

Homer Hickam

(Homer Hadley Hickam, Jr.)
Feb 19, 1943 (Coalwood WV) –

NOW, THIS IS INTERESTING! Someone just came across it the other day. So, what are the chances that something like this could happen?

A million to one?

A gazillion to one?

Someone didn't just walk into a staff meeting one day and say, "Hey, let's waste a little time and see if we can create an alternative title for Homer's new book, *Rocket Boys*."

More about that later, but for now, let's travel back in time to when Homer Hickam was a high school student.

After checking out everything available by science-fiction writers Jules Verne, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein in the Coalwood Public Library, Homer and his high school buddies established the Big Creek Missile Agency (BCMA). Then, under the non-existent authority of the BCMA, they built and fired off rockets in an empty field.

But there can be a downside to being teenage rocket scientists, especially when some of the BCMA's rockets landed in Coalwood's residential areas. It was something that Homer's mine superintendent father took seriously, and the BCMA was shut down – at least for a while.

Fortunately, Homer and his friends had a friend in Big Creek High School physics teacher, Miss Frieda Riley, who not only encouraged them, but gave them a book titled: *Principles of Guided Missile Design*.¹ Then she made herself available to assist them with their projects – projects that would take them all the way to the National Science Awards finals competition.

Just how good were Hickam and his friends? During their senior year, the former BCMA rocketeers won gold and silver medals for propulsion with their entry, *A Study of Amateur Rocketry Techniques*, at the 1960 National Science Fair competition.

After high school, Hickam graduated from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, earning a degree in Industrial Engineering

(1964), after which he enlisted in the military and served six years in Vietnam as an infantry officer.

After his military tour, he went to work for the Army Aviation and Missile Command at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama.

That was followed by a tour of duty with the 7th Army Training Command in West Germany, and then it was back to Huntsville and a job with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) at the Marshall Space Flight Center where he helped to prepare astronauts for space travel.

In 1998, as mentioned upfront, NASA engineer Homer Hickam authored a book titled *Rocket Boys*. It was his second nonfiction book.

His first, *Torpedo Junction: U-Boat War Off America's East Coast, 1942*, was published by the Naval Institute Press in 1989.²

When first released, *Torpedo Junction* sold well enough to be considered a bestseller, encouraging rocket scientist Hickam to write another book. That book, already mentioned, *Rocket Boys*, was his biography.

It's the story of what it was like growing up in a small West Virginia coal-mining town under the watchful eye of a domineering coal-mine superintendent father.

Rocket Boys lifted off as a selection by the *New York Times* as one of its Great Books of 1998. It was also an alternative selection for both the Literary Guild and the Book of the Month Club.

Next, came a nomination by the National Book Critics Circle as the Best Biography of 1998, and then came talk about turning the biography into a movie.

That's when someone decided the title, *Rocket Boys*, wasn't right for the movie, thinking it lacked appeal to lady moviegoers.

It's not known who suggested the eventual title of the movie, *October Sky*, but there is a minor reference in the film to "Sputnik," an artificial satellite that was visible in the October sky as it orbited the Earth.³

But that's not what *Rocket Boys* was all about, and yet there is a unique relationship between the two titles, and it is this.

The title *October Sky* is an anagram of *Rocket Boys*. In the unlikely event that you've forgotten what you learned about anagrams in your 9th grade English class, an *anagram* is a new word or phrase formed by rearranging the letters of the original word or phrase, using each of the alphabetical letters exactly once.

For example, here are a few anagrams:

Dormitory = *Dirty room*

A decimal point = *A dot in place*

A gentleman = *Elegant man*

Statue of Liberty = *Built to stay free*

Now, back to how *Rocket Boys* became *October Sky*.

A few scriptwriters may have been playing around with possible anagrams of Hickam's book, *Rocket Boys*, which consists of these ten letters [r, o, c, k, e, t, b, o, y, s].

Those same ten letters can be creatively rearranged to spell *October Sky*, a movie title that might have more relatability to lady moviegoers than a movie titled *Rocket Boys*.

What an excellent way to establish an unmistakable yet veiled relationship between the two titles of the same story. Which, you can be sure, was arrived at with a healthy dose of imagination, a dollop of creativity, and a lot of smiles.

-
1. Locke, Arthur S., *Principles of Guided Missile Design*. D. Van Nostrand, Publisher, 1955.
 2. Hickam, Homer, *Torpedo Junction: U-Boat War off America's East Coast, 1942*. Naval Institute Press, May 3, 1996.
 3. The Soviet Union launched Sputnik on October 4, 1957. It was the world's first artificial satellite to be launched into space.

*
**

I have always found the best way to live is to be optimistic and energetic and willing to work hard for my dreams, as well as the dreams of others.

Homer Hickam (1943–) NASA engineer, author