The Crossing Short Guide

The Crossing by Gary Paulsen

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The Crossing, like many of Paulsen's novels for young adults, pairs a teenage protagonist with an older adult.

The chance meeting of Manny Bustos and Sergeant Robert S. Locke in the border town of Juarez, Mexico, changes both lives in ways dramatic and not immediately predictable.

Manny Bustos—smallish, underfed —survives on the streets of Juarez. His existence is meager, a constant struggle in a world where brute strength leads frequently to brutality. Bigger boys and men prey on Manny, filling his already dire days with fear. Despite the adversity, Manny dreams of a better life in the United States. He will cross the border; soon his every action aims at reaching this goal.

Sergeant Robert S. Locke is a veteran of the Vietnam War. Stationed in El Paso, Texas, he crosses the border freely, and often, to drink in places where there is "noise and women and cheap whiskey." Locke seeks escape, through alcohol, from the cries of dead friends and haunting recollections of Vietnam.

His drinking is methodical, sterile, and utterly joyless. The sergeant and Manny meet three times: once when Manny tries to pick Robert's pocket and is allowed to go free; once when, pulled together by inner compulsions they cannot identify, they spend a day in each other's company; and finally, on the border itself when the ultimate answer to their dilemma presents itself and, in his own way, each goes free.

During the day in which Manny attaches himself to Robert, leechlike, they attend a bullfight. In a review of this novel for Horn Book Magazine, Ethel Twichell observes: "a profoundly moving conclusion finds Robert sacrificing himself in a death that powerfully recalls the slaughter he witnessed in the bull ring."

Paulsen's prose is taut, terse, and understated. In blunt, gritty language, he portrays Manny's desperate poverty and Robert's anguish with great skill and to great effect. Drawn into a suspenseful story that gains momentum as it moves, readers will not likely leave this narrative until after its explosive, final encounter.

About the Author

Born May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Gary Paulsen is an avid outdoorsman, a man of many interests, and a prolific and accomplished writer.

He has worked as a field engineer, editor, actor, director, farmer, rancher, truck driver, trapper, singer, sailor, and as a soldier. Serving with the U.S.

Army from 1959-1962, Paulsen attained the rank of sergeant; his military experience allies him closely with one of two central characters in his novel The Crossing.

Paulsen has authored more than twenty novels for young adults, numerous works of nonfiction, several plays and over two hundred short stories and articles. He most recently achieved acclaim in the world of adult fiction with Winterdance, a narrative rooted in his running of the Iditarod.

Participating in this twelve hundredmile dog sled race from Iditarod to Nome, Alaska, was, by the author's own account, a life-changing adventure.

Paulsen has received many awards for his fiction; Dancing Carl and Tracker were among the American Library Association's Best Young Adult Books in 1983 and 1984, respectively. The Green Recruit, Sailing, Dogsong, and Hatchet have received similar honors. Dogsong was a Newbery Honor Book in 1986.

In 1971, Gary Paulsen married his second wife, an artist, Ruth Ellen Wright. The couple has collaborated on several publications. A second-generation American, Paulsen and his ancestors hail from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. His father, a career military man, served under General Patton; his mother worked in a munitions plant in Chicago during World War II. Raised by his grandmother and a bevy of aunts, Paulsen saw his father for the first time when he was seven years old.

A self-styled "army brat," he claims to have lived in every state of the union, been terribly shy as a child, and disliked school. At fifteen, Paulsen started "taking off," hoeing sugar beets in the summer, working nights during the school year.

Although somewhat isolated in adolescence, Paulsen credits "all them women" who nurtured him with providing assurance. One day, too, while walking in subzero temperatures, he wandered into the warm local library.

There, a librarian handed him a library card, and "handed him the world." He says: "It was as though I had been dying of thirst and the librarian had handed me a five-gallon bucket of water. I drank and drank."

In 1957 Paulsen entered Bemidji College, Minnesota—where he supported himself by laying trap lines for the state—but only stayed a year before entering the army. Thereafter, he was employed by Bendix and Lockheed as an engineer. Soon, Paulsen grew dissatisfied with designing missiles and considered writing as an occupation. He

realized, however, that he knew virtually nothing about the profession. On a lark, he produced a fictitious resume and mailed it to the publisher of a prominent men's magazine, was hired as an editor, then saw his ruse exposed. Retained despite his deceptive entry, Paulsen credits this editorial apprenticeship with "Doing more to improve my craft and ability than any other single event in my life."

