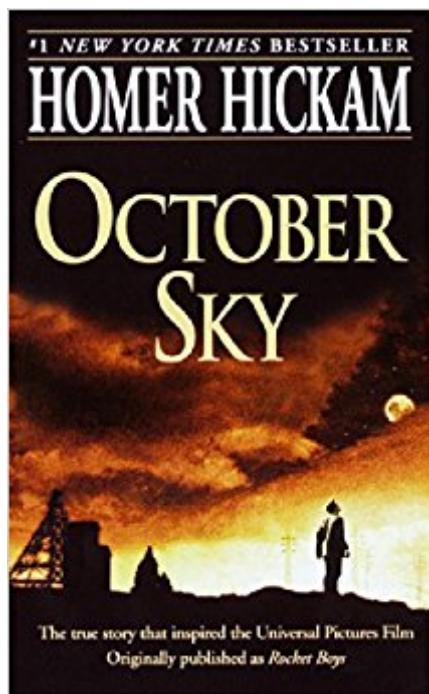


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# October Sky (The Coalwood Series #1)



## **Synopsis**

The true story, originally published as *Rocket Boys*, that inspired the Universal Pictures film. It was 1957, the year Sputnik raced across the Appalachian sky, and the small town of Coalwood, West Virginia, was slowly dying. Faced with an uncertain future, Homer Hickam nurtured a dream: to send rockets into outer space. The introspective son of the mine's superintendent and a mother determined to get him out of Coalwood forever, Homer fell in with a group of misfits who learned not only how to turn scraps of metal into sophisticated rockets but how to sustain their hope in a town that swallowed its men alive. As the boys began to light up the tarry skies with their flaming projectiles and dreams of glory, Coalwood, and the Hickams, would never be the same.

## **Book Information**

Mass Market Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Dell; First Edition edition (February 16, 1999)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0440235502

ISBN-13: 978-0440235507

Product Dimensions: 4.2 x 1.2 x 6.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 978 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #23,961 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #38 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Aerospace #39 in Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Aeronautics & Astronautics #73 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Scientists

## **Customer Reviews**

Inspired by Werner von Braun and his Cape Canaveral team, 14-year-old Homer Hickam decided in 1957 to build his own rockets. They were his ticket out of Coalwood, West Virginia, a mining town that everyone knew was dying--everyone except Sonny's father, the mine superintendent and a company man so dedicated that his family rarely saw him. Hickam's smart, iconoclastic mother wanted her son to become something more than a miner and, along with a female science teacher, encouraged the efforts of his grandiosely named Big Creek Missile Agency. He grew up to be a NASA engineer and his memoir of the bumpy ride toward a gold medal at the National Science Fair in 1960--an unprecedented honor for a miner's kid--is rich in humor as well as warm sentiment. Hickam vividly evokes a world of close communal ties in which a storekeeper who sold him saltpeter

warned, "Listen, rocket boy. This stuff can blow you to kingdom come." Hickam is candid about the deep disagreements and tensions in his parents' marriage, even as he movingly depicts their quiet loyalty to each other. The portrait of his ultimately successful campaign to win his aloof father's respect is equally affecting. --Wendy Smith --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Great memoirs must balance the universal and the particular. Too much of the former makes it overly familiar; too much of the latter makes readers ask what the story has to do with them. In his debut, Hickam, a retired NASA engineer, walks that line beautifully. On one level, it's the story of a teenage boy who learns about dedication, responsibility, thermodynamics and girls. On the other hand, it's about a dying way of life in a coal town where the days are determined by the rhythms of the mine and the company that controls everything and everybody. Hickam's father is Coalwood, W.Va.'s mine superintendent, whose devotion to the mine is matched only by his wife's loathing for it. When Sputnik inspires "Sonny" with an interest in rockets, she sees it not as a hobby but as a way to escape the mines. After an initial, destructive try involving 12 cherry bombs, Sonny and his cronies set up the Big Creek Missile Agency (BCMA). From Auk I (top altitude, six feet), through Auk XXXI (top altitude, 31,000 feet), the boys experiment with nozzles, fins and, most of all, fuel, graduating from a basic black powder to "rocket candy" (melted potassium chlorate and sugar) to "Zincoshine" (zinc, sulfur, moonshine). But Coalwood is the real star, here. Teachers, clergy, machinists, town gossips, union, management, everyone become co-conspirators in the BCMA's explosive three-year project. Hickam admits to taking poetic license in combining characters and with the sequence of events, and if there is any flaw, it's that the people and the narrative seem a little too perfect. But no matter how jaded readers have become by the onslaught of memoirs, none will want to miss the fantastic voyage of BCMA, Auk and Coalwood. First serial to Life. 10-city author tour. (Sept.) FYI: Rocket Boys is currently in production at Universal, which plans to release it later this year. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Starts of slow and picks up. Nostalgic with a tiny bit of math and science. I personally enjoyed the success story of the boys whom people didn't expect much from. Especially Homer, whom was mocked for struggling with Algebra and went on to be a NASA engineer. The book paints just how crucially important and influential teachers are, as well as receiving support from somewhere so that life doesn't end up crushing young people's dreams. I learned a great deal about West Virginia during that time period, and how the space race impacted life in Homer's little town. Overall I would

recommend.

