

# **Nightjohn Study Guide**

## **Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Nightjohn Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1-2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 6-7.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>



## Plot Summary

Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen is set in the South before the Civil War. The story is narrated by Sarny, a slave on the Waller plantation. One day while Sarny is outside the big house, she overhears Waller's wife complaining that her husband has spent \$1,000 on a new slave. Sarny is intrigued but knows better than to ask any questions. The next day, she sees this new slave named John attached to Waller's horse cart pulling his new master back home. Waller is a cruel master who regularly beats his slaves. Waller has stripped John naked and forced him to run through the dirt, pulling the cart by his neck. Immediately, Sarny sees the scars that criss-cross new slave's back. She wonders why Waller would buy a slave that is obviously difficult to train.

That night, in the sleeping barracks, John calls out and asks if anyone has any tobacco to trade. Knowing that John came it naked, Sarny knows that he obviously has nothing to trade; but, at the same time, she is intrigued by his question. She remembers the tobacco she still has stored in her pocket. She asks John what he could possibly trade. He promises to trade her letters, the knowledge of reading and writing. Sarny knows nothing of letters or numbers, except that they are dangerous. Still, she takes John up on his offer. For the next few nights, Sarny and John meet in the middle of the night, when the rest of the slaves are asleep. John traces letters into the dirt teaching Sarny what they look and sound like. From these evening meetings, John earns the nickname "Nightjohn."

One evening Sarny's caretaker, an older woman called Mammy, overhears John's reading lesson. Enraged, she beats John and demands to know why he's putting Sarny in such danger. Slaves caught learning to read or write were beaten, tortured, or killed. John tells Mammy his story. After suffering years of torture and abuse, he ran from his previous owner and made it all the way North. There, he learned to read and write. Empowered, he traveled back to the South to teach other slaves, holding secret night classes at various plantations and escaping to safety before the sun rose. Eventually, he was caught again and sold to Waller. Despite the danger, John passionately seeks to educate the slaves so they can document their histories and create empowered futures. After hearing this, Mammy silently agrees to let the lessons continue.

At the same time, Waller continues beating, torturing, and inadvertently murdering his slaves, which adds to the tension around the plantation. One afternoon, he sees Sarny scratching a word into the dirt and furiously begins beating her. He demands to know who is teaching Sarny to read, but she refuses to tell about John. Enraged, Waller begins brutally whipping Mammy. To stop the unfair torture, John steps forward and admits to teaching Sarny. As punishment for his crime, Waller chops off two of John's toes. John spends a few days healing in the barracks. Then, in the middle of the night, he runs back to safety up north. Thinking she will never see John again, Sarny is surprised when he returns for her one night a few months later. He takes her to a secret camp where he is teaching slaves to read. The story ends with the knowledge that Nightjohn has returned. He will bring hope to the slaves.



# Chapters 1-2

## Summary

Sarny, a twelve-year-old slave on the Waller plantation, opens the novel by saying that this story is just as much about her as it is about Nightjohn. There have been rumors that Sarny brought Nightjohn to the plantation through witchcraft, but she knows it was God that brought him to her. Before she tells the story about Nightjohn coming to their plantation, she tells the reader a bit about the plantation itself. It's run by Master Waller, who is a violent slave-owner. When Sarny was born, she came out backward, which might be what started the witchcraft rumors. Almost immediately, Sarny was separated from her "birth mammy" and given to her "mammy," an old woman named Delie. Delie was responsible for raising all of the newborns. Sarny's birth mammy was sold when Sarny was four-years-old.

Even though she's only twelve, Sarny still works full time on the plantation, doing odd-jobs around the home. Recently, she's been working on the flower boxes, which she enjoys because she can hear gossip from the white women inside the house. When she comes home from work each night, Sarny lies in bed and goes over all she's learned that day. Although she tries to fill her mind with new things, her thoughts always drift back to questions about her birth mammy.

One morning, Sarny is sent to chew tobacco leaves and spit the juice on the rosebushes to kill the bugs that have been eating the plants. The work is atrocious, and Sarny often gags on the tobacco juices; but, it's better than working in the fields. At least, she is able to listen to the gossip. Today, she hears "The Missus," Margaret Waller, tell her sister, Alaine, that Waller has just bought a new slave even though they don't have the money for it. The slave Waller bought cost over \$1,000. Sarny does not understand the value of \$1000. Her only experience with money was when she was young. Sarny found a penny in the dirt, and Mammy told her to hide it or someone would steal it from her. Sarny still digs up the penny from where she's buried it, shines it with her shirt, and admires the metallic sheen.

In addition to not being allowed money, there are many other things slaves are not allowed to have or do, including praying. Mammy is a devout Christian, but she knows that if she is caught praying she will be severely punished. When she feels the need to speak with God, she pulls out the large soup pot and whispers into its opening. Once when she was little, Sarny poked her head into the soup pot and heard Mammy praying that one day she might be free. At the time, Sarny didn't understand what that meant. She added it to her list of things she knew better than to talk about around white folk.



