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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



October Sky
Homer Hickam

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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

October Sky

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.

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 3

26. Sonny's first attempt at rocket building blows up his mother's fence. All she says is, "Didn't I tell you not to blow yourself up?" Why doesn't his mother put a stop to such a dangerous activity? Imagine that the women in Coalwood have told Sonny's mother that she should stop him for his own safety. How would she explain to them her decision to support his rocket building?

Chapter 6

36. Sonny's cat, Daisy Mae, provides him with a lot of comfort when he is lonely. She sleeps on his bed at night, and he sometimes talks to her about things he can't say to anyone else. Describe a pet which has provided you with comfort when you needed it. (If you've never had a pet, describe a stuffed animal, some other item, or place which helped you deal with stress.)
37. The Big Creek Missile Agency is formed. Sonny and his friends are dedicated to making rockets. Imagine that you are a newspaper reporter interviewing Sonny about his new organization. List the questions you would ask him.
38. Miss Riley suggests that the BCMA enter the science fair. Sonny immediately says no. He is sure that they are not ready and that they would just make fools of themselves. Describe a time when your initial reaction to something was to say absolutely not, but you later changed your mind.
39. Sonny is still in love with Dorothy Plunk; he believes: "There had to be a way to win Dorothy, some strategy, some ploy." Sonny is thinking of Dorothy as a problem to be solved. What do you predict Sonny will attempt to do next to "win Dorothy"?
40. Quentin and Sonny keep trying to find a rocket book, but they can't. Their rocket making is almost entirely trial and error. Research is much easier today because of the Internet. Do you think the rocket boys would have enjoyed themselves as much if they had had all the answers provided for them? Write a letter to Sonny explaining to him how his "body of knowledge" would have grown much faster today. Tell him why he is or is not fortunate that he had to learn by trial and error.