



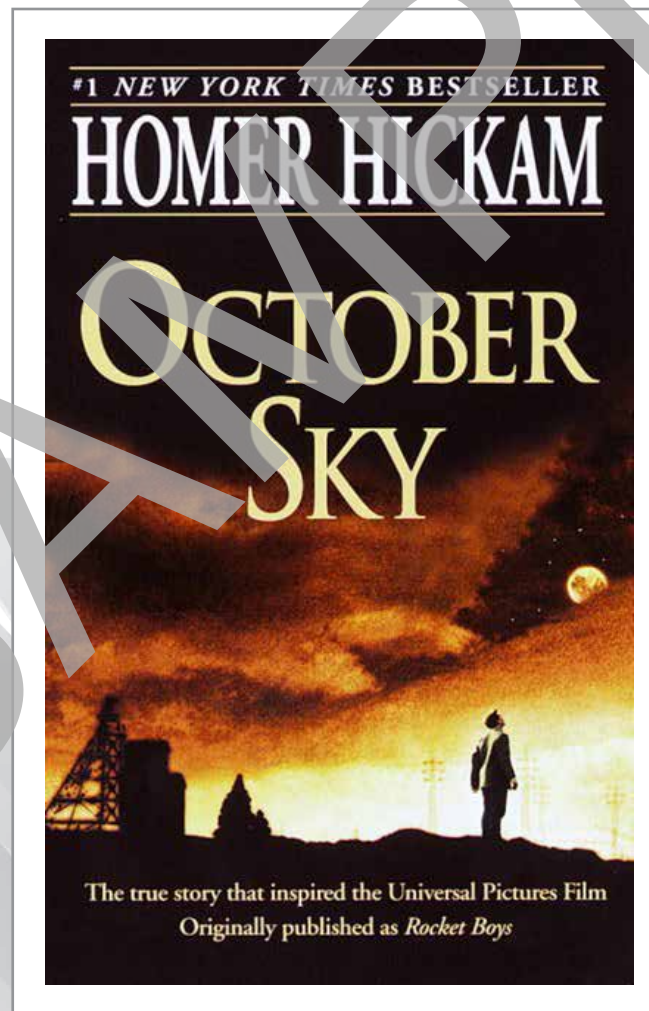
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

October Sky

Homer Hickam



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

October Sky

Homer Hickam

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

ISBN 978-1-50204-039-8

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Skills and Strategies

Comprehension

Cause/effect, evaluation,
compare/contrast

Literary Elements

Characterization, metaphor,
allusion, simile, theme,
symbolism, irony, inference,
prediction

Thinking

Analysis, research

Vocabulary

Target words, definition,
application

Writing

Essay, poetry, letter, eulogy,
newspaper article

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, interview, oral
presentation, audio/video
presentation, picture essay

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, caricature;
Drama—script, charades;
Current Events—articles,
pictures; Music—appropriate
selections

Genre: memoir

Setting: Coalwood, West Virginia, and surrounding communities; 1957–1960

Point of View: first-person

Themes: perseverance, relationships (family and interpersonal), nonconformity, destiny, motivation

Conflict: family, e.g., sibling rivalry, father-son; vocational

Tone: candid, conversational

Mood: optimistic

Style: narrative

Summary

Inspired by the 1957 launching of the Russian space satellite *Sputnik*, Homer Hickam, Jr. (Sonny), the 14-year-old son of a coal-mining superintendent in Coalwood, West Virginia, pursues his dream to build rockets and send them into space. If Sonny and the motley members of his rocket club succeed, they can leave Coalwood and seek academic careers rather than face uncertain futures in the mines of the slowly dying town. The boys persevere through numerous failures and the ridicule of those who believe they will never achieve their goal. They are spurred on by the faith of Sonny's mother, the boys' chemistry teacher, and other confident adults. Their rockets begin to illuminate the skies above Coalwood, and their dream brings hope to the town and surrounding communities.

Characters

Members of the BCMA (Big Creek Missile Agency):

Homer "Sonny" Hickam, Jr.: teenage narrator; resolutely follows his dream to build rockets and move away from Coalwood

Roy Lee: good-looking teenage boy; has own car; popular with girls

O'Dell: small, excitable teenage boy

Sherman: compact, muscular teenage boy; left leg shriveled and weak because of polio

Quentin: school "nerd;" intelligent; chosen to join the BCMA after initial rocket failures because Sonny believes he might know how to build a rocket