## Analysis

Immediately from the novel's opening, Sarny's voice and character are apparent. The novel is written in slave vernacular, which affects grammar, spelling, and syntax. Therefore, some of the narrative may be difficult for readers to understand. But, the language helps create a vivid portrayal of a slave's voice. In the opening pages, Sarny refers witchcraft and the rumor that she's dumb. Later in the story, Sarny tells more about those issues. This suggests that the novel may actually be written by an older Sarny, the grown-up, literate version of the child protagonist. It's unclear exactly why John chose to take Sarny under his wing. For an uneducated population, witchcraft is a clear possibility. This highlights the ignorance of the slave population, an ignorance created out of oppression, lack of education, and restricted communication.

This opening section identifies the setting and introduces the novel's main themes. Sarny tells the reader the story of her birth and childhood in a matter of fact way. While the idea of being taken away from one's birth mother is harrowing, this was an expected, everyday occurrence during slave times. Infants were often taken from their parents in an attempt to prevent emotional ties within families. Since a mother was likely to become upset over any mistreatment of her children, they were taken away at birth to prevent trouble. Waller practiced this cruel tradition on his plantation. Sarny was taken from her mother at birth; so, other adults stepped in to become parental figures in her life. The most important person was Old Delia, or "Mammy," who was given the job of raising all the infants on the plantation. Despite the fact that she cares for so many, Mammy does her best to provide security and love for the children. Mammy tries to protect the children, especially the girls, from the harsh realities of slave life. Mammy keeps sticks in a jar and adds a slash to each of the girls' sticks each summer as a way of tracking their ages. This way, Mammy will know when the girls should expect their first menstruation, which is when they will be taken to the breeding shed, like animals, for impregnation. Many of the novel's themes are dark and violent, but Paulsen does an excellent job of navigating the adult themes. Although difficult to read, Paulsen manages to create scenes appropriate for young readers that still portray the harsh realities of slave life.

Sarny's memory of finding a penny while digging in the dirt foreshadows her learning how to read later in the novel. Sarny innocently showed the penny to Mammy who, mortified by the danger, quickly told Sarny to hide the penny back in the dirt before someone stole it from her, or worse. Her experience with the penny parallels the way Sarny must keep the knowledge of being educated by John hidden from those who would seek to punish her for it. This parallel also underscores the theme that education is valuable.

## Vocabulary

breeder, trough, pallet



## Chapter 3

### Summary

When Waller brings John to the plantation, he has a rope tied around John's neck. John is naked as he pulls Waller's wagon. Sarny notes how proud Waller looks lordling over his new slave. On most plantations, there's an overseer to punish slaves; but, Waller likes to beat the slaves himself. While John and the horse pull the wagon, Waller screams and swears at him, yanking and jangling the rope around his neck. John's body is covered in old scars, which surprises Sarny because usually scarred slaves don't sell well. John is covered in dust and flies from having been run through the countryside as Waller tried to "break him in." Even when they arrive at the plantation, Waller continues to whip John and force him to run. This proves to John, and the other slaves, and to Waller himself that he is in charge.

That night, Sarny watches John while at the trough for their evening feeding and after all of the other slaves have gone to bed for the night. John doesn't talk to anyone, and no one speaks to him, not even when Mammy hands him the canvas pants she's sewn for him to wear. When most of the slaves are asleep, John hasn't even laid down. He sits in the corner of the room calling in a whisper, asking for tobacco. No one answers him. Suddenly, Sarny remembers the tobacco she's been saving in her pockets to chew for the rosebushes. When she shows it to John, he offers to trade her something for the leaves. Sarny is skeptical. When John came to the plantation, he brought nothing. How could he possibly have anything worth trading? But she's intrigued enough to ask him. John chuckles and offers to trade her letters:

"I knows letters. I'll trade A, B, and C for a lip of chew" (Page 34). Sarny is deeply excited. She doesn't know what letters are, but she knows they have something to do with reading, which only white people are allowed to do. When she was a child, Sarny had traced the letters 100 lbs, which she saw on a sack of grain, in the dirt. When Mammy saw this, she beat Sarny and told her not to ever get caught doing that again: "You learn to read and they'll whip you till your skin hangs like torn rags. Or cut your thumbs off. Stay away from reading and writing." (Page 36).

As soon as Sarny hears that John can read, she drags him outside and traces what she can remember from the sack into the dirt. John tells her that, unfortunately, the letters "lbs" don't mean anything to him and that the first "letters" are actually numbers. Sarny is disappointed, but also she is also amazed that John could tell her so much about her tracing. She hands him a pinch of tobacco in exchange for the three letters he's promised. John slips the tobacco in his lip and writes the letter "A" in the dirt with his thumb. He tells her that when she sees this letter written down, it makes the sound "ayyy" or "ahhh." While intrigued, Sarny doesn't understand why learning to decode letters causes such trouble for slaves. She asks John why white people would kill slaves just for wanting to know what the letters mean. John says, "for us to know things is bad for them ... They thinks we want what they got." (Page 39).



## Analysis

In this chapter, the reader sees John for the first time. Immediately, the reader is presented with strong images of slaves being treated like animals. John is forced to pull Waller's cart as if he were a horse or ox, imagery that echoes back to the idea that slaves are property, less than human. In this novel, the slaves are most frequently compared to livestock. They are treated as chattel, like horses and cattle. Chattel is property, other than real estate. The animal imagery continues when Sarny describes feeding time on the plantation. Mammy prepares hog fat and vegetables from the garden in a pot, and the slaves eat with their hands from a giant trough. At the end of the meal, the children lick milk and cornbread crumbs from the trough, like kittens drinking milk from a bowl.

