

My Life in Dog Years Short Guide

My Life in Dog Years by Gary Paulsen

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Overview

My Life in Dog Years contains stories about several of Paulsen's dogs. A few are sad, but even the sad ones can be funny. For instance, in "Dirk," Paulsen lives in a basement, surviving on what he can earn from setting pins at the bowling alley and selling newspapers in bars and trying to avoid having his money stolen by teenage thugs.

This is a bleak background, but Paulsen tells the story with much vigor, and the descriptions of Dirk chasing away thugs are very funny. Other stories describe disastrous circumstances, but Paulsen seems to attract dogs that love him, at least two of which he characterizes as coming close to being "a live nuclear weapon," and a smart dog or two that were (and in one case, still is) smarter than many humans. My Life in Dog Years is informative reading; it is adventure in the wilderness; it is dogs, bears, skunks, pigs, gardens, and barns; and it is capable of tugging at the heart, but mostly it is fun. The lingering impression from the book is happiness.

About the Author

Gary Paulsen was born on May 17, 1939, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His father served in the military and Paulsen did not meet him until 1946, when the family joined him in the Philippines. Paulsen remembers running wild at age seven, learning about street life firsthand. Eventually, in 1949, he and his parents returned to the United States, moving frequently about the country as his father's postings were changed. He recalls being antisocial and a very poor student until he was a teenager.

He sold newspapers to bar patrons and learned that if he gave them time to have a few drinks, they would pay twenty-five cents instead of ten cents for a paper. One cold day, while waiting for the right time to start selling his papers, he entered a library to get warm. An elderly librarian asked whether he had come for a library card, and Paulsen defiantly said that he had. According to Paulsen, the library card with his name on it made him feel like he was somebody, and he used it to check out books, becoming a voracious reader; he can recall reading only one book before that time.

When he was seventeen, he joined the army, and although he did not see action himself, he served with veterans of World War II and the Korean War and absorbed their accounts of combat. He used these accounts to create realistic experiences for Charley Goddard in *Soldier's Heart*. While in the army, he became an expert in missiles, and after his discharge he found work as an engineer at Lockheed. He eventually worked on satellites.

In the 1960s he changed his direction in life, deciding that he would become a professional writer. His first book, about the Vietnam War, was followed by a river of fiction and nonfiction—a river that was dammed when he was sued for libel for his book *Winterdance* (1977). His publisher gave him far less support than he expected, his finances were drained, and he was dispirited. Even though he won his case, he stopped writing and headed to the Midwest to live in the wilderness. His experiences from that period show up frequently in his young adult books about surviving in the wilderness.

In the early 1980s his life took another turn, this time back to writing. Perhaps his third wife, the artist Ruth Wright, helped him recover. In any case, he began turning out books for all ages. His pace picked up each year, and he not only has become one of America's most prolific writers but has prospered, owning his own ranch in Wyoming. During this period he has tackled controversial topics, often surprising readers with fresh points of view and resisting the stereotype of the tough-guy mountain man.

My Life in Dog Years offers insights into Paulsen's life, beginning as a seven-year-old boy in the Philippines, when he learned to think like a dog and to experience life like a dog. This may account for his everlasting affection for dogs. Although the focus is on dogs, Paulsen's bleak youth is presented unaffectedly, especially the period when he had to cope on his own as a small kid who was easy to beat up and who more or less raised himself after his parents lost themselves in alcohol.

Setting

Paulsen has moved so much and so many times that it is hard to pin down exactly where he is living at any given moment. For instance, as of this writing, an interviewer says that Paulsen lives in Wyoming (which is the likeliest possibility), while a publisher's blurb says that he is somehow in New Mexico and at the Pacific Ocean simultaneously—a feat of geographical flexibility that perhaps only Paulsen could pull off. Thus, the settings for *My Life in Dog Years* wander; adding to the confusion is that the stories are not necessarily presented in chronological order. The novel is constructed as though Paulsen is sitting with some folks and swapping dog stories with them, so the dogs come up in a casual order.

