Eastern Sun, Winter Moon Short Guide

Eastern Sun, Winter Moon by Gary Paulsen

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Eastern Sun, Winter Moon describes the origin of Paulsen's disappointment with adulthood and sense that his childhood slipped away too quickly.

Although he confesses in the Forward that he resisted remembering the unpleasant events of his first seven years, writing about them was the only way to deal with the "wounds, scars, things that damage me." Today, when most adults remember World War II nostalgically as a challenging time that brought out the best, spiritually and morally, in American men and women, Paulsen recalls behaviors and attitudes usually hidden from children. He relates them matter-of-factly because, he argues, children deserve the truth.

Paulsen's story is a story of contrasts: between youthful expectations and adult realities, between a modern American city and a war-torn Asian land, between a desire for a stable home and the unexpected dislocation caused by war, between the bravery of soldiers and their unthinking contempt for Oriental foes and friends alike, between a mother's love and a woman's search for self-worth, between American occupation troops hardened by war and Filipino civilians ravaged by Japanese conquerors. Most importantly, though, Eastern Sun, Winter Moon is about the contrast between what happens externally to a boy and how he feels internally about the experiences.

Although many events just happen to Gary, as they just happen to many children, he often reacts with a sense that he is somehow responsible, or a sense that he carries a burden of silence for adults' secrets, or a sense of helplessness that he cannot resist, undo, or direct the course of events.

About the Author

Gary Paulsen was born May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota shortly after his father, a career-army officer, left for duty in war-torn Europe. He spent the years of World War II partly with his mother in Chicago (who worked in a munitions factory) and partly with relatives in Minnesota.

Paulsen did not meet his father until 1946 when he and his mother were reunited with his father in the Philippines. He spent his adolescence as an "army brat," moving frequently, staying no longer than five months in any school, and often spent long periods with relatives such as a grandmother or an aunt. Paulsen has summed up his childhood thus: "I didn't have a home life; frankly, my parents were drunks."

Indeed, Father Water, Mother Woods (1994), a series of essays about hunting and fishing in the north woods as a child, relates how he used these activities as a substitute father and mother.

His experience as a wandering self-reliant child set a pattern for his life.

In 1957 Paulsen entered Bemidji College but only stayed a year before joining the army. Serving until 1962, he attained the rank of sergeant and took extension courses until he accrued enough credits to become an engineer.

During the next four years, Paulsen worked at a variety of jobs: field engineer, associate editor of a men's magazine, even a movie extra in Hollywood.

In 1966 he published his first book, The Special War, a nonfiction work based on interviews with servicemen returning from Vietnam. Paulsen continued a peripatetic career during the following decade as teacher, director, farmer, rancher, truck driver, trapper, professional archer, migrant farm worker, singer, and sailor. In 1976 he resumed his education at the University of Colorado and concentrated on writing; in this period he became one of the country's most prolific writers, publishing over 200 articles and more than threedozen books, including career guides, sports, and "how-to" books. Unfortunately, his work did not generate much financial profit; a series of "business reverses" with publishers in Colorado left him "totally broke and then minus broke."

A year later Paulsen went to Minnesota, one of his youthful homes, because he knew he could survive by gardening for food and burning firewood for fuel. Abandoning writing for a while, he lived in poverty, typically earning only $2,300 a year by trapping fur-bearing animals for the state.

The year 1983 brought two significant changes in Paulsen's life: a new direction in writing and an invigorating passion, sled-dog racing. Through the earlier gift of a ramshackle sled and a few dogs to help him trap game, he became interested in running the Iditarod, the great Alaskan dog sled race; his experiences with sled dogs and races transformed him. One alteration was that he was motivated to resume writing,

concentrating on subjects that interested him—the wilderness, dogs, sledding, surviving off the land—instead of the category novels and nonfiction he wrote formerly. He began composing in longhand every day (although he now uses a computer), in the kennel or by the campfire while the dogs rested. Dogsong, Hatchet, and several other books were written in this way. The same year Paulsen began to write for Richard Jackson, then at Bradbury Press, and developed a new focus: young adult fiction.

Since the publication of Dancing Carl in 1983, Paulsen's career has flourished. He has written numerous, successful books about the subjects that he knows the best: the wilderness, dogs, sledding, surviving off the land. A majority have strong autobiographical elements. Three of Paulsen's novels, Dogsong, The Winter Room, and Hatchet, are Newbery Honor Books; many of his other works have won various local and national awards. Paulsen is now successful enough to own a ranch in New Mexico (where he lives with his wife Ruth Wright Paulsen, photographer and artist) and maintain residences in several states. Paulsen wears his success lightly, believing that when people are living simply they really have what they need. He has decided he was as happy in poverty as he is now in affluence.

