

A GUIDE TO Sounder

William H. Armstrong

*“In Bible stories everybody’s always goin’ on a long journey. . . .
And in Bible-story journeys, ain’t no journey hopeless. Everybody
finds what they suppose to find.”*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Sounder is a novel about the triumph of love in the face of tragedy. It deals with issues of racial justice, courage, loyalty, friendship, and education.

Setting: Late nineteenth century, the rural South.

Protagonist: An unnamed African American boy whose father, a sharecropper, owns a wonderful hunting dog named Sounder.

Conflicts: The overriding conflict that provides the background for the novel is between blacks and whites in the post–Civil War South. The specific external conflict that sets the plot in motion is the clash between the protagonist’s father and the law after he steals a ham to feed his hungry family. Other conflicts include Sounder’s attempts to survive his near-fatal wounds; the external conflict between the protagonist and white authority when he goes in search of his imprisoned father; and the boy’s internal conflict as he struggles to learn to read while searching for his father and providing for his family.

Resolution: The major conflict between blacks and whites is resolved in personal instances—for example, the white writer of the book honors his black teacher by writing this novel. Sounder survives his wound but is never the same. After years in prison, the father is released because he has been maimed in an accident. The family has managed to survive through the mother’s and the protagonist’s hard work. In his unsuccessful search for his father, the protagonist finds a schoolmaster who teaches him.

Themes: The great power of love carries people through tragedy; African Americans face injustices in white-dominated society; the thirst for knowledge is a powerful force; deep ties bind humans and animals together.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

This novel should pose no comprehension problems for students reading at the middle school level. Offensive racial slurs are used several times, and black characters are treated brutally by white authority figures. The dog Sounder is badly maimed by a gunshot. The **language** and **style** of this novel are unusual—not difficult to understand but almost poetic, evoking the direct sensory experience of the child-protagonist. The story is told in dialect, contains allusions to the Bible, and raises compelling questions about cruelty and the power of storytelling.

BACKGROUND

Sharecropping. Many poor Southern families, both white and black, turned to sharecropping as a way of earning a living. A sharecropper is a farmer who works land owned by someone else. Sharecroppers have to give to the owner a large percentage—often as much as half—of what their land produces.

MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Except for the dog named Sounder, the characters in this fictional family are nameless—perhaps so that they stand for *all* families everywhere.

The boy, the oldest son of a black sharecropper, about twelve at the beginning; yearns to read; loves the dog Sounder; goes on a quest for his imprisoned father.

His father, a silent, strong sharecropper who supplements his family’s income by hunting with Sounder; goes to prison after stealing food for his family.

His mother, a devout, hard-working woman who does laundry and gathers nuts for income; keeps her family together when her husband is imprisoned.

Sounder, a hunting dog with a great mellow voice that gave him his name; is shot and maimed trying to follow when his master is taken to prison.

The schoolmaster, an elderly black man who runs a rural school; kindly cares for the boy when he is injured; later houses and educates him.

PLOT

Author's Note. The author introduces the novel by describing a quiet, solitary African American man, who had taught him to read fifty years before; the author says that what follows is this man's story.

Chapter I. The **setting** is a sharecropper's cabin in the rural South, probably before the turn of the century. The central **characters** are introduced: the oldest son of an African American family, about twelve years old; his silent, admirable sharecropper father; and his hard-working, religious, stoic mother. Next to his parents, the most important being in the boy's life is the family dog, Sounder, who helps the father hunt raccoons and possums for meat and skins. It is now winter, when nights are usually too windy for the father and Sounder to hunt. On such nights the boy shells nuts with his mother, listening to her tell stories of Biblical heroes, stories he longs to read for himself. One day, after a long meatless spell, the boy wakes up to the smell of ham. But trouble is **foreshadowed** because his mother is humming, and he knows that she sings when she is happy and hums when she is worried.

Chapter II. The trouble materializes and the plot's main **conflict** begins when, three days later, a white sheriff and two deputies barge into the cabin and arrest the father for stealing a ham. As his master is driven away in chains, Sounder runs after him but is cruelly shot by a deputy—another plot **complication**. Badly wounded, Sounder crawls under the cabin porch and stays there, without taking any food. The boy and his mother are afraid that he will die.

Chapter III. The next day the mother, who must now support four children, goes to town to sell nuts, and the boy, half expecting to find Sounder's dead body, crawls under the house looking for the dog. He then searches the area around the house but finds nothing.

Chapter IV. When the mother returns from town, she suggests that Sounder may not be dead. She thinks he may have crawled away from the house in search of oak leaves to lie on and heal his wounds. Her suggestion that he may return in a few days **foreshadows** later developments. However, weeks pass, and Sounder does not

come home. Around Christmas, the mother bakes a cake for the boy to take to his father in prison. Carrying the cake carefully, the boy walks to the prison in town, a new **setting**, where the cruel white jailer mashes the cake, looking for tools or weapons. Fantasizing about a gruesome death for the jailer, the boy is ushered in to see his apparently defeated father, who says he will be home soon and asks his son not to come again.

Chapter V. The boy trudges home, sad and discouraged. He worries that his father will be sent away with a prison work gang after his trial, and he wonders how the family will keep track of him. As she shells walnuts that night, his mother shifts from humming to singing, **foreshadowing** a happier development. The next morning the boy hears a familiar sound and rushes to the porch to see Sounder—thin, partly hairless, missing an eye, hobbling on three legs, and looking around for his master. Sounder's great voice has dwindled to a whine. Soon the mother learns that the father has been sentenced to hard labor, but the duration of the sentence is vague.

