The Island Short Guide

The Island by Gary Paulsen

BOOKRAGS

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Overview

The Island is the story of a crucial summer in the life of fifteen-year-old Wil Neuton. Uprooted from city, school, and friends when his father accepts a job in rural Wisconsin, Wil becomes increasingly self-absorbed.

His withdrawal is aided by an island which he finds in the middle of a nearby lake, and he begins to spend his days there. Eventually he stays through the night and remains for days on the island, wondering if he will ever go home.

To the island comes a parade of visitors: his recent friend Susan, his newfound enemy Ray Bunner, his parents, a reporter, a counselor, and a television news crew. To protect himself, Wil must fend them all off: Susan with kind words, Ray with his fists, his parents with determination, the counselor with scorn, and the journalists with clever retorts. None of them can understand what motivates him, until his father returns alone for a second visit.

Wil is not simply a teen-ager, however. He is a teen-ager with an instinct for art. On the island he first cultivates an artist's eye, learning to look at, around, and into people and objects.

Next he begins to paint and to write his visual impressions of the world and his memories of family or friends. Surprisingly, the more he studies others, the more he learns about himself.

When the visitors arrive, a new Wil greets them. Although still fifteen as the story ends, Wil has matured dramatically on the island that is friend, parent, and mentor.

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 non-fiction 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 resi dences 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 island sits in the center of a small lake in rural northern Wisconsin.

It is the other central character in the novel: "Wil Neuton discovered the island, or was discovered by it—he was never sure which."

The prologue describes the origin of the island. Sweeping across geological time, the description explains how a glacier scooped out a lake but left a U-shaped clump of earth and rocks almost dead center. Situated on the verge of the great woods stretching northward, the lake never feels the impact of civilization. Tourists never find the lake, named for the useless sucker fish and not even identified on local maps.

The island's thin top soil supports some scruffy trees and timothy grass.

The right and left arms of land jut out protectively to form a bay, with a sandy beach to the left and a jetty of rock to the right. Home to herons, loons, and turtles for centuries, the island lives unchangingly. It sits expectantly, awaiting an inhabitant worthy of its ancient wisdom about the cycle of life and death. It awaits a human being. The island is a teacher ready for a student.

Social Sensitivity

The Island demonstrates that even a good child from an ordinary, normal family can have an identity crisis. The crisis may surface quietly and gradually, especially if the central character has a sensitive, introspective personality. The crisis need not involve overt rebellion, angry exchanges, and antisocial behavior. Rather it manifests itself in passivity, silence, and withdrawal.

Thus the novel lacks the crude language and sensational plot elements that often characterize novels about an adolescent's crisis of identity.

Wil's anxiety is ultimately a spiritual one. It can be mistaken for other things: his father accuses him of using drugs, his mother fears he has joined a cult, and the counselor worries that he does not have the normal hang-ups of young people. Paulsen's criticism of the adult world is constructive. The book is a plea for tolerance and patience in dealing with someone at a turning point in growing up. The best qualities for family and friends to show are a willingness to listen before diagnosing the malaise and a confidence in the new person inevitably emerging.

Literary Qualities

The primary achievement of The Island is its rich characterization of Wil Neuton. The novel is structured recursively to bring the reader again and anew to a deeper awareness of—and ultimately participation in—Wil's experience. At crucial points the pace of the story slows so that Wil's psychological development can be highlighted.

Three devices give access to Wil's interior life. First, Paulsen uses a narrative style that records Wil's words as well as his thoughts. Through indirect discourse, the narrator tells how different Wil's thoughts often are from his words. In many scenes there is a delicious difference between Wil's routine conversation and the witty comment uttered only in his imagination. Although his parents and acquaintances are seldom aware of Wil's feelings, the reader is always in touch with them.

The second device is the epigraph (usually one hundred to two hundred words long) that precedes each chapter. Usually epigraphs are quotations from famous authors, but these come from Wil himself. (Although it is not stated when they were written, the passages seem to come from a diary or journal.) The epigraphs deal with Wil's observations about life's dilemmas and problems as perceived by a sensitive adolescent: the prevalence of blame, the pros and cons of lying, the value of money, and the value of making mistakes.

The third device is the interpolation into the text, at irregular intervals, of Wil's essays and paintings. In these works Wil explores his reactions to people of Pinewood and to the creatures of the island. Functioning like soliloquies in a drama, the essays reveal Wil's impressions in the process of formation rather than as finished products. His mood and opinion often shift as he sifts through new observations and fresh reflections.

Themes and Characters

When Wil comes to be the island's student, he needs its guidance to deal with his parents, his new friends, and himself. His mother and father are good people who work hard: Mom is constantly cleaning the house while Dad works long hours for the highway department and dabbles with get-richquick schemes. From Wil's perspective, they are too quick to turn on the television at night or to bicker over Something Important instead of conversing with their son. Wil is not angered by their behavior, but he is frustrated. So he ignores them as he perceives his parents ignore him.

His new acquaintances, Susan and Ray, bring opposite problems. Susan states her interest in Wil straightforwardly. While she shows him around town, Susan confronts his shyness about girls and asks him what is on his mind. Wil, whose previous "girl friend" never requited his affection, is intrigued by Susan but is unsure how to reciprocate. Ray is the town bully.

He introduces himself to Wil by offering to fight him. Although he is Wil's age, he is more muscular, aggressive, and unthinking.