Paulsen plans a sequel to Eastern Sun, Winter Moon, yet untitled, in late 1994. A popular speaker on the bookstore, library, and school lecture circuit, Paulsen nonetheless chafes at the restraints the demands of book promotions puts on his time. Although a heart condition forced him to give up running the Iditarod (and the as many as ninety-one dogs he kept), the lifelong adventurer, in his free time, pushes his own physical limits. One summer he took a team of horses up to 12,000 feet and did pack trips for a week; another summer he rode a Harley-Davidson motorcycle to Alaska.

Although survivalist themes dominate his novels of the last decade, recently he has tried historical and comic fiction also. Paulsen's popularity with adolescent readers results from their mutual identification. He frankly speaks his views on adults and children: "adults stink" and have "polluted the earth. . . . Kids haven't done that." Like Peter Pan, he wants never to grow up or old: "I kind of wish I wasn't an adult."

Setting

The story opens in Chicago as Paulsen recalls his earliest memories of life when his mother worked in a munitions factory during the Second World War. He remembers only the toddler's narrow world: the cramped apartment, the frightening dark alley nearby, and the noisy bar where he sang for patrons who bought him fried chicken and Coke. At the war's end, Paulsen and his mother begin a grueling crosscountry trip by car to catch a transport ship at San Francisco which would take them to the Philippines to meet his father. The slow Pacific crossing is recounted in detail as seven-year-old Gary explores the seemingly huge ship, learns the ways of rough soldiers and sailors, and visits battle-scarred Hawaii and Okinawa. In the Philippine Islands, Gary lives in a crude military base house open to heat, lizards, and snakes. Since his parents are frequently away, he spends most of his time with the Filipino housekeepers, Rom and Maria, and learns their perspective about life. The book ends with Gary leaving the Islands in 1949 with his mother, whose nerves have been shattered by the ennui and difficulties of life in the tropics.

Social Sensitivity

Paulsen's account of his first seven years contains material that is suitable for mature adolescents. He occasionally uses the profanity common to adults under stress. He witnesses much havoc wrought by the war: shattered Manilla buildings, corpses of Japanese soldiers, wrecked planes, and ruined tanks. He describes frankly his growing awareness of his mother's relationships with other men and his own sexual initiation with Maria.

Paulsen's style, however, is never sensational. Profanity is used rarely and in context. The gruesome results of war or accident are never horrific; Paulsen includes only those details that communicate the narrator's reaction of fear, sadness, or bewilderment. The passages about sexuality are not meant to titillate; rather they emphasize the narrator's sense of lost innocence and regret for a too-early initiation into one of adulthood's secrets.

Paulsen intends to be thoroughly honest about the events of eighteen months that were his dramatic, intense introduction to the world. His coming-of-age was neither graceful nor lingering but rough and abrupt. He speaks frankly in order to be thoroughly honest, matching a mature tone to the mature subject matter.

Literary Qualities

Like all autobiographers, Paulsen is anxious to describe what his life has felt like rather than to record a thorough, accurate chronology. He aims to give readers what the British author Samuel Johnson called "a map of his mind." Paulsen avoids lengthy descriptions of background information—for example he never names the street he lived on in Chicago or the boat on which he traveled across the Pacific—because a child simply accepts many things as givens in life. He does recall, however, vivid images that haunt the imagination: the grimy face of the drunk who assaulted him in a Chicago alley, a mother desperately trying to save her baby from the sharks, the lizard infested ceiling of their house in the Philippines. He also uses metaphors and similes to describe the emotional impact that events, scenes, or words had upon him.

Eastern Sun, Winter Moon is more a collection of memorable scenes than an intricately woven narrative. Like all good scene writers, Paulsen allows characters to speak for themselves.

(The crispness of the dialogue, supposedly remembered from events of fortyeight years before, underlies some reviewers'—e.g. Tim Zindel—incredulity about how much is memory and how much is imaginative recreation.) Most chapters are discreet scenes built around one central event with a rising action, climax, and denouement. Paulsen seldom draws explicit lessons or interpretations from these scenes, satisfied with the implicit meanings that arise from the contrast in characters' attitudes or from reality's undermining of childhood expectations and hopes.

Themes and Characters

With the exception of young Gary, the characters in Eastern Sun, Winter Moon are grownups, amplifying the influence the often indifferent adult world had on Paulsen's life. Of course, the two most important characters are Paulsen's parents, known simply to readers as Mother and Father. Despite his parents' shortcomings, Paulsen carefully draws them multidimensionally, causing readers uncertainty about whether his parents were flawed individuals or victims of their circumstances. Mother's promiscuous behavior and alcoholism allow her to temporarily escape the problems common to military wives: fear, loneliness, and uncertainty. Although Gary clearly resents her weaknesses, he also admires his mother's strengths. She methodically nurses the mangled victims of a shark attack and unhesitatingly organizes at Okinawa a raid of the ship's pantry to give food to starving Japanese women and children. While she is sometimes emotionally removed from her son, at other crucial times she is close and supportive.

