

#10613 SOUNDER

DISNEY, 2003
Grade Level: 5-13+
90 Minutes
1 Instructional Graphic Included



CAPTIONED MEDIA PROGRAM RELATED RESOURCE

[#8207 TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD](#)

Teacher's Guide

SOUNDER

Subject: Language Arts, Social Studies,
Character Education

Grade Level: 4-9

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Running Time: 87 Minutes



SYNOPSIS

Sounder tells the story of an African American boy, his family, and their beloved coonhound. As in author William H. Armstrong's book, none of the main characters has a name—except the dog, Sounder.

The boy's parents are sharecroppers who struggle to feed their three children. One day the father's employer refuses to pay him, unfairly blaming him for a bull's death. For the boy's father, this is the last straw; he steals a ham to feed his family. As the family sits around the dinner table eating, the sheriff and his deputies barge in. They handcuff the father and take him away, and as Sounder runs after his beloved master, a deputy shoots the hound. Sounder runs off howling with pain. The boy searches for him, but the dog is nowhere to be found.

After a dismal visit to the jail by his son, the father is sentenced to five years of hard



labor. The family cannot even find out which work camp he has been sent to. The only bright spot is that Sounder returns! He's limping, missing part of an ear, and seems to have lost his voice, but at least he's back. Leaving the dog at home, the boy sets off on a journey to find his father.

Along the way, the boy befriends a kindly old schoolteacher who offers him a home and schooling in exchange for doing chores. The boy is at home on a visit when his father

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finally returns. For the first time since Sounder was shot by the deputy, the dog's great baying bark bursts forth as he recognizes his long-lost master hobbling down the road.

As the boy makes plans to return to school, his father seems to be recovering. But while

on a hunting trip, the man meets his peaceful death beside a campfire in the woods. Soon the faithful Sounder crawls under the cabin and dies as well. Back at school with his teacher friend, the boy writes a story about his family and his dog, and calls it "Sounder."

OBJECTIVES

The student will:

- ✓ Have an opportunity to compare and contrast the film and book versions of the Newbery Medal-winning book, *Sounder*
- ✓ Be encouraged to write responses to literature which exhibit careful reading, understanding, and insight
- ✓ Be introduced to the plight of poor black sharecroppers living in the American South in the early 1900s
- ✓ Explore the values of family love and loyalty, persistence, patience, diligence, faith, and improving one's life through education
- ✓ Make judgments about human iniquities such as racism, racist laws, and deliberate cruelty
- ✓ Analyze literary symbolism in a film

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

William H. Armstrong, Author of the Book *Sounder*

William H. Armstrong (1914-1999) grew up in Lexington, Virginia. A short, asthmatic child with glasses and a stutter, William did not come into his own until sixth grade when his favorite teacher, Mrs. Parker, singled out his work. Armstrong became a teacher and taught ninth-grade history and study techniques at the Kent School in Connecticut for over fifty years. He did not complete his first book, a student handbook called *Study Is*

Hard Work, until he was 40. After his wife died suddenly, Armstrong was left with three young children to raise on his own, so he rose at four o'clock each morning to write. He said, "There is something very satisfactory about having one big job done before breakfast—like back on the farm with the milking before breakfast."

Armstrong based *Sounder* and later books on

stories he heard from a gray-haired black schoolteacher named Charles Jones. Jones “taught the one-room Negro school several miles from where we lived.” He also worked for young William’s father, and “when our lessons were finished he told us stories from Aesop, the Old Testament, Homer, and history.” Armstrong said that *Sounder*’s tale was “the black man’s story, not mine... It was history—*his* history.”

Sounder was a huge success. Published in 1969, the book earned its author the 1970 John Newbery Medal, among many other distinguished awards for children’s literature. It was translated into 28 languages and made into a 1972 film starring Cicely Tyson, Paul Winfield, and Kevin Hooks as the boy. Thirty years later, Kevin Hooks directed this 2003 Disney version of *Sounder* in which Paul Winfield, who played the father in the 1972 film, portrays the elderly schoolteacher.

Armstrong felt that his book’s popularity was partly due to “the art of omission” that he learned from Old Testament stories. He said, “If the boy’s age was not given the reader could become a part of the story: ‘The boy must be about my age.’... without names [the family] 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.”

Armstrong’s other works include several study handbooks for students, a sequel to *Sounder* called *The Sour Land* (Harper, 1971), and books on Grandma Moses, Hadassah (Queen Esther of Persia), and Abraham Lincoln. Armstrong was so obsessed with Lincoln that he owned about five hundred books on the Civil War president.

