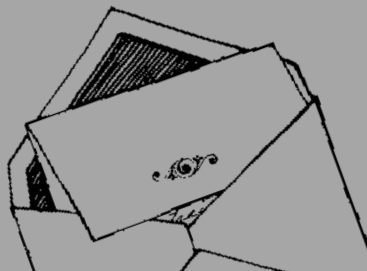


Setting/Place and Time: Where in the World Are We?



“There were fields and grass and sky
and not much else.”

—Anna, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*

Place

The setting of a book is where and when the story takes place. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* takes place in a rural area on the prairie lands of the United States. The prairie is a part of the United States that includes Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Illinois, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Much of the land there is fairly flat. There are sprawling fields of grass that are perfect for farming corn and wheat. Patricia MacLachlan never tells the reader exactly what state the family lives in, but she provides a vivid picture of the land around the farm and how it changes with each season. She discusses the sky as well as the plants, trees, and animals that inhabit the area.

When telling the reader about winter on the prairie, Anna first describes the sky at that time of year: “Outside the prairie reached out and touched the places where the sky came down.” She says that patches of snow and ice cover the landscape and that the days sometimes seem long and dark.

When Sarah asks Caleb and Anna to describe the prairie winters to her, they tell her that it gets very cold there and that they go to school at that time of year. The children wouldn't have gone to school for as many months a year as kids today do. Caleb and Anna would have needed to stay home more often during the other seasons of the year to help out around the farm.

Caleb tells Sarah that it snows a great deal in the winter. The snow gets so deep that they sometimes have to dig their way through it just to feed the farm animals. He says, "When there are bad storms, Papa ties a rope from the house to the barn so no one will get lost." Caleb goes on to tell Sarah that winter winds blow the snow and make the sheep run around.

MacLachlan describes spring on the prairie in great detail. In the spring the land is full of new flowers. The grassy fields bloom with "Indian paintbrush, red and orange, and blue-eyed grass." Sarah arrives in the spring and she and the children pick the paintbrush, as well as clover and prairie violets. Anna notices wild rosebuds that climb up the paddock fence and even describes the Russian olive that her mother had planted.

The animals are out and about around the farm during the spring. The gophers run back and forth across the road. The woodchucks eat quietly in the fields. The cows move toward the cow pond very slowly, "like turtles," as MacLachlan writes. Anna can see marsh hawks fly down behind the barn and hear meadowlarks singing in the distance.

Summertime on the prairie is lovely. The days are longer, it is hot, and the animals still roam the farmland. The sheep are out grazing. The summer winds carry Sarah's songs as she lies in the meadow. The cows move very close to their pond, where there is cool water and trees to shade them from the heat. The dogs, Lottie and Nick, sniff around the children and Sarah. The chickens fuss, leaving tiny footprints in the dirt. Jacob works the horses hard as they plow the fields under the hot summer sun.

The fluffy, featherlike heads of the dandelions blow by in the wind. The summer roses open, and Sarah and the children plant flowers by the porch.

There is another setting that Patricia MacLachlan describes in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, but it's a place where only one of the characters has ever been. It's the Maine setting that exists in Sarah's memories. The reader can imagine what it is like there based solely on Sarah's descriptions.

Sarah discusses the colors of the ocean: "My favorite colors are the colors of the sea, blue and gray and green, depending on the weather." She also talks about how the water in the ocean is salty and wavy. The ocean stretches out farther than the eye can see. The water gleams "like the sun on glass," Sarah says. Sarah's brother has told her that when he is out on his fishing boat and it is foggy, the water is a color so unique that there is no name for it.

When Sarah first arrives, she brings things from the coast of Maine for the children. She brings Caleb a shell called a moon snail. It is curled and smells like salt from the ocean. Sarah tells Caleb that the seagulls that live on the shore fly up high and carry moon snails in their beaks. The gulls drop the shell so that it crashes on the rocks below. The shell opens. Then the birds swoop down to eat what is inside. For Anna, Sarah brings a sea stone. Sarah tells her that the stone is smooth and round because the water washes over and around it for a long time, wearing away the sharp ridges and edges. These items from Maine, and their descriptions, give the reader a better sense of what Maine looks, smells, and sounds like.