On the other hand, his aloof, rulesoriented, army-officer father never achieves a close relationship with Gary, whom he refers to as "the boy." The bond cementing Father and Mother's marriage is a fragile, liquid one—alcohol. Like his wife, Gary's father copes with the stress of war through an extramarital affair. His father's betrayal and his incommunicativeness with his son during their seven-year separation contribute to the psychological distance between them. Additionally, the warweary man, unlike other soldiers sent home, is ordered directly from the battle in Europe to the occupation in Southeast Asia without furlough or leave.

The other important male characters in this work are sexually involved with Paulsen's mother. Two of his mother's lovers, Casey and Ryland, display indifference toward Gary's physical and emotional well-being. When the boy innocently interrupts a sexual encounter between Casey and his mother, Casey nonchalantly proceeds as the child is watching them. While babysitting him at a party, Ryland goads Gary into jumping from a balcony to prove he can out-jump some Filipino children, supposedly proving white racial superiority. There is, however, one man involved with Paulsen's mother who genuinely seems to care for both the mother and the son—Harding, the corpsman who serves on the transport. Harding is one of the few adults providing a sympathetic view toward the Japanese. Harding feels responsible for the Paulsens' welfare, defending them when people try to take advantage of them.

Maria and Rom, the Filipino house servants, also love Gary and his mother. The house servants become responsible for Gary when his parents become physically and emotionally absent as their drinking increases. Rom, Gary's alter ego, is his equal in isolation from family and desire for companionship.

Despite the difference in their ages, the young Filipino is a combination friend, big brother, and. surrogate father. As they play together, Gary gradually learns about the harshness and futility of war. Maria, too, gives him insight on the war but from a different perspective; the Japanese raped her and killed her entire family, causing her continuing

nightmares. Gary's sympathy for Maria is not shared by the American adults—except Mother—who have no understanding of her experience. His relationships with them develop the autobiography's themes of war's catastrophic effects and racism's insidious, damaging message.

These themes feed into the larger theme of Paulsen's indictment of the adult world. Typically, in his world adult sympathy for or awareness of children is limited and rare because adults are always distracted by something and incapacitated by personal problems. Consequently, the most any child can hope for is to be understood some of the time. With an adult's divided loyalties, a child can never expect to be the complete center of attention.

Topics for Discussion

1. Some reviewers have commented that Paulsen's memory for small and precise details strains the reader's credulity. Do you sense any passages where memory seems to mix with invention?

2. Compare Paulsen's expectations of what his father would be like with his discovery of the man's character. What factors made a seven-year-old's disappointment inevitable?

3. As he grows, Gary gradually realizes that his mother is promiscuous and an alcoholic. Yet he continues to love her. In what ways did Mrs. Paulsen show herself a good mother?

4. Many of the American characters in the book express racist attitudes towards the Japanese and the Filipinos.

What is the basis of these attitudes?

How does Gary react to them?

5. Describing his reluctance to cry in front of Rom, Gary explains, "He wasn't a grown up, and I wasn't a kid."

How do you understand this statement?

6. Paulsen shows that war has dire consequences not only for soldiers in battle but for civilians as well. Discuss the various ways that war insidiously affects the hearts and souls of those— adult and child alike—who experience it firsthand or secondhand.

7. In certain situations Paulsen asks readers to consider whether lying— especially by parents to children for their protection—really is wrong. Do you agree or disagree?

8. Paulsen frankly discusses the "secret nontelling part" of his life. Is he typical of a child's reluctance or inability to share certain ideas or information with parents?

9. Paulsen writes frankly, even graphically, about war, death, and sexual behavior. Do these passages add to or detract from the book?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Paulsen lived through or saw the results of important historical events.

Choose one of the following events of World War II and report on it: a) internment of Japanese-Americans in 1942; b) the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, especially the Bataan Death March; c) the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, d) the American attack on Okinawa.

2. Paulsen never explicitly mentions the title. Evaluate Eastern Sun, Winter Moon as a description of the events of the book as well as its mood or atmosphere.

3. J. G. Ballard wrote a fictionalized memoir, Empire of the Sun, of his childhood spent under Japanese occupation in Singapore. Compare and contrast his experiences with Paulsen's. Compare and contrast the style of his book with Paulsen's.

4. Samuel Johnson wrote a famous essay, Idler #5, explaining the appeal of biography and autobiography to readers. Apply the principles of Johnson's essay to Eastern Sun, Winter Moon.

