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Sample MonkeyNotes

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Rocket Boys / October Sky

by

Homer Hickam, Jr.

1998



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Coalwood, West Virginia, 1957 - 1960

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Homer "Sonny" Hickam - The author of the book and the main character, Sonny is the young man who, in search of himself, takes on the mission of firing a rocket into space. Along the way, he learns a great deal about himself, those he loves, and life itself.

Homer Hickam, Sr. - He is Sonny's father, a man who never went to college, but learned engineering skills on his own in order to run his beloved coal mine in the safest and most profitable way. He is a hard man who finds it difficult to show his feelings. His approval is something Sonny comes to crave.

Elsie Hickam - She is Sonny's mother, a very wise and determined woman, who married Homer Hickam, but regretted her choice later. Nonetheless, she is loyal to him even as she.....

Quentin Wilson - He is the brilliant young man who Sonny meets at Big Creek High School. Often jeered and mistreated for his brilliance, he and Sonny hook up and become.....

Roy Lee Cooke - He is Sonny's best childhood friend and one of the "players" among the young men at Big Creek High. He loves women, but loves the rockets more. His father had died in a mine accident, so.....

Miss Freida Riley - Sonny's science teacher, Miss Riley was instrumental in encouraging the boys, especially Sonny, to continue their search for the biggest rocket they could get to fly. She died of.....

Minor Characters

O'Dell - Another of Sonny's friends, he was a runner and doer when firing off the rockets, more than he is thinker. He was small and excitable with pale, translucent hair.

Sherman - Yet another member of Sonny's rocket boys, Sherman was.....

Jim Hickam - Sonny's older brother, he is very concerned about his appearance, all the girls he can acquire, and a football scholarship to the college of his choice. He and.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - The protagonist is Sonny Hickam, a young West Virginian who is determined to build a rocket and shoot it into space. He takes on every

Antagonist - There are several antagonists. The first one is his father who would prefer that Sonny become an engineer and work in the mine. The second includes those who try to destroy his.....

Climax - The climax occurs when the Rocket boys win the National Science Fair.

Outcome - Sonny becomes an engineer for NASA just as he had always dreamed. The other boys also go to college and then into the Air Force. Jim becomes a successful high.....

SHORT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Sonny Hickam, a young man from a mountain town in West Virginia, dreams of a life in the aerospace industry. As a result, he organizes a group of his friends to form their own space agency and build a rocket. This all happens in this little town at the dawn of the 1960's and evokes.....

THEMES

The first and most important theme is: **It takes a village to raise a child.** Although this idea is sometimes overworked in the political arena, in this particular work, it is the most prevalent theme of all. Sonny and the other Rocket Boys impressed the people of their town with their desire to fly their rockets as far as they could reach. Then, the West Virginian cultural trait of closing ranks around those you love and care for the most stepped in every time Sonny and the boys needed them the most.

The second theme is: **hope and triumph.** In the search for the perfect rocket, Sonny and.....
Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide.

MOOD

The mood is at times troubling and even quite sad, because of the feeling of hopelessness that pervades the town. However, there is a sense of victory, of winning in spite of the.....

Homer Hickam - BIOGRAPHY

Homer "Sonny" Hickam Jr. (born February 19, 1943) was raised in the small Appalachian coal town of Coalwood, West Virginia, where his father was the superintendent of a small mine, and where life was always filled with a sense of danger and death. He had a dream of building a rocket and working for NASA. Both of his dreams came true. He graduated from Big Creek High School in 1960 and attended Virginia Tech University, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in industrial engineering in 1964. He served for six years in the U. S. Army and in Vietnam from 1967 – 1968. He later worked from 1971 to 1981 for the U.S. Army Aviation and Missile Command. He went to work for NASA at the Marshall Space Flight Center in.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

COALWOOD

Summary

Sonny opens his memoir by pointing out that until he decided to build a rocket, he didn't know that his hometown was at war with itself over its children and that his parents were locked in combat over how he would spend his life. This foreshadows how hard the parents of the town, especially Elsie Hickam, work to help their children find a way out of it. It especially foreshadows how Elsie Hickam fights silently, and at times loudly, against Sonny's dad to keep her sons out of the mines.

Sonny explains that he grew up in Coalwood, West Virginia, which was a town built for the purpose of mining coal. It was a town of 2000 people, and his father was the mine superintendent. It wasn't a pleasant place to live for many reasons, but especially because of the clouds of coal dust that crept into everything. Maybe because everything had a dirty, gray look to it, Elsie Hickam planted a rose garden with a strong fence around it. Everything in the town was owned by the mine company. They charged a monthly rent for each house in the town that was automatically deducted from the miner's pay.