When Sarah's brother goes fishing in Maine, he catches flounder, sea bass, and bluefish. He sees whales in the water and birds flying overhead. Sarah also tells the children about the seals in Maine: "I've touched seals. Real seals. They are cool and slippery and they slide through the water like fish. They can cry and sing. And sometimes they bark, a little like dogs."

The house that Sarah lived in in Maine is tall. The salty air has turned the shingles gray. There are rosebushes near the house and lots of other plants and flowers, too. Sarah describes them: "We have seaside goldenrod and wild asters and woolly ragwort. . . I had a garden in Maine with dahlias and columbine. And nasturtiums the color of the sun when it sets."

We find out that Sarah's brother, William, has a gray-and-white boat named *Kittiwake*. A kittiwake is a small gull found off the shore of Maine, where William goes to fish. Sarah and William have three aunts who live near them. Sarah says, "They wear silk dresses and no shoes."

Time

Many of the details about *Sarah, Plain and Tall* indicate that it takes place in the late 1800s. In the nineteenth century (1800–1899), the prairie lands of the United States were being settled. People often made their living on farms and did not have any of the modern conveniences we have today.

The family uses a horse-drawn wagon to transport them from place to place. Today, most people travel by car or bus, but this method of travel was not common in the nineteenth century. Anna cooks meals for the family over an open fire. The same fire supplies heat to the house during the cold winter months. This is because there was no electricity back then! Anna would not have had an electric or a gas stove or an oven to cook with, and the house would not have had electric heat. The family lights oil lamps to see in the dark. No electricity meant no electric lights!

Jacob, Anna, and Caleb exchange handwritten letters with Sarah. The story occurs well before e-mail existed. After Sarah arrives, she cuts the family's hair for them rather than bringing them to a barber shop or hair salon, so the reader can guess that

such places were not yet common. They all sing together for entertainment rather than watch television or movies, as many people do today.

Another indication that the story takes place in the nineteenth century is that Caleb's mother died giving birth to him at home. Anna tells the reader how she remembers the day her mother died. She says, "They had come for her in a wagon and taken her away to be buried." Medical practices were very different in this time period than they are today. Women who lived in newly settled areas, like the prairie, often gave birth at home because there weren't many doctors' offices nearby. Sometimes there wasn't even a doctor, so a person called a midwife would help a woman have her baby.

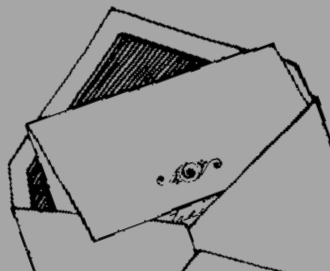
Today new medical equipment and well-trained doctors make childbirth much safer. In the nineteenth century these things were not available, so if a problem occurred, the mother or baby often died.

MacLachlan further establishes the nineteenth-century rural setting by describing the daily activities of the family. Most of what they do involves maintaining the farm. Jacob plows the fields with a horse-drawn plow. He does this so that he can plant a crop that he can harvest later. The children care for the animals and the house. Anna tells the reader, "Caleb and I did our chores. . . . We shoveled out the stalls and laid down new hay. We fed the sheep. We swept and straightened and carried wood and water." Anna is also responsible for making the family's meals. She cooks stews and breads for her brother and father.

Thinking about the setting

- Where does *Sarah, Plain and Tall* take place? How does the author tell the reader this?
- What is the second setting of the book? In what ways does the reader find out what this place is like?
- When does *Sarah, Plain and Tall* take place? How does the author let the reader know this?
- What is your home like? How does it compare with Caleb and Anna's home on the prairie?

Themes/Layers of Meaning: Is That What It *Really* Means?



"Soon there will be a wedding....
There will be Sarah's sea, blue and
gray and green, hanging on the wall.
And songs, old ones and new."

—Anna, *Sarah, Plain and Tall*

The theme of a book is the subject matter about which the author is writing. Themes are the main ideas on which the book is based. *Sarah, Plain and Tall* has several themes. Let's investigate them!

New beginnings

The quotation above, spoken by Anna at the end of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, illustrates one of the novel's main themes: new beginnings. Anna's words speak of the future of the family. She is hopeful about the new things that have happened to her recently. She looks forward to even more new things to come now that Sarah is staying. At the same time, she acknowledges the importance of keeping memories of her mother close to her heart.

