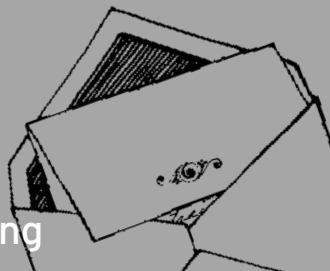


Chapter Charter: Questions to Guide Your Reading



The following questions will help you think about the important parts of each chapter.

Chapter 1

- Why do you think Caleb asks Anna about their mother so often?
- When Caleb asks his father why he does not sing anymore, his father replies, “I’ve forgotten the old songs.” Do you think there’s another reason why he may not sing anymore? What might it be?
- In her very first letter to Jacob, Sarah tells him that she is not mild mannered. Why might she feel it is important to tell him this?
- Why do you think it is important to Anna that her father ask Sarah if she sings?

Chapter 2

- What does Sarah tell the children about Maine in her letters? Why do you think she includes these details?
- Why do you think Caleb reads Sarah’s letter so many times?
- When Anna sets the table, she sets four places and then puts one away. Whom do you think the fourth setting was meant for? Why does she put it away?

Chapter 3

- Why does Papa get dressed up for Sarah's arrival? Why do you think Caleb asks Anna so many questions while they are waiting for Sarah and Papa to return?
- Why does Sarah bring Caleb and Anna gifts from the sea?
- Anna says, "I wished we had a sea of our own." What do you think she means? Why would she wish for this?

Chapter 4

- When Sarah listens to the conch shell, Anna notices that Sarah looks sad. Have you ever felt sad about missing a person or a place?
- Caleb keeps noticing things that Sarah says, and he tells Anna, "That means Sarah will stay." Do you think Caleb wants Sarah to stay or leave? What parts of the story support your opinion?
- When they sing a song with Sarah, Papa "sang as if he had never stopped singing." What do you think that means about the way Papa is feeling?

Chapter 5

- When the lamb is found dead, Sarah cries and will not let the children near it. What do you think this says about her personality?
- Why do you think Papa makes the hay dune for Sarah?
- After Papa builds the hay dune, Caleb asks Sarah if she is scared to climb it. Sarah is not scared at all. Have you ever been brave when other people were afraid?
- How do you think Papa feels about Sarah?

Chapter 6

- Sarah asks the children about winter even though it is still spring. Why do you think she wonders about winter?
- How does the author describe summer and winter on the prairie, and the ocean in Maine? What types of words does she use? Can you imagine what these places might be like based on her words?
- After they all go for a swim in the cow pond, Anna dozes off and dreams a “perfect” dream? What does she dream of, and why do you think she calls it perfect?

Chapter 7

- How does Anna know that the chickens “would not be for eating”?
- Why is Maggie so nice to Sarah, bringing her gifts and offering to teach her to drive a wagon?
- Maggie says, “There are always things to miss. No matter where you are.” What do you think she means by this?
- Maggie knows that Sarah “must have a garden” because she loves flowers so much. Is there anything you love so much that you need to have it, wherever you are?

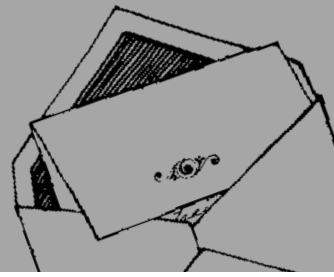
Chapter 8

- When Caleb tells Sarah, “Women don’t wear overalls,” how does Sarah respond? What do you think this says about her?
- When Sarah runs out into the storm with Jacob, what things do they bring back with them? Why do you think they choose to rescue these things?
- Caleb points out what is missing from Sarah’s drawing of the sea. What is it?

Chapter 9

- Why are the children so worried about Sarah going to town alone? What does Anna remember about her mother in this chapter?
- Why is Caleb so relieved when Sarah returns? What does he tell Sarah when she gets back? What do you learn about Caleb's personality in this scene?
- What does Sarah bring with her when she returns? What are the reasons she brings these things?

Plot: What's Happening?



"I will always miss my old home, but the truth of it is I would miss you more."

—Sarah, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*

Sarah, *Plain and Tall* is the story of a loving family that has experienced a great loss. Anna, the narrator, is about twelve years old. Her brother, Caleb, is several years younger. The two children live on the prairie with their father, Jacob, and their two dogs, Nick and Lottie. Anna and Caleb's mother is not present because she died as a result of giving birth to Caleb.

When the book opens, Anna is rolling bread dough while Caleb watches her. It is winter on the prairie and a fire burns in the kitchen. Caleb asks Anna the same questions about his mother over and over again. He was just a day old when his mother died, so Caleb is not able to remember her at all.

Anna, who is old enough to remember her mother, remembers very well how things were after her mom died: "And then the days seemed long and dark like winter days, even though it wasn't winter. And Papa didn't sing."

