



# OCTOBER SKY



**Rated:** PG • **Running Time:** 1 hour, 48 minutes

**Starring:** Jake Gyllenhaal as Homer Hickam; Chris Cooper as John Hickam; Laura Dern as Miss Frieda Riley; Chris Owen as Quentin Wilson; Chad Lindberg as Sherman O'Dell; William Lee Scott as Roy Lee Cook

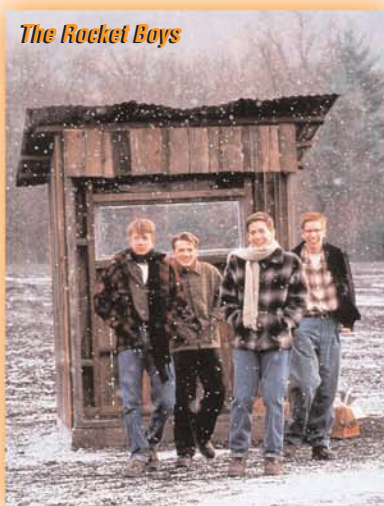
**Director:** Joe Johnston

**Themes:** Chasing an impossible dream, father/son conflict, quest for parental approval, perseverance, sibling rivalry, family unity, the power of a supportive mentor/community

**Cautions:** Mild violence. Profanities are common, but the majority are relatively mild (S.O.B., h---, d--n). Homer's buddy mocks virginity and coaches him on stealthily touching a girl's breast. The boys steal some materials to build their launch site and rockets. They also appear tipsy after visiting a moonshiner to get pure alcohol to use as rocket fuel.

## Story Summary

This inspirational biography, infused with humor and classic rock tunes, is set in the coal-mining town of Coalwood, W.Va., in October 1957, just after the Soviets put the first satellite, Sputnik, into earth's orbit. Mining is a way of life in Coalwood. Most local residents work for "the company," which owns employees' homes and nearly every building in town—including the church. Boys growing up there seem destined to inherit a place in the dark, dangerous mine, except perhaps the lucky few who manage to attend college on football scholarships.



In one 17-year-old, however, the sight of Sputnik streaking across the night sky sparks a dream. Homer Hickam dares to hope that one day he could become a NASA scientist. But unlike his athletic brother, Jim, Homer's shot at college seems remote. Still, his fascination with rockets, coupled with the encouragement of his idealistic teacher Miss Riley, leads him to convince buddies O'Dell and Roy Lee—as well as Quentin, the school geek—to begin building rockets in hopes of winning the national science fair in Indianapolis. In addition to a gold medal, the victors will receive academic scholarships.

Homer's father, John Hickam, is the mine foreman, an alternately heroic and narrow-mindedly combustible personality who disapproves of Homer's pursuits. In John's view, his son's dream is an absurd affront to the noble call of mining. Homer needs to grow up, forget about rocketry (except as a hobby) and proudly follow him underground. This clash of dreams and expectations is the story's central conflict.

Through trial and error, always learning from mis-

takes, Homer and his friends build and launch a series of rockets from a barren site eight miles outside of town. Early attempts result in spectacular, explosive failures. Gradually though, with help from a pair of mining-company welders, their designs and fuels improve. Unfortunately, just when they achieve their first big success, one of their stray rockets gets blamed for starting a forest fire. The Rocket Boys get shut down. Homer's dream seems dead.

Things go from bad to worse when his dad is seriously hurt after a shaft collapses. In a selfless act of responsibility to his family, Homer drops out of school to grab a pickax and miner's helmet so that Jim can go on to college. Despite an enduring hatred for the mine, Homer is willing to choke on coal dust until Dad gets back on his feet.

The story takes another turn when Homer visits Miss Riley, whom he learns has Hodgkin's disease. She encourages him, "Sometimes you really can't listen to what anybody else says. You've just gotta listen inside." He's inspired. Homer returns to his study of rocketry and proves that their rocket could *not* have started the forest fire. A local hero once again, he abandons the mine, re-enrolls in school and enters the county science fair.

A fully recovered John Hickam isn't pleased. But his son insists, "The coal mine is *your* life. It's not mine. I'm never going down there again. I want to go into space." The boys go on to win the county science fair and elect Homer to represent the team in Indianapolis. As he prepares to leave, the local miners go on strike. Then, on the eve of the judging at the national science fair, a key part of the boys' display is stolen. To get it replaced in time, Elsie Hickam urges her husband to swallow his pride and settle the strike so that the machinists can help. John comes through, as do his men.

With all of Coalwood pulling for them, the Rocket Boys win first prize. Each receives a college scholarship. At the launch of their last rocket, named in honor of the now bedridden Miss Riley, Homer's dad makes a surprise appearance. Showing maturity and forgiveness, Homer invites him to push the button, and the two are reconciled. As this charming true story ends, viewers get to see grainy home video of the actual people portrayed onscreen, as well as information about what they went on to accomplish in life.