Paulsen works at what might fairly be called a frenetic pace. He once wrote eleven articles and stories in four days and sold them all. He was sued for libel following the 1977 publication of Winterkill, and, while he eventually won that suit before the Minnesota Supreme Court, the experience brought him near to bankruptcy and so soured his feelings for the publishing industry that he stopped writing altogether, for a time.

Without work, Paulsen resumed trapping for the state. Without transportation, he trapped slowly, on foot or on skis. A friend named Bob McWilliams gave him a team of four harness dogs at this time; of his first extended outing with these dogs, Paulsen says, I was initiated into this incredibly ancient and very beautiful bond, and it was as if everything that had happened to me before ceased to exist. When I came off that seven day run, I pulled all my traps, having resolved never again to kill.

Paulsen's reverence for his dogs and subsequent sledding and racing reawakened the old urge to write. His written work, thereafter, is noticeably influenced by this transformation of spirit.

"Core toughness and compassion are the opposite of macho," Paulsen claims. "The absence of fear comes with knowledge, not strength or bravura. More people should be telling this to young people, instead of 'climb the highest mountain and kill something'." By way of advising novice or younger writers, he says: get the best equipment you can afford, stick to subjects you know best, rewrite and polish in your mind, and set deadlines for yourself. He also praises the services of literary agents.

Along with writing, Paulsen enjoys giving small-town public readings, and gardening. He has worked for nuclear disarmament and collaborated with Russian writers. Paulsen says: "I kind of live for a spiritual progress or perfection that has nothing to do with an organized religion. It is a personal thing." That notwithstanding, he adds: "I don't think individuals have any strength on their own. I think they have to find strength from an outside spiritual source."

Setting

Most action in The Crossing occurs along the border between El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Mexico. Beneath the Santa Fe Bridge, in the muddy shallows of the dammed Rio Grande, Manny and other homeless children beg for coins from American tourists.

At the back door of the Two-by-Four Bar and Cafe, Manny entreats Old Maria, the cook, for a handout. Across the river, at Fort Bliss, the barracks are orderly and antiseptic, a place from which American soldiers seek escape and excitement in the clubs of Juarez.

Near Club Congo Tiki—the preferred destination of Sergeant Robert S. Locke 2976 The Crossing —Manny sleeps in the alley, waiting on the chance that a drunk serviceman might appear, ripe for pocket-picking.

The Rio Brava Hotel, the market and the plaza de toros—the bullring—also make cameo appearances in this novel.

It is the border proper, however—the bridge that unites and the river that divides—which serves as both obstacle and opportunity for Manny and Robert.

More borders than one are crossed in the course of this story, and the three episodes, or meetings, are recorded sequentially. While the passage of time is difficult to judge precisely here, the important markings are sunrise and sunset, for these dictate the rhythms of Manny's days. A few days elapse between Manny and Robert's first and second meetings; a week elapses between the second and the third. At any given moment, it is the pace that matters more to these characters than the clock or calendar. Manny must move fast and stay alert always; for Robert, "time off duty" seems interminable.

Social Sensitivity

The Crossing sensitizes readers to issues of homelessness, poverty, crossgenerational and cross-cultural obligations. It asks us to view borders both as obstacles and opportunities, as fluid and negotiable, not fixed and automatically divisive. While Robert "crosses a border" between death and life, Manny "crosses a border" not only between Mexico and the United States, but between hopelessness and hope, as well.

Both Manny and Robert connect across borders that often divide—those between nations, the young and the old, the hungry and the sated.

In this novel, Paulsen vividly exposes the debilitating effects of war on "survivors" via Sergeant Locke's enactment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His unsentimental depiction of Manny's life on the streets may also give more fortunate readers a taste of the courage required for survival by the less fortunate. Although the author remains dispassionate and detached in his telling of this story, the story itself heightens social awareness and informs opinion in many ways. Above all, the lasting evocation is a clear, authorial preference for honesty, and truth.

Literary Qualities

The Crossing evinces a blunt, spare writing style. Paulsen's prose cadence is clearly reminiscent of Hemingway's, a debt he acknowledges freely. Some critics find fault with this obvious indebtedness, though, suggesting it leads readers to feel the narrative voice is contrived. One distinctive trait of this written voice is the use of coordinating conjunctions, which has the effect of "leveling" presentation. Every idea is, then, as important as the next; little dynamic development occurs thanks to subordination in sentence structure.

