

Literature Circle Guide to
WALK TWO MOONS by Sharon Creech

Book Summary

The Newbery Medal-winning *Walk Two Moons* is a story about journeys, family love, and commitment. Salamanca Hiddle and her Gram and Gramps are on a cross-country trip to Idaho to see Sal's mother. As they travel, Sal tells her grandparents about her friend Phoebe Winterbottom, whose mother mysteriously left the family, just as strange messages began appearing anonymously on the Winterbottoms' porch. At the same time, Sal thinks about her own past with her parents, including her mother's mysterious reasons for leaving her husband and daughter to take a bus to Idaho. These two stories unfold simultaneously as Sal continues the journey westward with her colorful, storytelling grandparents. In the end, Sal and Phoebe learn the truth about Phoebe's mother when she finally returns to her family: Mrs. Winterbottom has a son who she gave up for adoption many years before her marriage. Sal also faces the truth about her own mother, who died in a tragic bus accident just outside Lewiston, Idaho. Just as Sal recognizes the hard truth about her mother, she learns that her dear Gram Hiddle has died.

Author Information

Sharon Creech was born in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, and grew up in a family quite a bit like the character Mary Lou Finney's. When she was twelve, her parents took the family on a road trip to Idaho, which she recreated many years later in *Walk Two Moons*. She discovered in college that she loved storytelling, and afterwards found a career teaching high school English and literature in England and Switzerland. She wrote later that teaching and traveling both provided the perfect training ground for writing her novels. Her first two novels (published in England) were written for adults, but all of her subsequent work has been written for children. After *Walk Two Moons* won the Newbery Medal in 1995, Sharon Creech stopped teaching and devoted herself to writing full-time. She now lives in Pennington, New Jersey, with her husband who is a school headmaster, and she has two grown children.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What does Sal say are the "real reasons" her grandparents are taking her to Idaho?

Sal states some of these reasons on page 5: Gram and Gramps wanted to see Sal's mother, who was "resting peacefully in Idaho." Gram and Gramps knew that Sal wanted to see her mother but was afraid. Sal's father had already seen Sal's mother and now wanted to be alone with Margaret Cadaver. Dad wanted Sal to chaperone her grandparents, who might not behave themselves without her presence.

2. At the very end of the story, why does Sal say that she is jealous of Phoebe?

Sal is jealous that Phoebe's mother came back and hers didn't. (page 279) While Phoebe's mother left and came back, Sal's mother left and never returned.

3. Why doesn't Sal like her new home in Euclid, Ohio? How is it different from her former home in Kentucky?

In Bybanks, Kentucky, Sal lived on a farm in a tiny town. In Euclid, she lives in a suburban neighborhood, where all the houses are "jammed together like a row of birdhouses." (page 2) Sal loves nature, and she misses the farm animals, her favorite trees, and the swimming hole.

4. Sal says that her story is hidden behind Phoebe's. What do you think she means by this?

The author uses the metaphor of the hidden fireplace in chapter one to set up the comparison between the two girls' stories. Students will probably notice the many similarities between the two stories. For example, both girls' mothers seem frustrated with their roles in their respective families. Phoebe's mother is struggling with her past secrets, while Sal's mother struggles with a recent miscarriage. Also, both Sal and Phoebe feel abandoned by their mothers, experiencing grief and resentment at their mothers' actions. By living through Phoebe's experience with her, Sal gains insight into her own experience.

5. As Sal gets to know Phoebe and the Winterbottom family, she notices some odd things about their family. What does Sal notice, and why does she think that Mrs. Winterbottom is unhappy?

Sal notes that the Winterbottoms are very proper and polite to each other. The household operates rigidly, with little show of emotion between family members. Mrs. Winterbottom takes her housewife responsibilities very seriously and seems to care deeply about pleasing her husband and children. Sometimes Sal notices Mrs. Winterbottom sighing to herself and acting nervous.

6. As you read, did any of the characters surprise you? Who turned out to be different than you first expected?

Many of the characters here might surprise a reader. Margaret Cadaver, who Sal believes is her father's love interest, is actually important to Sal's father in large part because she was with Sal's mother in the bus wreck. The messages were being left by the blind Mrs. Partridge, rather than "the maniac" as Sal and Phoebe imagine. Mike Bickle turned out not be a maniac but rather the son of Mrs. Winterbottom. Mrs. Winterbottom was not kidnapped, but instead turns out to have a secret past, including a child before her marriage.

7. If you had a friend who was experiencing family problems like Sal and Phoebe, how would you try to help? What kind of advice would you give your friend?

Students who have experienced their own family strife, especially their parents' separations, will connect with the experiences of Sal and Phoebe. Both girls have trouble believing that their mothers left of their own will, and Phoebe tries to take matters into her own hands. Students might counsel the two girls to recognize that their parents have their own problems and issues, and not to take responsibility for their parents' problems.

8. In chapter 41, Sal remembers the time her dog Moody Blue had puppies. How does she compare Moody Blue's behavior to her mother's? What do we learn about Sal's mother through this comparison?

After Moody Blue's puppies grew older, she encouraged them to be independent by ignoring them and pushing them away. In the same way, Sal's mother may have been encouraging Sal to be more independent of her, by leaving her daughter for what was intended to be a short trip to Idaho.

