homer Hadley, Jr.

Personal Information: Family: Born February 19, 1943, in Coalwood, WV; son of Homer (a superintendent of a coal mine) and Elsie (Lavender) Hickman; married first wife, 1977 (divorced, 1986); married Linda Terry (an artist, editor, and assistant), 1998. Education: Virginia Polytechnic Institute, B.S. (industrial engineering), 1964.

Avocational Interests: Scuba diving.

Military/Wartime Service: Army First Lieutenant in Vietnam, 1967–68; became Captain; received Army Commendation Medal and Bronze Star.

Career: U.S. Army Missile Command, Huntsville, AL, and Germany, engineer, 1971–81; National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Marshall Space Flight Center, Huntsville, AL, aerospace engineer and training manager for astronauts, 1981–98.

Awards: Distinguished Service Award, State of Alabama, 1984; *Rocket Boys* selected as one of “Great Books of 1998,” *New York Times*; National Book Critics Circle Award nomination, best biography, 1998, for *Rocket Boys*; honored by the State of West Virginia, 1999, for “his support of his home state and his distinguished career as both an engineer and author.”

WORKS

- *Torpedo Junction: U-boat War Off America’s East Coast, 1942*, Naval Institute Press (Annapolis, MD), 1989.
- *Rocket Boys: A Memoir*, Delacorte Press (New York), 1998, retitled and published as *October Sky*, Delacorte Press, 1999.
- *Back to the Moon*, Delacorte Press, 1999.
- *Sky of Stone* (memoir), Delacorte Press, 2001.

Media Adaptations: *Rocket Boys: A Memoir* was adapted to film as *October Sky*, directed by Joe Johnston, Universal, 1999, which received the Humanitas Prize for feature film, 1999.

“Sidelights”

Rocket scientist and memoirist Homer H. Hickam Jr. was meant to be a coal miner. Born in 1943 in Coalwood, West Virginia, he was raised by a mine supervisor in a town where all the boys followed their fathers into the mines. But when Hickam saw the lights of Sputnik in the sky he became obsessed with rockets, and by the time he was a NASA engineer his hometown’s coal mine had closed. After graduating from Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1964 Hickam served as an Army lieutenant in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968. He realized his childhood dream and enjoyed a seventeen year career as an aerospace engineer before retiring to a second career as a novelist. He was divorced from his first wife of nine years in 1986, and remarried artist and assistant Linda Terry in 1998.

They met through another of Hickam's passions, scuba diving. Hickam and Terry live near the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

Scuba diving also led to Hickam's first book, *Torpedo Junction: U-Boat War off America's East Coast, 1942* (1989). While on a dive off the North Carolina Capes he found American ships sunk by torpedoes, and two sunken German U-boats. His book tells how, during World War II, several German U-boats sank some 275 American ships. The Germans called the Cape "the American shooting gallery" because only one Coast Guard cutter guarded it, the *Dione*. But merchant captains defied Navy orders and hunted down the submarines. Hickam spent ten years researching *Torpedo Junction*. He read war logs and diaries, and conducted interviews. Brian Firth wrote in his review for *West Coast Review of Books*, "Hickam shows what an enormous strategic effect was achieved by a small force of only simple submersibles, devoid of snorkels or any modern refinement."

Rocket Boys: A Memoir (1998) began with a story Hickam wrote for *Air and Space/Smithsonian* magazine in 1995. He expanded the story of the pivotal year in his life into an admittedly embellished memoir told in a nostalgic style reminiscent of *Stand by Me*. Hickam said his life consists of two phases, before and after the launching of the Soviet Sputnik satellite on October 5, 1957. He was fourteen years old and living where life revolved around the mining industry. A *Smithsonian* critic included this quote from *Rocket Boys* in his review: "I ate supper after Dad saw the evening shift down the shaft, and I went to sleep to the ringing of a hammer on steel and the dry hiss of an arc welder at the little tippie machine shop during the hootowl shift"

Once Sputnik made its launch, he became obsessed with rockets and read all he could. Rocket scientist Wernher von Braun became his new hero. Hickam and a group of boys formed a rocket club, the Big Creek Missile Agency, and began building rockets. The first launch destroyed his mother's picket fence. After another accident in town the boys built a rocket center at a dumpsite they called Cape Coalwood, complete with a "blockhouse" for missile projection and a cement launch pad. They named their rockets for the flightless bird, the Auk. The rocket club suffered the jeers of the townspeople and the taunting of Hickam's older brother Jim and his gang of friends. But the whole town took notice when a launch broke the one-mile barrier. Miners then helped the boys construct parts for the rockets and teachers supplied them with helpful books.

