

William H. Armstrong on Writing



Although William H. Armstrong described himself as a teacher and not a writer, he was the author of more than fifteen books. And, although he didn't publish his first book until he was forty-two years old, he had been a writer when he was in high school and college. In fact, he nearly chose a career as a journalist.

Armstrong often recalled a story he wrote in high school, "Not Even with Wings," about a boy watching from his wheelchair as his pet cat climbed a tree outside his window and destroyed a nest of baby birds. It was so good and so original that neither his teacher nor the head of the English department believed Armstrong had written the story; they thought he must have copied it from somewhere. But he hadn't. He eventually went on to publish a revised version of the story in his college literary magazine, of which he was the editor, and sent copies to the two doubters. "Beautiful letters came from each," he said.

Despite being able to write and being drawn to writing at a young age, Armstrong put aside writing for nearly twenty years after graduating from college. "I enjoyed teaching so much, building my house with my own hands . . . reading to my children and helping my wife care for them that any thought of writing disappeared from my life." Then, in 1950, the headmaster and director of studies at Kent School asked him to write a book on

how to study. Although reluctant at first, Armstrong eventually agreed, and he finished his first book, *Study Is Hard Work*, in 1953. It was published three years later.

Although Armstrong kept teaching—and building and farming and reading and raising children—he resumed his writing life. He described his writing routine as follows: “Early in the morning is my time to write. From 4 A.M. until 7 A.M. There is something very satisfactory about having one big job done before breakfast—like back on the farm with the milking before breakfast.

“I write with a pencil on a lined tablet. . . . I’m afraid a typewriter would somehow rob me of my own particular feeling.”

Armstrong also recalled how he started his books: “Most of my books begin with an idea that I take inside [me] and keep there for a long time before I write a single word. It gets into my blood and is filtered through my heart until it is a part of me. *Souder* . . . was filtered through my heart about four years before [I did] any writing except a few notes on 3” x 5” cards.”

While the subjects, genres, and intended audiences of his books vary, Armstrong almost always wrote about the same themes: the importance of hard work, education, religious faith, and respect for nature.

For aspiring writers

Armstrong once said, “In speaking to young people who ask me how to start to become a writer, I say to them—dot your *i*’s and

cross your t's. Be proud of your schoolwork." After all, it was praise of a neat homework assignment in sixth grade that inspired Armstrong to achieve, to strive for excellence. But Armstrong's advice doesn't end there. He goes on to say:

To that advice I add a second . . . thing to do: Read all the books you can. . . .Visiting elementary schools today brings a lump to my throat. I remember the scarcity of books that surrounded my early years (a short shelf in each classroom, a place for not more than a dozen books). I tell my audiences . . . that if I had by some magic been transported to such a library when I was their age, I wouldn't have gone home when school was out. I would have been reading until the last door was locked against me.

Armstrong has a very concrete example of how reading books can turn into writing books. The first book he owned was *Abraham Lincoln* by Lord Charnwood. It cost \$1.65, and he earned the money to pay for it by digging sassafras sprouts for five cents an hour. He went on to collect hundreds of books about Lincoln and to write a highly praised book about this subject, *The Education of Abraham*.

So, Armstrong advises, be a conscientious student and read. "These things you do now in order to get ready to write your book twenty, thirty, forty years from now."

You Be the Author!



- **Share a story!:** As William Armstrong tells you in the introduction to *Sunder*, he wrote this book based on a story he had heard as a child. Armstrong didn't simply retell the story as he had heard it, he took what he had heard and used it as the skeleton of the story, then he fleshed it out, and made it his own as well as the teacher's who told it.

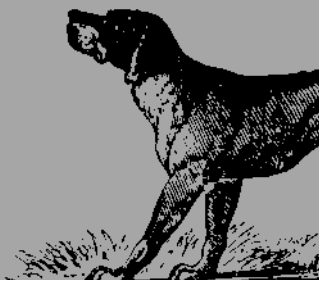
Listen to the stories people tell you—parents, siblings, grandparents, cousins, friends, teachers—and think about one that you might like to add to and make your own. Then, write your story. Be sure to share a copy with the person whose story started your own.