Thinking, however, is exactly what Wil wants to do. He feels a "great roaring thirst to know things." He seeks out the island as a place of retreat more than a refuge. He has reached a stage in his life where he wants to decide what he has learned and what he wants to learn in the future. "What is important? What endures? What do I know? What have I failed to notice?

What difference do I make in the lives of those I know?" These questions recur as Wil settles in on the island, assuming that no person can help him.

Three creatures on the island do help him. The heron stands patiently and unmovingly on one leg at a time as he fishes in the bay. The heron has a poise that Wil would like to have. Although he practices standing and moving his body as the heron does, he really needs poise for his soul to deal with the feelings Susan stirs in him. The loon sings often, singing in different tones and different keys. Wil learns to distinguish the loon's joy from its sorrow, its anxiety from its contentment. The loon teaches Wil about communication, about learning, which begins with listening. This lesson remains with Wil when his father comes alone to the island. On the other hand, the turtle lies in ambush for its prey. Not just content to eat and swallow, the turtle tortures and devours its victim. The turtle is like a part of Wil, previously unknown, that surfaces when Ray confronts him and stupidly assaults Susan as well.

When he is not studying the lake's creatures, Wil thinks about people he has known. He discovers that his dead grandmother is the one he thirsts to know most of all. He suddenly recalls that at age six he asked her an unintentionally cruel question. Grandmother's response was to open a photo album and guide young Wil through the pictures that sum up her life. One moment haunts him: grandmother's expression when

she looks at the picture of a fiancee killed in the war. On the island Wil "feels the tearing thing" that was in grandmother's eye then.

Lessons from nature and memory give Wil the confidence to respond rightly to each visitor to the island. He talks honestly with the sympathetic reporter, scorns the jargon-spouting counselor, repels the intrusive television news crew, and welcomes his fa ther with renewed interest. The novel ends with the reconciliation of father and son, united now in a desire to care and a willingness to listen.

Topics for Discussion

1. What mood does the prologue set for the novel?

2. How does Emil Aucht embody for Wil everything that is wrong with his new home?

3. What impression does Wil's father's lack of handyman skills make upon his son?

4. Why is biking an appropriate hobby for a character like Wil to have?

5. What is Wil's attitude towards the residents of Pinewood as expressed in his essay, "The Cafe"?

6. In what ways does thinking about his grandmother prepare Wil for thinking anew about his father?

7. Is the frog as important a teacher to Wil as the heron, loon, and turtle?

8. Why does Susan decide not to visit Wil at the island any longer?

9. What is wrong with the counselor's approach to Wil?

10. Does the novel have sufficient plotting to keep the reader's interest?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In a literary dictionary or encyclopedia, look up "kunstlerroman." Apply the concept to Wil's story.

2. Read Siddhartha by Herman Hesse.

Compare and contrast the spiritual journey of its central character to Wil's journey.

3. Read about Buddhism in a religious encyclopedia or short introductory book. Describe the parallels and differences between the Buddhist quest for spiritual perfection and Wil's search for identity.

4. Read Walden by Henry David Thoreau. Compare and contrast Thoreau's year by a pond with Wil's days on a lake. Consider especially the lessons about himself each character learned.

5. Write a series of mini-essays in imitation of Wil's epigraphs. Describe lessons that you have learned about life from small, seemingly inconsequential events.

6. Write Wil's essay about his father, the essay that would describe the relationship that begins just as the novel is ending.

7. Imagine you are the sympathetic reporter who visits Wil. Write the feature story which is mentioned but not reprinted in the novel.

8. Wil writes about other people.

What might they write about him?

Write an essay about Wil from the point of view of Susan, Ray, or Wil's parents.

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 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 Paulsen's work for children through 1988.

McCormick, E. "Author Dedicates Latest Book to High School Librarian."

American Libraries (May 1988): 338.

McCormick's article describes the relationship between Paulsen and Topeka, Kansas, West High School librarian Mike Printz, to whom Paulsen dedicated The Island.

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

Virtually every novel by Paulsen treats the topic of an adolescent coming of age. The protagonists invariably and successfully survive. Some stories end happily; others stop before a resolution is accomplished but with a sense that the worst is over. What varies significantly is the situation in which the central character works out his or her destiny, permanently altering his or her perception and understanding. In general, Paulsen presents two types of situations.

One situation presents a protagonist whose secure, unsuspecting world is disrupted. Just as Wil's universe teeters with the family's move to Pinewood, other main characters have to deal with unexpected change. In The Monument, the quiet life of the thirteen-year-old heroine suffers upheaval when a middle-aged, iconoclastic artist comes to town and shatters many of the grownups' illusions and assumptions. In Dancing Carl the twelve-year-old hero meets the town's most famous, unusual alcoholic who teaches the boy subtle lessons about loving and living. After these encounters, the main characters settle back outwardly unchanged but inwardly matured.

The other situation begins with a character already in the midst of emotional trauma. An unexpected happening adds a physical threat. In Hatchet, the thirteen-year-old hero tries to cope with his parents' divorce. Stranded alone in the woods by a plane crash, he survives danger from starvation and animals and gains the self-reliance needed to handle the emotional upheaval. In Nightjohn, a twelve-year-old slave girl battles interiorly against the system of bondage that enchains her; the struggle becomes life-and-death when she joins a literate older slave in running a "pit school" to teach reading and writing. The punishment for discovery is disfigurement or death at the hands of the overseers and masters.

The Island's theme of the artist coming-of-age also occurs in The Monument, whose heroine, Rocky, learns, as Wil Neuton does, that imaginative and creative expression is the path to, and the ultimate expression of, identity.

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