Billy: the last to join the BCMA; quick, intelligent

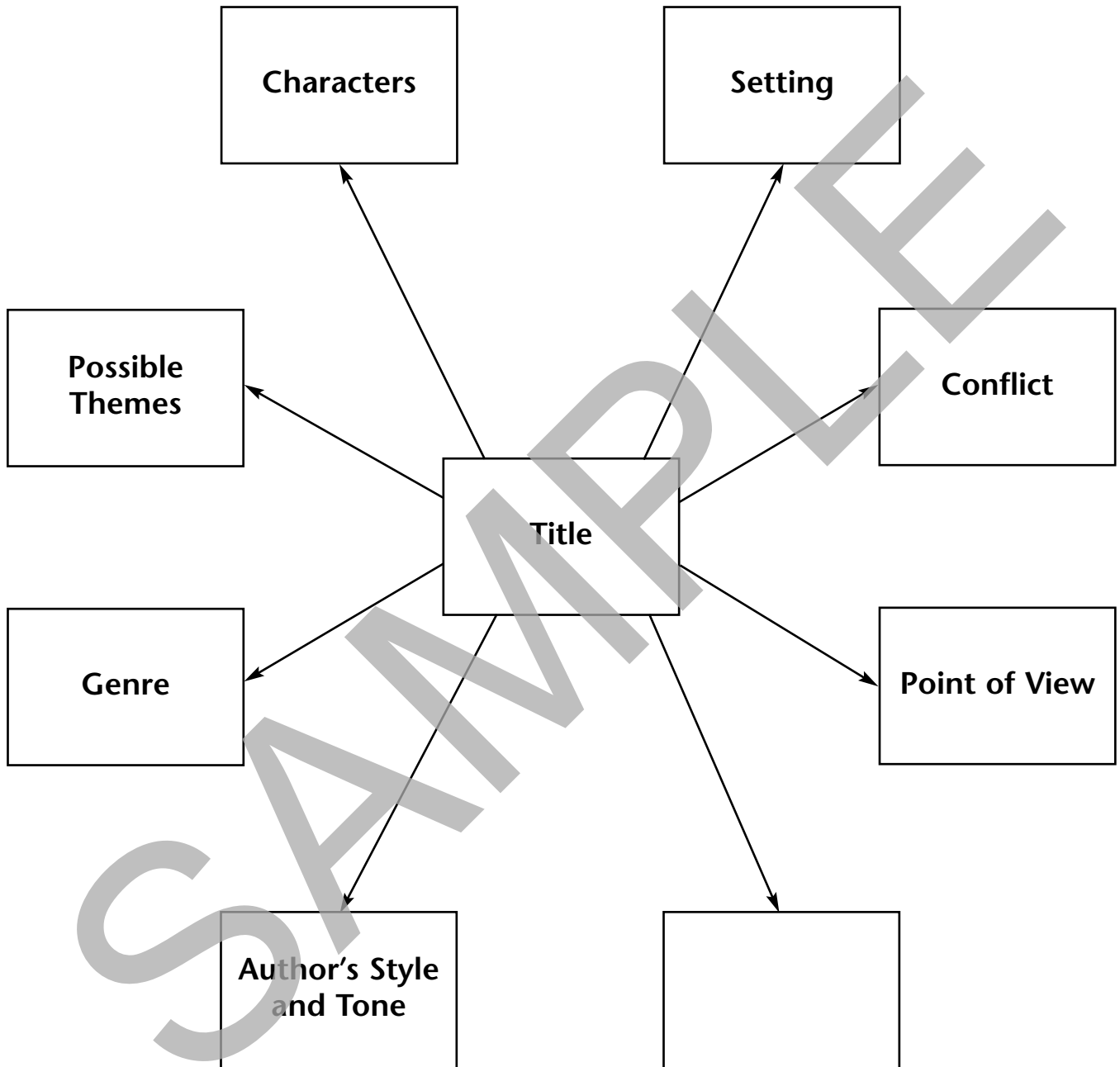
Homer Hickam, Sr.: Sonny's father; skeptical; mine superintendent; believes his younger son's future lies in the coal mines; favors his eldest son, Jim

Elsie (Lavender) Hickam: Sonny's mother; determined that he will escape the drudgery of life in the mines; has faith in his dream; dislikes her husband's attachment to the coal mines

Jim Hickam: Sonny's older brother; athletic; arrogant; primarily concerned about success of the football team

Freida Joy Riley: chemistry teacher; encourages Sonny

Story Map



Note: Examples of literary devices found in each section are included in the Supplementary Activities when applicable. Guide students to identify these devices as they read the book. For clarification in the discussion questions, Homer “Sonny” Hickam, Jr. is referred to as Sonny and his father as Homer.

Chapter 1, pp. 1–16

Homer “Sonny” Hickam, Jr. tells about his life in his hometown of Coalwood, West Virginia, in 1957. Although Sonny is apparently destined to become a coal miner like his father, his mother emphasizes that he is not just like his father.

Vocabulary	
enthalpy (1)	
kinetic (1)	
bituminous coal (1)	
sonorous (4)	
pristine (7)	
tipple (11)	

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Coalwood, West Virginia, and how Sonny’s family reacts to their life there. Elicit students’ responses concerning the author’s chance of leaving Coalwood and achieving a better life. *(Almost everyone in Coalwood works for the company that owns the coal mine, and every Coalwood family must have a father who works for the company. The company owns the miners’ houses, the church, the hotel, and the store; it also pays the salary for the doctor, dentist, and minister of the main church. The company’s general superintendent’s mansion sits on a hill overlooking the town. Main*

Street leads to the cluster of miners’ houses. When it forks to the “colored” camps, the pavement ends. Sonny’s parents, Homer, Sr. and Elsie, disagree about how he and his older brother, Jim, will live their lives. Homer is the mine superintendent and believes Sonny is destined to live and work in Coalwood. Sonny’s mother tells him he is not just like his father. Sonny is proud to live in Coalwood. pp. 1–3, 15–16; Responses will vary.)