There is a glimpse of the Philippines.

There, seven-year-old Gary saves a puppy from being raised for food in an upriver village. (He has seen a dog strangled and prepared for food while he is there.) He wanders with the dog into the jungle, along streets, more or less wherever the dog's nose says something interesting is to be found. In addition to finding ordinary stuff, such as the ever-present wreckage of war, he finds a cave with Japanese swords in it.

Paulsen and the dog are inseparable, and he learns to smell and look at the world the way a dog does.

He also gives us a glimpse of his street life in the United States. Because his parents are "drunks," he pretty much has to survive on his own. The streets are hostile, populated by toughs with nothing better to do than loiter and beat up and rob little boys, something that happens often to Paulsen. A dog adopts him, however, and takes care of the toughs. Somehow, out of the bleakness, comes a happy ending: the dog finds a happy home on a farm where Paulsen works for a while.

Most of the settings are frontier ones.

Paulsen and his wife (or wives—he has had three but does not distinguish them in *My Life in Dog Years*, so maybe only one, Ruth Wright, is mentioned in the stories) have lived long on the fringes of civilization, raising much of their own food—or trying to—and roughing it. Paulsen takes his dogs on his frequent adventures in the wilderness. On one such adventure, traveling to Alaska to race in the Iditarod, he acquires an already old, little dog that thinks nothing of roughing it; back home he will bury his teeth in the chest of a charging bear to protect Paulsen's wife. Curiously, this fierce little animal lives to a great age in spite of his uncompromising attitude toward larger creatures, even ones with bigger teeth. The frontier settings are rich in country odors, treacherous paths, near-deaths, and a bunch of dogs Paulsen could not live without.



Social Sensitivity

This book is primarily about a man's relationship with dogs. Paulsen makes few attempts to universalize his experiences; he does say that he believes dogs are necessary to civilized living, and he does find a trait or two in his dogs that he can find in other dogs—for instance, Josh's high intelligence seems to be found in other Border collies.

Of significance is the companionship Paulsen has found in dogs. He says flat out that they have saved his life. He begins *My Life in Dog Years* with a story about Cookie, a smart, alert sled dog that knows he has fallen through ice and reacts quickly to pull him out. He starts the book with Cookie because, without her, he says, he would be dead and unable to write the book. He seems to have needed a dog to save him in this heroic way on other occasions. Still, there seems to have been another way dogs have saved him—through their care. Snowball's constant companionship is a godsend for a lonely little boy in a place he does not understand; it is no wonder that Paulsen remembers Snowball as if she were alive only yesterday. Then there is Dirk, a beatup dog that attaches himself to Paulsen for a hamburger and then frightens away the thugs who are compounding the difficulty of the boy's already very difficult life. Dirk is also bodyguard and companion, helping to make loneliness less lonely. The same goes for Ike, who acts like Paulsen's friend, an equal who chooses to spend time with Paulsen. These sorts of interactions can be lifesaving, with the human giving as much as the dog. It seems likely that Paulsen saves Dirk's life, eventually taking the dog to the farm where he works and leaving Dirk behind there after his heart has healed.

Other social issues are touched on but not discussed in depth. There is the problem of unwanted pets and what to do about them. Paulsen adopts many, and he expresses contempt for whoever dumped Quincy by a road, left to be run over, to starve, or, as luck would have it, to be picked up by a dog lover. Human interactions with wildlife form some of the action in the stories. With Ike, Paulsen hunts ducks.

In other stories he tries to create a balance between the needs of his family and the needs of the wild animals who live nearby.

Raising chickens proves impossible because he does not kill the critters that eat them.

His gardens are often raided, but instead of killing the raiders, he and his wife try to grow enough so that even after the raids they have food. This practice results in many pounds of excess tomatoes.