Although she cares very much for her brother now, Anna tells the reader that she found it hard to love Caleb when he was first born. She says that he was not very pretty, smelled bad, and cried. And the worst thing about Caleb's birth was that her mother passed away the next day.

Jacob, the children's father, returns home from a trip into town. The children welcome him with hugs. Caleb asks his father why he does not sing anymore. Jacob tells him, "I've forgotten the old songs." Jacob then informs the children that he has placed an advertisement in a newspaper for a wife. In the 1800s, women would sometimes answer an ad to be a mother and a wife to a family who did not have one.

Jacob reads the children a letter. The letter is from Sarah Elisabeth Wheaton, a woman from Maine who is answering the ad. She tells the family a little about herself in her first letter. Anna and Caleb think it is important to find out if Sarah sings, like their mother had. Anna tells her father, "Ask her if she sings."

The family all write letters to Sarah in Maine, and she replies to each of them separately. She answers their questions and tells them more about Maine and her life and family there.

Sarah agrees to come and stay with the family for a short time to see if she likes them and if they like her. If they all get along well, Sarah will marry Jacob and stay on the prairie. In Sarah's second letter to Jacob she says, "I will come by train. I will wear

a yellow bonnet.” And then at the close of her letter she writes, “Tell them I sing.”

On the day she arrives, Caleb is very nervous and asks Anna a lot of questions: “Will she be nice? . . . How far away is Maine? . . . Will Sarah bring some sea? . . . Will she like us?” Sarah brings a gray cat named Seal with her, as well as gifts from the sea for Anna and Caleb. The children worry immediately that Sarah will be lonely so far from home. They are concerned that she will miss the ocean, as well as the brother and family she describes in her letters.

Winter turns into spring and Sarah picks flowers for the house. She makes meals for the family, grooms their hair, and, most important, she sings with them. Sarah becomes fond of the animals on the farm where Caleb, Anna, and Jacob live. The family and Sarah exchange stories about the lands they know. Sarah tells Jacob and the children of the ocean and dunes along the coast of Maine: “. . . there are rock cliffs that rise up at the edge of the sea. And there are hills covered with pine and spruce trees, green with needles.” The children tell Sarah about winters on the prairie: “Papa builds a warm fire, and we bake hot biscuits and put on hundreds of sweaters. And if the snow is too high, we stay home from school and make snow people.”

Sarah is still with the family when the summer roses start blooming. Matthew and Maggie, neighbors of Anna, Caleb, and Jacob, come to visit and to help Jacob plow a new cornfield. Maggie spends time with Sarah. The two women find that they have things in common and get along well with each other.

Maggie tells Sarah that she too misses the state where she grew up: "I miss the hills of Tennessee sometimes." Sarah confesses to Maggie that she misses her brother, William, and the sea. But Maggie tells Sarah something important: "There are always things to miss. . . . No matter where you are." She helps Sarah understand that there are ways to be more comfortable in a new place, like planting a garden, getting new pets, and learning new skills.

The next morning Sarah tells Jacob that she wants to learn to do the things he does around the farm: ride a horse and drive a wagon. She also wants to travel into town on her own, a wish that makes the children very nervous. Caleb asks Anna, "Why does she want to go to town by herself? . . . To leave us?"

The same morning a terrible rainstorm comes and the family is forced to take shelter in the barn. Sarah runs back out into the bad weather, with Jacob following right after her, to rescue a few important things from the storm. The two return with the chickens Maggie gave to Sarah, the summer roses Jacob had given Sarah, some food, and the seashells Sarah had brought with her from Maine. As they wait for the storm to pass, Caleb notices that the stormy sky is the same colors as the ocean Sarah has described, and that these colors are missing from a drawing she has made.

The day after the storm, Jacob keeps his promise to Sarah. He teaches her how to drive the wagon so that she can go to town by herself. The children watch anxiously. "Why does she have to go away alone?" Caleb wonders. Anna tells him to hush, but then

they both escape to the barn where they cry together without Sarah and Jacob seeing them.

The next morning Jacob, Anna, and Caleb watch Sarah climb into the wagon and leave, bound for town. Anna tells the reader, “It was sunny, and I remembered another time when a wagon had taken Mama away. It had been a day just like this day. And Mama had never come back.” Papa spends the day quietly working in the fields while the children wait, fretting that she will not return. Just before dark, they finally spot dust rising on the road and Sarah’s yellow bonnet comes into sight.

Sarah returns with special gifts, including pencils the color of the sea so that she can finish her drawing. She tells Anna and Caleb that no matter how much she may miss Maine, if she were to leave, she would miss them more. Sarah will stay from now on, and “soon there will be a wedding. Papa says that when the preacher asks if he will have Sarah for his wife, he will answer, ‘Ayuh.’”

Thinking about the plot

- Why does Sarah come to stay with this family?
- Why do the children worry that Sarah may leave them?
- What things does Sarah do that make the reader understand she will stay on the prairie?