As a reviewer for the San Antonio Express-News, I got the advance copy of this book a few weeks ago. I put it aside in order to finish a few other projects. About a week ago, I picked it up before going to bed after a late evening, intending to read it until I fell asleep. At 7:30 the next morning, I closed the book after finishing it. Oh, I tried to put it down a few times, but I finally gave it up and decided to finish it. I enjoyed it immensely, although I think it could have been a little less pretentious in spots. It almost seemed like "Revenge of the Nerds" in places. However, a very strong story very reminiscent of Beverly Cleary's "Henry Huggins" stories. Should make an interesting movie, provided they concentrate on the personal triumphs and not try to turn it into a "90210" episode. A keeper.

Homer Hadley Hickam. Junior. If ever there was a name that suggested either a captain of industry or a boy steeped in science, this is it. A little of both, I'd say. The story starts in a West Virginia town named Coalwood, and takes the reader into the home of the Hickams. All the elements of a good story are found within. The time period is set early on - a 50's nuclear family in a mining town; dad has modern day problems - he must be available to the mine around the clock. Mom dreams of a life far from Coalwood along a beach in North Carolina as witnessed by her ongoing painting of a seaside landscape. I was touched by the mother's resolve to get through her day to day in Coalwood, in part because of the view she'd created for herself in her artwork. Brilliant. As described by the author, she's a strong woman determined to raise and prepare her sons to get a good education and a job that doesn't involve the brutal realities of mining. Two adolescent boys vie for their father's attention; one son's the high school football star, Jim, who's assured he has his father's solid interest, while the younger son, a kid swept up by rocket science, rarely captures his father's attention. The end of the story was made more satisfying because, after trying time and again to gain his father's interest, Sonny, finally does so as he's approaching his college years and his father's pushing towards the end of his career at the mines. The family dynamic - scrappy and straightforward, had universal themes for the reader to consider and Sonny's spirit had me cheering as he worked hard to improve his rocket-launches, built his boyhood friendships in a team of sorts, and made connections with scientists and educators beyond the world he knew well in Coalwood. I found Sonny a fearless, strong leader of his intrepid "rocket boys" who kept at his dreams even though, as a group and as individuals, they suffered failures along the way, both personal and professional - the science fair was a huge opportunity for them. Hickam

played the right notes when describing the high school scene; the students drowsy morning starts along a harrowing route, the tippy toeing around the girl/boy interests, the fights that surfaced between brothers and players, and the studied, thoughtful way the young boys applied themselves to making rockets that actually flew. It's a riveting story with opening scenes focused on the family, good tension builds as Homer (Sonny) keeps at his project while navigating high school life and in the end, it was gratifying to discover that the old adage, "hard work pays off" served the Big Creek Missile Agency (BCMA) delivering the attention and accolades they deserved. Homer Hadley Hickam, Jr. triumphed in the end and the reader soars right along with those rockets. rocket-building

This is Americana at its best. The reader is propelled into the 1950s, small town America, and the cold war. Readers are immediately find themselves living the life of a teenager in the small town that evolves around the coal mining industry. Here we learn about the students in the high school and workers that risk their lives in the mines. But we also learn that through innovation and a dream, that this everyday student was able to overcome any predestination set up for him by his surroundings. Here he has a dream to build a rocket and does it with the help of his friends and the town. Easy reader, grades 6 on up.

This is a well written book that holds your interest and in my case was a trip down memory lane. I too like many boys raised in the 1950's and 60's was inspired and challenged by the launching of sputnik and like Homer I built rockets beginning where Homer finished with dimensions and power enough to reach altitudes measured in miles. But unlike Homer I had to do this in only a couple iterations because I lacked what Homer had in terms of support at school, home, or community. I had the ability to imagine as Homer did and I was good at Physics and Chemistry. I taught myself a little materials engineering and got a friend that was taking a high school shop class to do the fabrication work from my drawings. We made several successful launches and sent them down range into Lake Ontario. We had a lot of fun and learned a lot but without my getting needed support, especially educational support, I never made it to NASA. I suspect my story is a lot more common than is Homer's as a lot of things clicked in his favor, especially his mother's support paying for college and encouraging his youthful experiments. In the USA it takes a lot of money to get an education. Self study is good but It takes a lot of money to get a credentialed education and I suspect a lot of Homer's like Homer senior or me did not reach our full potential because had that happened maybe Mr. Hickam would be reading my book on rocket designs. I also was only a few feet away from JFK but did not field a question on rockets or education as I would have asked why

support going to the moon and do such a poor job supporting low cost state supported higher education the way it is supported in Europe. Sure was fun ... Michael Law

This was a saw the movie and then read the book situation for me. I have to say the book is a very easy read and interesting slice of life in West Virginia as well as in the early days of the space race.

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