It is interesting to note that Sarny is confused as to why Waller would buy a slave as scarred as John. Slaves were scarred from frequent beatings, and frequent beatings were usually a sign of behavioral problems. Scarred slaves like John were considered troublemakers. For a sadistic master like Waller, however, having a constant whipping boy was probably alluring. It would also be deeply satisfying for Waller to be the master who could "break" John when those before him had failed. Based on this vicious relationship, the reader can safely assume that John's life will not be easy on Waller's plantation. In everything he does, Waller seeks to dehumanize his slaves. He beats them, mocks them, and abuses them into submission. Waller is undoubtedly a cruel master. However, even if his actions are not those of every plantation owner, his mentality toward his slaves is prevalent. No exact time or place is given for the novel's setting. This underscores the fact that the horrors of slavery were not isolated to a particular place or time.

Finally, in this section John begins to teach Sarny how to read. Sarny knows that white people can read because she's seen newspapers and books through the window of the big house. She also knows it's illegal. Nevertheless, she's young and naïve; so, Sarny agrees that she'd like to learn. Mammy's warning after catching Sarny write numbers in the dirt foreshadows a horrific event later in the novel.

## Vocabulary

speculator, overseer, shackle, whipping, sassafras, canvas, calabash, gourd, skillet, shuck



# Chapter 4

## Summary

After her first meeting with John, Sarny experiences a traumatic event. She tells the story of a girl named Alice. Alice slept near Sarny in the bedroom but was a bit “addled in the head,” which is why Sarny didn’t spend much time with her. The day after Sarny’s first reading lesson, Waller sees that Alice will make a good breeder and sends her to the breeding shed. When she didn’t want to mate, he orders her to be tied down and the breeding men force themselves on her. Afterward, Alice wanders mindlessly around the plantation. She wanders over to the big house in the middle of night. Waller is so enraged that he strips Alice naked in the spring house and whips her until the skin hangs like rags on her back. Then he orders Mammy to get salt and rub it into Alice’s open wounds. The sounds Sarny hears from Alice’s throat are no longer human, and the entire experience traumatizes Sarny deeply. Waller orders that Alice should be left to hang in the springhouse overnight. In the morning, Sarny helps Mammy clean out the maggot eggs laid in Alice’s wounds. Mammy rubs oils and grease in Alice’s wounds to help them heal, and Sarny pins Alice’s hands back so she won’t swat Mammy’s help away. For the next three days, Alice lays on the floor as if waiting to die. She refuses to eat, drink, or speak. Sarny continues to meet with John and talk about the letter “A,” but most of her time is spent worrying about Alice.

Then one night, Alice runs. Sarny has heard of two other slaves attempting to run away to freedom, and both stories ended with death. The first was a man named Jim. When Waller heard Jim had run, he chased him on horseback with his bloodthirsty dogs. The dogs followed Jim’s scent to where he was hiding in a tree and tore him to bloody shreds while he still clung to the branches. The second man who ran was named Pawley, and he didn’t even run to escape. He met a beautiful slave woman on another plantation and started sneaking out at night to meet her. One morning, he fell asleep in her arms and missed the morning bell. Waller sent the dogs after him, too. When he was found, Waller castrated him to prevent him from running after more women. But the cut went wrong, and Pawley bled to death that night without ever making a sound. After hearing stories like this, it is no surprise to Sarny that when Waller hears that Alice is missing, he races after her with the dogs. Since she is weak and slow, he finds her quickly and unleashes the dogs. Although they bite, tear, and maul, Alice refuses to die. Waller calls for a few hands to carry her back to the plantation, and Mammy does her best to sew up the patches of skin she can.

That night, John comes to give Sarny another lesson. Sarny waits until Mammy is asleep and then sneaks out to learn about the letter “B.” John traces the letter in the dirt, as he had done in previous lessons. As he is explaining the sounds he makes, he suddenly collapses to the floor. An enraged Mammy is standing over him demanding to know what he’s doing with Sarny in the middle of the night. She’s figured out that John is teaching Sarny to read, and she is outraged: “What in the hell are you doing? Don’t you know what they’ll do to her if they find her trying to read? We already got one girl





tore to pieces by the whip and the dogs. We don't need two." (Page 54). John explains that, like Alice, he once ran away, but he made it all the way North to freedom. While he was there, he realized that he needed to come back. He needed to empower other slaves by teaching them to read. At first, he sneaked around different plantations in the South, teaching midnight lessons. Eventually, he was caught and returned to slavery, which is how he found himself on Waller's plantation. He sees a future for young slaves like Sarny, but he knows that they need to be literate to embrace it. When she hears this, Mammy turns away without speaking and walks silently back to her bed. John clears his throat and starts teaching Sarny the letter "C."

## Analysis

In this section, Sarny and the reader witness firsthand what happens to slaves who disobey Waller. While Sarny has certainly heard horrific stories of abuse and murder, Alice's beatings are the first she sees firsthand, and the first she sees carried out on a girl her own age. The fact that Alice was once Sarny's playmate highlights Sarny's tender age. Although she's still a child, it's only a matter of time before Sarny, who is already twelve, experiences her first menstruation and is treated like an adult (forced to breed, work in the fields, etc). The small amount of freedom that Sarny feels now will be snatched away as soon as she matures.

