

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 the boy is so fond of Sounder? Have you ever felt that way about an animal?
- Do you think Sounder is a good name for the dog? Can you think of any other names that might have suited him?
- What kind of life do the boy and his family have? Do you think it would be easy or difficult for them to change their life? Why?
- The author says that in winter, there are no crops and no pay. What do you think are some of the challenges of raising a family without a regular source of income?
- Where do you think the father got the sausage and hambone? How can you tell that both the father and the mother are worried about something?
- Why is it so important to the boy that he learn to read?

Chapter 2

- What do you think of the sheriff and his deputies? Do you think they are fair law-enforcers?
- Why do you think the father leaves with the sheriff without a fight?
- What does it say about how white people treated black people in this time and place when a deputy calls the father “boy”?

- Do you think the father can expect a fair trial?
- Why does the mother seem so calm in the face of such troubles?
- What do you think is going to happen to the boy's father?
- Do you think Sounder will survive?

Chapter 3

- Why does the boy's mother return the pork sausage and ham? Do you think it will do the father any good?
- One hymn the boy's mother often sings or hums has these lines: "You gotta walk that lonesome valley, You gotta walk it by yourself, Ain't nobody else gonna walk it for you." How do you think this hymn relates to her life?
- What do you think happened to Sounder? Where is his body?

Chapter 4

- Do you think the mother should have given back the sausages and ham? Why or why not?
- The mother tells the boy that he must learn to lose. She says, "Some people is born to keep. Some is born to lose. We was born to lose, I reckon." Do you agree with her? Do you think there's anything she can do to change that?
- Do you think the boy is right to be afraid going into town? Why or why not?
- Were you surprised at how the jailer treats the boy and the cake?
- The boy deals with his hatred for the jailer by imagining him choking himself to death as he had seen a bull once do. Do you think it's helpful or harmful for the boy to have such thoughts? What would you do if you were in his position?

Chapter 5

- How does the boy's Christmas compare with the holiday as it is probably being celebrated in most of the big houses in town?
- Why do you think the boy's mother is kind and gentle to him when he returns from the jail?
- Why do you think Sounder no longer barks?
- Do you think the punishment of hard labor fits the father's crime of stealing the ham and sausage? Do you think he got a fair trial? Do you think there are ever circumstances when stealing would be okay?

Chapter 6

- Why do you think the boy doesn't remember his age? What helps you remember your age?
- Do you think the boy should listen to his mother and just wait for his father to come home, or should he go out looking for him? What would you have done?
- How is the boy usually treated when he searches for his father? Why do you think he keeps searching?
- What is the one good thing about the boy's search for his father?
- Why are stories so important to the boy? How does remembering them help him during his search?

Chapter 7

- The mother says to the boy, "There's patience, child, and waitin' that's got to be." Do you think she's right to be patient? Does she have a choice?
- The boy imagines that, had he been there, his father would have attacked the guard who threw a piece of iron at him. Do you agree? Why or why not?

- The boy fantasizes about throwing a piece of iron at the guard and killing him. Why do you think he doesn't do this?
- When the boy finds a book, he reads a section called Cruelty. How do these words relate to the boy's life (even though he doesn't yet understand what they say)?
- Why is the boy sure that the plant the man worries over must be something to eat? Up until now, do you think the boy has often—or ever—been able to enjoy something just for its beauty?
- Do you think this man will help the boy? If so, how?

Chapter 8

- Do you think the mother is right to let the boy go live with the teacher? Is the boy right to go? Why or why not?
- After the boy reads to his brother and sisters, the mother says, "The Lord has come to you, child." Why do you think she says that?
- Why doesn't the boy tell his mother what the term "dog days" really means?
- Even before they know the figure they see coming is the father, why do the boy and his mother suspect it is him?
- What does it say about the father that, despite his enormous injuries, he manages to make it home?
- Why do you think the boy and the mother aren't sadder when the father dies?
- The boy had read in his book, "Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead." What does that mean? How does this thought console him now? Do you have a memory of someone or something that comforts you when you think of it?

Plot: What's Happening?



"Maybe his father didn't know Sounder was dead. Maybe his father was dead in the back of the sheriff's wagon now."

—*Sounder*

Sounder is the story of a poor black sharecropper (see page 24) who is arrested for stealing food and how his family—especially his older son—deals with his absence, as well as with the shooting of their beloved dog, Sounder.

The story starts with the father and son standing on the front porch of their cabin one October evening with their coon dog, Sounder. The father tells his son that if the wind does not rise, they will go hunting together that night. Farming season is over, and with no crops there is no pay. A possum or coon hide would bring in much-needed money to help pay for food and warm clothes.

The boy loves to hunt with his father and Sounder. The dog has a voice like no other's. Sounder is the boy's consolation for not being able to go to school. He has tried, but the eight-mile trip is

too far to make twice a day. One day, he tells himself, he will go to school. In the meantime, he has Sounder.

When the boy and his father go into the cabin, the boy eats with his younger sisters and brother while his mother and father talk about how poor the crop was this year and how bad the hunting has been.

After supper, the father goes out alone. The boy wonders where his father has gone without Sounder; they always go out together at night.

After the father leaves, the mother sits in her rocker picking walnut meat, called kernels, out of their shells to bring to the store to sell. The boy asks his mother to tell him one of her Bible stories, which help chase away his loneliness.