5. In his Foreword, Paulsen describes how Eastern Sun, Winter Moon originated in memories stimulated by a box of old photographs. Some of these are reproduced in the text. Compare the episodic structure of the work to a series of verbal "snapshots."

6. Assess the place of graphic language and mature subject matter in literature for young adults.

7. Paulsen has generalized that "adults stink." Evaluate the accuracy of the phrase when applied to the adult world of Eastern Sun, Winter Moon.

For Further Reference

Brown, Muriel W. and Rita Schoch Foudray. "Gary Paulsen." In Newbery and Caldecott Medalists and Honor Book Winners. New York and London: Neal-Schuman, 1992: 324-326. This entry lists awards, includes a bibliography, and provides background reading material concerning Paulsen through 1991.

Clark, Carol. Review. School Library Journal (August 1993): 208. Clark recommends the autobiography, saying it "is an unforgettable, riveting story of a dysfunctional family influenced by the circumstances of the era."

Coil, Marianne. Interview. Standing Room Only. National Public Radio.

WFYI, Indianapolis. April 7, 1994.

Coil's interview focuses on Paulsen's recent novel, Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod and his interest in the race, but it does include some recent personal information about the author.

Commire, Anne, ed. "Gary Paulsen." In Something About the Author. Vol. 54.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 7682.

The majority of personal information about Paulsen found in this entry comes from an interview Marguerite Feitlowitz did for another Gale reference series, Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Details of Paulsen's career and a listing of his writings through 1987 are also included.

Devereaux, Elizabeth. "Gary Paulsen."

Publisher's Weekly (March 28, 1994): 70. Devereaux's interview with Paulsen yields information explaining his career's reversal of fortune in 1983, productivity since 1985, and newest efforts. The article also includes other commonly found background information about Paulsen.

"Gary Paulsen." In Authors and Artists for Young Adults. Vol. 2. Edited by Agnes Garrett and Helga P. McCure.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 165173. Lists the author's work through 1988 and draws biographical information from three sources: an interview for this Gale series; a 1986 article in Voice of Youth Advocates; and a 1980 article in Writers's Digest.

"Gary Paulsen." In Children's Literature Review. Vol. 19. Edited by Gerard Senick and Sharon R. Gunton. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 167-178.

Beginning with a summary of Paulsen's work through 1985, this essay's author-commentary section comes from Maryann N. Weidt's August 1986 article in Voice of

Youth Advocates, "Gary Paulsen: A Sentry for Peace." Readers will also find reviews on a variety of Paulsen's work for children through 1988.

Review. Publishers Weekly (January 25, 1993): 78. The reviewer lauds the author's frankness in "this gripping memoir of a tumultuous childhood."

Serdahely, Franz. "Prolific Paulsen."

Writer's Digest (January 1980): 20-21.

Although this article is somewhat dated, Serdahely includes still useful material on Paulsen's early years as an author, his writing habits, and his tips for beginning writers.

Trumpet Video Visits Gary Paulsen. Directed by Diane Kolyer. Trumpet Club, 1993. 24 minutes. The purpose of this video is to introduce children to the author and interest them in his books. Paulsen makes brief comments on Canyons, The Cookcamp, Hatchet, The Monument, The River, and The Winter Room, but the true value of the video is the insight it lends into Paulsen's methods of writing.

Weidt, Maryann N. "The Fortunes of Poverty." Writer's Digest (January 1992): 8. Weidt's brief motivational article for struggling writers is based on Paulsen's recollections of the lean years of his writing career.

Zindel, Tim. Review. Library Journal (February 15, 1993): 174. Although he points out that Paulsen's memory for small and precise details strains the reader's credulity, Zindel recommends the autobiography, saying it is "wonderfully readable."

Related Titles

Many of Paulsen's writings are thinly disguised autobiographical accounts.

Although they may be profitably read as fiction, the following titles are based on personal experience and the central character reflects Paulsen's own feelings about the events: Harris and Me, The Cookcamp, Father Water, Mother Woods, The Madonna Stories, Woodsong, and Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod. In the comic novel Harris and Me, he nostalgically remembers the adventure-filled summer he spent on the Larson farm with his distant cousin, Harris. More of Paulsen's boyhood memories are found in The Cookcamp, which praises his loving and understanding grandmother, who helped him deal with the loneliness caused by frequent separations from his parents. Father Water, Mother Woods is a series of essays about Paulsen hunting and fishing in the North woods as a child. Some excerpts from Eastern Sun, Winter Moon and The Cookcamp are found in The Madonna Stories, a collection of stories intended as a tribute to the strong women he has known. Paulsen's experiences as an adult running the Iditarod are recounted in Woodsong and Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod. Collectively, these books give readers great insight into Paulsen's life and psyche.

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