Bruce Watson wrote in *Smithsonian*, "Hickam's descriptions are striking. . . . The main narrative, as inspiring as any to come out of the space age, rings like a ninepound hammer on coal." Watson finished, "His memoir honoring both earthbound miners and their sons who gazed into space is required reading for understanding the American Dream." Reviewing the memoir for the *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt called it "thoroughly charming" and found most satisfying "its eloquent evocation of a lost time and place." Hickam's book was made into an acclaimed film, *October Sky*, and *Rocket Boys* was retitled and published in mass-market format as *October Sky*, whereupon the book made it to the number one spot on the *New York Times* best seller list.

Hickam followed *Rocket Boys* with the novel titled *Back to the Moon* (1999). It begins in the year 2002, on Cedar Key, Florida. There, former NASA engineer and recovering widower Jack Medaris and his high-tech company plan to send a rocket to the moon and bring back some of the rare isotope helium3, which will power a reactor. This will supply enough clean fusion energy to power the earth for centuries. Jack's plans go awry when the rocket is destroyed under suspicious circumstances. He "legally" hijacks the space shuttle Columbia and brings along Penny High Eagle, the stunning Native American celebrity biologist and bestselling author (his regular captain is shot outside the launching pad elevator). She adds a little romance, and a nefarious fossil fuel consortium provides plot twists. A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* wrote that "Hickam packs his narrative with complicated space program minutiae" and that the story "both enthralls and numbs. . . as Hickam's tale heats up, the reader's tenacity pays off, and the rocket ride achieves high velocity." Anita Gates also gave qualified praise in her review for *The New York Times Book Review*: "There are a lot of characters to meet. . . . This is . . . about great dreams. Being reminded of them is a little like revisiting the New Frontier."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, August, 1998, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 1917.
- *Library Journal*, November 1, 1998, Gregg Sapp, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 96.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 15, 1998, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 1172.
- *New York Times*, October 1, 1998, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "How Chasing a Star Structured a Boy's Life," p. E9.
- *New York Times Book Review*, October 18, 1998, John R. Gaines, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 38; June 27, 1999, Anita Gates, "Space Cadets," p. 19.
- *People Weekly*, April 19, 1999, p. 153.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 10, 1998, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 377; November 2, 1998, review of audio version of *Rocket Boys*, p. 34; May 31, 1999, review of *Back to the Moon*, p. 66.
- *Sea Frontiers*, January-February, 1990, Charles M. Dugger, Jr., review of *Torpedo Junction*, p. 62.
- *Smithsonian*, March, 1999, Bruce Watson, review of *Rocket Boys*, p. 142.
- *West Coast Review of Books*, January, 1989, review of *Torpedo Junction*, p. 81.

OTHER

- *Bookpage*, <http://www.bookpage.com> (July 6, 1999).
- *Homer Hickam's Official Website*, <http://www.homerhickam.com> (August 10, 2000).

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Detroit: Gale, 2002.

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

Author Interview

Q: When you were a little boy, what did you expect to grow up to be?

Homer H. Hickam, Jr.: By the time I was in the third grade, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I loved to write stories. My third grade teacher, Mrs. Laird, said I would make my living as a writer some day and I believed her! But when I was in the 10th grade, I was so impressed by the new space race that I decided to become an engineer. Eventually, I came back to writing. I guess you could say that I wanted to be a NASA engineer but I had to be a writer.

Q: What subjects did you like best in elementary school?

HHH: I loved reading, spelling, and English most of all. I also liked science a lot. I liked arithmetic, too, but I had trouble with it. I read everything I could. I loved the Hardy Boys mysteries and the Bobbsey Twins adventures and even Nancy Drew. I also remember reading *Last of the Mohicans* when I was in the fourth grade and *Huckleberry Finn*, too. I loved everything Mark Twain wrote. I also liked science fiction a little. I read mostly the works of Heinlein.

