The Rifle Study Guide

The Rifle by Gary Paulsen

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The Rifle is the story of a flintlock rifle that is made just prior to the Revolutionary War in Pennsylvania. Through a remarkable series of circumstances, the Rifle makes its way to 1993, where it figures in a tragic accident.

A man named Cornish McManus establishes his own gunsmith shop in 1768. McManus is a visionary and a very skilled gunsmith, and after finding a remarkable piece of maple gun stock, he decides to craft his life achievement, a "sweet" rifle of tremendous quality and accuracy. He spends the next months painstakingly crafting the Rifle. The Rifle is far more accurate than most any gun existing at the time due to McManus' innovation, care, and artistry.

Though McManus does not wish to part with the gun, he meets a woman he marries and he needs money to raise a family. A woodsman named John Byam takes a liking to the Rifle. McManus sells the gun for a year's worth of animal hides from Byam. Byam then gets caught up in the American rebel fight against the British, leading into the American Revolution. Byam becomes a folk hero in the Revolution, with his long-range sniping of British officers becoming the stuff of legend.

Byam dies of dysentery, and the Rifle is handed off to a woman named Sarah. It remains dormant in an attic for many decades until it is discovered. After more changes of ownership, the Rifle is eventually purchased by a "gun nut" named Tim Harrow at a gun show. Harrow in turns trades it to a man named Harv Kline, and the Rifle finally ends up hung above Kline's fireplace.

The story changes directions to describe a fourteen-year-old boy (in 1993) named Richard Mesington. He grew up in Colorado and moved to Missouri when he was seven. His early life is described in some detail, including his career aspirations (construction worker, archaeologist, major-league baseball pitcher), his romance with a girl named Peggy, his love of sports, etc. By 1993, it is clear Richard has great promise and a limitless future.

Fate now intervenes. Richard's family lives next door to the Klines. Christmas comes, and Kline places a couple Christmas candles he got from work onto his mantle. The burning candles melt the wax that had been placed (by Byam) into the hole of the Rifle between the still-live gun powder and the striking plate. As Richard adjusts a Christmas ornament on his tree in his living room, Kline stokes logs in his own living room. Kline trips, sending a shower of sparks into the air from the logs. One of these sparks enters the hole of the Rifle, causing the loaded Rifle to fire. It travels into the window of Richard's home and kills the boy instantly, striking him in the head. No one in all the years of the Rifle's life had bothered to check if it was loaded. The story ends with the Rifle in the gun case of another man named Tilson, seemingly waiting for its next victim.

The Weapon, pages 3 to 33

The Weapon, pages 3 to 33 Summary

In 1768, a gunsmith named Cornish McManus establishes a new gunsmithing shop west of Philadelphia. He had apprenticed for fourteen years under a man named John Waynewright. Waynewright is well known for developing a new method of "rifling" (or adding grooves to the bore of a gun). Rifling is a relatively new development that aids a bullet's accuracy. Previous smoothbore guns were quite inaccurate by contrast.

Most rifles made by gunsmiths are functional guns of middling quality for hunters and farmers. However, great smiths are capable of making what's called a "sweet" rifle, a once-in-a-lifetime kind of rifle that is a work of art. Though technically skilled, Waynewright lacks the genius or vision to produce a sweet rifle. In fact, Waynewright scolds McManus for producing careful drawings of intricately-designed rifles, though McManus persists in daydreaming about creating a sweet rifle and hides his drawings from his master.

McManus gets his own shop, and usually he is busy with mundane gunsmithing. However, one day he gets a bundle of "blanks", or gun stocks cut by a carpenter intended to be carved into rifles. In this bundle is a very special piece of "curly" maple, which contains tiny knots called bird's eyes, which will make for a very handsome piece when finished and stained. McManus is taken by this piece of maple and decides to make his masterpiece, the sweet rifle.

The manufacture of the rifle is painstakingly described. McManus can only work on the rifle in the evenings by candlelight because his days are taken up by more mundane gunsmithing. He first makes the barrel of the rifle, which takes six months. He chooses to make the barrel .40 caliber. Although most rifles at the time were .58 or even .75 caliber, McManus chose .40 caliber because he knew that a smaller caliber meant more accuracy, and he wanted the rifle to be as accurate as possible.

