

Sounder Short Guide

Sounder by William H. Armstrong

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Overview

Sounder reflects Armstrong's personal history, his knowledge of southern rural life, and his admiration for strong individuals. Concentrating on an innocent child's perspective, the story provides graphic descriptions of the cruelties inflicted upon a black sharecropper family trapped by poverty and lack of education. Sounder is the tragic and moving story of an unnamed boy who is devoted to his family and their faithful hound, Sounder. His father, jailed for stealing food to feed the starving family, is put on a chain gang that is constantly moved around the state, and the boy sets out on a quest to find him. The story also involves the boy's loving relationship with Sounder, who is named for his resonant howl that reverberates across the countryside.

About the Author

William Howard Armstrong was born September 14, 1914, near Lexington, Virginia. He was raised on a farm in the lovely, history-steeped Shenandoah valley, and the descriptions of southern life in his most famous novel, *Souder*, reflect his Christian upbringing in the rural South. The strong individuals that play major roles in Armstrong's fiction can be traced back to the history of his neighborhood; Stonewall Jackson, the famous steelwilled Confederate general killed in the Civil War, had taught Sunday school at the same church Armstrong attended as a boy. Military history was a part of Armstrong's childhood because several Civil War battles had been fought near his home.

His love of history was cemented at the Augusta Military Academy, a private military high school that he attended from 1928 to 1932. According to his family, Armstrong wrote his first story as a cadet at Augusta, but the story was so good that his teachers falsely accused him of plagiarism. Later, the story was published in the literary magazine at Hampden-Sydney College, where Armstrong edited both this magazine and the college newspaper. He graduated from Hampden-Sydney with honors in history in 1936 and also studied history at the University of Virginia.

Armstrong married Martha Stonestreet Williams in 1942. Three years later, he became a history teacher at Kent School, a private school in Kent, Connecticut. His wife died when his children were very young and Armstrong raised his family as a single parent. He has been a teacher most of his adult life and also raises sheep on his farm.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Armstrong focused on writing history books and study skills guides rather than fiction. He wrote his fictional masterpiece, *Souder*, in 1969, in the heat of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It won both the Newbery Medal and the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1970, and was called the best children's book of the year by the New York Times.

Souder received high praise for its tragic and understated beauty, its fine descriptions, and its depiction of a boy's experiences with his dog and with the racism in his society. Like Armstrong's subsequent fiction for young adults, it portrays a strong individual who strives to overcome racial injustice.

In the early 1970s, Armstrong wrote two more books that echo the characters and plot of *Souder*. *Sour Land* features Moses Waters, a black man of near-mythic goodness, as its hero. *The Mills of God* set in Appalachia during the Great Depression, has a boy and a dog as central figures and provides vivid descriptions of the era and setting.

During the 1970s, Armstrong wrote three books about historical figures: *Barefoot in the Grass*, a folksy biography of another strong individual he admired, the painter Grandma Moses; *Hadassah: Esther the Orphan Queen*, a fictionalized account of the Old Testament figure Esther who started life as an orphan but rose to become a queen; and *The Education of Abraham Lincoln*, which dramatizes Abraham Lincoln's early life. None

of Armstrong's later historical portraits or novels were as highly praised or as popular as Souder.

Setting

Sounder begins shortly before Christmas, in a small cabin on a poor, desolate farm somewhere in the American South, where the boy lives with his parents and siblings. There are two dimensions to the setting—one psychological, the other physical. The exact place and time of the story are deliberately vague, but Sounder probably takes place around 1900, before tractors and machines were common on small farms. The psychological setting, the young boy's mind, is more precisely defined.

Social Sensitivity

Because Armstrong attempts to realistically portray a racist society, he includes scenes of violence and racist language that readers may find offensive. Without excessive goriness, he graphically describes wounds to the dog and to the boy, and he also describes violent details of the boy's revenge fantasies.

