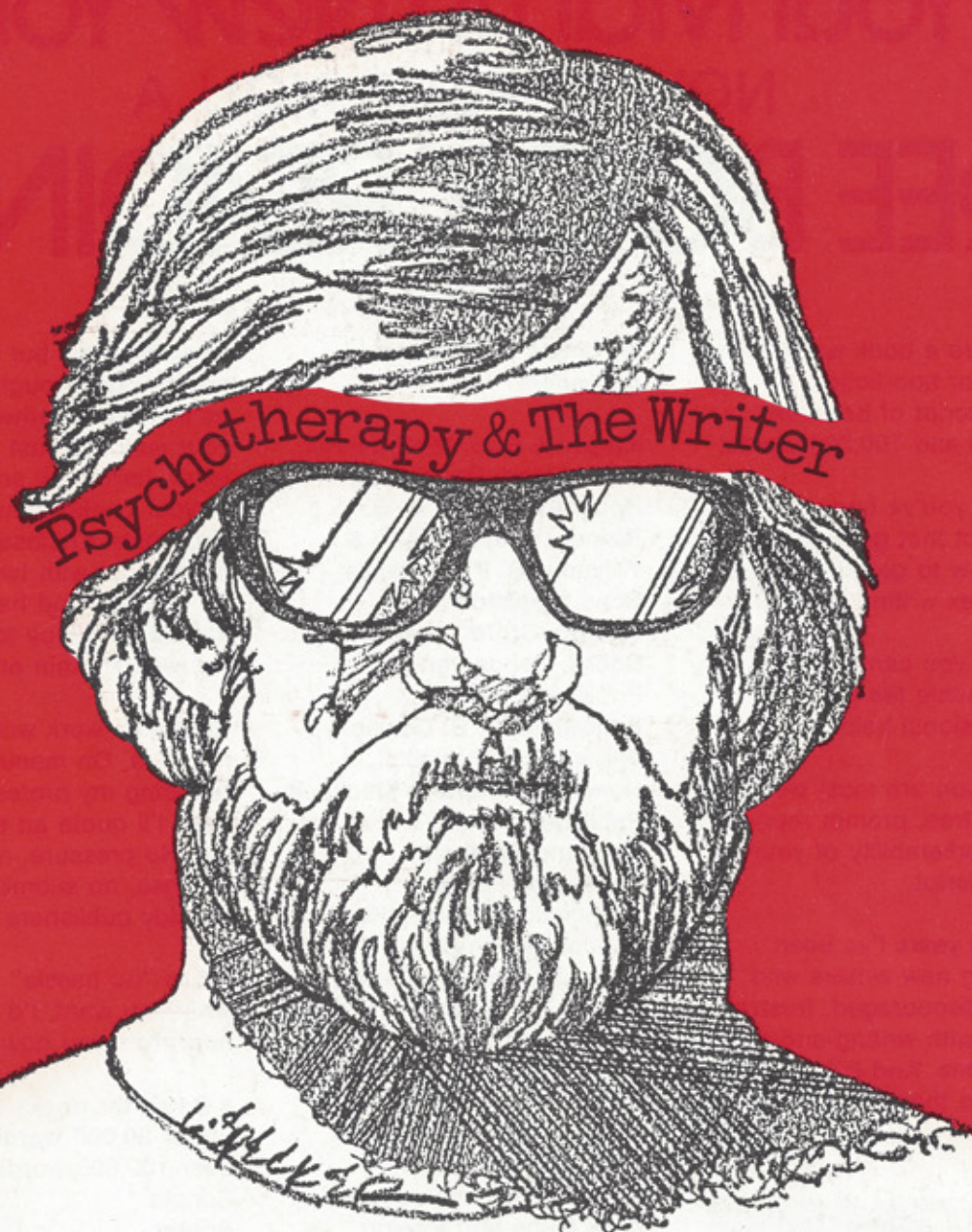


# Writer's Digest

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# William Armstrong's Old Masters

By Jennifer Bryon

"The art of omission simply means leaving out everything you can. Letting the reader supply. Then the reader knows that you know more than you have put down. He appreciates that more than if you had put down too much."