After many months, McManus rifles the barrel, and he takes a cue from his former master Waynewright by making a complete rifled turn in only thirty-five inches of barrel length. He did not know it, but thirty-five inches is actually the ideal length of this rifled turn, with respect to a .40 caliber rifle. The rifling itself is a tough, arduous process, in which the barrel is turned dozens of time on a wooden rod with steel teeth that slowly etch the rifling grooves.

The barrel is not done yet. McManus polishes the barrel again and again, using very fine sand until it has a mirror-like finish.

The next step is to stain the barrel, and for that McManus uses a rag dipped in cow urine and then another rag dipped in refined cooking grease.

With the barrel done, McManus works on the wooden stock next. Contrary to prevailing gunsmith custom, he cuts the curve of the stock butt only about half as severe as other guns of the period. This will increase the gun's accuracy and help with recoil.

McManus next turns to cutting grooves into the wooden stock so that the barrel of the rifle fits snugly into the stock. The hardness of the maple wood and the additional hardness of the bird's eyes knots makes cutting difficult, and perhaps because of the slowness with which McManus must operate, his grooves are perfectly made, fitting the barrel like a glove.

A flintlock rifle such as this one requires many different parts - the hammer, the pan (in which fine powder is held to be struck by the hammer), the trigger, the striking plate, and the hammer springs. These components must all be perfectly aligned for the weapon to fire accurately. McManus works on each of these parts with great care. A brass butt plate is finally applied, and after more polishing, the gun is ready.

McManus thinks the rifle is so beautiful that he does not wish to sell it, even though it is greatly admired in his shop. It comes time to shoot the rifle to test its accuracy, and McManus draws a V-shape on a tree and marches thirty paces away before carefully lining up to shoot three balls. After shooting, he comes back to the tree and is crushed when he discovers there is only one hole at the bottom of the V - only one shot was apparently accurate enough. However, he digs out the ball from the tree and discovers there is not one ball but all three balls in the same hole. He had never heard of such an accurate test, and he knew then he had made a great rifle.

The very next day after the test, McManus meets Clara, the young daughter of a customer. They are immediately smitten, and soon McManus asks for her hand in marriage. He knows he must now raise money to start a family, and his only thing of value is the rifle. Soon after, a woodsman named John Byam comes into the store and takes a liking to the rifle. Byam is an expert shot, and he shoots the limb off a tree with the rifle at an incredible eighty paces. Byam offers his year's worth of animal hides as well as his packhorse for the rifle, so taken is he by the weapon. McManus agrees to sell the rifle for the hides only, which are by themselves quite valuable.

What both men don't know is that the American Revolution is brewing at that time, and soon Thomas Jefferson would be writing the Declaration of Independence, and a war with England would take place.

The Weapon, pages 3 to 33 Analysis

Paulsen begins his story with a significant amount of exposition with respect to gunsmith Cornish McManus, and how he came to be in a position to craft the perfect, "sweet" rifle. The level of specificity and amount of details that Paulsen uses to craft McManus' life lends credibility and authenticity to the story, as is characteristic of the historical fiction genre.

While an average man in some respects, McManus is given the trappings of genius by Paulsen. McManus is a dreamer, a man who imagines fantastic and not-yet-realized firearms, drawing them on parchment. Paulsen sets up a clear contrast between the dreamer McManus and the technically skilled but essentially visionless master gunsmith, John Waynewright. While Waynewright is an expert at crafting ordinary rifles for fowling and hunting, he is unable to dream and fantasize about the crafting of a "sweet" rifle.

For McManus, gunsmithing is an art form, and the Rifle of the title is his masterpiece, his Mona Lisa or La Pieta. As such, Paulsen takes great pains to describe every single step in the process of the rifle's crafting. Much like a painter might agonize over a brush stroke, McManus agonizes over the coloring of the stock or the rifling of the barrel. The level of detail Paulsen incorporates not only demonstrates to the reader that the Rifle is very special indeed and that McManus' process is an artistic one; it also provides interesting historical tidbits about early American gunsmithing that will probably not be known to the general reader.