Sounder has caused a controversy among critics over whether the depiction of the family is racist. In an article printed in Donnaræ MacCann and Gloria Woodard's *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, Albert Schwartz attacks Armstrong for imposing a "white fundamentalist" style and belief structure onto his representation of black culture. Schwartz contends that a white author who leaves his black characters unnamed is unconsciously expressing a form of "white supremacy" that "has long denied human individualism to the Black person." But critic and young adult author John Rowe Townsend defends Armstrong, arguing that omitting the characters' names simply universalizes their experiences. Whatever side one takes on the issue, there is little doubt that *Sounder* is a powerful reminder of the pain and suffering caused by racism.



Literary Qualities

By leaving the family unnamed and by keeping the exact setting somewhat unclear, Armstrong makes the story more universal. The vagueness of the world outside the cabin reflects the limited vision and knowledge of the novel's illiterate protagonist. Armstrong uses a third-person limited omniscient point of view that focuses on how the boy thinks and reacts to events. This method of setting the story in a person's mind and trying to imitate the ways his mind works is called "psychological realism."

The boy's consciousness and innocence form the lens through which readers view his world.

Armstrong's descriptive powers are a strength in *Souder*. His precise images are especially effective in portraying aspects of the family's daily routine. For example, his vivid description of them harvesting walnuts elevates a mundane activity to an almost mystical ritual: Inside the cabin, the boy's mother sat by the stove, picking kernels of walnuts with a bent hairpin. The woman watched each year for the walnuts to fall after the first hard frost. Each day she went with the children and gathered all that had fallen. The brownish-green husks, oozing their dark purple stain, were beaten off on a flat rock outside the cabin. On the same rock, the nuts were cracked after they had dried for several weeks in a tin box under the stove. When kernel-picking time came, and before it was dark each day, the boy or the father took a hammer with a home-made handle, went to the flat rock, and cracked as many as could be kernalled in a night.

Armstrong also artfully links physical descriptions of farm life to the young boy's emotions, thus integrating elements of the natural landscape with the boy's inner life. One passage links the boy's loneliness at night to the wind blowing outside. By connecting loneliness, an emotion, to the natural force of the wind, Armstrong creates a striking contrast between the coldness and cruelty of the world outside the family to the warmth and light of the world of the family inside the cabin.

The story is also well plotted and uses parallelism between the crippled dog and the father especially effectively. The father almost disappears from the story after his arrest, and the boy's attention shifts to *Souder*. The boy waits weeks for *Souder* to return, and when the mangled dog hobbles home on three legs, he is nurtured by both the boy and the mother. The dog's maiming foreshadows the father's injury. The wounded *Souder* becomes a kind of stand-in for the father who is gone, and he absorbs some of the family's love for their missing father.

Themes and Characters

The unnamed boy is the book's central consciousness and only well-developed character. The boy is first seen as a lonely child, perhaps six or seven years old, who idolizes his father and loves to hunt with him and Sounder. Rather than providing a description of the boy, Armstrong allows the boy's thoughts and observations to reveal that he is strong, curious, and good-hearted. His family is illiterate, and he longs to learn to read. After Sounder is shot, the boy comforts and tries to help him, demonstrating his devotion to the dog.

When his father is unfairly jailed, the boy is adventurous enough to leave his mother and his small cabin and embark on a quest to find his father and to learn how to read.

The boy eventually finds a teacher who becomes a substitute father. The boy develops into an unselfish, hard-working teen-ager who takes care of his mother and the other children. He never forgets his roots and returns from school in the summers to work the family farm and pay the rent. The boy stoically endures pain and failure, overcoming all setbacks with a quiet nobility.

The courageous and faithful dog Sounder is "a mixture of Georgia redbone hound and bulldog." Both Sounder's bark and his heart are noble and larger than life. Armstrong describes Sounder's melodious bark as haunting the countryside: "But it was not an ordinary bark. It filled up the night and made music as though the branches of all the trees were being pulled across silver strings." The dog, a wonderful hunter, suffers a crippling gunshot wound when he bravely goes to his master's aid as the father is being arrested. By drawing parallels between the fates of Sounder and the father, Armstrong makes the point that humans are treated like dogs in the racist early twentieth-century South.

Both are subjected to cruel and unprovoked violence that cripples and eventually kills them.

The boy's mother is a long-suffering and hard-working woman who believes that fate is too powerful a force to resist.