The theme of slaves being treated as animals continues with the reference to Pawley's castration and the horrific scenes of Alice's systematic rape and abuse in the breeding shed. Masters schedule the pairing and mating of their slaves. The slaves are mated just like livestock. Strong males are partnered with good-looking females. Female slaves are sent to the breeding shack against their will as soon as they experience menstruation. For the masters, these girls are simply bodies used to breed more slaves. They are viewed as animals and treated as animals. In Waller's mind, there is no distinction.

The violent abuse Alice suffers for disobeying Waller sends a clear message of the danger Sarny is in for participating in her nightly lessons. John tells Mammy that he is putting Sarny at risk because all slaves need to know how to read and write so that they can tell about their treatment. John sees that he can't better the lives of the entire race, but he knows that if he can help record the tragedies that have been carried out from the whites to the blacks, he may inspire change for future generations. For this reason, John is willing to put life and limb on the line to promote literacy among slaves. John's revolt against the institution of slavery is nonviolent, which promotes the idea that words and education are stronger than physical violence.

Although she doesn't admit it, it's clear that Mammy deeply respects John for risking his life to educate the slaves. After hearing John's story, something shifts in their relationship. Sarny doesn't recognize or sense the change, but readers will likely have an emotional reaction to the gaze that passes between Mammy and John. While not romantic, there is clearly a bond forming. Mammy has prayed for years for freedom, and now she is faced with a man who tasted freedom and gave it up for the betterment of



his people. For Mammy, this is as close as she will get to God, or Christian sacrifice. In this moment, Mammy joins John on his crusade, even if her only action is one of silent support.

## Vocabulary

addle, baying, plantation, bramble, fetch, cower, scrabble, gaggle



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Life continues as normal. The slaves work in the fields. Waller whips the slaves. John teaches Sarny. Although brutal, Sarny finds a sense of comfort in the plain repetition of her days. She is so comfortable, in fact, that she forgets the danger of her lessons. She has learned the letters A-G and spends her days daydreaming of new combinations and new ways to form words. While working in the garden, she takes a stick and proudly scratches the word "BAG" into the dirt. All of a sudden, Waller appears and grabs her by the dress. Enraged, Waller demands to know who is teaching Sarny to write. "Don't know nothing about writing," Sarny says, but Waller knows it's a lie and starts beating her. Somehow, she manages to escape from his violent grasp and sprint back to the shed, to the safety of Mammy's arms. But, she should have known better. Waller chases her to the shed. After seeing the bond between her and Mammy, he grabs Mammy and drags her out to the spring house. Sarny is mortified. She saw what happened to Alice out there, and she knows that whatever happens to Mammy will be entirely her fault. After Waller chains Mammy to the spring house and leaves, Sarny begs Mammy to forgive her. Mammy is surprisingly calm: "He would have whipped me anyway someday. Some other reason would have come along. He loves to use the whip" (Page 66). Mammy realizes that Waller won't whip her until dark, when the rest of the slaves have returned from the field and can watch, which means that she'll be hanging here all day in the beating sun. She tells Sarny to bring her water when no one is looking, to care for the babies (who will need changing soon), and to prepare the rags and oil for her back. Sarny is overwhelmed and emotional, but she does her best to make things right with Mammy.

When the slaves finish in the fields for the day, Sarny rushes to John and tells him what Waller saw and what he's planning to do to Mammy. John is upset, but he realizes there is nothing he can do. When Waller finally emerges from the house, Sarny is surprised that he doesn't have his usual whip. Instead, he harnesses Mammy, naked, to his cart and whips her with the riding crop while forcing her to pull the cart like an ox. None of the men lift their eyes from the ground as Waller whips and shouts, "Faster, damn it, faster" (Page 71). Unable to bear the abuse any longer, John steps forward and says that he is the one to blame, that he is the one teaching Sarny to write. Waller can barely contain his glee as he forces John to chain himself in the spring house. Rather than unleashing on him with the whip, Sarny is horrified to see Waller drag out an old stump, used for chopping the heads of chickens, a chisel, and a hammer. "It is wrong to learn to read," Waller says (Page 73). "It is against the law for you to read. To know any letters ... Punishment, according to the law, is removal of an extremity." Sarny has never heard the word "extremity" before, but watches with sick fascination as Waller unceremoniously chops off a toe from each of John's feet. Sweat pours from John's face, but he refuses to cry out in pain. When he's finished, Waller spits and walks back to the house without looking back. Sarny rushes toward Mammy and John. With the help of two hands carrying them back, she immediately starts dressing their wounds.



## Analysis

This section is the literary climax of the novel and the section to which most of the novel's foreshadowing has alluded. Sarny has learned to write basic words. In her naïve excitement, she has exposed her new knowledge to Waller. When faced with the catastrophe of her "crime," all the relationships that have been forming burst fully into fruition. Mammy puts her safety on the line when Waller catches Sarny writing. Like a true mother, Mammy recognizes the value of Sarny's education and is willing to sacrifice her own safety to ensure Sarny learns to read. Similarly, John believes Sarny should be taught to read and write, no matter the cost. He shows Sarny affection, as a father would, and nurtures her future. Like Mammy, John puts his safety on the line to protect his "family." Two of his toes are cut off after standing up for Mammy.