Paulsen's own experiences in the Philippines, on the streets in America, and with alcoholic parents all suggest social concerns, but he remains focused on his experiences with dogs and those concerns are not developed. Why there were idle thugs on the streets beating him up, and whether there were other youngsters hanging on to life one hamburger at a time as he was, are questions he does not explore.



Literary Qualities

Paulsen is a sort of poet of the wilderness, and he paints pictures of it in spare sentences that are vibrant with color, as in "The maples were red gold and filtered the sunlight so that you could almost taste the richness of the light." Paulsen does not waste words, but each story is amply described, with not only colors but smells and sounds making the background of the events he relates seem abundantly populated with life.

Although there is sadness in *My Life in Dog Years*—dogs die sooner than people do—the book is usually happy and uplifting; the stories of the dogs are stories of love with no strings attached, of affection for the sake of affection. The overall impression of the book is of someone sitting and telling some folks about his adventures with some of his favorite pets. The tone is relaxed, the events earthy, and the stories calculated to be pleasing.

This snippet from "Josh: The Smartest Dog in the World" is a good example of what Paulsen offers in *My Life in Dog Years*.

He has spotted a rat in his barn that has run behind a sack: I looked at him [Josh] and told him, "Get ready—get ready now. There's something there. Are you ready? Ready?" until he was excited enough to jump out of his skin, and then I moved the sack and the rat made its break. Josh grabbed it without hesitation but didn't kill it. Holding it in his mouth, he looked up at me in total disgust as if to say, "You fool—I've got a rat in my mouth," then turned sideways and spit it out—he distinctly made the sound ptui as he did it—and then walked away from me.

This is great fun, and the humor is universal enough that one does not have to be a dog lover to enjoy the book.



Themes and Characters

My Life in Dog Years is an autobiography because it is about Paulsen's relationship with dogs, but the dogs are the stars of the book. Paulsen declares: I am—I say this with some pride and not a little wonder—a "dog person." I make no excuses for unabashedly loving them—all of them, even some that have bitten me. I have always had dogs and will have dogs until I die. I have rescued dozens of dogs from pounds, always have five or six of them around me, and cannot imagine living without dogs. They are wonderful and, I think, mandatory for decent human life.

These are the most important facts a reader needs to know about Paulsen for My Life in Dog Years. Other facts come out in his stories of his dogs—that he likes to wander, likes challenges, and can be cantankerous—but that he loves dogs is the key to his outlook and his never-ending kindness to them.

Yet Paulsen likes other animals too. To explain why he took a huge, clumsy, rambunctious Great Dane into his house, he says that he is driven by the thought: If you don't take him, who will? This drive has brought me dozens of dogs and cats, a few ducks, some geese, a half dozen guinea pigs, an ocelot, several horses, two cows, a litter of pigs (followed by more and more litters—my God, they are prolific), one hawk, a blue heron, a large lizard, some dozen or so turtles, a porcupine and God knows how many wounded birds; chipmunks, squirrels and one truly evil llama (am I the only person in the world who did not know they can spit dead level for about fifteen yards, hitting your eye every time?).

He cares about wildlife, although he has hunted ducks. When animals invade his garden, he and his wife try to drive them away without hurting them, even though the law says they may kill the animals that damage their property. This forbearance toward invaders includes bears, although, Paulsen says, he once had to shoot one.

The stars of My Life in Dog Years are, in order of appearance, Cookie, Snowball, Ike, Dirk, Rex, Caesar, Fred and Pig, Quincy, and Josh. "Cookie was my lead dog when I first started to run dogs, and she was also my lead dog in my first Iditarod sled dog race; she took me from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska, when most people—including me—thought I couldn't do it." She is a smart team leader who saves his life when he steps too near the ice around a beaver lodge.