Sharecropping

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, about four million former slaves, known as freedmen, confronted issues that, as enslaved people, they had not previously faced. For example, how could they earn money to support themselves and their families? Southern farmers and plantation owners confronted a problem of their own—now that free slave labor was a thing of the past, how could they afford to pay laborers to work their land?

Sharecropping, a system of tenant farming, eventually evolved as a solution—though a grossly unfair one—to both groups’ money problems. Under this system, people who could not afford land—poor whites and freedmen—contracted with property owners



to work their land. In return for their work, tenants received a share of the crops or part of the financial proceeds. Usually the landowner would also furnish the tenants with food and a small cabin to live in.

At first, sharecropping seemed to freedmen like a relatively good system. Unlike slavery, it gave people the right to work for themselves. As they performed their daily chores, sharecroppers could presumably act as their own bosses. There was also the hope that, if they worked especially hard, they might eventually be able to afford land of their own.

Unfortunately, conditions under tenant farming turned out to be little better than those under slavery. In general, landowners told their tenants what to plant and how to farm. Some property owners, like the overseers of slavery days, were constantly present. Tenant farmers rarely earned a profit. A tenant might save a small amount in a good year, but he was far more likely to end the growing season owing money to the landowner or other creditors. If he experienced several bad years in a row, chances are he'd find himself hopelessly mired in debt.

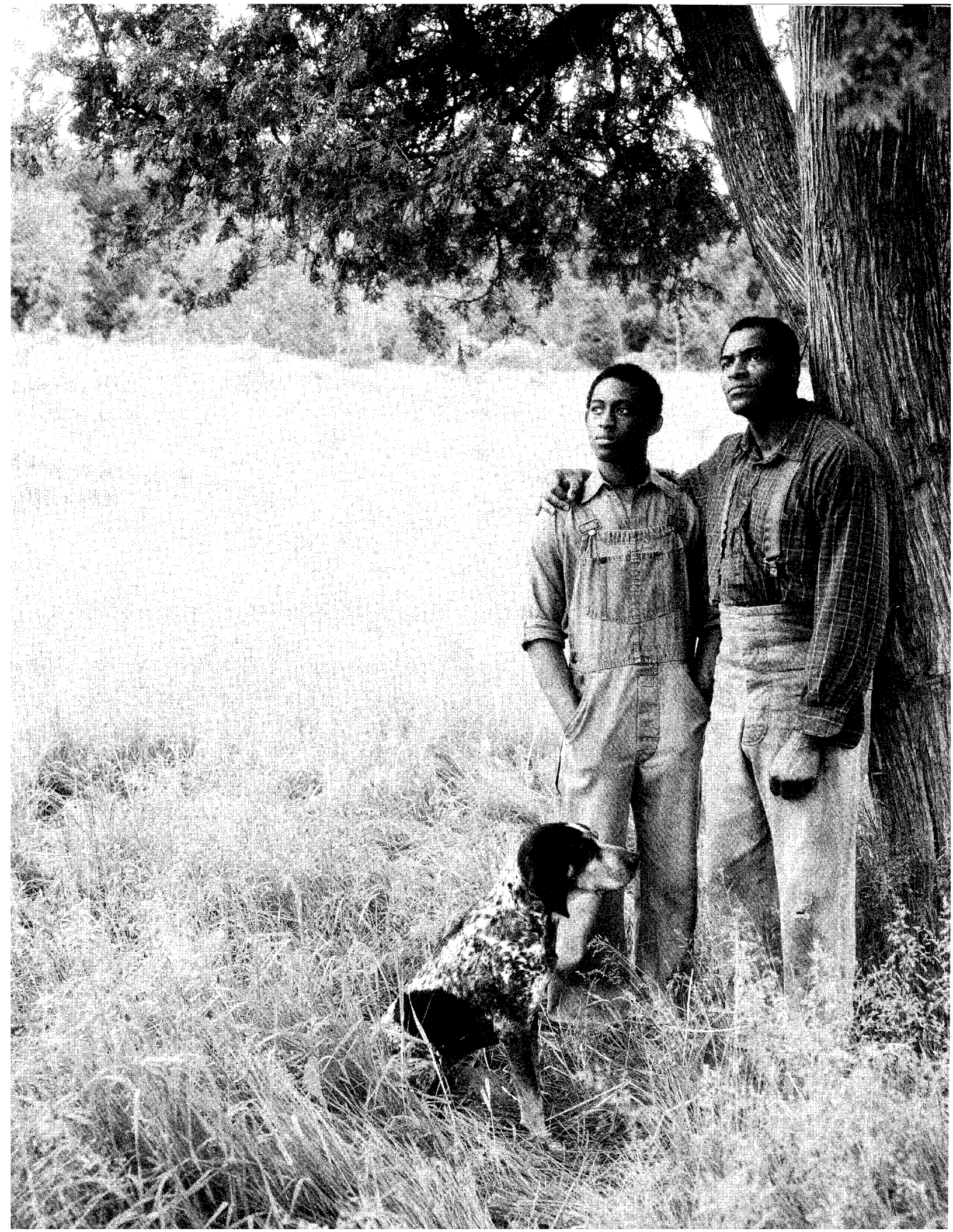
By the early 1900s, in spite of its unfairness, sharecropping was firmly established as a key element of the Southern farm economy. While assuring that poor blacks and whites remained poor, the system enabled rich white landowners to grow wealthier. After the start of the Great Depression, government programs intended to help the Southern farm economy only widened the economic gap between the races and social classes. In 1934, sharecroppers formed the Southern Tenant Farmers Union to protest unfair conditions. The union made some gains in the next few

