***Sounder***

***Chapter 2***

***Summary:***

A few days later the family is still eating from the ham bone. Around dusk they hear footsteps, and three white men enter the cabin. One says, "There are two things I can smell a mile … One's a ham cookin' and the other's a thievin nigger." One of the men grabs the tablecloth, which is soaked in grease, and the other man points out the rip in the father's overalls, saying that it happened when the father stole the ham. The men take the boy's father, and Sounder begins to follow them, barking. They threaten to shoot the dog if he does not stop. The boy tries to hold Sounder back and succeeds until the men are down the road. Finally, Sounder rips away from the boy and runs after the wagon. The deputy shoots him, and Sounder falls down on the road.

The boy runs after Sounder. The dog tries to get up but cannot. The side of his head and shoulder is missing. His mother beckons for his return and tells him to leave the dog to die in peace. Later the boy goes to look for Sounder, but the dog is gone. The boy finds Sounder's ear on the ground and takes it with him, putting it under his pillow so he can wish for Sounder to live. Before the boy goes to bed, he fills Sounder's food dish and leaves it outside, just in case.

***Analysis (Ch1-2):***

One of the first noticeable aspects of this book is the fact that no one except Sounder has a name. The protagonist is simply "the boy," and his parents are "the boy's mother" and "the boy's father." The lack of names immediately suggests that these could be any people, anywhere. They are not particularly special or important, and they are not particularly anything. Armstrong wants the reader to perceive these people as average, even slightly below average. They are poor, nineteenth-century African Americans who cannot read and who live a meager existence. Armstrong chooses this cast of characters for a number of reasons: first, not many books are written about black sharecroppers such as these, especially in 1969. Perhaps the Civil Rights Movement inspired such a story. Second, these are characters whose inability to change is profound and disturbing. They have little money and little opportunity, and it is easy for their lives and characters to remain stagnant. Third, Armstrong depicts how difficult daily life is for these people, even on the good or easier days. Sounder is the only being to have a name in the entire book, and perhaps that is meant to underscore the fact that many African-American sharecroppers had no real identity during this time period. Sounder has more of an identity than they do, which illuminates an ironic and horrible reality.

Armstrong begins the book at a time that is particularly difficult for this family. The hunting is not going well, and money is scarce. The boy has stopped going to school because it is too long and too hard to walk there, especially in the winter. Armstrong sets up a fairly typical scenario when the father steals the ham to feed his family. This crime—done not out of a desire to do a wrong but out of a desire to survive—makes people question the motivations behind punishment. Armstrong also sets up the Sheriff and deputies as villains who take the father away with no regard for extenuating circumstances. They become even more monstrous when they shoot Sounder just to eliminate a nuisance. This chain of events illustrates the family's victimization by poor circumstance; they are tragically unable to improve their life or escape unscarred. Armstrong's decision to take two main characters out of the plot in Chapter 2 is an interesting one—the boy's father is taken off to jail and Sounder is shot and perhaps dead. This is a surprise, and one hardly expects the title character to be shot or killed at the beginning of a text. Armstrong sets us up to watch how the family, especially the boy, copes with the loss of both figures and what he does to try and fill the voids they leave. Their lives seem to become ever lonelier, as the boy points out each night as he goes to bed.

***Summary in detail:***

The land is now stark and frozen, and almost no one passes by during the winter. Any speck on the horizon is a curiosity to people sitting on their cabin porches. On the third day after the meat appeared, the family still has plenty to eat. The boy leaves the cabin to go to the woodpile, but at the doorway he stands motionless, even when his father tells him to shut the door. Three white men rattle across the porch and push their way inside the cabin. The men are rough and accuse the boy’s father of stealing meat from the smokehouse as one of the men dumps the remaining ham onto the floor. The sheriff and his two deputies are clearly angry and disgusted at having to be here. One of the deputies says “stick out your hands, boy.” The boy starts to raise his hands; however, the deputy puts the handcuffs on father’s wrists. As the men prepare to leave, Sounder barks and begins growling and scratching at the cabin door. One of the men says father tore his overalls on the door hook of the smokehouse; threads from the hook match his overalls, and soon father will be in jail. One man shoves the boy outside and commands him to hold his dog if he does not want them to shoot it. The boy drags Sounder into a corner, and the men prepare to ride off with their prisoner. The commotion and confusion are unsettling to the dog, but the boy manages to restrain Sounder. The men chain father to the wagon as Mother watches from the doorway. Sounder makes an awful, strangled noise and then drags the boy as he follows the wagon. One of the deputies shoots at the dog and Sounder falls. Finally mother speaks, telling her son to come inside. Sounder is still lying in the road and the boy feels sick. As the boy brings in an armload of wood, he hears a sharp yelp from the road. He drops the wood and races to Sounder. He sees the dog struggling to run, but one shoulder and half the dog’s face have been shot. The boy is crying and calls out, but the dog stumbles to his home under the porch. Mother finally tells her son to come in, as the dog is “only dying.” When the boy retrieves the wood he dropped earlier, he traces Sounder’s trail of blood back to the road. He discovers Sounder’s ear and brings it with him, hoping he can put it under his pillow and then have his wish—for Sounder to live— come true. He sees and hears nothing under the porch. The normally lonely cabin is even lonelier now, and it hurts the boy. Tonight mother does not shell walnuts, sing, or even hum. The boy listens for Sounder, but everything is silent. The boy fears his father has been shot and vows to bury Sounder when he finds him.