The scenes of Mammy and John's torture is also a coming-of-age for Sarny. She is no longer an innocent child. She realizes the horrific gravity of her actions. She must face the heartbreaking guilt like an adult. She no longer has Mammy to protect her. Instead, she must protect Mammy. She takes over the caregiver role by bringing water to Mammy as she hangs in the spring house. She takes over Mammy's role of caring for the babies, and she prepares the bandages for what she knows will be a terrible whipping for Mammy. It's interesting to note the historical details Paulsen brings into the novel, a clear sign of his rigorous research, such as the disturbing detail of Mammy refusing food. Even though she is hungry in the spring house, she knows Waller's beating will cause her to throw up. The scene of John having his toes chopped off is also historically accurate. While this novel is written for young readers, it does not shy away from the extreme trauma and violence of slave life. While some students may be uncomfortable with the novel's violence, these scenes add depth that allows the reader a glimpse into a historic world made believable through the language and descriptions.

It is also interesting to note why Waller is so incensed by Sarny's education. Historically, slaves were forbidden from learning how to read or write because slave owners, like Waller, feared their education. If slaves were literate, communication within the plantation and with other plantations would be much easier, heightening the possibility of escape or revolt. Additionally, slaves who could read and write could also promote "learned" ideas, like civil rights and freedom. It was in the slave owners' best interest to keep their slaves uneducated and afraid. For this reason, Waller instilled devastating punishments on those he caught reading. He made all of his other slaves witness the punishment so that their curiosity about literacy was curbed.. Waller's violent actions against Mammy and John show his evil spirit. They also show how afraid Waller is of losing control of his plantation.

## Vocabulary

shirt dress, scribble, extremity, swoon



## Chapters 6-7

### Summary

John lies in the shed for three days recovering. Mammy, who is also recovering from her whipping, nurses his wounds and cleans him. The first day, John lays staring at the ceiling, not speaking or looking at anyone. The second day, he calls Sarny over: "H," he says. "The next letter is H" (Page 79). Mammy walks into the room and starts smiling, which shocks Sarny. When Mammy warns John that Waller will kill him if he catches him again, John whispers that he's planning to run. He'll take two more days to heal, and then he's running back to the North. He flirts with Mammy and says that he wishes he knew her in another life, and Mammy keeps smiling. After the reading lesson, John asks Sarny to bring him some rawhide from the barn so he can make himself shoes. Two nights later, Sarny watches John slather lard on the rawhide of his crude shoes, and then she says goodbye. John promises to come back someday, but Sarny doesn't believe him.

Once again, John proves Sarny wrong. He doesn't come back immediately, but he does show up in the middle of the night in winter. When the sun rose after John's escape, Waller was livid. He took his dogs and trekked John's scent for two days before coming home empty-handed. When Mammy saw Waller return alone, she wept and told Sarny it was because she was happy. Before he left, John had taught Sarny the letters A-J, and she was a bit upset that he had left before finishing her alphabet. She tried to supplement her education by forming as many new words as she could think of, but she lived in constant fear of Waller's wrath. Sarny's fear grew when she got her first period and knew that it was only a matter of time before Waller would find out. Then, he would drag her to the breeding shed. Mammy tried to console her, but her comfort comes when John reaches out for her in the night. He takes Sarny off the plantation and to a night school he's formed between neighboring plantations.

Inside a dark shelter known as a "pit school," slaves from various plantations have gathered to learn how to read. John passes around a catalog of items the slaves could buy if they ever had any money. Sarny is overwhelmed when she sees all the beautiful things white people can buy, things she knows she'll never own, and she starts to cry. Then she sees a photo of a horse with a feedbag strapped over its mouth and nearly cries out. She knows the word on the page is " bag." John's laughter fills the school, and he promises Sarny that one day, she'll know all the words on the page.

The final chapter, entitled "Words," is a short homage, almost like a poem, written about Nightjohn. It describes how late at night, when all the white folk are sleeping, John comes walking with words. "Late he come walking and it be Nightjohn and he bringing us the way to know" (Page 98).



## Analysis

In this final section of the novel, all of John's work comes to fruition. Once again, Paulsen fills these scenes with historically accurate research, particularly about John's escape plan, that brings resonance and truth to the narrative. John steals rawhide from the shack to make shoes. He rubs pepper and lard on the soles to confuse the dogs. John has escaped North many times before, and readers will likely trust that his plan will be successful this time as well. At the end of the novel, it's revealed that John sneaks back and forth between plantations every night without getting caught. It's interesting to note that even though John has a successful escape scheme, this is not the information he shares with other slaves. He realizes that in the long run, education is far more important than simply escaping slavery. Sharing his secrets may help one slave escape, but spreading literacy might save his entire race.

There are lovely moments of tenderness between Mammy and John in the days before his escape. It's clear that there is some romantic connection between the two, but John would never sacrifice his mission for his personal pleasure. While he might have enjoyed a pleasant life with Mammy, it would still be in slavery, and he would never be truly free to love her. When Mammy learns that John has made it safely to the North, she bursts into happy tears. John's escape is a victory for everyone on the plantation. One of their own has tasted freedom, and it gives everyone hope.

Since Mammy and John's abuse at the spring house, which was a coming-of-age moment for Sarny, it becomes clear that she has reached full maturity and is now considered a woman. It is no coincidence that John returns to the plantation to resume Sarny's education at just this time. Now that Sarny has reached menstruation, she is more at risk than ever to the harrows of slavery. John's arrival ensures that she still has hope. It is interesting to note that Paulsen based Nightjohn's story on a real slave, whose biography is almost identical to Nightjohn's. Therefore, great credence should be given to the idea of pit schools – which are historically accurate – and the impact Nightjohn had on the slave population in the area. Interested students should be encouraged to research the “real” Nightjohn.

