

Literature Circle Guide to
SOUNDER by William H. Armstrong

Book Summary

Set in the 19th-century South, *Sounder* is the story of a poor African American boy's struggle to carry on when his father is jailed. The boy's father steals a ham to feed his hungry family, and a few days later an angry sheriff and his deputies come to arrest the father. In an effort to protect his master, the family's coon dog Sounder races after the deputies taking his master away, and one of the deputies shoots the dog. For months, the boy thinks that he has lost both his father and his dog, but then Sounder reappears, though he is now lame and voiceless. Missing his father, the boy searches for him, and on one of his journeys, he is befriended by a schoolteacher who offers him the opportunity to live in his house and attend school. After many years pass, the boy's father does return to his home, deformed and partially paralyzed from a quarry accident. Shortly after, the father dies on a final hunting trip with Sounder, and Sounder dies soon afterwards.

Author Information

William H. Armstrong was born on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley. He became a history master at a school in Kent, Connecticut, and spent 52 years teaching ninth graders. In addition to teaching, he spent time working as a farmer, carpenter, and stone mason. He began writing self-help books for students, and in 1969, he published *Sounder*, receiving high praise from critics and winning the Newbery Medal. His book was eventually translated into 28 languages and made into a motion picture.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. Why doesn't the boy in the story attend school?

Though the boy would like to attend school, he would have to walk eight miles each way, even in winter (3).

2. Why was "Sounder" a good name for the dog?

Sounder has a louder, clearer, deeper voice than any other dog in the vicinity. His voice "filled up the night and made music as though the branches of all the trees were being pulled across silver strings" (4).

3. What happened to the cake the boy took when he went to visit his father in jail?

The jailer yanked the cake box away from the boy, squeezed the cake in his hands until it broke into pieces, and then threw the pieces back in the box (59).

4. How do you know that the boy loves and admires his father?

The boy is very proud to hunt with his father, proud to stand with him and Sounder on the porch and look out into the night (14). He also admires his father's large, strong hands, hands tough enough to lift a hot lid from a pan on the stove without a potholder (14). He is proud of his father's strength, but also fearful of his temper:

“He [the father] didn’t get hurt. He would get mad and fight back. . .” (17). After his father is gone, the boy replays his father’s words over to himself in his head (37).

5. The boy enjoys when his mother tells him stories from the Bible, because the stories take away the “night loneliness.” What do you think he means by this? How do these stories help the boy?

These Bible stories are the main source of entertainment in the boy’s life, and probably help the boy forget his own troubles. Many of the stories involve biblical characters overcoming trials, and these stories encourage the boy. Also, the boy’s mother tells stories when she is calm and not worried, so the boy associates the stories with his mother’s happiness.

6. Why do you think the deputy shot Sounder?

The deputy had told the boy “Go out and hold that mongrel if you don’t want him shot” (23). The boy had tried to hold Sounder back, but the dog broke away and ran barking towards the wagon carrying the boy’s father. Probably the deputy felt threatened by the dog’s great voice and felt he needed to silence the dog.

7. There are many famous children’s books about a child with a special pet dog. What are some of these other stories? How do the dogs in these other stories compare to Sounder? And why do you think this kind of story has been so popular?

In each of these stories, the dog is truly “man’s best friend,” taking on a role as important as any human in the book. Many students can relate to the characters who feel so strongly about a pet.

8. After his father is taken away, the boy seems more concerned about his dog than his own father. Do you think he really cares more about his dog than his own father? Why does he act this way?

Most likely the boy feels some responsibility for Sounder getting shot, since he was unable to hold Sounder back from the deputy. Or perhaps the boy has misplaced some of his concern about his father by focusing just on Sounder, since both his father and the dog represent strength and security to the boy.

9. When the boy goes to visit his father in jail, his mother tells him to “act perkish, and don’t grieve your father.” Why does she say this, and what does she mean?

The boy is sad and worried about his father and Sounder, and his mother asks him not to show this sadness to his father, perhaps because it would make him feel even worse. So as he prepares to see his father, the boy imagines all the things he will talk about with his father (62), in order to let his father see that the family is able to go on without him.

