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HATCHET

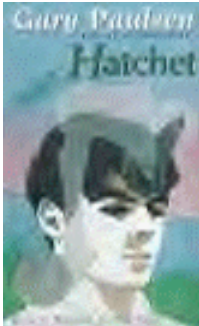
BY GARY PAULSEN

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SUMMARY



Hatchet is about a boy named Brian whose parents are divorced. While on a trip to visit his father, Brian's plane crashes in the wilderness, leaving him alone to survive only with the hatchet given to him by his mother. Injured, hungry, and without shelter, Brian must face the darkness of the forest, swarms of insects, and an angry moose. How will Brian survive on his own?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born May 17, 1939, Gary Paulsen is one of America's most popular writers for young people. Although he was never a dedicated student, Paulsen developed a passion for reading at an early age. After a librarian gave him a book to read—along with his own library card—he was hooked. He began spending hours alone in the basement of his apartment building, reading one book after another.

Running away from home at the age of 14 and traveling with a carnival, Paulsen acquired a taste for adventure. A youthful summer of rigorous chores on a farm; jobs as an engineer, construction worker, ranch hand, truck driver, and sailor; and two rounds of the 1,180-mile Alaskan dogsled race, the Iditarod; have provided ample material from which he creates his powerful stories.

Paulsen's realization that he would become a writer came suddenly when he was working as a satellite technician for an aerospace firm in California. One night he walked off the job, never to return. He spent the next year in Hollywood as a magazine proofreader, working on his own writing every night. Then he left California and drove to northern Minnesota where he rented a cabin on a lake; by the end of the winter, he had completed his first novel.

Living in the remote Minnesota woods, Paulsen eventually turned to the sport of dogsled racing, and entered the 1983 Iditarod. In 1985, after running the Iditarod for the second time, he suffered an attack of angina and was forced to give up his dogs. "I started to focus on writing with the same energies and efforts that I was using with dogs. So we're talking 18-, 19-, 20-hour days completely committed to work. Totally, viciously, obsessively committed to work, the way I'd run dogs. . . . I still work that way, completely, all the time. I just work. I don't drink, I don't fool around, I'm just this way. . . . The end result is there's a lot of books out there."

It is Paulsen's overwhelming belief in young people that drives him to write. His intense desire to tap deeply into the human spirit and to encourage readers to observe and care about the world around them has brought him both enormous popularity with young people and critical acclaim from the children's book community.

Paulsen is a master storyteller who has written more than 175 books and some 200 articles and short stories for children and adults. He is one of the most important writers of young adult literature today, and three of his novels—**HATCHET**, **DOGSONG**, AND **THE WINTER ROOM**—are Newbery Honor Books. His books frequently appear on the best books lists of the American Library Association.

Paulsen has received many letters from readers (as many as 200 a day) telling him they

felt Brian Robeson's story in **HATCHET** was left unfinished by his early rescue, before the winter came and made things really tough. They wanted to know what would happen if Brian were not rescued, if he had to survive in the winter. Paulsen says, "I researched and wrote **BRIAN'S WINTER**, showing what could and perhaps would have happened had Brian not been rescued."

In Paulsen's book, **GUTS: THE TRUE STORIES BEHIND HATCHET** and the Brian Books, Paulsen shares his own adventures in the wild, which are often hilarious and always amazing: moose attacks, heart attacks, near-misses in planes, and looking death in the eye.

Paulsen and his wife Ruth Wright Paulsen, an artist who has illustrated several of his books, divide their time between a home in New Mexico and a boat in the Pacific.



BOOK REVIEW

Could you survive in the Canadian wilderness with just your basic instincts and a hatchet? In Paulsen's book, **HATCHET**, the protagonist, Brian Robeson, does just that, he survives in the wilderness for 54 days by using his instincts and a hatchet, a present from his mother.

Brian is being flown to see his father in the Canadian wilderness, for the summer after his parents' divorce, when he is thrown into a life threatening situation when the pilot of the two-seater plane has fatal heart attack. Immediately Brian must think of how to survive by landing the plane in a lake. From this moment Paulsen takes you through the survival techniques of Brian's 54 days in the wilderness.

