

The Monument Short Guide

The Monument by Gary Paulsen

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Overview

The Monument records a brief, odd, but important acquaintance between a teen-age girl and a middle-aged freelance artist. Their instant, intense friendship plays out against a background of small town political squabbling over the value and meaning of a public monument.

The action occurs over a few hectic days during a crucial summer in the life and education of thirteen-year-old Rachael Turner, known better as Rocky. Her transformation begins when she meets Mick Strum, itinerant and free-spirited, who has come to a small Kansas town to design the war memorial. In frenetic preparation for a town meeting, Mick sketches the people, animals, and places, with results that often surprise and disconcert residents.

Watching Mick at work, Rachael discovers her talent for art; under Mick's imperious tutelage she begins to draw.

She watches amazedly as Mick survives bar fights and angry town meetings to bring the monument into being: a small grove of oak trees sheltering stone benches and plaques bearing the names of eighteen men from the area who died in America's wars. As soon as the memorial is built, Mick leaves for another commission in Texas. He is accompanied by his newfound love, Tru Langdon, who originally brought him to Bolton.

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

Bolton is a typical Midwestern small town, population 2000. It is the county seat; its courthouse square and park are the literal center and the spiritual heart of the town. Because the monument will be placed here, what it is matters and what it symbolizes is significant to everyone. Around the square is the small business district and a few residences. Around the town are the large farms which underlie the economy.

In her thirteenth summer, Rocky is working at the grain elevator owned by her adoptive father, Fred. It is hot, dusty, dawn-to-dusk work relieved by the parade of familiar personalities as local farmers buy seed and sell grain.

Rocky thinks Bolton is the flattest landscape in the flattest part of Kansas.

Only gossip relieves the tedium and routine.

Social Sensitivity

Rocky and Mick's sense of the weird leads them to irreverent or iconoclastic thoughts. Rocky does not automatically give respect to every adult or social institution; Mick has the stereotypical sensibility that an artist helps the spiritually nearsighted to see clearly and thus refuses to conform. At the orphanage, for instance, Rocky worries that no one will adopt her and she will someday have to get pregnant in order to leave. Mick, in turn, sketches townspeople as he sees their characters and does not worry if they are not flattered.

Yet their observations are never gratuitously mean-spirited or crudely expressed. Rocky and Mick are frank individuals who do not put convention or politeness first. They are classic American pragmatists who judge others only by their actions and who speak—or at least think—their own minds.

Literary Qualities

Rocky is a delightful creation. Like many other adolescent characters invented by Paulsen, she has an exquisite sense of the weird. Her initial meeting with the dog who will become her fast friend is a fine example. The dog's most obvious characteristic is his manginess, a trait that self-doubting Rocky easily identifies with. Yet when the dog steals and skillfully swallows a chicken whole, she remembers a snake in the circus sideshow which fed the same way. Rocky, whose own nickname is surprising for a girl, delights in the incongruity of naming a desperate canine for a sleek reptile. Similarly, Rocky nicknames her favorite nun at the orphanage from an unexpected source: "Gene Autry" after an early cowboy movie star.

As Rocky's mentor, Mick shares her sense of the weird; he is a skillfully crafted foil and complement. When the two interact, the results are wonderful. The Monument 3641 fully comic scenes. The best occurs when they first meet. On her morning walk around Bolton, Rocky sees a roadworn car parked along the street. Its sole occupant is motionless in an awkward position: his head down on the seat and his hips and legs up in the air and out the window. Rocky immediately thinks she has met a "Pervert," the dangerous stranger that well-meaning adults have always warned her against. Slowly Mick awakens from a hangover and struggles to recall where he is and how he got into this posture.

Thus, Rocky is the first Bolton resident to greet and converse with the eagerly awaited, sensitive artist who will design the monument.



Themes and Characters

Rocky is an articulate, lively firstperson narrator. She observes the world shrewdly and speaks her mind frankly because she had to grow up quickly. Abandoned at birth, of mixedrace parentage, and handicapped by a stiff leg, Rocky lived in an orphanage for her first nine years, convinced that no adoptive parents would find her attractive. When an older couple, the Hemesvedts, adopts her, she finds her new parents kindly but distant. In Bolton, Rocky is a loner; she has no companions her age and possesses a jaundiced view of adults that she is not related to. Her only real friend is Python, a mongrel whom she saves from the pound. While not unhappy, Rocky is without special interests, aspirations, or direction in life.

Mick Strum gives her that direction.