We called the first through the sixth grade teachers in Coalwood the “Great Six.” They were not only our teachers but in some cases had even taught our parents. They knew us better than we knew ourselves! The Great Six decided I would be a good writer when I told them so many big stories! To make them happy, I started writing. My first short story was about a boy who helped the Roman warrior Horatio fight a battle against invaders at a bridge. I was eight years old at the time.

Q: What subjects were the most difficult for you in school?

HHH: As I mentioned, I had trouble with arithmetic. I guess I just got bored with it. I was good at my multiplication tables and long division but I had trouble concentrating on the problems. My teachers and my fellow students carried me along, giving me extra help when I faltered. When I got in the 10th grade and decided to become an engineer and start building rockets, math became much easier for me. I think it was because I had a reason to learn it.

Q: When did you get interested in science and math?

HHH: It was in the 10th grade after I'd seen Sputnik fly over Coalwood. Five other boys and I decided to build our own rockets. That was harder than we realized. We had to learn a lot of things, engineering drawing, strengths of materials, welding, machine work, and lots of math. I had to learn calculus and differential equations when I was having trouble with algebra! Eventually, I taught myself this advanced math by using my dad's self-help books.

Q: Who were the "Rocket Boys" and what did they accomplish?

HHH: The Rocket Boys were a group of six teenagers in southern West Virginia who were so excited when the Russians launched Sputnik I in 1957 that they formed a club called the Big Creek Missile Agency to learn how to build rockets. Big Creek was the name of their high school.

The members of the BCMA were Homer "Sonny" Hickam (me), Quentin Wilson, Roy Lee Cooke, O'Dell Carroll, Billy Rose, and Sherman Siers. All of the boys except Quentin were from Coalwood. Quentin was from Bartley, a small coal camp a few miles away. All of our fathers worked in the coalmines and most of us had never traveled outside the state.

Starting with no knowledge of how to build a rocket, we began to try to learn all we could. At first, we failed everything we tried. Gradually, we began to learn and soon we were building rockets that were going over 1,000 feet high. At first, the people of Coalwood opposed what we were doing because we made a lot of noise and smoke but after awhile, most Coalwoodians began to help us. The preacher in town preached a sermon that got us our launch range, which we called Cape Coalwood. Miss Freida Riley, our chemistry and physics teacher got us a book, *Principles of Guided Missile Design*, and also suggested we enter local science fairs to bring honor to our school and town. After three years of experimentation, we were able to fly a rocket over four miles high. We entered the local science fairs, won them, then went to the 1960 National Science Fair where we won a gold medal. I wrote about the Rocket Boys in my book *Rocket Boys: A Memoir* and also in a follow-up book titled *The Coalwood Way*.

These books were adapted into the movie *October Sky*. October Sky is an anagram of Rocket Boys. Hollywood felt that *Rocket Boys* would not be a good title for a movie because it sounded like it was about astronauts rather than coal miner's kids.

Q: How did a bunch of boys have the discipline to work together as a team? Did you have adult supervision and direction to pursue your hobby?

HHH: Except for Quentin who was not from Coalwood, all the boys in our club had known each other our entire lives. We had started school together in the first grade, gone to church together, been in the boy scouts together, and played together in the mountains. We simply liked each other and when one of us would get interested in something, all would help. I was the one who first got interested in rockets. The others joined in. We had no adult supervision but we had lots of adult help. The coalmine machinists volunteered their time to build our rockets when they started to get really complex and required expert machine work. Explosives experts from the mine made suggestions on our propellants and other mine company employees gave us materials. My dad, the mine superintendent, helped by looking the other way while this was all going on. My mother supplied pots and pans and mixing utensils to make our propellants. Our teachers were supportive, especially Miss Riley, by fighting for us to get special classes and books.

Q: When you wrote the story of your childhood pals and their rockets, did you ever expect that it would become a bestseller and a Hollywood movie?

