

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *October Sky*

*by Homer Hickam*

written by Sue Wachtman

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## **Title**

1. The original title of *October Sky* was *Rocket Boys*. When the movie was made, they thought that title would be confused with science fiction, so they changed it. One reason they chose *October Sky* is because it is an anagram of *Rocket Boys*. Try to make an anagram of your own name. Can you create a phrase which has something to do with who you are?

## **Author's Note**

2. In the author's note, Mr. Hickam tells us that he has used "author's license" to write his story – to change some things to make it a better story. He says he has used pseudonyms – false names – for some people, and he has sometimes combined two or more people to simplify the story. He also says he has "taken certain liberties" with the sequence of events. When writing a story based on true events, should an author stick only to the truth, or is it sensible to change some things? Is it even possible to write "the whole truth and nothing but the truth"? Write a letter to Mr. Hickam explaining your beliefs about truth in fiction.

## **Quotes**

3. The quotes at the beginning of the book are from Sonny's two heroes: Dr. Wernher von Braun and Miss Freida Joy Riley. Benjamin Franklin once said that if a man put all his money into his head (education), then it could never be stolen. Why do you think this idea was so important to these two famous men? Miss Riley's quote also concerns education. Write a letter to an elementary student explaining why getting an education is so important.

## **Chapter 1**

4. The narrator, Sonny, says that he learned three “truths” after he began building rockets. He learned about his hometown, his parents, love for a girl and the heartbreak that came with it, and kinetic energy. These are widely varied subjects! Write an email to Sonny telling him three truths that you have learned in your life.
5. Sonny tells us that there are only 2,000 people in Coalwood. The whole town is owned by the coal company, including the Club House, post office, church and store. Everyone works for the coal company, either in the mine itself or by providing services to the miners and their families. There is one Main Street, and one main business, so everyone knows everyone else. Would you rather live in a place like Coalwood or a big city? List some of the advantages and disadvantages of living in a small town.
6. Sonny describes the black powder which covers everything in Coalwood. He says that when he lifted his blanket in the morning, he could see the coal dust float off of it, and his socks were always black with it in the evening. His mother’s garden provides a sharp contrast to his description. Pretend you are a neighbor and write her a letter telling her how much you appreciate her hard work. Be sure to describe the garden vividly.
7. Reverend “Little” Richard, the black preacher and Sonny’s friend, tells Sonny: “God looks after fools and drunks, and I guess he’ll look after you too, Sonny Hickam.” Write a journal entry that Sonny might have written that night, explaining his reaction to the Reverend’s statement.
8. Sonny describes the segregation of Coalwood – the black people have their own section of town, their own church, and their own graveyard. Sonny takes this situation for granted. He’s grown up with it, and it’s just the way things are. Do you think a black boy of Sonny’s age would take it for granted? Write an imaginary dialogue between a black teenager and Sonny about the situation.

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## *October Sky*

9. Sonny creates an Indian tribe, “the Coalhicans.” The Coalhicans streak their faces with berry juice, put chicken feathers in their hair, and “ambush” people. Tell about a time when you and your friends played an imaginary game. Were you the leader, like Sonny, or were you a follower? Was the game based in history? Based on a book or movie? What inspired your imagination? Write a journal entry as if you were that age again, and write about it in the language you would have used then.
10. Sonny describes the history of Coalwood in detail. The founder of Coalwood came in on a mule in 1887 and dug for coal. He then bought the land and started his company and his town. He funded the clubs, the school, and one of the first cable television systems in the United States. Do you know as much about the history of your town? List the differences between Sonny’s hometown and your own.
11. Sonny mentions the union on page 8. Throughout the book the tension between the coal company and the union will be clear. Sonny mentions that his grandfather worked at a mine where “a war broke out between union miners and company ‘detectives.’” What do you know about unions in your own life? Ask an adult whether he or she is a member of a union and write a journal entry about the answer.
12. The stories told at the kitchen table are important to Sonny. He relates the story of his parents’ engagement. Sonny says that he thinks his mother “often regretted, but still would not have changed” her decision to marry his father. Pretend you are creating a time capsule for your family and write down a family story that you have heard.
13. Sonny’s father develops cancer, but refuses to get treated until he collapses and is forced to. He finally “passed out in the mine.” Tell about a time when someone you cared for was sick. Was that person a “good” patient or a “bad” one? Write a letter to that person explaining how you felt then.

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*October Sky*

14. Sonny is a reader. He lists many books which he enjoyed when he was young. He mentions science fiction writers like Bradbury, Asimov, and Heinlein. Write a letter to the author of a book you remember reading. Explain to the author why it is that you still remember the story.
15. Sonny says: "I knew, even as a child, that my mother was different from just about everybody in Coalwood." It's hard to tell whether Sonny is glad or sorry about that when he is young. Describe a friend or relative of yours who is "different" to a classmate. Explain what makes that person different. What makes that person different? How can that be both a good and a bad thing?
16. "No, you're not," Mom sings to Sonny after his grandfather tells him he is just like his Dad. Why is she so insistent that he is not like his father? Pretend you are Mom and write a letter to Dad explaining why you are determined that your son will not be like him.

## **Chapter 2**

17. Sonny says that his brother blames him for the rift between their parents, because his father wanted a girl. His mother was angry, and so she named Sonny after his father. Is it fair for Jim to blame Sonny for the difficulties between their parents? Write a letter to Jim explaining what you think is the cause of the problem between their parents and why Sonny should not be blamed for it.
18. Sonny explains that October 5, 1957, was a turning point in his life. He talks about what a shock it is for people, and later he will talk about how the schools will insist that students must work harder to “catch up” to the Russians. For people today, September 11 was a turning point. Write a paragraph comparing and contrasting the effect and any other major historical event.
19. The sibling rivalry between Jim and Sonny takes a nasty turn. They get into a fight which scares even them, because Sonny’s ribs get hurt and a chair gets broken. If you were their mother and had caught them fighting, what would you have said? Write the lecture their mother would have given.
20. Sonny describes his three best friends in detail. Roy Lee is handsome and has a car but no father. Sherman has a crippled leg, but doesn’t let that stop him from doing anything. O’Dell is small and excitable. Get together with a classmate and describe each other as vividly as you can in a short paragraph.
21. Sonny has a hard time with algebra, and he says: “It seemed the more frustrated I got, the wronger I tended to be, in algebra or anything else.” Write a letter to a teacher explaining how a school subject frustrates you, and how you attempt to deal with your frustration.