He says that you think "the ice will give way slowly." On the contrary, "it's as if you were suddenly standing on air. The bottom drops out and you go down." Cookie alerts her team of sled dogs and leads them away from the hole, pulling Paulsen up with a dangling rope. This sets the theme for the book as a whole, the dependence of a man on dogs. It is an ancient idea that has often been expressed—Paulsen alludes to Jack London—but Paulsen's friendly tone makes it seem fresh.

The first dog to matter to Paulsen is Snowball. "I was just seven years old," he recalls, when he went with his parents and his father's bodyguard to a village. "The village we



were visiting raised dogs for food." He decides to save one of them, and his mother buys one for him. Life in the Philippines is hard on him: "I was only seven and found myself dropped into a world that was in many ways insane," remarking that "I evolved into being Filipino." This story sets forth another important idea in *My Life in Dog Years*—Paulsen's psychological dependence on his pets. Snowball and he are inseparable, and he learns how to discern odors and how to look for food. Her death is a very sad moment; it is a great loss for a boy with little human contact, and Paulsen claims, "I miss her as much as if she'd just died yesterday."

Paulsen provides other examples of dogs that have taken the edge off of his loneliness. He tells of Ike, "a great barrel-chested black Labrador that became one of my best friends I've ever had and was in all ways an equal." At the time, "I lived and breathed to hunt, to fish," although he is not a good aim. Someone has trained Ike to be a fine hunting dog, one who knows good hunting when he sees it. When Paulsen misses a shot, "he would watch the duck fly away, turn to me and give me a look of... uncompromising pity and scorn." It is sad when Ike stops meeting Paulsen after school, but years later Paulsen learns that Ike's master has returned wheelchair-bound from the Korean War and that Ike stays with him after his return. "That was why Ike had not come back. He had another job."

On the other hand, Dirk is either terrifying or hilarious, depending on where one stands with him. Paulsen first encounters Dirk as a sound: "It was not loud, more a rumble that seemed to come from the earth and so full of menace that it stopped me cold, my foot frozen in midair." Half a hamburger seems to buy passage past Dirk, but Paulsen no sooner escapes Dirk than four young thugs try to rob him and beat him up. He drops into a ball to minimize the damage from their kicks, and then, "there was a snarling growl that seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, followed by the sound of ripping cloth, screams, and then the fading slap of footsteps running away."

The situation is frightening, but it is hard not to share Paulsen's joy that his tormentors have been put to flight. This must have occurred after Paulsen got his library card, because he says that he named the dog after a character in a mystery he was reading.

Dirk, he says, "was Airedale crossed with hound crossed with alligator." The dog shows little affection, although he makes sure to stay close to Paulsen when they sleep, and he goes with him everywhere.

When Dirk again puts the thugs to rout, the scene is one of jubilation: "It was absolutely great. Maybe one of the great moments in my life. I had a bodyguard."

This dog turns out to have more in him than loyalty to the boy who feeds him.

Taken to a farm, Dirk thrives and, according to Paulsen, lives well with the farmer.

The dog even wags his tail when the farmer pets him.

There is some organization to the stories, although it is not chronological. The story of Dirk and the farm leads comfortably to the story of Rex. Paulsen is thirteen or fourteen



years old and working on a farm when he decides to follow the dog Rex through his workday. He discovers that the dog is conscientious: he checks out the entire property, even noting where a skunk has tried to get in at the chickens and later ambushing that skunk and creating a very bad smell. The dog seems to take pride in his work and to regard his life as important, and he never stops working. At night he is outside keeping watch.

Before the faithfulness theme becomes cloying, Paulsen introduces Caesar, an enormous Great Dane. A man who can no longer keep him leaves Caesar at Paulsen's house.

At first the story seems to be sad, because the dog will not eat and just stares at the door. "I have never seen a dog grieve like Caesar," says Paulsen. But when Caesar perks up, he is an explosion. Paulsen opens the refrigerator door for him, and food disappears in sudden gulps. The dog cannot help but knock over furniture. (Paulsen confesses that he eggs Caesar on when his wife is not home.) Caesar "became many things to us—friend, entertainer, horror show," remembers Paulsen, and "I think he would have sold his soul for a hot dog."

