Harris and Me: A Summer Remembered Short Guide

Harris and Me: A Summer Remembered by Gary Paulsen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

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".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

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Overview

Like The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and many other novels for adolescents, Harris and Me is a book about a special summer. It is rich in autobiographical overtones of Paulsen's own youth when problems with his alcoholic parents sent him at various times to stay with relatives. Me, the unnamed elevenyear-old narrator of the story, finds himself living on the isolated Larson farm far from the friendly town he is used to. The one person near his age and his constant companion for the summer is second cousin Harris, a Tom Sawyer-like nine-year-old, whose initial taunt, "Man, you don't know nothing, do you?" sets the stage for numerous comic adventures.

Quickly the narrator discovers that Harris is a relentless, restless instructor in the chores and games of farm life.

Whether it is milking, playing soldiers in a pen of pigs, or trying to get a fair share of food at mealtime, farm life has its own rules and rituals. Few of them favor the timid and ignorant. To survive—to avoid embarrassment, exhaustion, and exploitation—the narrator learns that he must compete with Harris both physically and by his wits.

There is a rich prize for Me every time he proves that he now knows something. He learns what it means to "belong." Two weeks after his arrival at the Larsons he has all but forgotten he had another life, and he settles contentedly into a rhythm of work, backyard adventure, and biweekly drives to what passes for a town. More importantly, Me learns that the Larsons contentedly accept him, affectionately christened "Gooner" by Harris, as one of the family. The novel ends with a letter to Gooner, again with his parents as Autumn arrives, urging him to "come back home."

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 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.

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 time is the early 1950s. The era is suggested by the popularity of Gene Autry movies and by reference to America's foreign enemies as "Commie Japs," a ludicrous lumping of the United States' old enemy from the Second World War and its new enemy in the Cold War. Only summer's boundaries are marked: the ride in the deputy's car to the farm after the closing of school and the return of the deputy when school is set to re-open.

The place is a farm forty miles north of an unspecified Midwestern city, so rural that the road to the farm is eight miles of unpaved, mud rut track. The nearest "town" is a collection of four dilapidated buildings, the centerpiece of which is the roughhewn "Lumberjack Lownge." Inside the farmhouse cooking is done by woodstove, laundry by hand, and interior illumination by Coleman lamp. The main stage of the action is outside the house: the fields that need work and host play, the barnyard where hostile chickens and pigs lurk, the paths and streams that invite adventure.

Social Sensitivity

Harris and Me is a book that celebrates mischief. It looks with an adolescent's instinctive excitement at activities that many adults would correct or punish a child for. Me knows that no adult would approve of his possession of "dourty peectures" but he is at an age when "hormones . . . dominate my every waking moment," and he finds them useful barter items. Both boys play with abandon in the muck and manure of the barnyard; they may be grossed out by the smell and touch, but they are delightedly grossed out. With normal adolescent curiosity, the pair test cigarettes but find they are not physically prepared for the results.

And of course, such activities usually require a fib or two to disguise them from the adult world.

One hilarious scene, in which Me goads Harris into urinating on an electric fence, has the potential to scandalize some readers. Through the use of euphemism, Paulsen de-emphasizes what could be perceived as crude and makes funny what is incongruous and naive in the prank. Euphemism is the way, after all, most children and adults talk comfortably about body parts.

Literary Qualities

Paulsen uses a device often found in nineteenth-century novels, a subheading for each chapter that cryptically and enticingly previews the action to come. Most of the subheadings are laconic and ironic rather than straightforward. Chapter 6's subhead reads, "Wherein I learn more physics, involving parabolic trajectories, and see the worth of literature." What happens is that Harris and Me, inspired by a Tarzan of the Apes comic book, find a rope and go swinging from the peak of the barn into disaster.

Harris and Me is essentially a collection of distinct vignettes rather than a connected narrative of plot. Each chapter contains its own story with a beginning, middle, and end: playing war by attacking the pigs, hooking up the washer motor to a bike, hunting field mice with Buzzer. Thus the book invites leisurely reading chapter by chapter and leisurely re-reading of favorite episodes.

Paulsen writes lean, economical, classical prose. He prefers to show action and character rather than tell about them, often with laugh-aloud results. He avoids extended description, preferring to capture an event or a person through a few significant details.

Themes and Characters

As characters, Harris and Me are modern-day versions of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. As Tom Sawyer does, Harris audaciously seizes any opportunity for mischief and adventure. His imaginative and inventive nature often produces both positive and negative consequences. He is naughty but not bad; the motives behind his antics are, like many adolescents', driven by his desire and determination to have a more adventurous life than his busy, boring parents.

Similarly, readers will see the parallels between Huckleberry Finn and Me.

The narrator approaches life skeptically after being passed among relatives because of his parents' drinking. Despite his knowledge that Harris's schemes spell trouble, Me abandons caution because the promised adventure is too exciting. He is usually content to follow the younger child's lead, but eventually he gains confidence and creates some memorable excitement of his own.