The Hickams lived only a yard away from the mine entrance at the corner of the mine-built road and the state highway which curved into the center of the town and was called Main Street. Before he entered high school, Sonny delivered the *Bluefield Daily Telegraph* down the valley and up the sides of the facing mountains. On the

overlooking hill was the turreted mansion owned by the company general superintendent, sent down from the owners in Ohio. Black people lived in “colored camps” named Mudhole and Snakeroot.

At the entrance to Mudhole was a tiny wooden church presided over by the Reverend “Little” Richard. Sonny liked going to church there and talking with the Reverend. He was known for his deep and honest opinions and told Sonny once that “God looks after fools and drunks.” Sonny said that in the days to come, when he was in trouble, he would think of the Reverend as a comfort in his moments of doubt.

Sonny had been proud to live in Coalwood as a child, and he and his friends played as “Coalhicans” after he found an Indian arrowhead. This is when his bond with the boys – Roy Lee, O’Dell, and Sherman – who would become the Rocket Boys, was first forged. He learned most of what he knew about Coalwood around the supper table when his parents would have their coffee and talk about the people and history of the town. He knew from them that Mr. George Carter founded the town in 1887 with the idea that he would provide for his people as long as they gave him a decent day’s work. His son brought home with him a Stanford University graduate named William Laird who became known as the Captain when Mr. Carter named him the man in charge of company operations. He immediately implemented the latest in mining techniques and expanded on Mr. Carter’s ideas. Even though these two men built the town into a decent place to live, there was always tension between the miners and the company, mostly about pay. Nonetheless, there was less violence, poverty, and pain than what was found in other mining towns.

In 1934, at the age of 22, Sonny’s dad applied for a job as a common miner, and almost immediately, the Captain saw something special in him. He was raised to section foreman and was taught how to lead men, how to operate and ventilate a mine, and how to carry on the Captain’s vision for the town. Homer convinced his dad to move from the Gary mine. He also wrote to Elsie Lavender and asked her to marry him. After she refused, the Captain wrote to her and asked her to marry Homer. She only agreed to come to Coalwood for a visit, but ended up accepting Homer’s proposal. Sonny believed that she often regretted her decision in the years to come, but knew she probably wouldn’t have changed things.

Homer was so dedicated to the mine that Sonny seldom saw him when he was growing up. He was also a stern man who seldom showed his feelings, so when he came in to check on his sleeping son, Sonny would pretend to be asleep so his Dad would touch him.

Everybody in the town lived by the rhythm of the shifts – they would awaken in the morning to the sound of feet walking to the mine for the dayshift and the clunk of lunch buckets at night. Sonny happily played around all the aspects of the mine like the railroad tracks and the coal tippie. He also spent many hours just reading and received an exemplary education from the “Great Six,” a corruption of the phrase “grades one through six.” They were six elementary teachers who instilled in Sonny and their many students a love of learning and the importance of reading. Sonny had many favorite books, but he fell in love with the science fiction of Jules Verne and later, other modern science fiction writers. Unfortunately, his love for the adventures in these stories never allowed him to see life past Coalwood. However, his mother did see past life in the town. She hated it there, because of the dirt and the danger of coal mining. Shortly after Homer became the mine superintendent, she began to work on a painting; a landscape of a seashore. Sonny thought she was painting herself into another reality, especially because the angle from which she painted her mural allowed her to look out, but not see any angle of the mine.

She was also very determined that her boys escape any future in Coalwood. One time, when Sonny’s grandfather had said that he was just like Homer, Elsie hugged her little boy and declared over and over in whispery little made-up song that he was nothing like his father. She kept singing that song one way or another throughout his growing up years. It was only when he began to build his rockets that Sonny understood why.

Notes

This first chapter is the introduction to the life in the town of Coalwood and sets the stage for the events of Sonny and his friends building and launching rockets. It especially emphasizes Elsie's hatred of the mine and how she will do everything she can to keep her sons out of it. We also see the stern, unbending loyalty that Homer feels for the mine, a loyalty that usually comes before his family.

SPUTNIK

Summary

When the Captain retired, Homer Hickam took his place, and his house became the Hickam house. Sonny loved it, because he didn't have to share a room with his brother, Jim. From his earliest memory, Sonny knew that Jim blamed him for the tension that always seemed to exist between their parents. Dad had wanted a daughter, and because he readily voiced his disappointment, he angered Mom, who retaliated by naming him after his father. She called him Sonny, because he was a happy child.