When the novel opens, Anna is patiently retelling Caleb stories of their mother, whose passing has left an emptiness in their lives.

They all feel alone without her but show this in different ways. Caleb never knew his mother because the day after he was born she died from complications from the birth. He has Anna tell him about their mother so that he can try to imagine what it would have been like to have her in his life.

Anna thinks about her mother all the time. She recalls the songs they used to sing together. She remembers the last thing her mother said to her before she died, "Isn't he beautiful, Anna?"

It is obvious that Jacob misses his wife. When Caleb asked his father why he doesn't sing anymore, Jacob tells him that he has forgotten the old songs. What he means is that he has been too sad to sing without his wife. He sees the chance to bring a new wife and mother to their home as "a way to remember" the old songs. When Jacob places the advertisement that Sarah answers, he is making a big step toward a new beginning for his family. It has been many years since his wife's death, and he wants to bring happiness into their lives. Caleb and Anna will have a mother figure and Jacob will have companionship.

When Sarah arrives at the farm, she breathes new life into the sad family. Sarah brings stories of a faraway place called Maine. She has a nurturing personality. Sarah shows the family that she's loving, caring, and gentle. Anna says, "Sarah brushed my hair and tied it up in back with a rose velvet ribbon she had brought from Maine." Then later, she says, "Sarah kissed us all, even my father, who looked surprised."

Most important, Sarah brings a desire to have a new beginning of her own. For Sarah, moving to the prairie will allow her to feel needed by a family again, since her brother has a wife to care for him now. “I miss my brother William. But he is married. The house is hers now. Not mine any longer,” Sarah says. It also means that she will get to experience a brand-new place to live that is very different from the one she grew up in.

With Anna’s closing words of hope, “Soon there will be a wedding. . . . There will be Sarah’s sea, blue and gray and green, hanging on the wall. And songs, old ones and new,” the author conveys a deep message. Sarah herself is a new beginning for a family that will always miss and love their mother and wife, but who desperately need light in their lives again. At the same time, this family is a chance for Sarah to make a new start, too.

MacLachlan makes it clear that although the children love and welcome Sarah into their lives, this in no way lessens the love that they have for their deceased mother. They still miss her because there are always things to miss, even when your life has become happy again. The case is the same with Sarah and her brother, William. Although she misses him and loves him dearly, she has started a new chapter in her life and loves Jacob and the children, too. But loving them does not make her love or miss William any less.

Family

Another central theme in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is that of family. Patricia MacLachlan once said, “I see that I write books about

brothers and sisters, about what makes up a family, what works and what is nurturing.”

In this novel, the author has created a special and unique family. Today, most families are not formed by placing advertisements, like Jacob does. They are a loving family, nonetheless. Sarah is not the biological mother of Anna and Caleb, and she did not know or love Jacob before she came to stay on the prairie. But, by the close of the novel, Sarah interacts with the children and Jacob just as a mother or wife would. Anna tells the reader, “We eat our night meal by candlelight, the four of us. Sarah has brought candles from town. And nasturtium seeds for her garden, and a book of songs to teach us. It is late, and Caleb is nearly sleeping by his plate and Sarah is smiling at my father.” Many people think that a family is made up of a mom and a dad and their children. But, in reality, families are made up of all kinds of people, with all different kinds of relationships with one another. MacLachlan shows the reader that these families are as good as any other.

MacLachlan reinforces family as an important theme in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* by showing the loving relationship that Caleb, Anna, and Jacob have with one another, even before Sarah’s arrival. Anna and Caleb have a sweet, close sibling relationship. Anna teases Caleb by telling him that he looked like a ball of bread dough when he was born because he had no hair. This makes Caleb smile. MacLachlan shows their special brother-sister bond when the two go into the barn together to cry. They worry about Sarah wanting to go into town alone, so they comfort each other.

The reader also sees the closeness of Jacob and his children:

Papa put his arms around me and put his nose in my hair.

“Nice soapy smell, that stew,” he said.

I laughed. “That’s my hair.”

Caleb came over and threw his arms around Papa’s neck and hung down as Papa swung him back and forth, and the dogs sat up.

Abandonment

One more important theme in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* is a less positive, but equally important one: abandonment. In this story, Jacob, Anna, and especially Caleb feel abandoned by their wife and mother. We see this theme expressed most vividly through Caleb.

