

The rocket boys

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“ The Rocket Boys” Homer Hickam Jr. For my reading assignment, I chose “ The Rocket Boys” by Homer Hickam Jr. It is an autobiography written more like a fiction novel about a high school aged boy, Homer, who lived in a coal mining town named Coalwood. His father ran the coal mine and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps but Homer did not want to become a miner. He wanted to grow up to be a rocket engineer. Homer and his father were never great friends and this built tension between them all the way through Homer’s high school years.

This passion for rockets began while Homer was watching the Russians launch a satellite into space for the first time ever. He started to learn about rockets and with a group of friends, he started to grasp the concept of rocket building. After some months of fighting for materials and a place to launch these rockets, the coal company allowed them to launch on an abandoned coal yard outside of town. For three years Homer and his friends launched better and better rockets, able to reach up to five miles in the sky! In their senior year they entered the county science fair and won all the way to nationals with the help of their whole community.

Homer’s successes pleased his father; they both finally were happier and moved on. Homer ended up at NASA after joining the Army for the Vietnam War. He is still alive today. A particular passage in the book I find appealing is found on pages forty and forty-one: “ All that fall, the Welch Daily News and the Bluefield Daily Telegraph were filled with stories of our American scientists and engineers at Cape Canaveral in Florida, desperately working to catch up with the Russians. It was if the science fiction I had read all my life were coming true.

Gradually, I became fascinated by the whole thing. I read every article I could find about the men at the Cape and kept myself pinned to the television set for the latest on what they were doing. I began to hear about one particular rocket scientist named Dr. Wernher von Braun. His very name was exotic and exciting. I saw on television where Dr. von Braun had given an interview and he said, in a crisp German accent, that if he got the go ahead he could put a satellite into orbit within thirty days. The newspapers said he'd have to wait, that the program Vanguard would get the first chance.

Vanguard was the United States' International Geophysical satellite program, and von Braun, since he worked for the Army, was somehow too tainted by that association to make the first American try for orbit. At night before I went to sleep, I thought about what Dr. von Braun might be doing at that very moment down at the Cape. I could just imagine him high on a gantry, lying on his back like Michelangelo, working with a wrench on the fuel lines of one of his rockets. I started to think about what an adventure it would be to work for him, helping him to build rockets and launching them into space.

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This passage describes when Homer started to think about how much he liked rockets and how Dr. von Braun started to become Homer's hero. It mentions how Homer just notices Dr. von Braun's name and automatically takes an interest in the scientist because of how exotic it was which foreshadows the fact that Homer will have a growing interest in Dr. von Braun. Homer's admiration for the scientist grew considerably when Dr. von Braun said that, if allowed, he could have a satellite in space in thirty days.

This made Homer think of him as an aeronautical hero and that is how he thought about him for the rest of his life.

The author used creative references, like when Homer would lie in bed and think about what Dr. von Braun was doing. He thought that he was like Michelangelo, high up on a gantry underneath his “art” or his rocket fixing something with his wrench like Michelangelo was fixing something under the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling with his brush. This thought made Homer think about how great it would be to be doing that alongside of the great Dr. von Braun. This important passage shows what Homer Jr. ’s main interest will be for the rest of his life. The most difficult choice Homer had to make was what he wanted to do in life.

All through high school Homer wanted to please his father but also wanted to do what he wanted to do. His father wanted Homer to become a mining engineer after Homer expressed an interest in engineering; he really wanted Homer to take over his work after he retired. Homer said to him that he didn’t really know what an engineer did but that all he wanted to do was build rockets. His father kept pressing Homer, explaining that coal mining was the life of their country and Homer would be doing his country an honor by running a coal mine. Homer had always wanted the respect from his father that his father gave to Homer’s brother and coal mining would get him that respect but his dream was to build rockets in Cape Canaveral. Homer was torn but he knew in his heart that he was going to follow his dream, despite whatever his father said. Interestingly, because this book is an autobiography that contains an epilogue, the reader learns about the character at the end of the book and later in life. At the end of the book,

Homer was physically the same as the beginning; Homer was in good health since there was no mention of his physical health changing, unlike his father, whose lungs were turning black and infected from mining.