Fast paced, suspenseful with minute detail description, Paulsen's theme of survival is evident in his description of how Brian must learn from his mistakes and to rely on nature to survive. But Brian must also learn to get over the divorce his parents just went through and not dwell on the past and his fears, for this takes away from his focus to survive. Through Paulsen's descriptions you experience Brian's first success in making a fire without matches, catching his first meat, to his disappointments when his "home" is destroyed by a tornado.

Paulsen effectively demonstrates to his readers how Brian must learn to survive by watching, listening, overcoming his mistakes, and through sheer determination to survive. Paulsen's sub-plot of "The Secret" about Brian's mother, and the divorce of his parents is mentioned a number of times in the story but it does not bring any relevance to the main theme of Brian's survival.

"Paulsen's knowledge of our national wilderness is obvious and beautifully shared...YA readers will surely identify with Brian's anger at his parent's divorce...his awakening self-assurance and pride" (Wilson, E. (1998, February). *Voice of Youth Advocates*, v. 10, #6, p. 283).

"Paulsen effectively shows readers how Brian learns patience - to watch, listen, and think before he acts..." (Chatton, B. (1987, December). *School Library Journal*, v. 34, p. 103).

By Terie Katz

<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/paulsen.html#Hatchet>



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Warning! Some of the questions contain key elements of the plot. Do not read if you don't want to know what happens!

1. If you had the time to put a survival pack together, what would you include? How does this compare to the items in the survival pack Brian pulls out of the plane? Why doesn't Brian use all of these items?
2. In Chapter 19, Brian discovers the rifle in the plane's survival pack. If he'd had the rifle from the beginning, how do you think it might have changed his experience in the wilderness? Why does he "set it aside, leaning it carefully against the wall?"
3. How might the story have been different if Brian had dropped the hatchet in the process of swimming to shore right after the plane crashed into the lake?
4. How do you think surviving in the wilderness would change you? What would it be like for you if you were isolated from other human beings and had no one to talk to?
5. How does Brian's attitude towards his mother and "the Secret" change during his time in the wilderness? Why do you think it changes?
6. What, in your opinion, does it take to be a survivor?
7. What rules for life does Brian learn in the wilderness? Will Brian find it difficult to return to his 'old' life after rescue? If so, what problems might he have?

<http://www.metronet.lib.mn.us/onebook/article.cfm?id=13>



AUTHOR INTERVIEW

What does a famous author do with the rest of his life? The last time I spoke with Gary Paulsen, nearly four years ago, we discussed his thrills and misadventures racked up during two Iditarod races, as described in his book, *WINTERDANCE*. But heart disease forced him to give up his beloved sled dogs, so he and his wife sold their Minnesota home and bought a ranch in New Mexico.

Lately, during this supposedly quieter period of his life, Paulsen has been keeping busy sailing the high seas. He fixed up an old sailboat, *Felicity*, and sailed from Mexico to Alaska, and now, back again. El Nino, however, was foiling his plans, stirring up the seas. When we talked, he was docked momentarily in Monterey, California, waiting for good weather. As usual, the amazingly prolific author was packing both his life and his prose with plenty of punch.

Paulsen says the 25- to 30-foot swells aren't a problem: "They don't break and you just slide over them. The problem was we were getting 25-knot winds on top of that, which made four- or five- or six-foot wind waves on top of the swells, and they would break. So you're looking at a 30-foot breaking wave. We were getting wet a lot. It was filling the cockpit all the time. It's not particularly dangerous; it just becomes very uncomfortable. The water's quite cold."

His goal is to sail to Cape Horn, seas permitting. He says he's neither being a daredevil nor trying to die. (Technically, thanks to a strict diet and exercise regime, he no longer has heart disease when he's at rest, which is, er, seldom.) Instead, something in his soul keeps him "seeking horizons," as he calls it, whether he's running the Iditarod, sailing or riding a Harley hundreds of miles to Alaska and back, a quest he describes in his roaring adult book, *PILGRIMAGE ON A STEEL RIDE: A MEMOIR ABOUT MEN AND MOTORCYCLES*.

In these pages he explains what others might see as a manic drive: "I could not stop it, could never stop it and I knew it then, knew I had to leave, to get moving again, to seek, to continue the run for the rest of my life and that if I stopped, even for a moment, 'it' would catch up with me -- whatever 'it' was -- and I would stop. Stop forever."