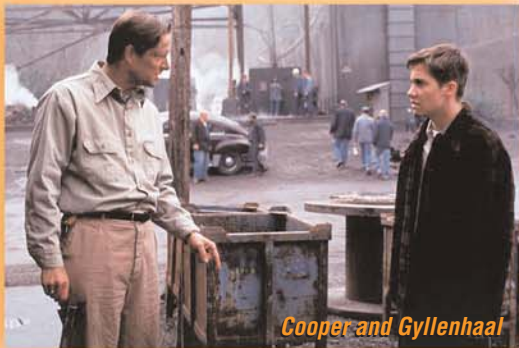
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### Before You Watch

Tour a workplace with your teen that's loud, hot, dirty, dark or even a little dangerous (compared to, say, a desk job). Then go out for pizza and ask, "Suppose all the adults in our family, going back generations, had worked in a place like that, not out of choice, but because it was the only employer in town and it was all they knew. Some had died in work-related accidents, others from diseases they'd picked up there.

Suppose everyone expected *you* to work there long-term too, and you really didn't have any other options. How would you feel about that? Why? Would you be content to work there? If not, how might you try to chart another course?"



Cooper and Gyllenhaal

**Bible Bookmarks** Eph. 4:29, 6:1-4; 2 Cor. 5:16-21; Matt. 9:9-13

### Talking Points

**1** Ephesians 6:1-4 tells children to honor their parents. How well did Homer do that? Was he right or wrong to reach for the stars? Why? That passage also instructs fathers to resist "exasperating" their children. How well did John Hickam do at that? Why?

**2** Do you think Homer and his dad could have found reconciliation sooner? What would it have taken? Read about our call to have a "ministry of reconciliation" in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. How does that relate to the family? Ask, "What can we learn from Homer and John Hickam's experience that will help us to better handle our next family conflict?"

**3** Late in the film, as Homer tries to make peace with his dad, he says, "I come to believe that I got it in me to be somebody in this world. And it's not because I'm so different from you, either. It's because I'm the same. I can be just as hardheaded and just as tough." Ask teens, "In what ways are we alike? How is that good? How is that not so good? Why?"

**4** What does this story tell you about human nature? The human spirit? The ability of a person to work hard, take risks and pursue a goal in the face of big obstacles?

**5** Which character in the movie do you most admire? Why?

**6** Do you have an encourager like Miss Riley in your life? If so, who is it? If not, where might you find one that models Ephesians 4:29? Ask, "How can we better support each other in the pursuit of our dreams?"

**7** Our society often belittles small-town morality as being outdated and irrelevant. How would you describe the worldview of the people who made this film? What things do they believe to be true and important about life?

**8** When Miss Riley plays the radio for her class, the announcer divides time by stating, "It's the radio signal transmitted by the Soviet Sputnik. Listen now for the sound that forevermore separates the old from the new." How did the events of Sept. 11, 2001, similarly separate the old from the new? Talk about the way the world and your attitudes have changed since being introduced to a new era of American anxiety five years ago.

**9** The film revisits a time when creativity, a thirst for knowledge and innocent boyhood exploration filled after-school hours. Has that been lost in this age of MTV, DVDs and the Xbox 360, or has it simply taken other forms? Explain.

**10** Early on, Homer risks social suicide by sitting with Quentin. Although he does it for selfish reasons at first, the boys develop a solid bond. Jesus wasn't above sitting with outcasts (Matt. 9:9-13). Ask, "Do you know of an outcast at school to whom you could reach out?" It might be awkward at first, but it could lead to a great friendship.

### Follow-Up Activity

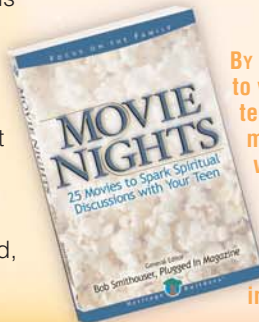
*October Sky* is based on Homer Hickam's autobiographical book, *Rocket Boys*. If your teen enjoys reading, encourage him or her to ask for it at your local library. Speaking of the book, here's an interesting bit of trivia: If your family is into word puzzles, you may have already noticed that scrambling the letters in *Rocket Boys* will yield ... *October Sky*.

### Just for Fun

Before ever climbing into a director's chair, Joe Johnston cut his teeth as a designer and visual effects man on the original *Star Wars* trilogy, creating (among other things) the final character designs for Yoda and Boba Fett. He is now in negotiations to direct *Jurassic Park IV*, due in 2008

—by Bob Smithouser

A **plugged** Resource  
online



**BY THE BOOK:** "Adults often invite teenagers to view films for their great messages. To a teen the phrase 'great messages' is tantamount to being told their blind date has a wonderful personality. The best films are fun to watch *and* think about."

—*Movie Nights*

You can request this resource by contacting Focus on the Family.