After ninth grade, Sonny left the Coalwood grade school and traveled by bus across the mountains to Big Creek High School. That's when he began to make friends with many new kids who came from all over the district to the high school.

Sonny came to understand that there were two distinct phases in his life: everything that happened before October 5, 1957, and everything that happened afterward. His mother woke him up that morning and told him he needed to go listen to the radio. There, he heard the news that Russia had launched Sputnik into space. Even though he was excited about this great achievement, the rest of Coalwood took a while for it to sink in.

His brother, Jim, had no interest in the great event, because his concern was for his looks and the girls who were drawn to him. He and Sonny had brawled with each other from the moment Sonny could remember. They had managed some real damage to each other and at least once, had gone too far when Sonny received cracked ribs. Elsie always said that Sonny was a Lavender like her. Every morning, Sonny caught the bus to school driven by Jack Martin, who ruled his bus with an iron hand. He wasn't above making a disruptive student get off the bus and walk the rest of the way to school. The bus was the first opportunity for Sonny to see Roy Lee, Sherman, and O'Dell. "For some reason, Roy Lee, Sherman, and O'Dell never seemed to mind who his dad was. As far as they were concerned, they were all just Coalwood kids together." The bus wound over eight miles of twisting, potholed roads. However, there was also a straight stretch called Little Daytona where the kids drag raced on Saturday nights. They passed along the way to school the Dugout, a dance hall in the basement of the Owl's Nest Restaurant. Then, the bus entered the town of Caretta where there was a white-washed brick building called the Spaghetti House, which Roy Lee insisted was a whore house. The bus then began to climb up War Mountain and entered the town of War. Big Creek High School sat on the outskirts of War. Once the boys had arrived at school, the talk was all about Sputnik, unlike in Coalwood.

While they talked about Sputnik, Sonny and his friends copied each other's homework, which he insisted wasn't exactly cheating. The topic of Sputnik continued to come up all day until the principal interrupted classes to announce that the Student Council had voted, in the light of the Russian achievement, to dedicate the remainder of the year to academic excellence. At the time, Sonny was in biology and was partnered with Dorothy Plunk, a beautiful girl his own age who scared him more than any Russians or Sputnik. Sonny was very naïve when it came to girls and chafed under Roy Lee's teasing about Dorothy. To Sonny, she was God's Perfection.

The Big Store steps was a favorite place for the off-shift miners to gossip, and everyone counted the importance of news according to how fast it reached the steps. Sputnik made it by mid-week after its launch. However, they were madder about the football team than they were the Russians. It seemed that Big Creek High was on its way

to an undefeated season, but had been ruled ineligible for the state championship, because they played too many Virginia schools. The towns of the district were up in arms about the decision and it became the subject of every conversation. "It didn't take much of a genius to see there was some kind of trouble ahead. As it turned out, it was Sonny's dad who ended up causing the trouble." Sonny's brother, Jim, was one of the team's best players and therefore, highly respected across the district. Homer was utterly thrilled about Jim's accomplishments, and Sonny felt that it would have been nice if he bragged on him once in awhile. As a result, since he was no football player, he joined the band. His brother and his friends called him a "sister." However, Sonny was content, because he just could never understand the purpose of playing football.

All that fall, the newspapers were full of stories about how the scientists and engineers at Cape Canaveral were desperately working to catch up to the Russians. Sonny began to hear about one particular scientist named Wernher von Braun. This man was in charge of a program called *Vanguard* which would be the first attempt to launch an American rocket. This is when Sonny began to think about what an adventure it would be to work for a man like him. For the first time, he was beginning to think past Coalwood. He added von Braun's name to the list of most admired which had begun with Dorothy Plunk. It was announced that Sputnik would be flying over West Virginia, and people would be able to see it as it went by. Sonny announced that anyone who wanted to could gather in his backyard to watch it go across the sky. Many of his friends and his Mom's friends joined him that night, but his father, who was convinced that a president like Dwight D. Eisenhower would never allow the Russians to fly their satellite over America, just went, as usual, to the mine. Ironically, Sonny's friends saw Sputnik first and he only saw it when his mother grabbed his head and pointed at the sky. He stared at it as if it were God himself in a golden chariot riding across the sky. Even after everyone left, Sonny could not stop gazing at the sky in rapt attention. That night, as he lay in his bed, he saw the hoot-owl miners heading for work. They were in charge of safety and rock-dust. As they walked along in their white mine helmets, Sonny could almost imagine they were spacemen on the moon. He thought to himself, "I was a boy in Coalwood, West Virginia. All of a sudden, that wasn't good enough."