2. Analyze Elsie Hickam’s feelings about life in Coalwood. Analyze the significance of her mural and the metaphor comparing the Olga Coal Company to a mistress. *(She hauls in dirt and plants a rose garden, attempting to find color in the black/gray atmosphere of the coal-mining town. Mural: Since Homer became the mine superintendent, she has been painting a mural of a seashore. The mural symbolizes Elsie’s dream of a reality different from her life in Coalwood. Metaphor: Elsie feels threatened by Homer’s time-consuming loyalty to the mine as if he were spending the time with a mistress. pp. 2, 14–15)*
3. Discuss George L. Carter and William Laird and why they are important to the story. *(Carter founded Coalwood. When his son came home from WWI, he brought Laird with him. Carter hired Laird to be in charge of operations at the mine. Laird established peace, prosperity, and tranquility for the citizens of Coalwood. He cared not only about the company but also about the miners and their families. He improved their living conditions and established programs such as Boy and Girl Scouts. His improvements in mining operations included concerns for the miners’ safety. Because of his legacy, Coalwood was spared much of the violence, poverty, and pain of other coal-mining towns. The people of Coalwood refer to Laird as “Captain” because of their respect for him. It was the Captain who gave Homer Hickam the opportunity to become superintendent of the mine. pp. 6–9)*
4. Discuss Homer Hickam, Sr. Examine his relationship with his family, particularly Sonny. Analyze the ramifications of a “workaholic” parent. *(He started working for the Carter mine as a common miner when he was 22 years old. Because of his intelligence and effort, he became the Captain’s protégé, rising to foreman and eventually becoming superintendent when the Captain retired. He asked Elsie to marry him after he became foreman. Because of Homer’s dedication to the*

Captain and the mine, his family sees little of him. Sonny longs for his father's time and his touch. pp. 8–11; Responses will vary.)

- Discuss Sonny's childhood and analyze how this impacted his life. Elicit students' responses concerning the impact of events of their childhood on their lives today. *(Sonny and his friends pretended to be miners, experiencing the unsettling effects of disappearing into the earth. The boys played around the railroad tracks, sometimes jumping into coal-filled cars. Sonny spent hours reading and developed a love for adventure and science fiction, but at his teachers' insistence, also developed diversity in his reading. He loved to read about real-life heroes who had courage and intelligence. Sonny couldn't see his life beyond Coalwood, yet dreams of adventure were planted in his mind. Sonny may not have known about his own future, but he did know his mother did not want him to become a miner. pp. 11–14; Responses will vary.)*

Supplementary Activities

- Have students (a) identify the profession of one of their parents and explain briefly why they do or do not plan to follow that parent's footsteps or (b) identify and explain briefly a time they were part of a childhood group or club similar to the Coalhicans. Their responses can be oral or written.
- Note the allusion to the Depression. Have students ask grandparents or other senior citizens about their memories of the Depression, then participate in an oral discussion.

Chapter 2, pp. 17–44

News of the Russian space satellite *Sputnik* changes Sonny's life. Sonny is intrigued by stories of Dr. Wernher von Braun and his work at Cape Canaveral. Sonny, Roy Lee, O'Dell, and Sherman build and launch their first rocket. Sonny and Jim experience intense sibling rivalry.

Vocabulary	
precipitously (26)	
prowess (33)	
proclivity (33)	
inexorable (39)	
molecule (39)	

Discussion Questions

- Examine the universality of Sonny's feeling that he may be responsible for tension between his parents. *(Sonny knows that Jim blames him for the tension. Homer wanted a daughter and proclaimed his disappointment when Sonny was born. Elsie retaliated by naming the baby "Homer Hadley Hickam, Junior." The arguments between Homer and Elsie continue, and Sonny feels their discontent has left him with a heavy name. Note that it is not uncommon for children to blame themselves for tension between parents, especially if they hear their names mentioned in an argument. p. 17)*
- Discuss why Sonny divides his life into two distinct phases. *(He sees his life as pre-Sputnik and post-Sputnik. After Sputnik is launched October 5, 1957, changes occur in the community, the school, and in Sonny's personal life. Community: almost every word on the radio is about Sputnik. A radio disk jockey cautions students they must "catch up with the Russians." Newspapers carry articles about American scientists and engineers at Cape Canaveral and their desperate attempts to catch up with Russia. School: The Student Council responds to the threat of Sputnik with a resolution dedicating the rest of the year to academic excellence. Student conversations depict their apprehension and misconceptions of the Russians. Sonny: becomes intrigued by stories of Dr. Wernher von Braun and begins to picture himself away from Coalwood, working with von Braun. He ultimately announces his plans to build a rocket to Roy Lee, O'Dell, and Sherman. They attempt to launch their first rocket. Note that Sputnik is a pivotal point in Sonny's life. Throughout chapter)*