

# Rocket Boys



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HOMER HICKAM

Homer Hickam grew up in West Virginia. When he was in high school, he and a large group of friends—called the “Big Creek Missile Agency” (BCKMA)—collaborated to design a series of amateur rockets. In 1960, their designs won the gold and silver medals from the National Science Fair. (These events form the plot of his memoir, *Rocket Boys*.) Hickam then studied at Virginia Tech, graduating with a Bachelor’s degree in Industrial Engineering. Following his time in college, Hickam served as a First Lieutenant in the Vietnam War, where he was awarded a Bronze Star for his bravery. He then worked for NASA as an engineer, designing spacecraft for the Hubble Space Telescope. In 1989, he published his first book, *Twelve Men*, about the history of the American navy. The book was a best seller, and enabled Hickam to write full-time. His most successful book was his second, *Rocket Boys* (1998), a memoir about his high school years with the BCKMA. The memoir was an international bestseller, and within a year of its release it had been adapted as a film, *October Sky*, starring Jake Gyllenhaal. In the last 15 years, Hickam has been an emergent author and public speaker, authoring science fiction thrillers about outer space, additional memoirs about his adolescence in West Virginia, and adventure novels set during World War II. He resides in West Virginia.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event related to *Rocket Boys* is the Cold War. Following the end of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were the only two remaining global superpowers. While the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. never fought each other directly, they competed in various indirect ways.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Rocket Boys* is a Bildungsroman—a “coming of age” story. While there are thousands of Bildungsromans, Hickam’s memoir is a little different than the usual examples of the genre, since his “protagonist,” Homer, comes of age by discovering the beauty of science, mathematics, and engineering. In this regard, one close cousin of *Rocket Boys* is Sinclair Lewis’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1901), the story of a young boy from a small town, and his ascent to the position of a respected doctor. Another was hugely popular in its time, and is said to have inspired dozens of rocket doctors (including several Nobel laureates) to study medicine. Hickam also wrote two other memoirs about his early life and his experiences with engineering: *The Coalwood Way* (2000) and *Sky of Stone* (2002).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Rocket Boys: A Memoir*
- **Where Written:** Coalwood, West Virginia
- **When Published:** Fall of 1998
- **Literary Period:** Cold War memoir
- **Genre:** Memoir, Bildungsroman
- **Setting:** Coalwood, West Virginia, United States
- **Plot:** Homer wins first prize at the National Science Fair
- **Antagonist:** Pecky Suggs, Doc Hickam, the football gang, the anti-intellectual culture of Coalwood
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Who says writing is for sissies?** Homer Hickam has won various honors—scholar awards, medals for military service, literary prizes—but received arguably his most impressive honor in 1994, in Alabama. Hickam acted in the rescue of a sinking jumbofish in the Tennessee River, making his the second fisher to save the passengers from drowning. For his incredible bravery, Hickam was awarded the Alabama Distinguished Service Award, one of the state’s highest civilian honors.

**Rocket Boys Day:** In the late ‘90s, *Rocket Boys* was a huge bestseller, and sparked tremendous interest in West Virginia culture and history. In gratitude for everything Hickam did to put his state on the map, the governor of West Virginia, Gaston Caperton, declared an annual “Rocket Boys Day” in celebration of Hickam’s literary and scientific achievements.



## PLOT SUMMARY

As the memoir begins, Homer Hickam Jr. is a young teenager living in the mining town of Coalwood, West Virginia. His father is Homer Hickam Sr., the superintendent of the mine. His mother is Elsie Hickam, who makes no secret of her dislike for the mine and mining, and his brother is Jan Hickam, a handsome, popular football player.

In 1957, the Soviet Union launches a satellite called Sputnik into space. Homer and his friends gather outside to watch Sputnik pass over Coalwood. As he watches, Homer realizes that his greatest ambition is to build **rockets**, and eventually to build satellites for the government, like his hero, Dr. Werner von Braun.

Homer’s first attempts at building rockets are comical. He ends

# Rocket Boys Study Guide

**William K. Hartmann**



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