Ironically, the pair's escapades are virtually unnoticed by the preoccupied Larsons. Paulsen supplies only sketches of the secondary characters, who provide background color to the author's portrait of farm life. Harris's parents, Knute and Clair, are a stereotypical farm couple; Knute, as silent as a monk, is engrossed in planning, plowing, and planting, while Clair orchestrates five performances a day in the farm's nonstop kitchen. Consequently, much of Harris's upbringing is left to his fourteen-year-old sister, Glennis, a mother-in-training with a right hand to be feared. Paulsen completes the farm family tableau with an uncouth hired hand, Louie. His feeding-frenzy manner at the table is balanced, however, by an artistic flair that ultimately gives Me tangible evidence of his place in the Larson family.

Like other Paulsen novels, Harris and Me includes animal characters with humanlike personalities. Vivian, the cantankerous cow, dislikes everyone and kicks anyone who gets close to her.

The barnyard bully is Ernie the menacing rooster, whose surprise attacks on children occur when no adults are present. Buzzer, the Larson's pet lynx, is a crook not to be crossed. Minnie the sow and Bill the horse are gentle creatures until the boys assign them an unwitting role in a rambunctious game.

The animals' aggression against the children exemplifies, here comically, the primal struggle of man versus nature; this motif is a common thread in many of Paulsen's works.

The author turns to a theme common in writers for children since Robert Louis Stevenson and Lewis Carroll: looking nostalgically at childhood as an ideal time of adventure. The sharp contrasts between the world of busy adults and playful children intensify this theme. Deploring the rule-oriented adult world, Paulsen advocates freedom for children, believing in the adage, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull

boy." This is not freedom simply from work and for pointless leisure, but rather freedom for the play, not just of the body, but of the imagination. Through imaginative play the child learns independence, creativity, self-reliance, and the ability to cope with the unexpected but inevitable intrusions of the natural world or the adult world.

Topics for Discussion

1. The disclaimer on the title page describes Harris and Me as a work of fiction, but the author admits most of the book is nonfiction. Why is the disclaimer that "any resemblance .. . to any person living or dead is unintended" necessary?

2. What characteristics make Harris a leader?

3. Discuss various ways that the chapter subheadings add to the reader's pleasure and involvement in the story.

4. Which of the boys' adventures strikes you as the most humorous? The most dangerous?

5. What bonds are established between Me and the Larson family? What role does Me come to play in the family?

6. How much influence do the adults in the novel have on Harris and Me?

7. What are the values associated with living, working, and growing up on a farm?

8. Why do stories need mischievous characters like Harris?

9. Although the novel is primarily comic, what other emotions does the novel stir?

10. What role does imagination play in the adventures of Harris and Me?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Harris and Me to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in one of the following ways: a) as books that appeal to young and old readers alike; b) how children are in conflict with the world of adults; c) similarities and differences in the relationships of Tom Sawyer with Huck Finn and Harris with Me; and d) childhood as a time of freedom and adventure.

2. Using Harris and Me and Beetles, Lightly Toasted, by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, develop a definition of a comic novel.

3. Compare the animal characters in Harris and Me with the animals characters in Hatchet, another novel by Paulsen.

4. Mark Twain says of Tom Sawyer, "He would be President, yet, if he escaped hanging." Apply Twain's observation to Harris and write a character sketch of him.

5. Collect a dozen metaphors that the narrator uses to describe his reactions to his experiences. Use them to write a character sketch of Me.

6. Imagine that Harris and Me are reunited for a second summer. Imitating Paulsen's style, write their first adventure.

7. Agree or disagree with the following statement: "The main appeal of the book is the ability to experience vicarious adventures that no real adolescent could have."

8. Read Paulsen's Hatchet, which is about Brian Robeson's survival in the wilderness, during which he comes to know the animals who inhabit the woods. Compare Harris and Me's relationships with barnyard creatures to Brian's relationship with wilderness animals.

For Further Reference

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

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: 76-82.

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 Hams and Me: A Summer Remembered 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. Agnes Garrett and Helga P. McCure, eds. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989: 165-173.

This reference article lists the author's work through 1988 and draws biographical information from three sources: Marguerite Feitlowitz's interview for this Gale series, Maryann N. Weidt's August 1986 article in Voice of Youth Advocates, "Gary Paulsen: A Sentry for Peace," and Franz Serdahely's January 1980 article in Writers's Digest, "Prolific Paulsen."

"Gary Paulsen." In Children's Literature Review. Vol. 19. Gerard Senick and Sharon R. Gunton, eds. 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 Paul sen's work for children through 1988.

Review. Horn Book (March-April 1994): 205-206. The reviewer applauds Paulsen's voice and tone, saying "nothing is out of place for the char acters, period, and setting."

Review. Publishers Weekly (October 18, 1993): 73-74. This review recommends the novel as "a hearty helping of old-fashioned, rip-roaring entertainment."

Serdahely, Franz. "Prolific Paulsen."

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

This article is somewhat dated, but it includes still valuable 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.

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: Eastern Sun, Winter Moon, The Cookcamp, Father Water, Mother Woods, The Madonna Stories, Woodsong, and Winter dance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod. In his autobiography, Eastern Sun, Winter Moon, Paulsen describes the origins of his disappointment with adulthood and sense that his childhood slipped away too quickly. 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 insight into Paulsen's life and psyche.

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