She takes in laundry and shells walnuts to eke out a meager existence. Because she does not want her son to leave home, she discourages him from learning to read. The mother constantly hums or sings the woeful song "That Lonesome Road." A limited, sad figure, she talks, like everyone in the story, in short laconic sentences, and tries to hide her emotions.

The father appears only at the beginning and the end of the story. At the beginning, he is a strong, resourceful, and loving man who finds joy in hunting. He hunts not just for sport but to put meat on his family's table. As the story opens, game is scarce and the



family is starving. In desperation, the father steals a ham and sausages to feed his family. The father loves his family passionately and risks his own freedom so they can eat. Brutally arrested and treated like an animal in front of his family, he is ashamed to speak to his son when the boy comes to see him in the county jail. At the end of the story, the father returns, crippled from a mining accident after years of labor on a chain gang. A man broken by his society's brutal response to a small crime, he dies while hunting with Sounder.

Armstrong uses the young boy and his family to dramatize the evils of racism and poverty. Notions of social injustice and unnecessary cruelty are developed through precise and realistic descriptions of the father's arrest, the boy's visit to him in jail, and the incident of the father's crippling. The boy's courage in confronting racism, his endurance in the face of opposition, his unselfish love for his family, and his love of learning are traits Armstrong promotes as necessary for the survival of humankind. The boy learns to read in order to help himself overcome his loneliness and to break the chains of ignorance that imprison his family. Thus, the book is also about the power of literature and stories to comfort people and to help them deal with hardships.

Adaptations

The 1972 film version of *Sounder* is quite different from the novel. It stresses the unity of the black family and its strength, and the family members are given names. Paul Winfield plays the father, Nathan Morgan; Cicely Tyson plays the mother, Rebecca Morgan; and Kevin Hooks plays the boy, David Lee Morgan, who is older than the boy in the book. Also, a definite setting, Louisiana in 1933, is established. The mother is not the passive martyr depicted in the novel but is instead a courageous, powerful woman who encourages her son to learn to read. Nathan returns home after only one year and is not as horribly crippled as he is in the novel.

Sounder is not as badly wounded either, and he accompanies the boy on his quest to find his father. The Hollywood version has a happy ending with the reunited family sending the boy to school. Several characters not in the novel appear in the film. Praised by most critics, the film is available on videotape.

A successful sequel to the film, *Part 2, Sounder*, was released in 1976 and starred Harold Sylvester, Ebony Wright, and Taj Mahal.



Topics for Discussion

1. What effect does Armstrong create by not naming any of the characters in this book? Do you think this makes the characters seem more timeless and universal, or does it make them seem like stereotypes?

2. What does the author gain by telling the story through the eyes of a child?

Does the boy's innocence intensify your reactions to events?

3. Why is the dog's name used as the title of this book? What purposes does the dog Sounder serve in the novel and in the lives of the family?

4. In your opinion, is there as much racism today as there was in the time depicted by Sounder? Are there different ways of expressing racism today?

5. Can the unnamed boy who is the protagonist in Sounder be called a hero?

If so, what are some of the heroic traits he displays?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does Armstrong draw the reader into the child's point of view in the novel? Describe how he uses his third-person limited omniscient point of view to move in and out of the boy's consciousness.
2. Compare the beliefs and attitudes of the boy and the mother in *Souder*. In what ways do their similarities and differences help characterize each of them and make them individuals?
3. Twice in the novel the boy wishes for revenge against cruel lawmen. Select one of these revenge fantasies and demonstrate how the boy's desire for revenge helps make him a more convincing character.
4. Armstrong says that as a child he loved Bible stories. In what ways does he use biblical stories in the novel? What effect does the use of these stories have in the novel?
5. Some critics have said that Armstrong's portrait of the family in *Souder* is flawed because he depicts the black men and women as powerless. Do you agree or disagree with these critics?

Be sure to cite examples from the novel to support your position.
6. Even though *Souder* is apparently set in a much earlier time, show how the novel reflects the events and sentiments of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights movement.
7. Compare the 1972 film version of *Souder* with the novel. What are the major differences in the focus of the novel and of the film? Who is the most dominant character in the film? In the novel? How do you explain these differences?

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