

Discussion Questions for
***The Trumpet of the Swan* (1970)**
by E. B. White

Chapter 1 – Sam (pp. 1-7)

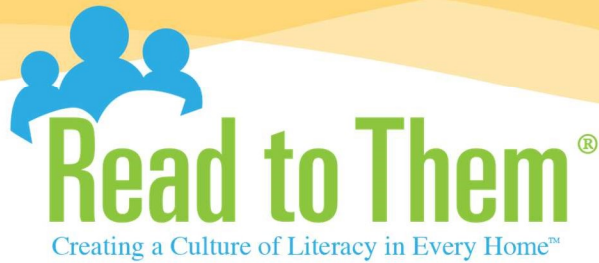
1. The opening sentence mentions that “Sam wondered whether to tell his father about what he had seen.” (p. 1) Have you ever been unsure if you should tell a grown up about something? What was it, and what made you hesitate to share?
2. “*As he trudged on, the boy’s mind was full of the wonder of what he had seen.*” (p. 2) Sam’s experience seeing the Trumpeter Swan nest is special, and it fills him with wonder. Have you ever had an experience that took your breath away or made you feel a lot of emotion? A sight in nature or something else? What was it?
3. The narrator says every boy deals with the problem of figuring out what to be when he grows up. This statement certainly applies to all kids – not just boys! Do you think it applies even when you are an adult? Do you know what you want to be when you grow up? Is that a fair question to ask kids?

Chapter 2 – The Pond (pp. 8-16)

4. We meet the swans during this chapter, and they’re choosing the perfect place to build their nest. They settle on the island, deciding that it is the best place to live. If you could pick anywhere in the world to ‘make your nest’ or settle down, where would it be and why?
5. Have you ever witnessed wildlife in their natural habitat like Sam? What was it like? Do you have a favorite habitat for observing nature? If you haven’t had the chance to be out in nature like Sam, where would you like to go?

Chapter 3 – A Visitor (pp. 17-28)

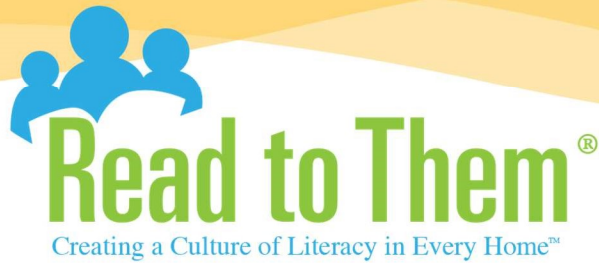
6. “*It has been my experience that all boys throw stones and sticks – it is their nature.*” (p. 20) That certainly is a broad generalization. Is it fair? Why do you think the cob thinks that way? How does Sam change the cob’s mind?
7. Sam protects the swans from trouble when the fox tries to intrude. The swans see this deed as an act of friendship, and it becomes clear what Sam’s intentions are. Have you ever done something for someone as a signal that you are friendly? How was that signal received?



8. As Sam writes in his journal that night, he asks many questions of how nature works, and marvels over the eggs and their purpose. Is there anything you can think of that makes you feel similarly? Something you can't fully understand, but you find utterly fascinating?

Chapter 4 – The Cygnets (pp. 29-41)

9. The cob begins a long, flowery speech with “Here I glide, swanlike.” His wife, much more practical, states “Of course you glide like a swan.” Which do you prefer – the verbose cob or his more succinct wife? Do you know people who talk in each of these styles?
10. Sam is perfectly happy while watching the swans. When are you perfectly happy? What does it feel like?
11. Does it take a certain kind of person to sit patiently and quietly to see the eggs hatch? Do you have those qualities?
12. If you had gone to sit by the lake to watch the cygnets being born, what would you have brought with you?
13. The swans say that they feel safe when Sam is watching them. Why do you think that is? Do you have a protector in your life?
14. As Sam leaves the camp, he cherishes the memory of meeting the cygnets, saying he'll never forget that memory. Do you have a memory that you hold near to your heart? What makes it special?
15. While falling to sleep that evening Sam returns to the thought of what he will be when he grows up. Based on the information we've learned about Sam, including his love for nature, what do you think he should be when he grows up?
16. We learn a lot about Sam through his journal. Have you ever tried keeping a journal? Do you think you would enjoy it? Would you share it with anyone?