The final chapter of the novel, “Words” is the only titled chapter in the novel. This signals to readers that Sarny has, in fact, learned all the letters in the alphabet and become literate. The chapter is much more lyrical than the previous chapters, which suggests that an older Sarny has written it. This chapter seamlessly guides readers to the next book in the series, Sarny, a Life Remembered.

## Vocabulary

hobble, pitch, slat



# Characters

## John “Nightjohn” Waller

John Waller is an escaped slave who returns to the South with the mission of teaching other slaves how to read. Like all slaves, John has taken on the last name of his owner, Waller, and his true birth name is unknown. When the reader first meets John, Waller is driving him back from town the way he would cattle. John is naked with a shackle around his neck. He is pulling Waller’s cart like a horse would do. Immediately, Sarny, the novel’s narrator, notes the scars that criss-cross John’s back and wonders why Waller would buy such an obviously difficult slave. While hankering for tobacco leaves on his first night at the plantation, John trades Sarny letters for a lip full of shredded tobacco. As their friendship deepens, John reveals that he was once an escaped slave who made it all the way to the North. There, he learned to read and write before returning to the South to teach other slaves the importance of literacy: “They have to read and write,” he said. “We all have to read and write so we can write about this – what they doing to us. It has to be written” (Page 58). Even after Waller discovers John teaching Sarny to read, and cutting off his toes, John – who by this time has earned the nickname “Nightjohn” for his late-night lessons – does not give up his mission. He successfully escapes to the North from Waller’s plantation and returns in the evenings to continue teaching Sarny and many other slaves how to read.

## Sarny Waller

Sarny Waller is the novel’s twelve-year-old protagonist and narrator. Like all slaves, Sarny has taken on the last name of her master, Waller. She knows very little about her actual birth parents. All Sarny knows is that she was taken from her birth mother soon after delivery and given to Mammy, the slave who raises all the newborns. Sarny doesn’t know how old she is, but she knows that she hasn’t yet reached the “troubles” of maturity that lead to girls being sent to the breeding shed. Mammy has protected Sarny from men’s prying eyes and from the hard work in the fields. Sarny passes her days doing odd jobs around the plantation, mostly working in Waller’s garden and helping prepare the food. Sarny’s life changes completely when Waller purchases John, and he begins teaching her to read during their nightly meetings. Sarny is excited to partake in something illegal, and she doesn’t understand the true gravity of her actions. One afternoon, Waller catches her scratching the word “BAG” into the dirt with a stick. Furious, Waller begins ruthlessly beating Mammy hoping that the true culprit, the one teaching the slaves to read, will step forward. John admits his guilt and has two of his toes chopped off. Then, Sarny realizes the danger of her education and also its value. If John is willing to risk life and limb to teach her how to read, it must be important. At the end of the novel, Sarny has resumed her nightly lessons with John and has even begun tutoring slaves herself.





## Old Delie / “Mammy”

Old Delie / “Mammy” is the slave who acts as a mother to all the infants born on Waller’s plantation. Waller seeks to break bonds between slaves, especially the bonds between mother and child, which is why he rips the infants away from their mothers at birth. Mammy is an old slave, ill equipped for working in the fields. So, she tends to the children until they are old enough to join the fields or be sold. Despite the fact that she is mother to so many children, Mammy does all that she can to protect them from Waller’s violent temper. When Waller catches Sarny writing, he beats Mammy ruthlessly, but she does not give up the true culprit (John). Mammy recognizes the value of Sarny’s education and is willing to sacrifice her own safety to ensure Sarny learns to read.

## Clel Waller

Clel Waller is the plantation owner and master to all the slaves therein, including John and Sarny. Waller is a ruthless master who regularly beats and dehumanizes his slaves. Waller is adamant that his slaves not learn to read, and he has no qualms about severely punishing or killing those who defy his orders. From the moment they are purchased, Waller seeks to dehumanize and “break” his slaves in search of blind submission. It is clear from the first pages that he is a very cruel master.

## Alice

Alice is a teenage slave with a mental disability. Despite her “addled” brain, Waller sends her to the breeding shed when she reaches maturity. At the breeding room, she is raped. Deeply traumatized, Alice wanders around the plantation, even wandering up to the “big house” where Waller and his family live. Enraged, Waller whips Alice until the skin hangs from her back like rags. Distraught, Alice attempts to runaway in the middle of the night, but Waller unleashes his dogs on her, who shred her body even further. Despite all this abuse, Alice refuses to die and is a symbol of resilience in the face of pure evil.

## Jim

Jim is the first slave Sarny ever heard of who tried to run away. Jim managed to get away from the plantation and climb a tree, but Waller unleashed the dogs that bit and ripped all the meat off Jim’s legs. He died from his wounds, but his hands never lost their grip on the tree.

## Pawley

Pawley is the slave who met a girl from another plantation. He would sneak off in the night to meet with her. One night, he fell asleep in her arms and didn’t make it back to





the plantation in time for the morning meal. Waller assumed Pawley had run/ He chased after him. When he discovered Pawley with a woman, Waller attempted to castrate him, but Pawley died from his injuries.