Caleb’s mother died just after giving birth to him, so he never had a mother figure in his life. When Jacob tells the children about Sarah, Caleb worries before he even meets her. He asks Anna, “Do you think she’ll come? And will she stay? What if she thinks we are loud and pesky? . . . What if she comes and doesn’t like our house?”

As Anna and Caleb await Sarah’s arrival, Caleb asks Anna, “Is my face clean? . . . Can my face be *too* clean? . . . Will she like us?” After Sarah comes to the prairie, Caleb still worries. When Sarah expresses her desire to go to town alone for a day, Caleb gets very

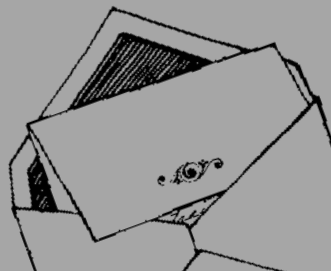
upset. He asks Anna, “Why? . . . Why does she have to go away alone?” After Sarah goes to town and returns to them, Caleb bursts into tears. “Seal was very worried!” he cries to Sarah. Sarah puts her arms around Caleb, and he continues to cry, “And the house is too small, we thought! And I am loud and pesky!” Sarah has not abandoned him. Caleb feels so relieved that Sarah has returned that he finally confesses his fears to her.

MacLachlan explores this sad theme with gentle humor, showing the reader that even though bad things sometimes happen in life, good things can come from them. In this book, even though Caleb’s biological mother died, Sarah has come into his life and brought new happiness to it.

Thinking about themes

- What do you think is the most important theme in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*?
- What are some different kinds of families that you know?
- Have you ever had a new beginning in your life? What was it? How did it change things for you?

Characters: Who Are These People, Anyway?



The way an author develops the people in a story is called characterization. The writer helps the reader understand the people in the book by describing what they look like, how they act, the things they say and do, how they interact with the other characters, and how they react to different situations. This is a list of the characters in *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, followed by descriptions of the most important ones.

Anna	a young girl, the narrator of the story
Caleb	Anna's younger brother
Jacob	Anna and Caleb's father
Sarah Wheaton	a woman from Maine who answers an ad to be a wife and mother
Maggie	a neighbor of Jacob's family who befriends Sarah
Matthew	Maggie's husband, a friend of Jacob's
Rose	a young daughter of Maggie and Matthew
Violet	a young daughter of Maggie and Matthew

Anna: Anna is the narrator of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, which means she is the person speaking to the reader, telling the story of her family. She is a young girl, and although the author never says exactly how old she is, the reader can guess that she may be about twelve or thirteen years old. Anna is old enough to do

many of the household chores, like cooking, but she is still young enough to want a mother figure in her life to guide her.

It's clear from the beginning of the book that Anna misses her mother deeply. She says to one of the dogs, "I miss Mama." She talks about how her mother's death has stayed with her, even though it was many years ago: "I looked at the long dirt road that crawled across the plains, remembering the morning that Mama had died, cruel and sunny. They had come for her in a wagon and taken her away to be buried. And then the cousins and aunts and uncles had come and tried to fill up the house. But they couldn't."

Caleb's birth caused Anna's mother to die. This made it hard for Anna to accept Caleb. Anna loves Caleb very much now, but admits to the reader that it was hard to love him when he was first born. She says, "It took three whole days for me to love him. . . ."

Anna has, in many ways, taken over the role her mother would have filled. She is very responsible, especially for such a young girl. Anna also does many of the chores around the farm, like feeding the animals. She prepares meals for the family and watches over Caleb. When Jacob reads Sarah's letter to Anna and Caleb, the first thing Anna does is look at Caleb. She has become like a mother to Caleb, so she wants to make sure he is not upset by what the letter says. Anna sees that the letter has made Caleb smile, so she knows he is all right.

Although she has had to grow up in many ways since her mother's death, Anna welcomes the presence of a mother figure in her life to make her feel like a girl again. Anna tells the reader, "Sarah brushed my hair and tied it up in back with a rose velvet ribbon she had brought from Maine. She brushed hers long and free and tied it back, too, and we stood side by side looking into the mirror. I looked taller, like Sarah, and fair and thin. And with my hair pulled back I looked a little like her daughter. Sarah's daughter."