9. Of her Gram and Gramps Hiddle, Sal says, "My grandparents can get into trouble as easily as a fly can land on a watermelon." What are some examples of this from the story?

When visiting Washington, D.C., Gram and Gramps "borrowed" the tires from a senator's car. Later, Gramps tries to help a woman with car trouble and pulls all the hoses off her engine. When Gram and Gramps decide to get off the highway for a quick swim in the Missouri River, Gram is bit by a snake and must be hospitalized.

10. What do Phoebe's and Sal's mothers have in common? Compare the two mothers, including their personalities, their problems, and their relationships with their children. How is Ben's mother like these other two mothers?

Mrs. Winterbottom and Sugar Hiddle had very different lives but shared some of the same struggles. Both women seem to feel frustrated with having to live up to others' expectations. Both women experience a time of crisis in their lives: Mrs. Winterbottom because the son she gave up for adoption has reentered her life, and Sugar Hiddle because she has just miscarried a baby. Both women leave home to have time and space to reevaluate their lives. Also, both women have children who seem overly dependent on them. Ben's mother also is separated from her son, and she too is under emotional distress, but in her case she is hospitalized for mental illness. Unlike Phoebe and Sal, Ben cannot depend on his mother, since she is not capable of providing for him in any way.

11. The title of the book comes from one of the mysterious messages Phoebe finds: "Never judge a man until you've walked two moons in his moccasins." In your own words, what does this message mean? Who in the story learns this lesson?

Students will notice the ongoing theme of not judging others based on appearances of what seems to be. Many of the judgments that Sal and Phoebe make of other characters turn out not to be true as they gain more information, and both girls learn important lessons about empathy.

12. On the last night of his wife's life, Gramps Hiddle writes Gram a love letter, the only one he'd ever written. What do you think his letter said?

The letter may have contained important references to their “marriage bed,” or the “egg man,” for whom Gram briefly left Gramps many years before. Despite all of Gram and Gramps’ quirky ways, their love for each other is one constant in this story, and the letter would emphasize this. Gramps is also a great storyteller, and he might recount past experiences he shared with his wife from their many years together.

13. Imagine the Winterbottom family, including Mike, five years after the book has ended. How has the family changed? Has Phoebe learned to accept Mike? Is the Winterbottom's marriage different? Is Mrs. Winterbottom much happier now?

Students will probably be optimistic about the future of the Winterbottom family. Now that Mr. and Mrs. Winterbottom are more honest with each other, and now that Mr. Winterbottom has shown his unconditional acceptance of his wife, their marriage will grow stronger. Mrs. Winterbottom is different, both in appearance and in her willingness to be authentic, rather than just living up to others' expectations of her. It might be difficult for Phoebe and Prudence, her sister, to accept their “new” mother as well as Mike, but the family environment is a healthier one.

14. As the story progresses, we gradually learn about Sal's mother's story. Putting all the pieces of the story together, explain why Sugar Hiddle left her family. What thoughts and feelings do you think she was experiencing at the time she left?

It seems that Sugar Hiddle struggled with living up to the expectations of others and with her own role as a wife and mother. She struggled with feeling inferior to her husband, and she was also suffering from a recent miscarriage and hysterectomy, which was especially painful since she had always wanted many children. She may have wanted some time to herself to grieve her loss and think about her life, and going to Idaho by bus was one way to do this. She may have also wanted to provide her daughter Sal with an opportunity to gain some independence from her mother.

15. As you were reading, what did you think happened to Sal's mother? Were you surprised by the ending? Why do you think the author kept this outcome hidden until the very end?

Many students will be surprised to learn that Sal's mother is dead, probably because Sal doesn't admit it to herself until the very end when she sees her mother's grave. Many students might have assumed that Sal's mother had left her husband and daughter temporarily, still planning to return, which is what Sal hopes all along. The way the author reveals the true outcome in the final chapters certainly adds to the suspense and drama of this story.

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-2; Comprehension: 3-5; Application: 6-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-13; Evaluation: 14-15.

Activities

1. In this story, we learn about the meaning behind Sal's full name – Salamanca Tree Hiddle. What do you know about the meaning of your name? If you don't already know, use a reference book to find out more about what your name means. Why did your parents choose your name for you? Were you named for someone? Why are names important? Write an essay about the significance of your name.

Teachers may want to provide name reference books to help students learn their name's meaning. The results of this activity would provide a good opportunity for class sharing.

2. Trace a map of the United States, and mark Sal's journey west from Kentucky to Lewiston, Idaho. Draw symbols to indicate important landmarks and geographical features that Sal visited along the way. How does Sal's geographical journey represent an emotional journey for her as well?

Teachers may want to provide maps for students to mark. Many students may have visited the places that Sal visited so they will have a personal context for places on Sal's journey. This activity could also take on a research component, with students researching some of the significant places that Sal saw on her journey.

3. In his sixth grade class, Mr. Birkway asks his students to draw their souls. How would you draw your soul? Take five minutes or less to draw your soul, and then compare your drawing with a friend's. Do you think this is a good assignment? Explain why or why not.

This would be an interesting assignment for an entire class. An alternative would be to give students additional time to complete their drawings, and then discuss the differences between the timed and untimed drawings.