The next morning, the boy awakes to the smell of pork sausages and ham cooking. His mother is humming and her lips are rolled inward—both signs that she’s worried—but the boy barely notices, he’s so happy to be filling his stomach with good food, so glad to be able to give Sounder more than scraps to eat.

That night his mother does not tell stories or sing; she hums “That Lonesome Road” while she picks walnut kernels. The boy feels very lonely. He vows, “One day I will learn to read” to keep from feeling lonely.

Three days later, the white sheriff and his deputies arrive. They push themselves into the house and roughly handcuff the boy's father while the family, frozen in terror, looks on.

Suddenly Sounder, who has been out in the fields, is growling and scratching at the door. One of the deputies pushes the boy outside, telling him, "Get that dog out of the way and hold him if you don't want him dead."

The boy tries to hold Sounder as the sheriff and his men put chains on his father and push him into the back of a wagon. Sounder breaks free of the boy's grasp, chasing the wagon as it is pulled away. One of the deputies turns and shoots the dog. The boy's father does not even lift his head to look as Sounder falls in the road, the whole side of his head and shoulder torn off.

Sounder is not dead, though. He manages to drag himself under the porch. The next morning, the boy's mother takes the walnut kernels to the store to sell them. She also takes the remaining sausage and ham with her.

The boy crawls under the cabin and looks for Sounder. He is not there. He looks along the road the way the wagon went and searches the entire area around the cabin. The dog is nowhere to be found. When his mother returns, she tells the boy that maybe Sounder went off to die, or maybe he went into the woods to try to heal his wounds with oak leaves. But she warns him, "Don't be all hope, child."

Weeks go by and the boy searches everywhere for the dog; he cannot find him.

Christmas comes and the mother bakes a big cake for the father, and asks the boy to bring it to him at the jail. The jailer is a cruel man. He tears apart the cake, then makes the boy clean up the mess. When the boy gets to see his father, both man and child are so sad they hardly know what to say to each other.

The next morning, Sounder comes home. He is in bad shape: "One front foot dangled above the floor. The stub of an ear stuck out on one side, and there was no eye on that side." But he is alive. He wags his tail and licks the boy's hand. He does not bark, however. The only sound he makes is a whine.

A short while later, his mother gets word that his father has been sentenced to hard labor.

Now "loneliness put its stamp on everything." And just as the family's loneliness increases, so does its hardship. The mother takes in more washing. The boy, though young, goes out to work in the fields.

As the boy grows, he becomes restless and wants to find his father. He searches for him in autumn, when the fieldwork is through. Though he visits many road camps, prison farms, and stone quarries, he never finds his father. These journeys are difficult, and the boy tries to keep up his courage and keep away loneliness by remembering the Bible stories his mother has told him.

During one journey, the boy is hurt when a guard at a road camp throws a piece of iron at him that hits his hand. The day is not all bad, however. The boy later finds a book someone has thrown in the trash. Though he cannot read well, he is happy to have a book of his own.

The boy stops at a small water pump next to a school for black children to clean his wound, and the teacher there takes him home to wash it in warm soapy water. The boy has trouble believing what he sees in the man's cabin. The man grows flowers, he has two lamps, and there are shelves and shelves of books. The man tells the boy a story from the book the boy found. The boy tells the man about his father and about Sounder.

When the boy returns home, his mother sees that he is excited. She thinks that he has found his father, but the boy says no, and tells his mother about the teacher. He tells her that the teacher has asked him to go back to him and go to school, to live in the teacher's cabin and do his chores. "Go child," the mother says. "The Lord has come to you."

The boy goes to school in fall and winter and spring, but comes home in summer to take his father's place in the fields, to pay the rent. Sounder always greets him by wagging his tail and whining, but he never barks.

One hot August day, six years after his father had been sent away, the boy and his mother are sitting on a shaded corner of

the porch. Sounder is acting strangely, and his mother attributes it to the heat.

As they sit, a speck appears in the distance. They can't make out if it's a person or an animal. Sounder is increasingly agitated as the figure approaches, then he lets out the first bark that they've heard in six years and runs off down the road.

It is the father. He had been caught in a dynamite blast in the prison quarry, and half of his body had been crushed by limestone. The doctors had been sure he was going to die, but the man was determined to go home.

Summer turns into autumn and the boy goes back to school. He comes home in October to help gather wood and walnuts for the winter. His father, remembering Octobers past, decides to go hunting. He and Sounder set off with the lantern as they had hundreds of times before.

Just before dawn, Sounder comes home alone. He leads the boy back into the woods, where he finds his father, leaning against a tree, the lantern still burning at his side. He is dead. The boy goes home and tells his mother. She is sad, but happy, too. "When life is tiresome," she says, "there ain't no peace like the greatest peace—the peace of the Lord's hand holding you."

After they bury his father, it is time for the boy to go back to school again. But before he leaves, he digs a grave for Sounder. He "ain't got no spirit left for living," the boy tells his mother.

“He’ll be gone before I come home again.” Sounder dies two weeks before the boy comes home for Christmas.

The boy consoles himself by remembering a line from the book he’d found years ago, which he can now read as well as understand. “Only the unwise think that what has changed is dead.” The boy knows that his father and Sounder will live forever in his memory, like “a lantern burning out of oil but not going out.”

Thinking about the plot

- Why does the boy’s father steal the food? Do you think he has a choice?
- How is the boy finally able to make his life better?
- How does the boy choose to remember his father and Sounder? Why?