

## OCTOBER SKY \_\_\_\_\_ (10/10)

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### *Launching into my Top 10 List for many reasons*

*Book by Homer H. Hickam Jr*

*Screenplay by Lewis Colick*

*Directed by Joe Johnston*

Jake Gyllenhaal ... Homer Hickam

Chris Cooper ... John Hickam

Laura Dern ... Miss Riley

Chris Owen ... Quentin

William Lee Scott ... Roy Lee

Chad Lindberg ... O'Dell

Natalie Canerday ... Elsie Hickam

Scott Miles ... Jim Hickam

*Homer: Dad, I may not be the best, but 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 mean, I can be just as hard-headed, and just as tough. I only hope I can be as good a man as you. Sure, Wernher von Braun is a great scientist, but he isn't my hero.*

... leaving unstated, "You are," i.e. that his dad is his hero. Kudos to the screenwriter, or perhaps the director or actors themselves, for letting the audience complete this sentence. It's just such a sign of intelligent life for these kinds of "boy-makes-good-through-struggle-and-family-values" movies that can easily succumb to sloppy sentimentality.

Not October Sky, it's safe from the maudlin for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is the quality of the actors combined with the absolute reality of the story written by the flesh-and-blood Homer Hickam—quite an amazing man apart from any exploits during his high school years as the leader of the Rocket Boys. The father-son relationship is especially noteworthy; it serves up probably one of the finest performances of Oscar-winning actor Chris Cooper (Adaptation, 2003), certainly his best as a father. As if to support my assertion, the film did win the Best Family Film award from the Broadcast Film Critics Association in 1999.

The story Hickam wrote, which became a New York Times #1 bestselling book, *Rocket Boys: A Memoir*, focuses on that relationship and growing up in West Virginia of the 1950s where coal was king. Not only king: working the dank, hard, backbreaking, black-lung-filling mines was the only destiny most of the boys in those coal towns would ever have. That: and football. It's no accident that the sport of American football started in the coal mines and steel mills of Allegheny-Appalachia America: these were the toughest men around... at least during their shortened life expectancies. (Interestingly, Homer's brother Jim (Scott Miles) was considered the lucky one, because a football scholarship would free him from the business.)

I like how the movie shows some of the (pun?) granularity to that coal business; clearly these men that worked down there were not a pack of mindnumbed dolts. Homer's father John (Chris Cooper) advances quite high in the company as a shift supervisor/foreman, and he loves his work. He's good at it. The film provides enough footage to educate us to a minimal level that working down here wasn't Hell, rather it's a job requiring hard bodies, tougher minds, and constant focus on what the flock one is doing. Slipups are easy, but teamwork and dedication bring success. (Kind of like a good football team.)

Anyway, Homer's dad is a comparative VIP in this working-man world, and none too happy when Homer—who is athletically challenged—announces he's going to build a rocket. The movie has opened with the story of the Russian space satellite Sputnik (October 1957) juxtaposed with scenes from the mines, towns, and railroads in that region... full of all the significance that Sputnik—which the people could see passing overhead every night in the Northern skies—would have for the Cold War.[1] [Woven in with the movie scenes is an exactly right mixture of the rock and roll tunes of the era; this was my kid-time, too, Baby Boomer time, only I'm six years younger than Homer is/was. VGS (very good stuff).]

So, as revealed in the initial quote above, the kid is as hardheaded as his old man, and he proceeds, with the help of three of his school chums, to learn how to make a rocket. More important, to learn how to make

a rocket that flies properly. If you'll recall—and this is well documented in virtually every fictional and nonfictional film about the space program of the times—the Americans were having a heck of a time trying to get a rocket that would not blow up on the launch pad... or otherwise embarrass everyone. *October Sky* does an excellent job of pointing out that repeated failure has this Buddhist quality of ultimately succeeding.

We see projectiles going this way and that way, crashing to the earth, chasing the boys around, making everyone look silly, like watching children on Independence Day throwing matches into a nest of bottle rockets. But the plot inevitably proceeds through the learning of ideas, mastering some key techniques, acquiring the proper equipment and materials (sometimes surreptitiously via the company's facilities), and gathering inspiration from some key persons. The key inspirational person in this case being Homer's math teacher Miss Riley (Laura Dern).

I swear this is Laura Dern's finest hour[2]; she completely recreates the archetype of the caring teacher who lives for the singular mind who can break free... in this case free from all this stifling, mindkilling—not to mention body killing—culture of the coal-tenders of the world:

*Principal Turner: Miss Riley, our job is to give these kids an education.*

*Miss Riley: Mmm-hmm.*

*Principal Turner: Not false hopes.*

*Miss Riley: False hopes? Do you want me to sit quiet, let 'em breathe in coal dust the rest of their life?*

*Principal Turner: Miss Riley, once in a while... a lucky one... will get out on a football scholarship. The rest of 'em work in the mines.*

*Miss Riley: How 'bout I believe in the unlucky ones? Hmm? I have to, Mister Turner, I'd go out of my mind.*

Miss Riley points Homer toward the science-fair competition and basically runs interference for him with the local authorities. No doubt Ms. Dern spent some serious time in Coalwood, West Virginia, or nearby, managing to be Miss Riley down to the last measure of the Appalachian accent. The other adult woman in Homer's life is his mother Elsie (Natalie Canerday). Nor is she a typical 1950s Leave it to Beaver wife sent over from central casting, as revealed by her plucky personality and her patient painting of a mural in the living room of their modest home.

One more reason to recommend the film: the rocket launching is boss, a total thrill in sound and sight. You can imagine standing there eight miles away (so they would not be standing on coal company land) on top of the broad expanse of a slate plateau serving as the launch platform. It's simply an exhilarating feeling when those little buggers take off... and makes me wish I'd managed to see a Saturn 5 moon rocket launch back in the day (1967-1973). Oh well.

As a tribute to the best hopes of the species and performances that will stay with you forever, you won't find a better work of art than this one. It's the also the ideal pickmeup on those days when the world seems to be going to pot... er, hell.

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[1] Needless to state, now I have an entirely different Gestalt of what was known as the Cold War. In other words, I'm absolutely convinced virtually all the machinations leading to conflict among nation-states were/are conducted at root by a <central controlling entity> serving the international banksters. Ref. the Rothschild Formula as described in the book of the 21st century: *The Creature from Jekyll Island*, by G. Edward Griffin. Still, the Cold War era makes a fitting context for this very human and universal American story.

[2] I also love Laura Dern in the HBO movie *Recount*, where she plays the perfect Katherine Harris, former airhead, pontificating Secretary of State of Florida; mountains of documentary evidence exist that she and Governor Jeb Bush literally stole the 2000 election (primarily by preventing eligible black voters from voting).

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*Homer Hickam* | *Rocket Boys* | *West Virginia* | *Space Program* | *Sputnik*