For example: What a thing it was then, he thought. What a thing to see it must have been. All the horses coming in abreast and the men firing and Pancho in front with his large sombrero and the silver pistol, and it was said he also had a silver saddle and a large mustache and the strength of five men.

Paulsen skillfully achieves dynamic development in this novel with rhythm, tempo, and rising action, which make for sustained suspense.

The audience is hooked early on and propelled through to the climactic conclusion.

Naturalism is the name often used for the literary tradition in fiction whereby nature is flatly indifferent to the trials and triumphs of mankind. As such, The Crossing can be considered a naturalistic text, with the characters' fate determined by heredity plus environment plus chance. Although free will is noted and preserved in naturalistic narratives, free will or choice alone does not produce desired outcomes. It is by chance that Manny and 2978 The Crossing Robert meet and by chance that they part, suggesting that their union is neither predestined nor governed primarily by desire.

There are, perhaps, veiled biblical allusions also in The Crossing; the sergeant's death is that of a martyr, and provides "salvation," of sorts, for Manny. Moreover, the nature of Manny's relationship to Robert and the timing of their three meetings recalls the three betrayals, or denials, of Christ by Simon Peter. Robert's final act—handing Manny his wallet and urging him to run—echoes Christ's exhortation of his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22). Christ intercedes with Satan on Simon's behalf, to restore Simon's faith, in much the same way Robert ultimately intercedes on Manny's behalf.

Themes and Characters

As does much of Paulsen's fiction for young adults, The Crossing features a young, male protagonist who forms an unlikely bond with an adult male deeply and adversely affected by war.

Highlighting their interdependence, this relationship finally helps both characters to be physically or emotionally free. Other recurring themes in Paulsen's fiction are physical survival, respect for the natural world, humanity, individuality, and acceptance of death.

The fast-paced action-adventure aspect of the story is tempered by a third-person narrative which reveals Manny's and Robert's thoughts and feelings throughout. Violence, destruction, and man's capacity for inhumanity are portrayed as reflections of the "real" world, ever at odds with the characters' instinct for what could be: a serene, harmonious existence from cradle to grave.

In their separate lives, neither Manny nor Robert knows serenity. This does not prevent either, though, from dreaming of, or wanting, that peace. It is easier, perhaps, to sympathize with Manny's character than with Robert's; Manny is, after all, a classic victim, oppressed and impoverished by forces beyond his control. Robert's character is more complex, less easily understood. At a glimpse, he seems to have privileges, choices, and personal freedoms Manny can only envy; closer inspection, however, reveals that Robert's torment is as oppressive and incapacitating as Manny's own. Regardless of the source of the shackles each believes he wears, there are pronounced differences between these two characters in their responses to pain and hardship.

Manny endures, believing he can begin again. Robert ends his pain in death, so that Manny might live.

We first meet Manny when the blistering heat of a new day calls him from his cardboard lean-to and his ceaseless quest for food begins. This day he resolves to "cross to the north to the United States and find work, become a man, make money, and wear a leather belt with a large buckle and a straw hat with a feathered hatband." The novel closes with Manny running in the dark for the river and the crossing. Paulsen portrays Manny as a resourceful, street-smart fourteen-year-old wholly without self-pity, but who is in constant danger. His natural good looks— red hair, large eyes, and long lashes mean—make him more valuable to "the The Crossing 2977 men who would take him and sell him to those men who wanted to buy fourteen year old street boys." Because he is small, Manny must also beware of the bigger boys who live as he does, and who will take what food or money he is able to find, beg, or steal.

Manny knows he cannot survive on the streets indefinitely. "I am too small," he says simply, "soon the hawks will get me." Adept at weaving whatever lies will work to get what he needs, he wonders what would happen if he were to tell the sergeant the truth, instead. If he were to ask the sergeant for help, would the sergeant provide it?

Sergeant Locke is, "above all things," a sergeant. He wears the mask of a career military man, a poster-perfect army prefect. Behind this decorous, tidy mask, however, are myriad scars.