"Fred and Pig" is about a dog named Fred and a pig named Pig. A little boy cons Paulsen into buying a small puppy that does his own bit of salesmanship: "I know some people think dogs can't smile, but they can, and he [Fred] did." Pig was intended for food, not to be a pet, but as Paulsen implies often happens, Pig becomes a pet anyway, living to a great age and a quarter-ton. Fred and Pig like hanging out with each other; Fred especially likes the weird slops that are put in Pig's trough.

Fred turns out to be a very determined dog. Pig has been raiding the garden, which has food the Paulsens depend on, so Paulsen eventually puts an electric fence around Pig's pen. When Fred is zapped by the fence, it is war. Fred wins.

Like Fred, Quincy is notable for his determination. This little dog was abandoned beside a road, picked up by a trucker who runs sled dogs, and taken deep into Alaska's wilderness. Quincy runs away and somehow traverses "thirty miles of rivers, swamps, wolverines, wolves and black and brown bears." Heading to race in the Iditarod, Paulsen and a friend take the opportunity to earn a free salmon dinner by building a set of steps in the home of the woman who has taken in Quincy. "When I first saw Quincy he looked like a dust mop that had been dropped in grease and rolled in old coffee grounds." Even so, Paulsen trades a sled dog that would be better off as a family pet for the determined little dog: Quincy "was approximately nine inches high at the shoulder, had four-inch legs and a long tail, and his whole body, including the tail, was covered with ratty, curly hair." In this story, the dog attaches himself to Paulsen's wife, defending her with devotion and courage. When a bear charges his mistress in the garden, "Quincy went for the bear like a fur-covered bullet." He bites into the bear's chest and hangs on. In spite of this and other adventures, Quincy lives to be very old for a dog—eighteen to twenty years, according to a veterinarian. "He should have been named White Fang," declares Paulsen.



Another very old dog rounds out *My Life in Dog Years*. Josh is eighteen to twenty years old as of the writing of his story. A Border collie, Josh "is loving, thoughtful, wonderfully intelligent—frighteningly so at times—and completely and totally devoted to the person he views as his master."

Like Ike, Josh seems to be more than a dog, "he [Josh] is a person," Paulsen asserts. "I do not think in my heart that he is a dog."

Josh seems interested in all aspects of Paulsen's life, picks up quickly what is being done, and participates in whatever needs doing, whether it is cleaning irrigation ditches or entertaining party guests.

"He will do anything I ask and many things I tell him to do, unless he thinks they are too stupid or repetitive or boring." Josh pays such close attention to Paulsen and picks up so quickly what Paulsen is doing that he is "like a spirit, like an extension of my mind."



Topics for Discussion

1. What was the most important thing Snowball gave Paulsen? Why would Snowball remain fresh in his memory fifty years later?
2. Why does Paulsen regard Ike as a friend, not as a pet?
3. Why does Paulsen leave Dirk at the farm rather than take the dog with him?
4. What does Rex get out of the work he does?
5. Is "Caesar: The Giant" a funny or a sad story?
6. Why does Fred's eating tomatoes mean to Paulsen that "Fred had won"?
7. Why does Paulsen say that Quincy "should have been named White Fang"?
8. Why would Paulsen's dogs remember the words "Dairy Queen" and "DQ"?

What does this say about Paulsen's relationship with his dogs?

9. Why does Paulsen say that Josh is "like a spirit, like an extension of my mind"?

How does Josh's behavior illustrate this?

