

Opinion: What Have Other People Thought About *Sounder*?



It's a winner!

Sounder is a winner—a Newbery Medal winner, that is. William H. Armstrong won the 1970 Newbery Medal for *Sounder*. The Newbery is a very prestigious honor: It is given annually by the children's librarians of the American Library Association to the author of "the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" published during the preceding year. Look at your copy of *Sounder* and you may see the medal printed in gold on the cover.

In his Newbery acceptance speech, Armstrong said that up until the call came informing him of the award, the word *Newbery* meant something entirely different to him. It was the name of a store in the town where he had grown up that carried the toys of a boy's dreams. He never got most of the toys he saw there; he had to go home and make his own. "But tonight it is real," he said of the award. "The boy will not have to go home and hammer the Newbery Award out of the top of a Campbell Soup can."

In addition to being the recipient of the Newbery and other prestigious awards, the book, which has been in print for more than thirty years, has been translated into twenty-eight

languages. *Souder* was also made into a movie that was nominated for an Academy Award® in 1972.

What's in a name?

Critics debate Armstrong's choice not to give any of his characters, except the dog, a name. Some critics believe that this literary device makes the book more universal, meaning that it could be the story of any poor family in any place at any time. One critic wrote, "The human characters' namelessness lends them a universality as oppressed people, while . . . authentic, detailed descriptions . . . assure their individuality."

Other critics argue that this namelessness has racist overtones. "Within the white world, deep-seated prejudice has long denied human individualization to the Black person," wrote one critic, saying that Armstrong's use of this device "raises the issue of white supremacy."

Armstrong himself defended his use of this literary device, saying he learned "the art of omission" from listening to his mother read Old Testament Bible stories, where characters' ages, as well as places and times, were left out or kept vague. About his characters in *Souder*, Armstrong said, "With names they would have represented one family; without names, they became universal—representing all people who suffer privation and injustice, but through love, self-respect, devotion, and desire for improvement, make it in the world."

Authentic

Some critics felt that a white man should not have been telling the story of this black family. They felt that a white person could not accurately describe the life of a family of a different race. Other reviewers, and Armstrong himself, disagreed.

One critic responded to the charge of lack of authenticity in this way: “It is not necessary or desirable that writer or critic be restricted to what he knows from direct experience; otherwise no man could write about women, no middle-aged person could write about old age; no one at all could write about the past. . . .”

Armstrong himself wrote, “I was writing about people’s hearts and feelings. There’s no color to feeling. There’s no color to heart. There are a lot of white people who have suffered indignities. . . . And there are a lot of black people who have done the same thing.”

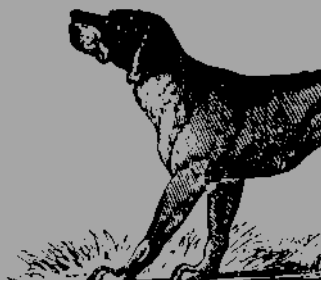
Too frightening?

At least one critic even wondered whether this was, in fact, a book for children. When *Souder* was published in 1969, a book reviewer for *The New York Times* wrote, “I am not sure children should read this book. If so, perhaps parents should loiter nearby, ready to enforce their child’s revulsion from violence so truly and so well described.” This critic felt that the violence was so well described it was frightening, perhaps too frightening for a child to read without a parent nearby.

Thinking about what others think about *Souder*

- Do you think *Souder* seems like an award-winning book?
What other Newbery Medal-winning books have you read? How does *Souder* compare?
- Do you agree with Armstrong's choice not to give his human characters names? Why or why not?
- Do you think authors should only be allowed to write from their own personal lives and experiences? Why or why not?
- Do you think *Souder* is a book for children or adults or both? Why?

Glossary



Here are some words that may have been new to you in *Sunder*. Understanding these words will make it easier to read the novel.

addled mixed up or confused

animosity a strong dislike for someone

bramble a thorny bush or shrub

carcass the body of a dead animal

chitlins the small intestines of a pig, fried as food

chute a narrow, tilted passage down which things can slide, be pushed, or dropped

cistern a reservoir or tank for storing water

compulsion an irresistible urge to do something

conjure to make something happen by magic or sorcery

constrained held back; restrained

crockery pottery that you use for food, for example, cups and dishes

damper a movable plate in the smoke pipe of a wood stove that controls the draft

famished very hungry

gaunt very thin and bony

gingham checked cotton cloth

grub hoe a tool used to dig up roots

gyrations circular movements

inhuman cruel and brutal

intoxication great excitement or enthusiasm

malicious shown or done from a desire to hurt someone

mange a skin disease of dogs and other mammals

moccasin a water moccasin, a kind of poisonous snake

mongrel a dog that is a mixture of different breeds

orneriness stubbornness or meanness

pallet a small, narrow, hard bed

peddle to travel around selling things

persimmon an orange-red fruit that is shaped like a plum and is sweet and soft when ripe

plaintive sad and mournful

poultice a soft, moist, and often warm mass applied to sores and other injuries

quarry a place where stone, slate, or limestone is dug from the ground

quiver to tremble or vibrate

remote faraway, isolated, or distant

rivulet a small stream or brook

sanctuary a place of safety and protection

scrapple a hardened mush of ground pork and cornmeal that is sliced and fried

sharecropper a farmer who lives and works on land that belongs to someone else. Instead of using money to pay rent, a sharecropper agrees to give a certain amount of the crop to the landowner.

smokehouse an enclosed place where meat and fish are smoked and cured

sowbelly salt pork from the belly of a hog

sustain to keep something going

ticking cloth used to make pillows and mattresses