Locke's mirror does not reflect the damaged man within. Scarred by having witnessed the gruesome deaths of friends, comrades in war, and haunted by his own inability to help when the dying cried for help, Locke finds solace nowhere thereafter. Alcohol makes it possible for him only to cope, inebriation obliterating memory. Even though Robert has long since decided he can help no other person in the world, when Manny asks "would you help me?" Sergeant Locke, to his own amazement, says yes.

Both Manny and the sergeant are fundamentally decent human beings forced to fight for their lives by factors in turn hateful and incomprehensible.

The world around them is indifferent to their presence or absence. It is neither benevolent nor malevolent. Like the bull in the bullring, Manny and Robert, too, bid farewell to their separate yet shared, indifferent worlds at this novel's close.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Manny Bustos want to live in the United States? Are his dreams realistic? Possible?

2. Sergeant Locke's drinking is described as "even and professional" rather than social or celebratory. Why?

3. What insights does this novel provide about poverty and homelessness?

About war?

4. Describe the significance of the bullfight within the larger narrative of The Crossing.

5. What prompts Manny to stop lying and tell the truth? How does Sergeant Locke react to this development?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Identify the various dangers Manny faces in his day-to-day survival.

Which does he consider especially threatening? Which would you consider especially threatening?

2. Explain the causes and effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as you understand it from reading this book.

How does Robert's experience with PTSD compare to or contrast with the experience as reported in other sources?

3. Look up Pancho Villa or Manuel Bustos and offer an overview, or summary of, the life of the historical figure.

Is either a fitting hero for Manny?

Whether yes or no, how so?

4. Review the development of bullfighting as sport and spectacle. How does attending a bullfight affect Robert, Manny, and their relationship?

5. Using clues provided throughout, speculate as to Sergeant Locke's motivation for his behavior at the close of the novel.

6. Research the plight of Mexicans who illegally enter the U.S. Explain how they cross the border, how they escape arrest, and how they begin life in a new country.

For Further Reference

Feitlowitz, Marguerite. Interview with Gary Paulsen. In Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Vol. 2. Edited by Agnes Garrett and Helga P. McClure.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1989:165-173.

An extensive interview in which Paulsen discusses his life, work, respect for the natural world, and evolving spirituality.

Review. Horn Book 63,6 (November/December 1987): 744-745. "In terse and understated prose the author brilliantly depicts Manny's appalling poverty and his matter-offact acceptance of life's inequities and builds a growing respect for the boy's pluck and lack of self- pity."

Review. Kirkus Reviews 13 (July 15, 1987): 1074. "Told from the point of view of both protagonists, the details of the story are familiar ones, and the style seems a bit too imitation-Hemingway. Paulsen, however, is skilled at pace, incident and characterization and he uses these to pull the reader to the memorable—and powerful—last scene."

Review. Voice of Youth Advocates 10,4 (October 1987): 206. "Cut-throat editing would have made this a great short story. As a book, it is tedious and repetitious in places and several times the author is amateurishly obscure. The concept is interesting and will give middle class American kids something to think about."

Weidt, Maryann N. "Gary Paulsen: A Sentry for Peace." Voice of Youth Advocates (August/October 1986): 129130. Questioned by Weidt, the author describes life as an "army brat," his feelings on gendered behavior, his first dogsled race, and his reading habits.

Related Titles

Readers who enjoy The Crossing may be similarly rewarded by several other titles by Gary Paulsen. Winterkill, narrated by a nameless thirteen-year-old, is another tale in which a boy attaches himself to a troubled adult, this time Duda, a corrupt cop with a "tough guy" exterior. Reviewer Diane Hass says Winterkill is reminiscent of Hinton's The Outsiders (1967) in its description of life on the wrong side of town.

In Dogsong, a young Eskimo, Russel Susskit, with the guidance of a village elder, embarks on a dog sled pilgrimage northward and struggles to sustain himself, his team, and the young, pregnant woman he rescues. Dogsong is a tribute to rites of passage, high adventure with neither a romanticized nor condescending tone.

Sentries offers a collection of vignettes whose characters do not meet but whose stories form a coherent whole nonetheless. Readers are greeted with the magnificence of human potential in many forms, then asked to imagine the devastation, the human waste promised by nuclear war.

Hatchet appears on the May 1994 New York Times list of all-time best-selling children's chapter books. In this book, Brian alone survives a plane crash with the aid of a hatchet. As he does with all his protagonists, Paulsen treats Brian's coming-of-age unsentimentally, yet with solemnity and respect.

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