## **Robe**

Robe is the slave charged with helping Waller chop off John's toes. It's clear that Robe does not want to participate in the horrific abuse, but he has no choice when Waller threatens to chop his toes off as well.



# Objects/Places

## The Waller Plantation

The Waller Plantation is where the novel is set. Sarny was born on the plantation and will live there until she is sold to another plantation, runs away, or dies.

## The Breeding Shack

The Breeding Shack is where Waller sends physically mature girls to mate. Waller sends the girls as soon as they have their first period and forces them to mate against their will. Sarny lives in constant fear of the breeding shack, especially after seeing the effect it had on Alice.

## The Spring House

The spring house is where Waller prefers to carry out his whippings. He typically whips his slaves in the spring house in the evening after forcing the punished slave to hang in the sun all day. He makes sure that all the field hands will be around to witness the attack.

## Bag

Bag is the first word Sarny learns to write. Excited, she constantly traces the word with her finger and even writes it in the dirt with a stick. When Waller catches Sarny writing “bag,” he beats her, Mammy, and John.

## North

North is the ambiguous heaven Sarny has heard about but actually has very little knowledge of. She knows that slaves who runaway all run north and that slaves who make it north are free. Although Sarny can grasp at these concepts, she doesn't fully understand them. She does not understand the physical geography of the poles, or the political landscape of the United States.

## The Pit School

The Pit School is where John teaches night classes at the end of the novel. The pit school is located between a few plantations, so a larger number of slaves can sneak away and learn at night. John teaches the classes at night and hides safely from the slave catchers during the day.



# Themes

## Slaves as Animals

There are many references to the slaves as animals throughout the novel. More than likely, this is because imagery echoes back to the idea that slaves are property, less than human. The slaves are most frequently compared to livestock, like horses or cows, which carries the symbolism of chattel. Chattel, defined as an item of property other than real estate, is most frequently used to describe slaves and livestock, so the imagery fits. The reader first sees this parallel when Waller forces John to drive the buggy to the plantation with a shackle around his neck, as if he were a horse. This dehumanization is the same punishment bestowed on Mammy when Waller catches Sarny writing. These comparisons are set up to expose the way society viewed slaves as insignificant.

Readers will also sense the comparison of slaves and animals with the reference to the breeding shed. Not only did masters often sleep with their slaves (which is not mentioned in this novel), they also scheduled the pairing and mating of their slaves. The slaves are mated the same way livestock would be. The strong males are partnered with good-looking females. Female slaves are sent to the breeding shack against their will as soon as they experience menstruation. For the masters, these girls are simply bodies used to breed more slaves. They are viewed as animals and treated as animals. In the master's mind, there is no distinction.

## The Value of Words

Perhaps, the strongest theme in the novel is that of literacy's power. Historically, slaves were forbidden from learning how to read or write because slave owners, like Waller, feared their education. If slaves were literate, communication within the plantation and with other plantations would be much easier, heightening the possibility of escape or revolt. Additionally, slaves who could read and write could also promote "learned" ideas, like civil rights and freedom. It was in the slave owners' best interest to keep their slaves uneducated and afraid. For this reason, Waller not only instilled devastating punishments on those he caught reading (and even the threat of death), he ensured that all his other slaves witnessed the punishment. This curbed their curiosity about literacy. Waller's violent actions against Mammy and John show his evil spirit and fear. Waller is afraid of losing control of his plantation.

At the same time that John and other slaves like him realize the value of recording history. John sees that he can't better the lives of the entire race. However, he knows that if he can help record the tragedies that have been carried out from the whites to the blacks, he may inspire change for future generations. For this reason, John is willing to put life and limb on the line to promote literacy among slaves. John's revolt against the institution of slavery is nonviolent, which promotes the idea that words and education



are stronger than physical violence. Indeed, when looking back through history, the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment and the outlaw of slavery happened not because of violent uprisings but because of education. The novel's final chapter, "Words," leaves the reader with a feeling of hope. It is the only titled chapter in the novel, which suggests that Sarny has indeed become literate, which leaves the reader with a resounding feeling of hope.

## Parental Love

As was typical during slave times, twelve-year-old Sarny has no recollection of either of her birth parents. Infants were often taken from their parents in an attempt to prevent emotional ties within families. This kept mothers from getting upset about the way their children were being treated. They wouldn't make trouble. Waller practiced this cruel tradition on his plantation. It is likely that Sarny's mother was impregnated in the breeding shed. It is unlikely that she would have known which man was Sarny's father. Then, Sarny's mother would have been sold after Sarny's birth. Because Sarny was taken from her mother at birth, other adults step in to become parental figures in her life. The most important is Old Delia, or "Mammy," who is charged with raising all the infants on the plantation. Despite the fact that she takes care of a house that is filled with young children, Mammy does her best to provide security and love for all of them. Mammy tries to protect the children, especially the girls, from the harsh realities of slave life, and even puts her safety on the line when Waller catches Sarny writing. Like a true mother, Mammy recognizes the value of Sarny's education and is willing to sacrifice her own safety to ensure Sarny learns to read.