HHH: I thought *Rocket Boys* might become a best-seller and a movie even while I was writing it because there was already a lot of interest from publishers and Hollywood. This was based on a short article on the Rocket Boys that I had written in Smithsonian's "Air & Space" magazine. What I didn't anticipate was that the book would spawn three sequels and be studied in over 400 schools and translated into eight languages! It was a lot of fun to see Jake Gyllenhaal portray me on the big screen but even more fun was to help out while the movie was being made. I was on set much of the time as a technical advisor. I didn't much like the changes the screenplay writer made to my book but authors rarely do. Hollywood never lets the truth get in the way of their movies. It turned out to be a good movie but I still think it would have been better if it would have used a few more things from the book.

Q: When the Apollo and Soyuz spacecrafts docked in 1975, and the American astronauts and Russian cosmonauts opened their hatches and reached out and shook hands, were you watching?

HHH: I didn't get to see Apollo and Soyuz dock or the handshake but I did see it later, of course, on videotape. At the time, I was on a scuba diving expedition in Honduras. But I was glad we were cooperating in space. I was never much afraid of the Russians even when they were our enemy. I was taught, by my parents and teachers, that our country was morally stronger than the Soviet Union and in the end, we'd win the Cold War. The space race to me was, and is, the movement of humanity into the Solar System and has little to do with geopolitics. Naturally, I wanted my country to be the leader in space and I still do. There's no other country in the world that has anywhere near the economic power that we have to fund spaceflight. Unfortunately, we do very little in space

compared to what we could do. If we wanted to, we could have bases on the moon and Mars right now. Our political leaders, however, don't want to do that right now. Their priorities are elsewhere including fighting a very important and sadly necessary war against terrorism.

Q: What did you enjoy most about working for NASA?

HHH: The best thing about working for NASA was its people. The engineers and scientists I worked with there were outstanding and I learned so much from them. Of course, I also loved working on space missions. I helped design spacecraft, I trained astronauts to work in space, and I traveled around the world to assist space scientists. I decided to retire when I was 55 years old for two reasons: I had 30 years in with the federal government which I felt was long enough and also because my writing career was really taking off. I had to make a choice and I chose writing.

Q: When you were working for NASA, did you have time to write?

HHH: Even while I was with NASA, I worked on my writing. I worked after hours and on weekends. I free-lanced to many magazines on a variety of topics and also wrote my first book, *Torpedo Junction*, a history of the U-boat battles along the American east coast during World War II. I began writing for publication in 1973 and worked hard to hone my writing skills. I studied magazines and wrote articles that I felt would fit. I never failed to place an article that I wrote even though I was at first often rejected. I just stuck with it, something I'd learned how to do in my Rocket Boys days.

While it's true most engineers don't write for publication, it is important that engineers know how to write. Getting your ideas down on paper is the first step to getting funds to accomplish them. As for whether my writing allows me to make a living, yes, very much so. If you added up all that I ever made with the federal government during 30 years, it still wouldn't come close to the pay I get as a writer. But I still wouldn't give anything for my great NASA career. It isn't money that makes me happy. It's doing the work I like to do. Since we don't have children, my wife and I have used the extra money to set up scholarship programs.

Q: As a writer, how did you learn to handle critique of your work especially when you do not agree with the critic?

HHH: Poor reviews of my work naturally sting but they represent but one opinion and it doesn't take me more than a minute or two before I've put them behind me. Fortunately, I've never gotten very many poor reviews! As for rejection, that is the writer's lot. When I started out writing for publication, I tried to learn something from each rejection. Ultimately, I began to understand that it was necessary to tailor my articles to the magazines. I read the magazines, noting the style and the emphasis, came up with an idea, wrote a dynamite query letter, and most of the time made a sale.

Q: As an adult, have you had any memorable moments that the young Homer Hickam could never have dreamed would one day happen?