Chapter 5 – Louis (pp. 42-51)

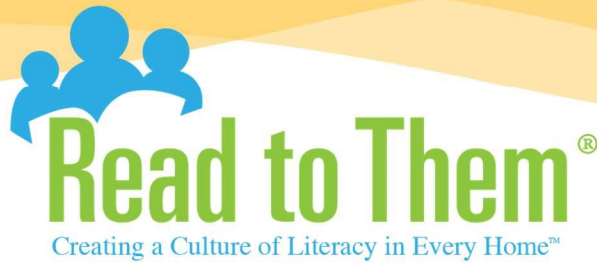
17. When Louis’s father learns that his son can’t trumpet, the first word he uses to describe Louis is “defective.” How do you feel about that word? How do you think Louis would feel? Is that the word you would use?
18. Without a voice, Louis “felt frightened at being different from his brothers and sisters.” (p. 51) How are you different from other members of your family? From your friends? How do you feel about that differentness?
19. At the end of Chapter 5, Louis thinks to himself, “Fate is cruel.” Is this true? Why? How should you handle unpleasant things you can’t control?
20. Do you think Louis’s father gives him good advice about how to handle his trumpet-less-ness? Would you offer different advice?

Chapter 6 – Off to Montana (pp. 52-61)

21. The cygnets are a little frightened about leaving their home and flying south for the winter. It’s all foreign to them. Have you ever been nervous about doing something for the first time? Why did it make you nervous and how did you cope?
22. The chapter ends with Sam posing the question of “How does a bird know how to get from where he is to where he wants to be?” (p. 61) What do you think? Are humans capable of the same thing, or do we need more guidance?

Chapter 7 – School Days (pp. 62-77)

23. When Sam Beaver tries to convince his teacher to teach Louis how to read and write, he explains that animals also need to be able to communicate. Louis, for example, will not be able to find a mate if he cannot communicate. Would *your* teacher buy this argument, and agree to teach a swan?
24. Louis is learning to adapt despite his challenges with communicating. Although he struggles with speech, he is great at many other things like flying and swimming. It can be easy to get hung up on the negatives, but it is also important to concentrate on the positives. What are some things you are good at? How do those skills make you feel? What positive thoughts can you keep on hand for when you are feeling down?
25. Jennie has a very particular catastrophe in mind when they’re sharing examples. Can you think of any catastrophes like the one Jennie came up with?



Chapter 8 – Love (pp. 78-90)

26. There's a lot of emotions surrounding Louis's return. Everyone is happy to know Louis is okay and back with his family, but Louis is disappointed that his family can't read his writing. How would you feel in this situation? Have you ever experienced something like this – happy to be back but feeling out of place?
27. It's clear that Louis is one smart swan. He can read and write. However, he is misunderstood by his fellow swans. Have you ever felt this way? How can Louis make his family see how special he is?

Chapter 9 – The Trumpet (pp. 91-98)

28. The cob says, "I will do anything to help my son Louis – even if I run into real trouble." (p. 91) While wanting to help his son is good, do you think he was right to steal the trumpet? Do good intentions outweigh bad actions?

Chapter 10 – Money Trouble (pp. 99-110)

29. It took Louis a little while to get the hang of playing the trumpet. Have you ever tried something new and struggled? Did you ever want to give up? How did you persevere through the frustration of getting started? Were you as motivated as Louis?
30. Sam says Louis has money problems. If you were in Louis's shoes what would you do to earn money? Brainstorm a list of ways a kid, or a swan, can earn an income.

Chapter 11 – Camp Kookooskoos (pp. 111-117)

31. Have you ever been to camp before? What was it like? Was it similar to how camp Kookooskoos is described?
32. When Louis gets to Camp Kookooskoos, a boy named Applegate Skinner says he doesn't like birds. What do you think of Applegate and his attitude about Louis?

Chapter 12 – A Rescue (pp. 118-133)

33. Have you ever been made fun of? Applegate Skinner is made fun of for his name in this chapter, and it didn't make him feel great. How would you have felt, and what should you do if you see someone getting picked on?



34. Applegate recalls how scared he was before Louis rescued him. Have you ever experienced something that scared you as much as this event scared Applegate? What did it feel like, and how did you recover?
35. Applegate Skinner and Louis don't start out as friends. Applegate announces that he doesn't care for birds, and he doesn't even give Louis a chance. If you were Louis, would you have rescued Applegate?

Chapter 13 – End of Summer (pp. 134-140)

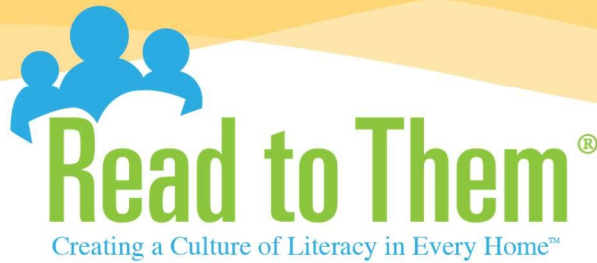
36. Louis is left alone at the lake for a while. He gets slightly lonely, but manages to fill his time. Do you like being alone? What do you do to entertain yourself when you're alone?
37. At the end of the chapter there is a list of things Boston is famous for. What is your hometown famous for? What do you think makes it special?
38. Louis sets off for Boston to make his fortune with only his trumpet, slate, chalk pencil, moneybag, and medal. If you were setting off on a big trip to seek your fortune, what special things would you take with you?