William Armstrong, whose *Sunder* won the Newbery Award in 1970 and was then made into a movie, is explaining the storytelling technique he calls "the art of omission"—a perspective he learned from the Old Testament writers.

"If you read the whole story of David when you are ten years old, you don't know how old David was so he can be ten. You read it again when you are 14, and you can still be David."

"You read the story of Joseph in three pages and have an unbelievably glorious experience. You can figure out for yourself how Joseph felt being sold into slavery by his brothers because the Old Testament writer left it out for you to decide. So everything that happened to him on the way to Egypt—being sold in the slave market and ending up in the stone quarry up the Nile—you can picture it all for yourself. You don't have somebody else's picture imposed upon you."

*Sunder* is a small book and the characters, except for the dog, are nameless. The main character is just called "the



The author of *Sunder* took his writing lessons from the Old Testament.

boy," a term which lets the reader know generally, but not specifically, his age. The location is also vague, so the story could have taken place almost anywhere.

Armstrong, who declares he is "first a teacher," has taught history at Kent School in Connecticut since 1945. Since his three children are grown, Armstrong lives alone on a farm in a house he built himself. His land is dotted with the Corriedale sheep he raises.

He wears cowboy boots and string bow ties, apparel not usually associated with a man who is a native of Virginia. But, says Armstrong, he wears the cowboy boots because "an old Indian once told me they were good for fallen arches." He says the string ties became a part of his wardrobe when the cost of regular ties got to be more than he wanted to pay.

He wrote his first book when he was 40 years old, and then only to help his students.

## Once Over Finally

"I was busy building my house, clearing the land, raising children, teaching students. These things filled up my time," explains Armstrong. "But I felt a great need for something to help students realize there is a way to study and a way not to study so I wrote my first book on that."

That book was *Study is Hard Work*. It was followed by *Through Troubled Waters, Peoples of the Ancient World* (in collaboration with Henry Ward

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Swain), *Eighty-Seven Ways to Help Your Child in School, Tools of Thinking, My Animals, The Story of Grandma Moses, Sounder, Sourland, The MacLeod Place, and The Education of Abraham Lincoln*. His most recent book is *Joanna's Miracle*.

"I wait as long as I possibly can before I start writing. I do everything else that I can, put it off. Then when I can't resist it any longer, I start getting up at a quarter of four in the morning, sharpen my pencils, write in longhand from four until seven or seven-thirty. Then I don't write any more that day.

"I get on my bicycle, ride to school, teach my students, come back home and work in the fields. I don't look at what I've written that day ever again, probably."

He spends a great deal of time thinking about his story and the characters before he ever begins to write: "I've spent maybe a year, maybe two years thinking. So before I start to write, I know exactly what the characters are like. They might take a slight turn from the direction I planned and might say something a little different from what I had already worked out in my mind, but usually they stay pretty much the same." He does not go back over his work to edit. The publisher pays somebody to do that, he says.

As the only parent to three small children, Armstrong found the early morning hours the best time to write.

"I was writing a history book when my wife died and I knew I would never get it finished if it had to be sandwiched in between all the things that go into getting young children ready for school, taxiing them to see their friends, and a thousand other things. So I made a rule that they could get up upstairs at seven or even before, but they could not come downstairs until seven-thirty so I could write from four to seven-thirty and not be interrupted."

Armstrong is afflicted with writer's block only when he tries to write in some place other than at his desk in his study overlooking the Housatonic River.

"If I'm working on a book and I'm going somewhere for a few days, I figure I'm going to have a lot of time early in the morning, so I'll take the book with me and write. But I never do."

*Sounder*, the story of a black sharecropper's family, is written with such feeling and understanding for the black person that Armstrong is often thought to be black himself.