- **Epilogue:** Armstrong wrote two sequels to *Sunder*. Write a short story telling what you think happened to the boy when he grew up. What do you think his life was like?
- **Leaving out:** Practice “the art of omission,” as Armstrong did. Find a short story in which names, ages, and locations are specific. Then, try rewriting it by leaving these specifics out. How does it change the story? You might even want to try writing your own story using this literary device.
- **A different point of view:** *Sunder* is told from the point of view of the boy. How do you think the story would be told

differently from the mother's, the father's, or even the sheriff's point of view? Choose another character from the book and write a brief retelling of the story from that character's point of view.

- **A sense of place:** Armstrong's descriptive use of language helped establish the bleak setting in *Sunder*. You can practice establishing setting in a story by writing about the places you know best. Write about where you live, where you go to school, or even where you play ball. Use telling details to put the reader right where you want him! (You might even want to show what you write to someone who knows the area and see if she can guess the place you're writing about.)

Activities



- **Feed the hungry:** The family in *Sounder* is poor and often hungry. While you can't do anything to help the fictional family, you can do something to help feed poor people closer to home. You might want to organize a group of family members and friends to collect food for a soup kitchen or food pantry in your neighborhood.

If you cannot locate a need near home, find the name of one of the many national or international organizations whose goal is to feed people, and do some research on how you can help. Some groups that fight hunger are the United Nations' World Food Organization, America's Second Harvest, and Meals on Wheels.

- **Looking at a way of life:** In *Sounder*, the boy and his family are sharecroppers—tenant farmers who pay a share of their crop to the landowner for rent. This was how many Southern black people—and some white people—barely made a living after slavery was abolished. Research sharecropping to find out more about the way the boy and his family lived. You can get a better “picture” by checking out the University of Illinois Web site of sharecropping photos at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brown/photos.htm. Think about how sharecropping compared with slavery: Was it a better way of life? Why or why not?

- **Lost dog:** Reread the author’s description of Sounder early in the first chapter of the book. Research what a Georgia redbone hound and a bulldog look like. Then, make a “lost dog” poster for Sounder. In addition, you might want to write a newspaper advertisement describing the lost dog and asking for its return.
- **Letter to the editor:** Imagine you are a friend of the boy’s family and have just heard the sentence the father has been given for stealing the ham and sausages. Write a letter to the editor of the local paper explaining what you think of the sentence.
- **Another faithful dog:** Armstrong explains that a teacher told him the story of Sounder after recounting the story of Odysseus’s faithful dog, Argus. Read a retelling of the *Odyssey* (see Related Reading), then choose a part of the story—it could be about Argus or another character in the book—to tell to someone you know.
- **Listen to the music:** The boy’s mother gave herself courage and comfort by singing and humming songs known as spirituals. Research these black religious folk songs to find out more about them, then borrow a tape or CD from the library and listen to the music that was an important part of the family’s life in *Sounder*. You can find some good background information on these spirituals at www.negrospirituall.com.
- **Bible stories:** Read the Bible stories that the boy loved to hear his mother tell (the stories of Joseph and Abraham were the boy’s favorites). Pay attention to what Armstrong describes as

“the art of omission” in these stories. Ask yourself if you, too, can easily put yourself into these stories the way Armstrong says he did as a child, the way the boy in the book does.

- **Winning ways:** William H. Armstrong won the 1970 Newbery Medal for *Souder*. Read one or two other Newbery-winning books and think about what it takes to be a winner. Some recent Newbery Medal books are:

Crispin: The Cross of Lead by Avi (2003 winner)

A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park (2002)

A Year Down Yonder by Richard Peck (2001)

Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis (2000)

Holes by Louis Sachar (1999)

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (1998)

The View from Saturday by E. L. Konigsburg (1997)

The Midwife's Apprentice by Karen Cushman (1996)

Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech (1995)

The Giver by Lois Lowry (1994)

Missing May by Cynthia Rylant (1993)

- **Get a library card!:** If you don't already have a library card, go get one and use it. Librarians will help you find whatever kind of book you're looking for—funny, sad, scary—and even make some good suggestions if you tell them what kinds of books you like.