In the November issue of *Life Magazine*, Sonny saw drawings of the internal mechanisms of a variety of different kinds of rockets. That's when he made his decision to build a rocket. He announced it at the dinner table where his father acted like he didn't even hear him, Jim snickered, and his mom, after a moment's hesitation, said, "Well, just don't blow yourself up." He gathered his friends together in his bedroom. Sonny decided they were going to launch it from the fence by the rosebushes. They decided that they could use the twelve cherry bombs Sonny had from the previous summer as fuel. "It was an important moment and we knew it," Sonny said. "We boys in Coalwood were joining the space race." Sonny appointed himself chief rocket designer and the others helped find materials to build it. Sherman was in charge of the countdown. On a night sometime later, they set up the rocket on the fence, Sherman began the countdown, and the rocket was – well, almost – launched. In a bright flash of light and noise, the boys sent his mother's rose garden fence flying.

Notes

This chapter is another eye-opener for the reader. It shows how Sonny judges his life as having been so definitively impacted by the Russian launch of Sputnik. It is also amusing that the building of their first.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Homer "Sonny" Hickam - Sonny is a typical young boy entering adolescence and in search of who is and who he will become. He despairs that he is not the son, like his brother, Jim, of whom his father can be proud, but he perseveres and triumphs in the end. He is sometimes a selfish boy as he focuses just on his rockets, but he is also sweet and loving. The most impressive aspect of his character is his determination. For example, when he is not allowed to take the new calculus course, he gets his father's book and teaches himself so he can understand how to build his rockets. He is very intelligent, but like all young boys, he often lacks commons

sense. However, he is willing and able to change himself when he needs to. He is brave and loyal to those he loves and never stops loving Dorothy. In the end, when he wins the National Science Fair, he recognizes how far he's come and how Coalwood, the town he once despised, is the home that nurtured and supported him when he most needed it.

Homer Hickam, Sr. - As Sonny's father, he should have been the one who most encourage his son. Instead, he tried to mold the boy into the same kind of man that he is. He is a hard man who has difficulty showing his feelings. He is also focused totally on his job in the mine that he thinks of

Elsie Hickam - As Sonny's mother, she is his greatest champion. She always finds a way to help him in building the rockets, giving up her home, her hot water heater, and her kitchen tools to his experiments. She is also determined that both of her sons will get out of Coalwood and she....

Quentin Wilson - Quentin is the stereotypical "geek" who speaks with a fake British accent and uses sophisticated vocabulary that the kids in Coalwood don't understand. As a result, he is usually rejected and laughed at. However, Sonny recognizes that Quentin will be the.....

Roy Lee Cooke - He is unique among Sonny's friends, because they have been friends since they were quite young. His father died in an accident in the mines which left him a.....

Miss Freida Riley - Miss Riley is a wonderful young teacher who has a great deal of influence over Sonny. She becomes his mentor as he builds and flies his rockets. Not only is she a teacher who makes learning fun and interesting for her students, but she is also a good friend. She tirelessly supports.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

Each of the twenty-six chapters that make up the novel is structured chronologically. It is part of a narrative told by a grown man as he remembers his life from 1957 through 1960 and the events which impacted his family. It is told like a novel rather than just a memoir, and it is pleasant to read.

As a memoir, the plot is told mostly as events happened, but the author has the liberty to.....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

The first and most important theme is: **It takes a village to raise a child.** Although this idea is sometimes overworked in the political arena, in this particular work it is the most prevalent theme of all. Sonny and the other Rocket Boys impressed the people of their town with their desire to fly their rockets as far as they could reach. Then, the West Virginian cultural trait of closing ranks around those you love and care for the most stepped in every time Sonny and the boys needed them the most. For example, they loaned him materials like his father and Mr. Caton did; they came to the rocket launches to cheer him on; like Tag Farmer when they got drunk on the moonshine, they often lied to protect him; Sonny's mom always went.....

Hope and triumph is the second most important theme. Coming from a poor Appalachian town like Coalwood, Sonny and his friends are not expected to achieve any kind of great future like the children of Welch, a wealthier town, would. Nonetheless, these young men pile all their hope onto making rockets and showing their town and those around them that they can succeed. Working with little more than their own perseverance and the cheapest tools, the boys ultimately make a rocket that goes beyond.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

Homer Hickam writes his memoir in such a simplistic way that it reads like a novel. He emphasizes the simplistic way of life in the town that is controlled by the company that owns the mine, and yet, he presents them in such a way that we see their complexities as well. The reader identifies with.....