### Uncolored Feelings

"After I'd sent *Sounder* to the publisher, they called me to come to New York to talk about it. So I went and was talking to the senior editor in her office. She was carrying on let's-get-introduced-conversation about the weather and so forth when she finally just burst out laughing. It seems that the five other peo-

ple who had read the book were standing outside her office door, trying to get a look at me.

"When they receive a manuscript from a person they've never met they try to build a picture of the author. After reading *Sounder*, they had decided I was a black man who had escaped formal education because the book was so sparse. The only thing they could think of was that I had some menial job at Kent and some brilliant English master had helped me write the book. They wanted to be sure he got the proper credit."

The germ of the *Sounder* story came from a black man who worked for Armstrong's father.

"This gray-haired black man taught the one-room Negro school several miles away from where we lived. He worked for my father after school and in the summer. There were no radios or television sets, so when our lessons were finished he told us stories from Aesop, the Old Testament, Homer, and history.

"It's been 50 years or more since he told the stories to us, but I remembered it all these years and wrote it down."

But Armstrong says he was not really writing about a black family or a white family in *Sounder*.

"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, but they strangely hold out against it and save themselves. And there's a lot of black people who have done the same thing."

He often cites the Greek outlook that a person's heart or soul is purified by suffering.

"That's the whole theme of Greek tragic drama. There was no easy way of redemption. A man had to suffer. He purified himself through suffering. And he came to that purification by wisdom, ultimately. And that was the theme—man learns against his will through suffering."

*Sounder* is one of what became three books. Armstrong had originally written them as one book. He sent the original to a publisher who rejected it with the remark that the book was beautifully written but just wouldn't sell.

### Two Kinds of Books

"I kept the book around for a long time but then made a deal with my neighbor who reviews books for the *Wall Street Journal*. He wanted some firewood, so I agreed to give him the wood in exchange for his reading my manuscript.

"The next afternoon he called me up very excited. I thought his house might be on fire, but when I got up there I found the manuscript lying in three different sections on his sofa. He told me I didn't have one book, but three. It was

really an accident. If all this hadn't happened, the book might still be on the shelf in my study."

The story of *Sounder* was there. The story of the black man as an adult was published later as *Sourland*.

"There was yet another story of what happens to people when tragedy and a broad slab of concrete about to destroy their land comes upon them," says Armstrong. "This was published as *The MacLeod Place*."

Armstrong believes writing can be taught, but that a person has to do his or her own teaching.

"A person teaches himself by, first of all, becoming keenly aware of the fact that he is using only about half of his ability to hear the sounds of the earth and about half of his ability to see the earth around. He's probably using less than half his ability to understand the feelings of others. Having done that, if he wants to read some great books, fine. He must create his own model."

Although *Sounder* is classified as a "book for young readers," Armstrong does not write just for children.

"I divide books into two classes: books with pictures for children to look at and books to read for people who can read. So if the people who can read are ten years old, that's all right. If they're 80, that's all right."

This author has had several publishers for his books, something that happened unintentionally which he thinks has probably worked out for the best.

"One publisher has a summer place near me and asked me to do a book on Grandma Moses even before *Sounder* was published. But I'd done textbooks and a book for the religious department for Harper & Row so I sent them *Sounder*. Then the editor there went to Coward, McCann. I had talked to him about *The MacLeod Place*, and I thought he ought to have a chance to publish it. I had also talked to him about *The Education of Abraham Lincoln* which I had been working on spasmodically for a long time. And out of just sheer friendship I gave it to him.

"I've talked with a person who has given all his books to the same publisher, and he says it is not as satisfactory as it might seem. They begin to feel they own you."

Armstrong does not work through an agent. He says he has been told he should use one, but that when he compares notes with people who do, he finds out that he is getting more on his own.

He seems able to defy all the conventions for writing and publishing and still come out ahead.

"I guess that's because I don't have to make a living out of it. I get my teacher's small loaf of bread to take home. Consequently, I'm not hungry. So I can say this I will do and this I will not do, as far as writing is concerned."