Though the level of detail is immense, Paulsen's prose is spare, with an air of authority and objectivity. Paulsen's omniscient narrator is usually detached from the events he is describing and is simply a presenter of information. This is probably due to the fact that, as a young adult piece of fiction, The Rifle is intended as a vehicle to spark classroom debate and offer multiple perspectives on the issue of guns in America and American gun culture.

As it stands, Paulsen "deifies" this special rifle to such an extreme that it seems like a willful character that has taken on a life of its own. This quasi-personification of the rifle will become more important as the weapon is handed down through the years, culminating in the central debate of whether guns are in and of themselves inherently dangerous, or if guns are simply tools that are neither good nor evil.

The Weapon, pages 33 to 66

The Weapon, pages 33 to 66 Summary

Byam happens to travel from McManus' shop to an area around Bainbridge Farm. Mr. Bainbridge is a nice man who frequently offered travelers lodging. Unfortunately for him, he lets a group of American rebels hide cannon powder on his farm. The British find out about this and consider it treasonous, the penalty for which is death. And so Mr. Bainbridge, at the time Byam happens on his farm, is being fitted for a noose around the neck, to be hanged.

Having no love for the British, Byam pulls out his new rifle and shoots the commanding British officer conducting the hanging in the throat, killing him. Mr. Bainbridge is nonetheless hung in the ensuing chaos. Byam shot from such a distance that the Redcoats' smoothbore guns have no chance of reaching him; nonetheless, he flees into the forest when they pursue him on horseback.

Byam runs into a group of American rebels called McNary's Rangers. Byam tells him his story and how the British are after him, and the Rangers ask Byam to join them. He agrees, and in the following couple of years. he battles in various skirmishes in the American Revolution. Byam and the Rangers join George Washington's army at New York, who are engaged in difficult trench warfare. Armed with a superior rifle, Byam becomes a kind of folk hero as he picks off British officers on horseback from unheard-of distances. One of the Americans' strategies is to kill officers, as the enlisted Brits often lose their nerve without a commander.

Byam dies an ignoble and painful death contracting dysentery (like many other soldiers) by drinking dirty water. A woman named Sarah, who has heard of Byam's amazing rifle, takes it for her own sons, fighting in the war. Unfortunately, they both die from an artillery shell explosion. Heartbroken, Sarah takes the rifle to her home in Connecticut and places it in the attic, where it remains forgotten.

The house changes hands several times over the proceeding decades, and eventually ends up in the hands of three generations of a wealthy New York family. All the while, the rifle is forgotten and is still in the attic. Finally, the house is sold to the family of an editor, and the editor's two young children discover the rifle in the year 1993. The editor's wife forbids a gun in the home, and so the editor sells the rifle for twenty-five dollars to an antique store.

The antique store owner sells the rifle for a profit to a gun collector, who in turns sells the rifle for three-hundred fifty dollars at a gun show to a thirty-five year old man named Tim Harrow.

Tim Harrow is described as a conservative and Christian member of the National Rifle Association, and a defender of the second amendment of the Constitution, the right to

bear arms. He is also against "Big Government," and he drives around in a motor home and operates only with cash so that the government cannot track him. Harrow's passion is firearms, and he knows much about muzzle velocities and bullet arc and the like. However, Harrow knows technical details but not history, and so he doesn't know how special and old the rifle is.

While traveling, Harrow's fuel pump on his motor home goes out, and he is stranded at the gas station/body shop of one Harv Kline. Kline tells Harrow the repair will be four hundred dollars, but Harrow doesn't want to pay that much, and so he offers Kline the rifle as a barter. Kline only accepts a barter after Harrow sweetens the deal by throwing in a painting of Elvis Presley he happened to have. More excited about the Elvis painting than the rifle, Kline absentmindedly hangs the rifle above his fireplace at home.

The Weapon, pages 33 to 66 Analysis

If the first half of "The Weapon" was about deifying the Rifle and building it up, the second half of "The Weapon" is about demystifying the Rifle and tearing it back down. The Rifle goes from a pure artistic instrument at the gunsmith's shop to a weapon that kills in Byam's hands. Throughout the American Revolution, Byam displays a certain artistry of his own, given his skill with the weapon and his incredible feats of accuracy, but his artistry is the artistry of death. The Rifle has been removed from a state of idealization in the shop to being sullied on the battlefield by fulfilling its purpose, to kill.