Homer was emotionally much better at the end of the book. After years of struggling, Homer figured out who he was and what he was going to: this issue was summarized powerfully on page three hundred seven, “ Standing under the apple tree where Daisy Mae was buried, I realized I didn’t have to envy them anymore: I also knew now who I was and what I was going to do. That was when almost as if someone had pulled a string, my stomach and head stopped hurting. ” Socially, Homer always seemed fine. He had a great group of friends- “ the rocket boys”- throughout the story.

By the end of the book, his social circumstances were even better as Homer was regarded as almost a small town hero in Coalwood after winning the science fairs. He still had a great group of friends that he was with since before and during high school and the community liked him and his friends a lot; this most evident after listening to the people watching the boys drive to their last launch: “ Some people saw the rocket sticking out of the window, and shouts of encouragement rang out. ‘ The rocket boys, hoo! ’ ‘ We’re proud of you boys! ‘ A-OK, all systems go! ’. ” People from all over the county respected the boys, especially Homer. Homer was in great shape at the end of the book- physically, emotionally, and socially, having stayed true to what he wanted to do, and sticking with his friends. Personally, I like Homer. He tries to please everyone he knows with whatever he does. He seems genuine and puts a lot of work into everything he does. One thing I noticed about

Homer that is most admirable is that he did not give up when he needed something.

If he needed to get supplies for his rockets, he would do whatever he could to get them. He would trade for supplies, do work for people, camp in the woods for a week, and dig steel out of the ground to sell. Homer did have some bad moments when he got tough and arrogant but whenever he did, someone knocked him back into his place and he realized what he was doing. Considering all of these things, I would like to be friends with Homer and would really enjoy being a “rocket boy”. “The Rocket Boys” title signifies the main point of the book.

It explains that the book is about a group of boys who are somehow connected to rockets, whether they have an interest, they like to fly them, or anything else with rockets involved. I think a better title to the book could be “Leaving Coalwood” because the story emphasizes all of the reasons not to stay in Coalwood but to leave and pursue one’s dreams. It also signifies the rockets themselves when they blast off and go high up in the sky, leaving Coalwood behind and seeing the world from above before falling back to Coalwood.

The ending of “The Rocket Boys” is very effective given the resolution of the tension that was prominent throughout the book. Homer’s final launch brought many people to Cape Coalwood, including Homer’s father. Homer let his father launch their last and best rocket ever that exploded the launch pad and flew to six miles in the sky. Homer’s father jumped around, happy and excited, very proud of his son. Homer’s father was finally showing just how pleased he was for his son’s success, something Homer longed for.

Since this story had such a happy, exciting, and true ending, it is hard to change it.

If I had to change it, another ending might be that the tension was not completely cleared up between Homer and his father. Homer's father wouldn't have come to the launch, and even though he was slowly getting used to the fact that Homer wanted to leave Coalwood and work with rockets. In the changed ending, he still wasn't happy that Homer wouldn't take over his job. This ending leaves the possibility for a sequel, following up on the continued tension as Homer became an adult and a successful NASA scientist.

While I thought the actual ending to "The Rocket Boys" was effective and good, having a new ending would also create new possibilities. I would recommend this book to someone who relates to this book in many ways. My father is one of those people who are always interested in learning about things, and how they work. This book is all about how Homer learned about how rockets work and how to build them. My father loves to build things and always wanted to become a carpenter, which is what he did.

His parents wanted him to go to college to work as a company executive like his dad and he never told them he wanted to become a carpenter. After struggling to decide whether or not to tell them, wondering if they would be mad or not, he told them, and to his surprise, they were fine with it. This isn't exactly like Homer's struggle with his father where it was external conflict, but internal. I think my father would relate to Homer's struggle. In addition, my father would enjoy the technical story of the building of the rockets and all of the excitement that this story provides.

Overall, I like this book a lot. I thought the book I was going to have to read for this reading assignment was going to be boring and long. I was completely wrong! I did not want to stop reading this story. I thought it was a very well written autobiography that isn't just filled with facts and dates, but is filled with rich information from the exciting adventures with Homer and his rocket boys. This was one of the best reading assignment books I have ever read; in fact, one of the best books I have ever read.