RISING ACTION

The rising action begins with 1957 when Sonny is fourteen years old and Sputnik has.....

FALLING ACTION

The falling action involves the June day after Sonny graduates from high school when he and his friends decide to shoot off the remaining rockets with a crowd of over 300 people there.....

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view is first person, told from Sonny's viewpoint. He is the narrator and this.....

OTHER ELEMENTS FORESHADOWING

There are several literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is **foreshadowing** which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing include:

1. Sonny opens his memoir by pointing out that until he decided to build a rocket, he didn't know that his hometown was at war with itself over its children and that his parents were locked in combat over how he would spend his life. This foreshadows how hard the parents of the town, especially Elsie Hickam, work to help their children find a way out of it.
2. "It didn't take much of a genius to see there was some kind of trouble ahead. As it turned out, it was Sonny's dad who ended up causing the trouble." This foreshadows that the football team would.....

Many additional examples of foreshadowing are included in the complete study guide.

IRONY

Another important element is irony – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony include:

1. Ironically, Sonny's friends saw Sputnik first and he only saw it when his mother grabbed his head and pointed at the sky.
2. Ironically, even though the company provided homes, a store and even a church for the town, when a woman was widowed, she and her family were required to move within two weeks of the miner's death, a perhaps deliberate move to make sure there were no reminders.....

Many additional examples of irony are included in the complete study guide.

QUOTATIONS – IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points of the story (Dell Publishing, 1998):

1. "Until I began to build and launch rockets, I didn't know my hometown was at war with itself over its children and that my parents were locked in a kind of bloodless combat over how my brother and I would live our lives." (pg. 1. This quote is foreshadowing for how hard the parents of Coalwood work to help their children find a way out of this dead-end town.)
2. "God looks after fools and drunks." (pg. 3; This comment was made by "Little" Richard in one of his many conversations with Sonny.)
3. "There were two distinct phases in his life: everything that....."

Many additional quotes are analyzed and included in the complete study guide.

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel include **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

1. One time when Sonny's grandfather had said that he was just like Homer, Elsie hugged her little boy and declared over and over in whispery little made-up song that he was nothing like his father. She kept singing that song one way or another throughout his growing up years. It was only when he began to build his rockets that Sonny understood why. The song symbolizes Elsie's determination to make sure her sons escape the coal town.
2. He thought there had to be a way to win her, some strategy or ploy. He thought it was like building a rocket – if he was just smart enough, he could figure it out.
3. The Reverend announced that his sermon was about fathers and sons and he spoke in a strangely nervous voice. He told the story of a boy who did bad things and every time he.....

Many additional examples of symbolism are discussed in the complete study guide.

MOTIFS

Another element that is very dominant in this novel is that of a **motif** or a recurring thematic element used in the development of a literary or artistic work. There is one dominant motifs in this novel: a bildungsroman or story of a young man coming of age. In this case, Sonny is the.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *Rocket Boys* – Later re-released as *October Sky*

Author: Homer Hickam

Date Published: 1998

Meaning of the Title: *Rocket Boys* refers to the young men in Coalwood, West Virginia, who decide to build and fly rockets with the help of the miners in their town and the teachers, friends, and family members who believed in them. *October Sky* is a title assigned during the production of the motion picture to enable the film to appeal to a larger audience, including women. The book was subsequently released under that title, as well as the original title.

Setting: Coalwood, West Virginia from 1957 through 1960

Protagonist: Sonny Hickam

Antagonists: Sonny's father, those in the town who wanted to destroy his.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. The event that prompted Sonny to build rockets was
 - a.) his grandfather's accident in the mine.
 - b.) Sputnik.
 - c.) the strike called by the union.
2. The Football Fathers were angry, because
 - a.) the team was forbidden to play in the state championship game.
 - b.) the coach played favorites, benching some of the best players.
 - c.) the school district had cut funding for the team.....

ANSWER KEY

- 1.) b. 2.) a 3.) c 4.) b 5.) a 6.) b 7.) c 8.) b 9.) c 10.) a 11.) a 12.) b 13.) c 14.) c 15.) c

ESSAY TOPICS – BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. Discuss the impact living in a coal mining town has on its children.

2. What was the basic conflict between Sonny and his father? How was it ultimately resolved?
3. Analyze Homer Hickam, Sr. with emphasis on his relationships with other people and his family, his feeling about the mine, and his.....

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