Similarly, John becomes like a father figure to Sarny. John believes Sarny should be taught to read and write, no matter the cost. He shows Sarny affection, as a father would, and nurtures her future. Like Mammy, John puts his safety on the line to protect his "family." Two of his toes are cut off after he stands up for Mammy. The novel hints at a flirtatious relationship between Mammy and John, creating the illusion of a nuclear family within the terrible constraints of plantation life, although their relationship never turns romantic. Both John and Mammy value Sarny's future and are willing to sacrifice everything to ensure that she is given an education. In this way, Sarny finds parental love despite Waller's effort to destroy family bonds.

# Style

## Point of View

The point-of-view of the novel is first person, limited omniscience narration, told from Sarny's perspective. The point-of-view is reliable, as Sarny does not have the education or the motivation to manipulate the audience. This point of view is important to the novel so the reader can be given access into Sarny's thoughts and emotions, particularly because she is usually silent and wouldn't be given the opportunity to voice her feelings aloud. Through her thoughts, the reader learns about Sarny herself and the plantation, including the tension between slaves and master. The main conflict of the novel occurs on Sarny's journey to read, and her thoughts help create a deeper understanding of slavery during the 18th century. The story is told mostly through exposition with scenes of dialogue. It is completely filtered through Sarny's thoughts and emotions. As a result, the reader sees the world solely through her eyes. While living on the Waller plantation, Sarny spends much of her time alone at work, so hearing her thoughts and emotions is extremely important for the reader to understand what is happening in the novel.

## Setting

Nightjohn is set on the Waller plantation, somewhere in the South before the Civil War. The actual time and location of the novel's setting is not explicitly stated, which suggests to readers that the horrors of slavery were not isolated to a particular place or time. The reader gets very little physical description of the Waller plantation. All that is revealed is that there is a "big house" where the Wallers live, a spring house, a breeding shack, a sleeping shack, and fields (although the crop is never revealed) where the slaves work. Aside from these few landmarks, there is little description to orient the reader in time or place. This disorienting setting makes clear reference to the world Sarny would have known as a slave. She has no understanding or inkling of the world outside of Waller's plantation, no knowledge of time or dates, and no comprehension of political movements. Because the novel is told in first-person narration, it would be almost impossible for the reader to receive such clues of setting, particularly from such a young narrator.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is very conversational, written from the point-of-view of a young, uneducated slave child. The main narration clearly comes from a child's point-of-view, and is written in slave vernacular, which affects grammar, spelling, and syntax. Therefore, some of the narrative may be difficult for readers to understand, but the language helps create a vivid portrayal of a slave's voice. It is also important to note that while this novel is written for young readers, it does not shy away from the extreme trauma and violence of slave life. While some students may be uncomfortable with the



novel's violence, these scenes add depth that allows the reader a glimpse into a historic world made believable through the language and descriptions.

All of the exposition is told through Sarny's perspective, which is interesting because she is clearly the most naïve slave in the novel. Despite the fact that Sarny often doesn't understand the ramifications of her actions – writing “bag” in the dirt, for example – the details of the novel are presented in a way that the reader can often glean information from the events, giving them an even deeper understanding of the slave society than even Sarny has. Although the novel is set over 150 years in the past, the history is well researched, and the language is accessible, giving all readers access into the world of slavery without much confusion.

## Structure

Not available.

## Quotes

But you can't remember what isn't there and no amount of thinking on it will make it come to my brain.

And there I was, with the tobacco in my dress and he said that I didn't know what letters was, nor what they meant, but I thought it might be something I wanted to know. To learn.

My life is short, but some live long and the one thing we know, short or long - it's wrong to run. Not wrong because it's wrong. But wrong because nobody ever gets away.

They have to read and write. We all have to read and write so we can write about this – what they doing to us. It has to be written.

I make the word. I couldn't believe it. I came to make the word. Don't matter what the word is, what it means. Just to make the word. The first word.

He would have whipped me anyway someday. Some other reason would have come along.

All the time I'm thinking, be a hell, be a good hell with fire and brimstone and devils cutting skin off backs like Mammy says. Be a good goddamn hell with demons eating at you, pulling your guts out – be the worst hell there is to be. And put Waller in it.

Late he come walking and it be Nightjohn and he bringing us the way to know.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

What role does tobacco play in the novel? How does it support the theme of trading, bartering, and objective value? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

## Topic 2

How is slave life described in the novel? List at least five ways in which Waller ensures that his slaves are stripped of their freedom. Which seems most invasive to you? Why? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

## Topic 3

Describe Sarny's relationship with Nightjohn. In what ways is he a friend, father, and caretaker to her? How has slavery affected their relationship and the way they interact with each other? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

## Topic 4

Why don't more slaves run from nasty owners like Waller? Why do the rest of the slaves view John's successful escape as a victory for themselves? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your argument.

## Topic 5

How does Sarny's life change when she learns how to read? Do you think the process will have a positive or negative impact on her life? Why? What message does Paulsen send the reader by naming the final chapter of the novel, "Words," and not the rest? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.

## Topic 6

Based on the textual clues, what do you think life on the plantation will be like for Sarny in the coming years? Paulsen has written a sequel to this novel, entitled *Sarny: A Life Remembered*. What plot might this novel follow? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.





## Topic 7

What is the earliest age group that you think this novel would be appropriate for? Why is it important to learn about the horrors of slavery? Do you think Paulsen does a good job of balancing the atrocities for teenaged readers like yourself? Why or why not? Be sure to include examples from the text to help strengthen your arguments.