Chapter VI. To help support his family the boy begins to work in the fields with men, but his dream is to find his father. Each autumn when field work is over, he walks all over the area, from one work camp to another, in his quest for his father. As he walks through towns, he picks up discarded newspapers and magazines to practice his reading; this quest for learning develops one of the novel's **themes**. As he sleeps outdoors on his travels, he imagines seeing his father's hunting lantern and hearing Sounder's great voice lifting once again.

Chapter VII. Back home the boy hears about a dynamite blast that killed prisoners in a quarry, but learns that his father was not among the dead. Years pass, and the boy continues his search. He stands outside the fence of one prison camp and scans the faces inside for his father, when a prison guard cruelly smashes his hand. Later that day, continuing his journey, the boy finds a discarded book that is too difficult for him to read. Then he finds a schoolhouse run by a gentle old schoolmaster who takes care of the boy's wound, tells him that the book he found was written by Montaigne, and offers him a place to sleep. The boy tells him his story.

Chapter VIII. The boy asks his mother if he can accept the schoolmaster's offer of housing and education in return for working at the school. The mother reluctantly lets her son go. Years pass, with the boy farming at home in the summer and going to school in the winter. The novel's **climax** comes one August afternoon, when Sounder responds oddly to an approaching stranger who limps up the dusty road to the farm. Then, for the first time in years, the dog lifts his mighty voice, for he recognizes that the stranger with a dragging foot,

humped shoulder, and twisted face is his master returning home. The father tells his family that he has been released from prison early because he had been crushed and maimed in the dynamite accident. Doctors had told him he would die, but “he resolved he would not die, even with a half-dead body, because he wanted to come home again.” As the days pass, the father sits on the porch, with his faithful old dog lying nearby. In the fall the boy returns to the schoolmaster but comes home one October day to chop wood for his family. He sees his father’s swinging lantern in the distance and realizes that he has gone hunting with Sounder for the first time in years. When Sounder returns alone, the boy goes on one last search for his father. He finds him dead, his lantern still burning. Sounder dies soon after his master. The boy reflects on Montaigne’s statement “Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead.” He now understands that memory keeps the people and things we love alive forever.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

One outstanding element of this novel is its focus on the child’s point of view, filtered through the third-person narrator. Discussion groups or individual projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Writing First-Person Narration

Imagine the boy grown up to become the solitary, eloquent man described in the Author’s Note. Review one of the following incidents in the novel (or one of your own choosing), and rewrite it as an adult first-person narrator would relate it. You might want to include comments the adult might make, such as “I didn’t realize at the time that. . . .”

- his attempt to find the wounded Sounder
- his trip with the cake to his father in prison
- his first encounter with the schoolmaster

2. Evaluating Credibility and Relevance

Discussion groups might focus on other specific elements of the novel:

- The narrator is not specific about the characters names or ages or the passage of time. Why do you think he wrote the book this way? Would you have enjoyed the novel more if you had known these things?

- Re-read the description of the author’s teacher in the “Author’s Note.” What similarities can you see between this man and the boy in the novel?
- Do you find the novel primarily optimistic or pessimistic? Explain your opinion.

3. Extending the Novel

Discussion groups might extend the ideas in the novel:

- A fine 1972 film was based on *Sounder*. How does the film change the plot and characters of the novel? Do the changes improve the story? Explain.
- The novel is set about 100 years ago. Do you think what happens in *Sounder* could happen today? Why or why not?
- Imagine that you are a state official and have heard about the protagonist’s father, imprisoned for years for a minor crime. What would you do to change the system of justice?
- Read Joseph’s story in the Bible, beginning in Genesis 37. Why do you think the boy identifies so strongly with Joseph?

MEET THE WRITER

William H. Armstrong (1914–1999) grew up in Virginia. A history teacher and educational administrator for most of his professional life, Armstrong turned to writing fiction in his fifties. His nonfiction works include *87 Ways to Help Your Child in School* (1961) and *Barefoot in the Grass: The Story of Grandma Moses* (1970). *Sounder*, his first novel, won the Newbery Medal in 1970. The idea for *Sounder* came to Armstrong on a midnight walk: As he was enjoying the October night, Armstrong heard a coon dog singing in the distance. From this seed, his novel began to grow. Armstrong admits that although he found the idea for *Sounder* intriguing, it was a difficult book to write.

In accepting the Newbery award, Armstrong read aloud some letters he had received from children. While *Sounder* made some young readers feel lonely and sad, it also helped them to understand the experiences of people like the ones in the novel. At first, one reader didn’t want to think about the characters’ struggles, but later he realized that the story was worthy of his attention.

READ ON

Wilson Rawls, *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Novel. A boy learns about life from his close relationship with two hunting dogs.

Fred Gipson, *Old Yeller*. Novel. A family living in Texas in the 1860s is adopted by a large yellow stray dog that defends his people at the cost of his own life.

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Novel. A girl in a Southern town is caught up in her father's defense of an innocent black man.

Homer, *The Odyssey*. Proficient readers might want to read Book 17 of Homer's epic poem, in which Odysseus' old dog, Argus, is the only one to recognize him when he returns home after twenty years.

Gary Paulsen, "The Dogs Could Teach Me," from *Woodson*. In this autobiographical account, the author learns several important lessons from the team of dogs that saves his life.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Zlateh the Goat." A classic short story about a boy and his beloved goat. Zlateh says only one word—"Maaaa"—but that word means many things.

Mildred D. Taylor, "The Gold Cadillac." A story about the racism faced by a family that travels to the South in an expensive new car to visit relatives.

Rex Warner, "The Labors of Hercules." A myth about a powerful Greek hero who must undertake a long and perilous quest.

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