years, but new farm machinery had already begun to make tenant farming obsolete. By the end of World War II, the sharecropping system had almost disappeared. To find work, many former tenant farmers migrated to Northern cities.

Redbone Coonhounds and Bulldogs

In *Sounder*, author Armstrong describes his canine protagonist as a mix of redbone hound and bulldog. The redbone coonhound is a strong, elegant-looking dog with long, hanging ears and a shiny, smooth red coat. An affectionate, even-tempered hound, it loves being with people—including children—and has a strong desire to please. A born hunter, the redbone is agile, alert, and persistent, and possesses amazing stamina. A natural treeing instinct makes it an expert coonhound. Among the redbone's few faults are its habit of treeing pet cats as if they were raccoons and a tendency toward excessive drooling.

The bulldog is small, wide, and muscular. It has a thick, massive head with a squashed-looking muzzle and round, staring eyes. It tends to waddle on its stocky legs. Although it may look scary, the bulldog is gentle, affectionate, and courageous. Extremely loyal, it is a good guard dog. To be happy it requires a lot of attention from its human family. Like the redbone, the bulldog has a tendency to drool and slobber.

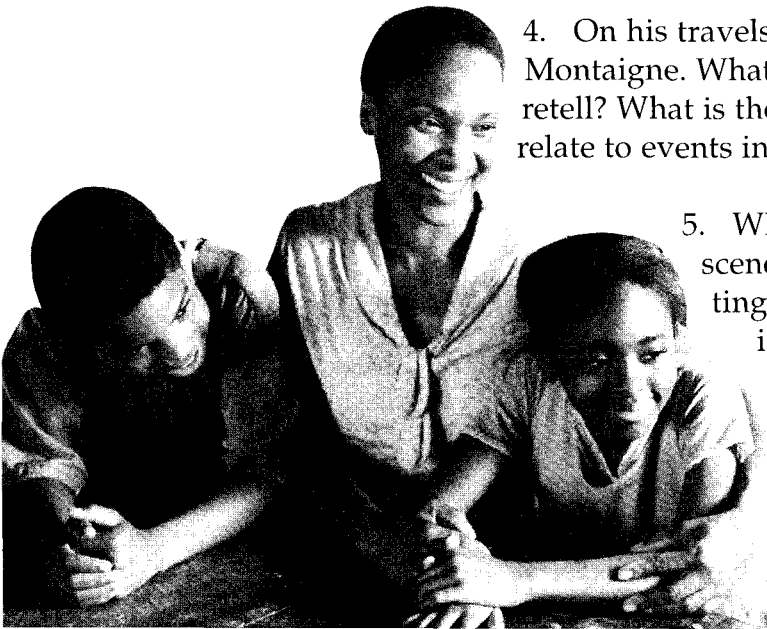


PREVIEW QUESTIONS

1. *Sounder* tells the story of an African American family living in the South after the Civil War. What do you know about relations between blacks and whites at that time?
2. According to the laws of that era, did black people have the same civil rights as whites? Give some examples.
3. How do you think most poor Southerners made a living then? What might have made it hard for them to support their families?
4. The movie's title, *Sounder*, is also the name of the family's dog. What do you think his name might mean? What traits do many dogs have that make them good companions for people?