That "it," he admits, might be death, although he isn't sure. "I feel like the boat is a kind of requiem," he says. "Not that I will die sailing the boat or die after the boat, necessarily, but there's something I will write as a requiem. . . . This seems almost choreographed in a way, not by me, certainly, but by nature, by some flow of events. I don't want to change. I have no desire to sit in front of a keyboard for the rest of my life."

Rest assured, though, he's spending plenty of time doing just that. The author of numerous books for children, adults and young adults -- fiction, nonfiction, historical novels, adventure tales and Newbery Honor-winners like **HATCHET** and **DOGSONG** -- simply sets the steering vane on his boat and goes below deck to work. Thankfully, holing up with his laptop helps ease the frustration when wind and weather shove him ashore. Just published is **SARNY**, sequel to his acclaimed historical novel and recent Disney Channel film **NIGHTJOHN** about a slave who taught others to read, including a girl named **SARNY**. The new novel tells what happens next to Sarny, taking her life through and beyond the Civil War as a free woman until her last days in the 1930s.

It's a spare but riveting tale, tracing not only a compelling life but the story of civil rights in the United States. "It's all true," Paulsen says. "Not true for one person, but everything in the book happened to people. I didn't intend to write a sequel, because I was afraid I might dilute the power of the first story, but I got so many letters asking me to keep writing." Now he's on the trail of another historical figure, a 15-year-old Civil War soldier who was shot several times during terrible battles and survived, only to die a few years after the war of what is now labeled "post traumatic stress disorder." After the death of this young man, Paulsen discovered, the illness became known as "soldier's heart," also the title of the forthcoming novel.

For one brief moment in Gary Paulsen's long and varied life, which has included stints as an Army sergeant, actor, truck driver, trapper, migrant farm worker, and high-tech engineer, he actually felt settled. The contentment lasted about a week. He had a wife, children, office job and a lovely feeling of comfort, which suddenly disappeared. He left for Hollywood to write, with his wife, painter Ruth Paulsen, remaining supportive these many years, despite Paulsen's certainty that his life would never again be calm.

At one point soon after, the writer ended up in Taos, New Mexico, standing beside the typewriter and ashes of D.H. Lawrence.

"I stood there looking," he remembers, "and realized that this was it, I was going to have to write. That I could never accept 'normalcy' again, that I would have to write and my whole life would always be in flux. I didn't know that it would be what it is now. I did not know that I would run dogs or seek horizons so much. I just knew that I would never be settled."

But Paulsen's hero is not Lawrence, but Cervantes: "He was captured," Paulsen notes, "he was a galley slave, he had his arm shot off in combat -- it was just one thing after another, always in poverty. Finally, he wrote 'Don Quixote' just to get money. And then he went back to his life, which was a mess all the time. What a life!"

Interview by Alice Cary



FURTHER READING

If you liked **HATCHET** by Gary Paulsen,
you might like the following books, too!

Other Brian's Saga books (**THE RIVER**, **BRIAN'S WINTER** and **BRIAN'S RETURN**)
by Gary Paulsen

FAR NORTH by Will Hobbs

OVERBOARD by Elizabeth Fama

WISH ME LUCK by James Heneghan

PARADISE: BASED ON A TRUE STORY OF SURVIVAL by Joan E. Goodman

JULIE OF THE WOLVES by Jean Craighead George

TOUCHING SPIRIT BEAR by Ben Mikaelson

THE BOY WHO SPOKE DOG by Clay Morgan

SHACKLETON'S STOWAWAY by Victoria McKernan

THE WRECKERS by Iain Lawrence

SOS TITANIC by Eve Bunting

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE by Alden R. Carter

TORN AWAY: A NOVEL by James Heneghan

BABES IN THE WOODS by Chris Lynch

SPARROW HAWK RED by Ben Mikaelson

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE by Alden Carter

FAR NORTH by Will Hobbs

A GIRL NAMED DISASTER by Nancy Farmer

THE PIRATE'S SON by Geraldine McCaughrean

THE THIEF by Megan Whalen Turner

Website

For more information about Gary Paulsen, visit www.garypaulsen.com