As if to underscore the apparent death of romanticism with respect to the Rifle, Paulsen's detached narrator provides a list of ignoble happenstances. Byam dies not as a war hero, but of cramps from dysentery. McManus is hanged by the British. Sarah's sons are killed by artillery. None of the romance and adventure inherent in the Rifle's making appears to have followed it. Instead, there is simply death and misfortune.

The present day (1993, around the time when the book was written) damages the romance further, in the character of Tim Harrow. Abandoning the objective, detached style for a moment, Paulsen offers plenty of scathing commentary for Harrow, offering the reader insight as to which side of the gun debate Paulsen supports. Harrow represents a politically right-of-center American, and Paulsen gives him several contradictory qualities in order to make him appear foolish and wrongheaded. Harrow has a vast knowledge of guns, but no knowledge of history. Harrow blindly supports the National Rifle Association and the second amendment, feeling that gun ownership is essential to freedom, but Paulsen seems to take a particular pleasure in dooming Harrow to stomach cancer, as if to render Harrow's life quest a fool's errand through use of irony. Other right-of-center stances - such as suspicion of "Big Government" — are summarily mocked with subtle jabs or ironic asides. It becomes quite clear via Harrow's characterization that Paulsen does not agree with the right-of-center view of gun rights.

Also noteworthy about the latter half of "The Weapon" is Paulsen's emphasis on the seeming randomness of the gun's travels and ownership changes. Paulsen often points out that history could have happened differently at certain critical junctions in the life of

the Rifle, making the tragedy that the book is building toward all that more senseless and inexplicable.

The Boy

The Boy Summary

A boy named Richard Allen Mesington is born. The year is 1979. He is a sickly, quiet infant, and given to ear infections. He was born in Colorado, where his father was a construction worker, but the family eventually moved to Missouri, where he resides in the present day of the novel (1993) as a fourteen-year-old boy.

As a young boy growing up in Colorado, Richard's constant companion is a border collie named Sissy. Sissy is initially jealous of the attention the parents give to this new "intruder," and she tolerates him as he tugs on her ears and fur. Richard grows up adventuring around the local woods, trying to sniff out scents like his best friend Sissy.

Sissy grows to love the boy very much, and follows him everywhere. Together they venture far from the house on outdoors adventures, causing Richard's mother to worry.

One day, Richard watches in amazement as heavy construction equipment is used at a neighbor's house, and the construction men allow Richard to sit in the seats of the backhoe and other vehicles. Richard becomes smitten with the construction equipment, and wants to grow up to be a construction worker. However, like a typical boy, he soon picks up new interests, and in the span of a few years Richard dreams of becoming a great many things.

The family moves to Missouri when Richard is seven. One of Richard's neighbors is Harv Kline, the man who bought the Rifle from Tim Harrow. Richard grows up as a typical boy, becoming best friends with a boy named Dennis and getting a crush on a neighbor girl named Peggy. They become boyfriend and girlfriend in an innocent, pre-teen way. By the time Richard is fourteen, he is crazy about sports and has memorized all the stats of his favorite players. His life as a fourteen-year-old is filled with typical dreams for what he would do as a job, romantic feelings for Peggy, and schoolwork (Richard is a slightly above-average student). He dreams of being a major-league pitcher, but he likes science and thinks that if baseball doesn't work out, he will become a doctor or teacher. His life at fourteen is full of promise and he is excited for the future.

The Boy Analysis

In "The Boy", author Paulsen sets up a parallel story construction in which the Richard's life and birth seemingly is compared to the Rifle's life and birth. This parallel construction emphasizes the personification of the rifle, and the sense that the Rifle is a living thing with agency.

Like the Rifle, Richard's life and times are treated with a great deal of specificity. This level of detail helps to make Richard a rounder, more real character that the reader can identify with (and thus react with horror and sadness at his inevitable demise). The fact

that Richard is a typical, completely innocent boy - so full of potential, and with no knowledge of the evil lurking on Harv Kline's fireplace - make him a truly tragic figure. The final paragraphs of "The Boy" drive this tragic aspect home, with Richard contemplating teaching or medicine or athletics, smitten with a childhood sweetheart, and otherwise living the perfect American boy's life. It is clear the boy has a nearly limitless future, making the accident to follow all the more senseless and horrible.