POSTVIEWING QUESTIONS

1. Most of the people in this movie have no names besides "Pa," "Son," "Sheriff," and so on. When did you first notice this? Why do you think the moviemakers decided not to name the characters?
2. How would you describe the boy's mother? How does she seem to feel about her husband and children, Sounder, singing and praying (both in and out of church), storytelling, hard work, stealing, coping with tragedy, patience, and getting an education? Do any of her feelings and opinions change by the end of the movie?
3. How would you describe the boy's father? What traits make you like and respect him? What makes him angry and sad? How does he show these feelings? What is his "philosophy of life"?
4. On his travels, the boy finds a book by a writer named Montaigne. What story by this writer does the schoolteacher retell? What is the moral of Montaigne's story, and how does it relate to events in *Sounder*?
5. What was your favorite scene in the movie? Which scene did you think was the saddest? The most upsetting? The most moving? The one with the most important lesson about life?



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Prior to viewing *Souder*, distribute copies of the Response Chart at the end of this guide. Have students fill in the chart as they watch the film. Then invite students to discuss their thoughts and feelings about key scenes. Encourage them to point out important details that evoke emotional reactions from viewers. You may wish to discuss the scenes in which:
 - the father greets his boss on the way home from church
 - the deputy shoots Souder
 - a deputy spoils the father's cake
 - Souder returns home
 - a guard hits the boy with a rock
 - the boy meets the old schoolteacher
 - the father returns home
2. Read aloud the following statements from the film, one by one. Ask students to tell which character makes each statement, when he or she makes it, and what the speaker means by it.
 - First speaker: "Five years for a ham?" Second speaker: "It ain't about no ham, and five years is never five years."
 - "You measure a dog by how much sound he can make. You measure a boy by what he can do."
 - "He's conjured. Conjured folks can conjure you."
 - "I used to think words were important if you found them in a book. Now I think different; words are important if they're true, whether they be in a book or no."
3. Inform students that many books and movies contain **symbols**—characters, events, objects, or other elements that stand for, and help illuminate, important ideas. Have students choose one of the following symbolic elements and write a short essay telling what it stands for in *Souder*. Alternatively, they might draw or paint one of the symbols listed and write a poem about its role in the story:
 - the fact that most of the characters have no names
 - the cake that the boy's mother makes for her husband in jail
 - the father's straw hat (which the boy wears when he goes out to work)
 - songs that the mother and other characters sing
 - the stone that the guard throws at the boy (which the boy picks up and puts down again)

4. Have students form small groups. Each group can do library and/or Internet research on one of the following topics or another historical topic related to the events in *Sounder*. Then each group can report its findings to the class in an oral presentation with visual aids. Researchers may wish to use some of the books and Web sites listed at www.edustation.com.

Suggested Research Topics

- Sharecropping
- Black Codes and Jim Crow laws
- State-run chain gangs

5. Have students read William H. Armstrong's Newbery Medal-winning book *Sounder*. Have students take notes on the similarities and differences between the book and the movie. Then lead a discussion to compare them. Discussion questions might include the following:

- Is the movie similar to the book? Explain why you think so.
- Both the film and the book show the boy bringing a cake to his father in jail. Compare the two scenes. How did you feel as you watched/read each one? How were the scenes the same? Different?
- What details did the book describe that the movies did not? (For example, reread the descriptions of the injuries suffered by Sounder and his master. Does the movie show how badly the dog and man are hurt?)
- Compare the ending of the book to the ending of the movie.
- Why do you think Kevin Hooks and Paul Winfield wanted to come back and work on the remake of *Sounder*, thirty years after they appeared in the 1972 film?

6. Ask students to retell *Sounder* from the perspective of one of the following:

Sounder the dog	the boy's teacher friend	the boy's mother
the boy's little sister	the sheriff or one of his deputies	the boy's father

7. There are many works of fiction about father-son relationships. In small groups, have students read one of these books. Then have each group conduct a book talk in which students summarize the story and discuss their opinions of the work. Have them compare the father-son relationship in the book with that relationship in *Sounder*. Also ask students to read aloud passages from the book that they feel are especially interesting, moving, or dramatic.

These stories and novels are about fathers and sons:

- *The Janitor's Boy*, by Andrew Clements (Aladdin Paperbacks, 2001)
 - *Danny, the Champion of the World*, by Roald Dahl (Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1998)
 - *One-Eyed Cat*, by Paula Fox (Aladdin Paperbacks, 2000)
 - *Caleb's Story*, by Patricia McLachlan (HarperCollins, 2002)
 - *A Day No Pigs Would Die*, by Robert Newton Peck (Random House, 1994)
 - *Just the Two of Us*, by Will Smith (Scholastic, 2000)
 - *Solitary Blue*, by Cynthia Voigt (Macmillan, 1993)
 - *Shadow of a Bull*, by Maia Wojciechowska (Simon and Schuster, 1992)
 - *Dragonwings*, by Laurence Yep (HarperCollins, 1977)
8. Have students interview an adult who owns a dog and considers the pet a family member. Interviewers might ask questions such as these:
- When and how did your dog come to live with you? Did you get it from a pet shop, an animal shelter, or some other place?
 - What is your dog's name? How did you think of its name? In what ways does your dog's name suit him or her?
 - Is there one person in your family whom your dog respects most, or to whom your dog seems especially attached? Who is that person, and why do you think your dog feels as it does about him or her?
 - What word or phrase best describes your dog? If he or she could speak English, how do you think your dog would describe you?