Caleb: Caleb is Anna's younger brother, who is probably about seven or eight years old. Caleb and Anna's mother died the day after she gave birth to him. He never got a chance to know his mother because he was only a day old when she passed away.

Caleb worries constantly that he will be left again, as he was when his mother died. This makes him very vulnerable. The way Caleb relates to Sarah illustrates this characteristic of his personality. He tracks Sarah's every movement, trying to guess if she is happy enough to stay. Anna tells the reader, "Papa was quiet and shy with Sarah, and so was I. But Caleb talked to Sarah from morning until the light left the sky."

"Where are you going?" he asked. "To do what?" Caleb also hangs on to the little clues in Sarah's comments. "Sarah said winter. That means Sarah will stay," he reports to Anna. Caleb's fears also make him cry frequently. He depends on his older sister for comfort when his feelings overwhelm him. He frequently leans up against her or grabs her hand when he feels afraid. Anna tells the reader that when Sarah arrives she brings a conch

shell from Maine as a gift: “She put it to Caleb’s ear, then mine. Papa listened, too. Then Sarah listened once more, with a look so sad and far away that Caleb leaned against me.”

Caleb takes pleasure in the smallest things he learns from Sarah. He says cute, funny things and is playful because he is so young. The author makes it obvious that he enjoys having a woman to act as a mother in his life. When she explains to him that there is a flower called woolly ragwort in Maine, he laughs at its name and makes up a song about the plant. When Sarah teaches him that *ayuh* means “yes” in Maine, he repeatedly uses the term, even after the conversation has turned to another subject, “Do you want more stew?” Sarah asks Caleb. He replies with an “ayuh.”

It’s also clear how much Caleb likes learning new things from Sarah when she teaches the children to swim. MacLachlan tells us: “Caleb lay on his back and learned how to blow streams of water high in the air like a whale,” while Anna “sank like a bucket filled with water.” Sarah explains to Caleb what the waves in the ocean are like: “‘Like this?’ asked Caleb, and he pushed a wave at Sarah, making her cough and laugh.”

Caleb also takes pleasure from teaching Sarah things about the prairie. When he tells her about the winter winds, “Caleb stood up and ran like the wind, and the sheep ran after him. Sarah and I watched him jump over rock and gullies, the sheep behind him, stiff legged and fast. He circled the field, the sun making the top of his hair golden.”

Jacob: Jacob is the father of Anna and Caleb. He has a home and farm for his family on the prairie. He works the land himself, with the help of Caleb's small hands and occasionally the more capable hands of his neighbor, Matthew. He also maintains the house and cares for the animals on the farm, so the reader knows he is a very hard worker.

One of the most important things about Jacob is that he is a caring person. This is very obvious in his relationship with his children. The reader learns that when they've had snow in the winter months, he takes his children to school in the wagon and bakes them warm bread. After Jacob receives a letter from Sarah expressing that she'd like to come to the prairie to see what she thinks of their family, Jacob informs Anna and Caleb, "Sarah has said she will come for a month's time if we wish her to. . . . To see how it is. Just to see." He asks his children for their approval because their happiness is even more important than his own. Caleb says, "I think. . . I think that it would be good—to say yes." Then Jacob looks to Anna for her response: "I say yes," she replies. It is only when he has the approval of both that Jacob is able to say for sure that he will accept Sarah's offer.

The day Jacob goes to pick up Sarah at the train station, he makes the extra effort to look nice and make a good impression on her. Anna says, "Papa got up early for the long day's trip to the train and back. He brushed his hair so slick and shiny that Caleb laughed. He wore a clean blue shirt, and a belt instead of suspenders." After Sarah arrives, Jacob wants to make her happy and comfortable in her new surroundings. He re-creates a dune for her in the barn, which is something she misses from Maine:

“Next to the barn was Papa’s mound of hay for bedding, nearly half as tall as the barn, covered with canvas to keep the rain from rotting it. Papa carried the wooden ladder from the barn and leaned it up against the hay.

“‘There.’ He smiled at Sarah. ‘Our dune.’”