10. Using descriptions and details in the book, compare the life of the boy’s family with the life of the landowner’s family.

Scattered throughout the story are details of life in the “big house” belonging to the white landowner, an inevitable point of reference in the boy’s life. The reader learns that the white landowner has “scattered the cabins of his Negro sharecroppers far

apart,” so that the boy’s family lives in isolation (2). Both of the boy’s parents work for the white landowner, in addition to being responsible for feeding and clothing their own family. The landowner’s family eats ham, an extravagance the boy’s family knows very rarely (39). The landowner’s family has curtains in their windows (washed by the boy’s mother), but the boy has never lived in a house with curtains (40). The landowner’s family gives their old, worn-out toys to the boy’s family (53).

11. Interestingly, the dog Sounder is the only one in this story with a name. Why do you think the author of this book didn’t give his characters names? And why does the dog have a name when the other characters don’t?

Students’ answers to this question will vary. The lack of personal names fits the understated style of the author and emphasizes that these characters do not have great value or importance in the social structure of their world. They could be any people, anywhere. The boy in the story doesn’t even know his age (77).

12. Why do you think the boy’s father told him not to visit him in jail again? What were his real reasons for saying this? Why doesn’t he explain himself to his son?

Perhaps the boy’s father felt ashamed to have his son see him in jail. Or perhaps he knew the humiliation his son had experienced at the hands of the warden (58-60) in order to get to see him. Whatever the father’s reasons, he is an inarticulate man, and his inability to explain himself is worsened by his own grief. As the boy says: “He knew his father was grieved, because he swallowed hard and the quiet spells came to him too” (63).

13. In what ways do you admire the boy in the story? Which character traits do you think helped him most in life?

Students will admire the boy’s fortitude and determination, his ability to go on with life in spite of his losses. He continues to search for his father after many years, unwilling to give up hope that he is alive. In spite of all his troubles, he maintains his love of learning, and it is his desire for an education that makes his future hopeful.

14. What crime did the boy’s father commit, and why did he do it? Do you think his punishment was a just one? Explain.

The boy’s father stole a ham to feed his hungry family. At the time, he was so desperate to feed his family that he ignored the possible long-term consequences of his action. Students’ opinions about the father’s punishment will vary, though most will see his punishment as overly harsh. Some students will notice that the family’s hunger and lack of opportunity is really due to the racism in their Southern society, and some will blame the injustice in the sharecropping system in the post-Civil War South for the family’s situation.

15. Is the ending of this story happy, sad, or both? Did you find the conclusion satisfying? Or should the author have ended this story in a different way? Explain. **Students' opinions will vary. The ending is happy in that the father is able to return to his family at last, but sad in that both the father and Sounder die at the end (114). The boy has begun his education, and so his future is more hopeful, and he has his memories which give him comfort (114).**

Note: These literature circle questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-10; Synthesis: 11-12; Evaluation: 13-15.

Activities

1. What do you know about hunting with dogs? What are the qualities of a good hunting dog? Find someone to interview who has hunted with dogs, or use the Internet to research the topic. Use what you learn to create an advertisement, complete with illustrations and descriptions for the "best hunting dog ever."

This assignment will help students understand the role of Sounder to the family as well as some specifics about hunting with dogs.

2. During what time in history does *Sounder* take place? What do you know about the historical events in the United States before and after this period? Create a timeline to show where the story of *Sounder* takes place in a continuum of events in American history. How might this story have turned out differently if it had taken place during a different time in history?

This assignment will give students a historical context for the novel, and provide an opportunity to discuss the sharecropping system in the 19th-century South.

3. What do you think the future holds for the boy in *Sounder*? Do you think he was able to continue his education and rise above the poverty in his family? Imagine that the boy is grown and writing his childhood memoirs. How would he describe the events in *Sounder*? Write a journal entry from the perspective of the boy, recounting some of these events and telling how they shaped his life.

Most students will be hopeful for the boy in *Sounder* and imagine that he gained strength through facing adversity in his youth. For students who do want to read more about the boy, his story is continued in William Armstrong's *Sour Land*.