10. Why does Paulsen think that dogs are "mandatory for decent human life"?
11. What overall impression does My Life in Dog Years give of how dogs have shaped Paulsen's life?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who was Jack London? What dog stories did he write? Were any like those in *My Life in Dog Years*? Why would Paulsen refer to him?
2. Who is White Fang? From what book? Write a book report on it.
3. Who were pin setters? Where did they work? What were their jobs? What were they paid? In what years were pin setters needed?
4. Paulsen mentions "Border collie field trials." What are these? Who competes in them? What are the rules? Where are they held?
5. For a time Paulsen has the companionship of Ike, a dog trained for duck hunting. What sorts of dogs are good for duck hunting? How are they trained?

How do a dog and a duck hunter work together?
6. Paulsen says that he could not walk around without treading on spent cartridges and other relics of the war when he was a child living in the Philippines.

What happened in the Philippines during World War II that would have left the islands covered in wrecked military gear?
7. Paulsen's father was posted in the Philippines after World War II. What was life like in the Philippines in the first few years after the surrender of Japan?
8. What is the history of Great Danes? What are their origins? What makes them special?
9. What is the history of Border collies? What are their origins? What makes them special?
10. Quincy is an abandoned dog. How many dogs are abandoned in a year in the United States? Why are they abandoned? What happens to them?
11. There are numerous accounts of dogs throwing themselves in harm's way to protect a person. Why do dogs do this?



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Gale, David. "The Maximum Expression of Being Human." *School Library Journal* 43, 6 (June 1997): 24-29. Commentary on Paulsen's career, with an interview.

Paulsen, Gary. "The Booklist Interview: Gary Paulsen." *Booklist* (January 1, 1999): 864. In an interview by Stephanie Zvirin, Paulsen mentions the importance reading when he was young. "I was an 'at risk' kid, as they are called now, and a poor student," says Paulsen. About *Soldier's Heart*, he says, "It's truth I'm after. No part of the Civil War was nice."

———. *Eastern Sun, Winter Moon: An Autobiographical Odyssey*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993. An account of Paulsen's life during World War II and in the Philippines. Its style is as blunt as that of *Soldier's Heart*. There is an analysis of *Eastern Sun, Winter Moon* in volume 8 of *Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults*.

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Roback, Diane. "Paulsen Inks Long-term Deal with HB." *Publishers Weekly* 240, 6 (February 8, 1993): 10. About Paulsen's relationship with Harcourt Brace.

Weidt, Maryann N. "The Fortunes of Poverty." *Writer's Digest* 72, 1 (January 1992): 8. According to Paulsen, the best writing advice is "learn to live with poverty."

Zvirin, Stephanie. *Booklist* 94, 9-10 (January 1, 1998): 799. Zvirin says of *My Life in Dog Years*: "Paulsen's style has been smoother, but this honest, unpretentious celebration of dogs further entrenches his reputation as an author who is as successful at writing nonfiction as he is at writing novels."



——. Booklist 95, 15 (April 1, 1999): 1382.

Recommends My Life in Dog Years's "sometimes hilarious, sometimes poignant accounts."

Related Titles/Adaptations

Eastern Sun, Winter Moon (please see separate entry) offers a fuller account of Paulsen's life in the Philippines and Snowball than does *My Life in Dog Years*. Paulsen says that the place was insane, and it certainly seems to have been. Destruction was everywhere, and the leavings of the military conflict were always underfoot. The book can be read as an adventure or as the story of a family's dissolution. Much of young Paulsen's desperate loneliness comes through.

Happier memories form the bases for *Father Water*, *Mother Woods: Essays on Fishing and Hunting in the North Woods*, *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod*, and *Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northers: Reflections on Being Raised by a Pack of Sled Dogs*. Paulsen has a good sense of humor, and these books display it, but they also capture some of the majesty of the North American wilderness and are fine tales of adventure. Paulsen mentions his experience racing in the Iditarod in *My Life in Dog Years*; *Winterdance* fills in the details.

Puppies, Dogs, and Blue Northers has somewhat more adult themes than *My Life in Dog Years* but is good reading nonetheless.



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