Have students create a bulletin board display listing some of the more interesting information they learned from their interviews. If possible, have them post photographs of the dogs whose owners they interviewed. As an alternative, students might interview someone who works with dogs in a veterinary hospital or animal shelter.

9. Encourage students to read movie reviews in books, newspapers, or online (one good source for reviews is the Parent's Television Council Web site, at www.parentstv.org). Then have them write a review of *Sounder*. Tell students to consider the movie's plot, dialogue, casting (choice of actors to play various roles), music, editing (how the different scenes are pieced together), and messages, as well as actors' performances. Reviewers can also assign the film a letter grade. Collect student reviews in a booklet so classmates can compare their opinions.

10. On chart or poster paper, have students create a time line of milestones in African American education, showing the events below:

	1837	Founding of the Institute for Colored Youth (later Cheyney University)
	1856	Founding of Wilberforce University, the first African American institute of higher learning
	1876	Founding of Meharry Medical College, the first medical school for black people
	1881	Founding of Spelman College, the first black women's college
	1922	First course in African civilization taught at a U.S. institution (by William Leo Hansberry at Howard University)
	1944	Establishment of the United Negro College Fund
	1954	Supreme Court's landmark decision on <i>Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka</i>
	1957	Desegregation of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas
	1960	Formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
	1962	Desegregation of the University of Mississippi
	1963	Though Governor George Wallace attempts to block their way, Vivian Malone and James Hood register for classes at the University of Alabama.
	1969	The Ford Foundation donates one million dollars for African American studies courses at Howard, Morgan State, and Yale universities.

In small groups, have students gather information on each event and topic. Then ask the groups to report their findings, using Internet photos, maps, and other visual aids. Students might then use the timeline, their visual aids, and their written reports to create a bulletin

11. Many novels for young people explore close relationships between humans and dogs. Have students read one of the following and write a book report about it. You can compile their reports in a binder labeled "Dog Stories" board display.

Dog Stories for Students Ages 9-12

- *Souder* by William H. Armstrong (HarperCollins, 1972)
- *The Good Dog* by Avi (Simon & Schuster, 2001)
- *Akiak: A Tale from the Iditarod* by Robert Blake (Philomel Books, 1997)
- *Tornado* by Betsy Byars (HarperCollins, 1997)
- *Ribsy* by Beverly Cleary (HarperCollins, 1992)
- *Strider* by Beverly Cleary (HarperCollins, 1992)
- *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo (Candlewick Press, 2000)
- *Ginger Pye* by Eleanor Estes (Harcourt, 2000)
- *Follow My Leader* by James B. Garfield (Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1994)
- *Old Yeller* by Fred Gipson (HarperCollins, 2002)
- *Sable* by Karen Hesse (Henry Holt & Company, 1999)
- *Big Red* by Jim Kjelgaard (Bantam Books, 1976)
- *Away to Me, Moss!* by Betty Levin (Greenwillow Books, 1994)
- *Anastasia, Absolutely* by Lois Lowry (Houghton Mifflin, 1995)
- *Shiloh* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (Simon & Schuster, 2000)
- *Where the Redfern Grows* by Wilson Rawls (Delacorte Press, 1996)

Dog Stories for Students Ages 12 and Up

- *Julie of the Wolves* by Jean Craighead George (HarperCollins, 1974—fits the theme, even though it is about wolves, not dogs)
- *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2001)
- *White Fang* by Jack London (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2001)
- *Black Star, Bright Dawn* by Scott O'Dell (Houghton Mifflin, 1988)
- *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell (Houghton Mifflin, 1976)
- *Dogsong* by Gary Paulsen (Simon & Schuster, 1999)
- *Lad: A Dog* by Albert Payson Terhune (Penguin Putnam Books for Young Readers, 1993)

RESOURCES

Disney Educational Productions

<http://www.Edustation.com>

This award-winning site contains additional activities and resources for use with this video.

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

VIDEO RESPONSE CHART

As you watch *Souder*, use the chart to record your reactions to key events in the film. In the first column, write a brief description of the event. In the second column, write your thoughts and feelings about it. Below the chart, record any questions you have about the film.

EVENT	THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

QUESTIONS: _____