Like Rocky, he is a loner and an iconoclast, but he has purpose in life: making people aware of art. Traveling in a beat-up car from commission to commission and seldom clean or sober, Mick delights in the sheer variety of life. He does not play anything safely; he cares little about what people think of him. Mick wants to experience every emotion from anger to joy to sorrow to laughter because they all enrich him as an artist.

The remaining characters become the audience for Mick's preaching about art and through art. Some, like Mr. Takern, listen carefully: he desperately wants Mick's monument to ease the hurt of a son lost in Vietnam. Others, like Tru Langdon, have their assumptions about the purpose of art turned topsy-turvy. Still others, like Fred and Emma, realize something important is happening in the town and are content simply to bear witness. Rocky is Mick's most devoted convert, the one perhaps destined to be his successor in creating art that stirs people up.

Mick is Paulsen's spokesperson for a theory of art. Mick quotes Katherine Anne Porter's definition of art ("What we find when the ruins are cleared away"), which Paulsen also quotes in the novel's postscript. Art is important because it affects the way human beings think and feel about their experiences; it is important because it is often the only beauty that grows out of some loss or catastrophe. What Mick means by art is not the simple representation of how things appear; rather, art is the viewer's insight into something. As Rocky notes when she looks at Mick's sketches, she seems to see inside the person or animal and senses something of the ongoing story around the one moment caught and frozen by the artist's chalk or pencil.

Art's effects upon both individuals and community are major themes. Art has the potential to make individuals more human by increasing their sympathy with other people, other creatures, and the world itself. It is also a mirror in which individual people can judge how close they have come or how far they fall short of their ideals.

Art transforms a community by keeping it connected to its past, both heroic and painful.

Topics for Discussion

1. Rocky decides that "Bolton, Kansas, is a microcosm of the world." How is your town or city like Bolton?
2. In her thirteenth year, Rocky says she learned about "art and life and sex and love." What did she learn about each?
3. What bonds Rocky and Python together? From Python's behavior, what do you guess about his life before Rocky saved him?
4. What bonds Rocky and Mick? 5. Why do some folks get so angry at Mick that they want to fight him, and why do others (like Tru and Rocky) grow to love him?
6. How does Porter's definition of art describe what Mick does for the residents of Bolton? Does it describe what Paulsen's novel does for readers? What art in general does for society?
7. Rocky is excited that Mick uses oak trees as the heart of the monument.
What is the significance and effect on viewers of trees?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the creation of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Find out the controversies surrounding its design and completion. Learn how it is perceived by those whose sons, daughters, friends, and relations are listed there.

2. Go to the nearest veterans' memorial in your area. Think about its structure and location. What are they supposed to mean? How do they affect viewers emotionally?

3. Investigate the origin of holidays like Memorial Day and Veterans' Day.

Compare and contrast their original intention and activities with the way they are currently celebrated.

4. The novel ends with a letter from Rachael to Mick. Write Mick's return letter about his adventures in Westphalia.

5. You are a reporter for the Bolton newspaper. Write an account of the opening of the memorial.

6. Look up the paintings by Degas that Rocky finds in the book which Mick gives her. Reread her impressions as you study the pictures. Select several other Degas pictures and analyze them as Rocky would.

7. Paulsen dedicates the novel to his father, a soldier "who should have had a monument." In his autobiography, *Eastern Sun, Winter Moon*, Paulsen describes his early relationship with his father. Read the autobiography and describe how the son's novel *The Monument* is a monument to Oscar Paulsen.

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 includes a bibliography, list of awards, 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

Paulsen is known primarily as a writer of fiction for adolescent males. *The Monument* is one of his rare experiments with a female first-person narrator. *Nightjohn* (1993) is another. The books have similar central themes: the power of art and language, respectively, to elevate and liberate the mind.

While these themes are gender neutral, Paulsen still creates convincing female protagonists. Each has personal concerns and a mode of expression characteristic of adolescent females.

The Winter Room (1989) also addresses the nature and purpose of art.

Its lyrical preface, "Tuning," is a hymn to the imaginative power of the written word. It celebrates the essence of literary art in the interaction of author and reader in a text to create meaning. *The Winter Room's* attitude toward literature parallels *The Monument's* attitude toward the pictorial arts: insight comes to those ready to look closely. *Dancing Carl* (1983) reflects a similar attitude about the art of the dance. Its protagonist expresses his private feelings in the language of motion and movement which only a patient, openminded viewer can learn to read. Paulsen views the arts as sacred, outward signs of the inward grace in which all human beings partake.



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