MacLachlan makes it clear that Jacob is happy to have Sarah in his life. He teaches her to drive the wagon and to plow, he accepts her help fixing the roof, and he lets her cut his hair. He understands that Sarah is independent and lets her be herself. When Sarah explains to Jacob that she wants to be able to go into town alone, he says, “That’s a fair thing, Sarah.” When the children are upset waiting to see if Sarah will return from her trip to town, Jacob explains, “Sarah is Sarah. She does things her own way, you know.” From this, the reader can tell Jacob respects Sarah’s individuality.

Jacob’s caring nature is also displayed in the thoughtful gestures he makes toward Sarah: “And then Papa came, just before the rain, bringing Sarah the first roses of summer.” The reader also sees that Jacob is sensitive and kind when, during the big storm, he follows Sarah back out into the rain and wind to help her save the chickens she loves.

Sarah Wheaton: Sarah is a woman from Maine who responds to an advertisement she reads in the newspaper. The advertisement was for a woman to be a companion to Jacob and to act as a mother to Anna and Caleb.

Sarah is the focus of *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, so the reader learns a great deal about her. At the beginning, the reader finds out about Sarah from the letters she writes to Anna, Caleb, and Jacob. In her first letter to Jacob, Sarah is very straightforward. She does not hesitate to tell him things about herself that he may not like. She writes, "I am strong and I work hard and I am willing to travel. But I am not mild mannered."

Sarah displays that she is not mild mannered in person after she arrives on the prairie. When Caleb tells her that women don't wear overalls, Sarah simply says, "This woman does." It is through direct, blunt statements that Sarah shows her independence. She wants to be able to do things on her own. Sarah insists that Jacob teach her things: "I want to learn how to ride a horse. And then I want to learn how to drive the wagon."

We also learn that Sarah can be stubborn when she has her mind set on something. When Sarah tells Jacob that she wants to learn to ride Jacob's horse, Jacob says no: "Not Jack. Jack is sly." Sarah responds, "I am sly, too." Her persistence makes Jacob smile, but still he says, "Ayuh [yes]. But not Jack." Sarah raises her voice to make Jacob understand that she is serious: "Yes, Jack!"

Sarah is the type of woman who does not like to be told what she can and can't do, or what she is or is not capable of doing. She is willful and determined. Jacob tells her that he has to fix the roof right away before a bad storm comes. "We will fix the roof," Sarah tells him. And then she adds, "I've done it before. I know about roofs. I am a good carpenter." And so Jacob and Sarah climb the

ladder to the roof to repair it together. Anna notices that Sarah is wearing overalls like her papa's: "Overalls that *were* Papa's."

Sarah is a free spirit. She does things that make her happy, even if other people might think her actions are unusual or silly. This is shown when she decides to teach the children to swim in the cow pond, a possibility the children had never considered before.

There is also a soft, gentle side to Sarah's personality. She likes to pick wildflowers to dry and hang up. She likes to brush Anna's hair and pull it back with pretty ribbon.

Sarah loves animals. She brings her gray cat, Seal, with her from Maine. She adores the dogs that live on the farm. Sarah befriends the chickens Maggie gives her. "Sarah loved the chickens. She clucked back to them and fed them grain. They followed her, shuffling and scratching primly in the dirt. I knew they would not be for eating," Anna tells us. Sarah even runs back out into a terrible rainstorm to save them.

Sarah also loves the sheep that inhabit the farm. Anna says, "The sheep made Sarah smile. She sank her fingers into their thick, coarse wool. She talked to them, running with the lambs, letting them suck on her fingers." When a lamb dies, the reader also sees that Sarah is protective of the children. Sarah does not allow Anna or Caleb near the dead animal, and she sits on the porch alone after Jacob buries it.

The gentle side of Sarah's personality is also shown in the way that she misses her home and her brother and aunts she left in

Maine. When the neighbors, Maggie and Matthew, come to visit for the day, Maggie and Sarah discuss Sarah's homesickness. "You are lonely, yes?" Maggie asks Sarah. This makes Sarah's eyes fill with tears, and she confesses, "I miss the sea." Anna overhears as Sarah goes on to tell Maggie, "I miss my brother William. . . . There are three old aunts who all squawk together like crows at dawn. I miss them, too."

Thinking about the characters

- Is there a character in *Sarah, Plain and Tall* you think is a little like you? How so? If not, do any of the characters seem like someone else in your life? in what ways?
- Which of the characters do you like the most? the least? Why?
- Are Anna and Caleb similar to kids you know who are the same age? How are they different?