Discussion Questions

1. As you read this memoir, did you relate to the people involved?
2. Discuss Homer Senior and Elsie’s relationship. What is the importance of the mural Elsie is painting in the kitchen?
3. How would you describe Sonny’s father? How does the conflict between his mom and dad motivate Sonny?
4. In the first paragraph of the book, Homer writes that his hometown was “at war with itself over its children.” What does this mean?
5. Discuss the women of Coalwood. Who stood out? Why?
6. The book is dedicated “To Mom and Dad and the people of Coalwood.” Why do you think Homer made that dedication?
7. This story is also about the rewards and costs of nonconformity. Who conforms, who doesn’t and what is the consequence of their actions?
8. Mr. Turner, the Big Creek High School principal, tells Sonny, “In the queer mass of human destiny, the determining factor has always been luck.” But later, Homer writes, “There’s a plan. If you are willing to fight hard enough, you can make it detour for a while, but you’re still going to end up where God wants you to be.” Which do you agree with?
9. Miss Riley is a major influence. Sonny says, “I had discovered that learning something, no matter how complex, wasn’t hard when I had a reason to want to know it.” (p. 168). Discuss the importance of teachers and other role models.
10. When Sonny thinks of giving up rocketry, Miss Riley tells him: “Your job, Sonny, is to build your rockets.” When Sonny asks why, she answers, “If for no other reason, because it honors you and this school.”(p. 296). How do the Rocket Boys help the town? Why are they celebrated?
11. The final chapter in the book finishes with the launch of the last rocket of the Big Creek Missile Agency. Homer Senior is invited to launch this rocket. Why do you think this invitation was made? Why do you think he accepted?