Chapter 14 – Boston (pp. 141-149)

39. The people love seeing Louis's talents on the Swan Boat. Have you ever been to a performance where someone displayed their talents like this? How did it make you feel to witness such a sight? Would you like to perform and be in the spotlight?
40. First Sam, and now the man who runs the Swan Boat have taken an interest in Louis. It must feel good to have someone to help him, and who believes in him. Have you ever felt support like this? How did it influence you? Is there anyone in your life that you believe in like these men believe in Louis? Why is support like this important?

Chapter 15 – A Night at the Ritz (pp. 150-165)

41. Louis feels very important staying at the Ritz. After all, he is a swan staying in a 5-star hotel! Have you ever had a moment in your life that made you feel super special and important? What was it, and how did it make you feel?
42. Different people (and swans) use different approaches to express and process their feelings. Sam writes in his journal and Louis plays his trumpet. How do you express your emotions? What do you do to help you work through strong feelings?



Chapter 16 – Philadelphia (pp. 166-177)

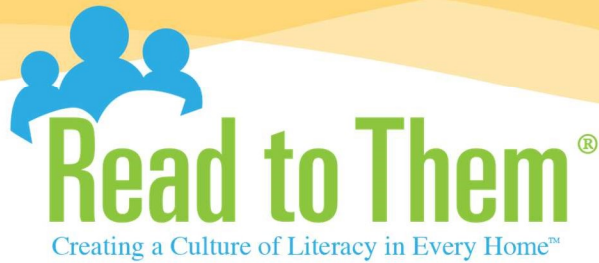
43. Why do you think the children antagonized Louis as he was playing his music? Do you think they thought of it as a joke? Many of them were laughing, do you think they took into account that they could've injured Louis?
44. Lucky Lucas tells Louis about how most of the birds in this Zoo have their wings clipped. Do you think this is right? If you were a bird, would you be happy if your ability to fly was taken away? Similarly, how would you feel if one bird was allowed to keep his wings while the others were clipped?
45. Lucky Lucas makes a deal with the zoo not to clip Louis's wings in exchange for Louis playing concerts on Sundays, his one day off from the nightclub. What do you think about the deal? Have you ever made a deal like this to get something you wanted?

Chapter 17 – Serena (pp. 178-198)

46. Do you think the way Serena treated Louis in the past is very nice? Now that they're together again, do you think Louis should still be trying to win her affection? How would it make you feel if someone had completely ignored you and then wanted to be your friend? Should we give people the space to change and improve?
47. When Louis is playing the trumpet in Philadelphia, a newspaper describes his playing this way: "Some of his notes are like jewels held up to the light. The emotion he transmits is clean and pure and sustained." (p. 186) Can you think of any song or performer that you feel this way about? What makes it so special?

Chapter 18 – Freedom (pp. 199-211)

48. When Louis is debating with the zookeeper in Philadelphia over whether to make Serena stay or let her go, he ponders the difference between "freedom" and "security." Which is more important? Can you have both?
49. Louis's first instinct when he is in trouble is to send a message to Sam. Who is the person you go to first whenever you're having a hard time or need advice?



Chapter 19 – A Talk about Money (pp. 212-224)

50. Louis has worked so hard to make money to pay back his father's debt. Do you think he's done the right thing?
51. Serena and Louis are able to live their lives in freedom because of Sam's help. The chapter ends by saying "Freedom felt so wonderful. Love felt so good." What makes you feel free? Additionally, Louis is surrounded by love: from Sam, Serena, and his family. What makes you feel loved?

Chapter 20 – Billings (pp. 225-242)

52. The storekeeper, the warden, and the police officer get so caught up in the money that they ignore the cob. Do you think their greed got in the way of helping the cob they'd injured? What would you have done if you were in this situation?
53. Do you think the storekeeper redeemed himself at any capacity by choosing to donate the leftover funds to charity?

Chapter 21 – The Greening Spring (pp. 243-252)

54. Louis had quite a strange life for a swan. However, he makes his way back to his natural habitat. Do you think Louis was happier during the heyday of his music career, or living on the pond with Serena and his cygnets? Would you make the same choice if you were Louis?
55. Why do you think Sam never told his father about the pond and the swans?
56. What does 'crepuscular' mean and why do you think E.B. White chose to use it in the last chapter?

End of the Book

57. There are many powerful moments in the book. One is when Louis plays Taps at the end of Chapter 11, the first night at Camp Kookooskoos. What was your favorite part of the book, and why?
58. This book is rooted around the adventures that Louis has throughout his life. How do you think Louis's life would have been different if he was never given a trumpet? How would the story be different?
59. What lessons can you take away from *The Trumpet of the Swan* for your own life?