HHH: I met astronaut Ed Lu years ago while on one of my wonderful book tours in a Houston bookstore. I recall it was for the Back to the Moon tour and he showed up in a signing line, introduced himself, and we became buds. When he was getting ready to go down to Kazakhstan to be launched aboard a Soyuz to the International Space Station, I sent him an e-mail which just caught him practically as he was going out the door. He e-mailed back and said he'd touch base with me in orbit. I puzzled about that but sure enough, he did! He called me on the phone! Can you imagine that? We talked about his view (glorious), his work (hard but satisfying), his time on-orbit (six months which he said is going entirely too quickly) and dinosaur-hunting (he wants to go). I also allowed him to speak to another species, that being Maxx the cat. Maxx meowed on cue (I tickled her) and Ed was, if not amused, at least bemused. Of course our old kitty-angel Paco was the very first cat to meow in space, way back in 1991, but his meows were taped, not live. When we hung up, I was struck by the thought that little Sonny Hickam the Rocket Boy could have happily died and gone to heaven if he'd had the chance to talk to an astronaut, especially one in orbit! Old Sonny, that being me, felt nearly the same way. Maxx was a bit underwhelmed and promptly went back to sleep.

Q: Did you ever want to fly into space yourself? If you could design a spacecraft to go anywhere, where would you want the mission to go?

HHH: My dream was to be like Wernher von Braun, a rocket scientist, not an astronaut. When I first got interested in space, there were no astronauts. Alan Shepard and John Glenn first flew when I was in college. I did not see myself as astronaut material at the time as I have very poor eyesight and, anyway, I knew I would first have to go to Vietnam after college. When I came back from Vietnam, NASA was letting engineers go, not hiring them. I had to go to work so I ended up with the Army Missile Command. I didn't come on board with NASA until 1981 when I was 38 years old. So becoming an astronaut never fit in with my situation.

Would I like to go into space? Absolutely! Space is an interesting place and I'd like to experience it first-hand. I would especially like to go to the moon. I think we should go back to the moon and build an outpost and a laboratory there. There is so much about it we don't know and it's close enough we could go back within a few years. As for designing a spacecraft that could go anywhere, I am very interested in the Jupiter moon Europa and the Saturn moon Titan. There could be life on both those moons.

Q: If you were going to design a rocket to take human beings to Mars, what type of propulsion system would you choose to use and why?

HHH: I would choose a nuclear-powered rocket engine to go to Mars. To see why, please see my article at <http://www2.ans.org/pubs/magazines/nn/pdfs/2001-7-3.pdf>

Q: Can space travel (for humans or robotic spacecraft) be made “safe” or is space travel inherently dangerous?

HHH: Space travel is best done rapidly as there are many hazards there including long-term exposure to weightlessness and radiation. These problems won't deter astronauts from going but they do deserve very fast engines to get them through the danger zones. Of course, I'd be happy to go along.

Q: What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies?

HHH: Spare time is hard to come by these days but I do find it. I have been a scuba diver for many years and continue to dive, usually near our winter home in the Virgin Islands. I also run 5-6 miles a day to stay in shape. But my latest passion is hunting dinosaurs! For the past five years, I have spent a portion of my summers in Montana working with the famous Dr. Jack Horner, the paleontologist who consulted on all the Jurassic Park movies. I've gotten to be pretty good at identifying dinosaur bones and this year even found the toe bone of a Tyrannosaurus-Rex. To see a picture of that bone, go to <http://www.homerhickam.com/newsletter6.htm> and you will see my summer newsletter with a photograph of me holding a piece of a T-Rex!

Q: What words of encouragement do you have for the children reading this interview if they dream about goals which are seemingly out of reach for them?

HHH: The most important thing to do is to first figure out what it is you want to do in life. What is your passion? Then, apply what I call the three P's of success: Passion, planning, and perseverance. I explain these in detail in my book *We Are Not Afraid*. I think that there's nothing a person can't do if they are willing to stand up and let the world know they want to do it. After that, the next step is to put together a plan (with the help of parents, teachers, and friends), and then stick to it until it happens!

Q: Do you have a favorite quote that inspires you?

HHH: I like what O'Dell said when we would get ready to launch our rockets:

“A rocket won't fly unless somebody lights the fuse!”

Although he was talking about a rocket, it's good advice for accomplishing anything. You've got to light that fuse and get on with it!

Courtesy of www.imagiverse.org

Discussion Questions

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. Nearly 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. Does the book tell a universal story? Could it be set in other times or is it specific to Coalwood and West Virginia in the late '50s? 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? (See the Web site's Teacher's button and the letters from them for many examples.)
10. This story is also about the rewards and costs of nonconformity. Who conforms, who doesn't and what are the consequences 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 epilogue) 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?

Courtesy of Bantam Dell Publishing Group