At the same time Paulsen provides many specifics for Richard's life - born in Colorado, raised in Missouri, girlfriend named Peggy, border collie named Sissy - Richard never speaks and is never given much of a personality. By doing so, Paulsen is intimating that Richard is an archetype for the typical American boy, and that the fatal accident to follow is not particular to Richard's life or lifestyle choices. It could have happened to anyone, making The Rifle ultimately a cautionary tale to all young people out there.

The Joining, and The Rifle

The Joining, and The Rifle Summary

The Joining: The narrator, at the beginning of the section called "The Joining", finds it remarkable that, in all the years the Rifle has existed and considering all the people who have handled it and owned it, the Rifle has never been checked to see if it was loaded. However, perhaps this is not surprising, especially with respect to more modern owners who would not know how to check to see whether a flintlock rifle is loaded or not. The only way to check is to stick the ramrod in the barrel and measure its length; if there is a ball loaded with gunpowder, the ramrod will measure slightly shorter than it would if the rifle was not loaded.

Because the flintlock rifle took so long to load, it was often carried or otherwise left fully loaded. This caused many accidental firings when it was in widespread use, such as on the Oregon Trail.

The narrator notes that black powder is highly explosive, and that the slightest spark can ignite the powder. On sailing ships in the eighteenth century, the powder room well below deck had absolutely no lamps hanging in it for this precise reason. However, when exposed to air for a long period of time, black powder tends to soak up moisture from the air and thus become less effective and finally ineffective over time.

Unfortunately in this tragic tale, the last person who loaded the weapon, John Byam, was particularly careful about packing the powder. He used grease in such a way as to protect the powder from moisture, and furthermore, when Byam packed it last it happened to be raining, which compelled Byam to stuff a bit of wax into the hole that connects the pan (where the spark originates) to the charge in the barrel. This wax has mummified to the present day, where the Rifle hangs above Harv Kline's fireplace. The result is that the powder inside the Rifle was well-protected and still quite volatile.

Christmas comes in 1993, and Harv Kline gets a couple of Christmas candles from his work. He sets these candles on the mantle, below the Rifle. Christmas Eve comes, and in parallel action, Kline lights his candles as Richard (in the house next door) checks the Christmas tree in the living room and adjusts an ornament. There is a breeze in the Kline home, and a candle flame leans just close enough to the wax in the hole of the Rifle to melt it.

Next in this series of tragic events, Kline decides to stoke the fire. He grabs the poker, but he stumbles on a corner of the carpet, and winds up pulling a log out of the fireplace with the poker, causing several sparks to rise up. At the level of individual sparks, a few scatter harmlessly but a single spark enters the hole of the Rifle that leads to the powder charge. There is immediately a loud crack and smoke fills the Kline home.

The ball leaves the gun, hits a door frame, becomes deformed (which changes its trajectory), and hurtles through the window of Richard's home. The culmination of these events is that Richard is struck by the ball right above the eye. The ball tears through his skull and he immediately falls down dead.

The author last lists all the events that Richard will miss because of this tragic accident, everything from thousands of movies to getting married to finding a cure for heart disease as a doctor.

The Rifle: This brief section deals with the aftermath of Richard's death. Richard's mother is overcome with grief, and she must be confined to a mental institution. Harv Kline blamed himself and became an alcoholic, and four years later he died in a drunk-driving car accident. Before Kline drove, he dumped the Rifle into the river.

However, a man named Tilson saw Kline dump the Rifle, and he used a fishing rod to fish the Rifle out of the water. Tilson, like Tim Harrow before him, believes that guns don't kill people, people kill people, so he thinks nothing of cleaning the Rifle and setting it above his own fireplace. Tilson then reads an article in a gun enthusiast magazine about antique powder rifles, and he toys with the idea of loading the Rifle up and seeing how it fires. On this ominous note, the narrator ends with stating that the Rifle is "waiting" in Tilson's gun cabinet - presumably waiting for someone to kill next.

The Joining, and The Rifle Analysis

Paulsen begins "The Joining" with a kind of condemnation against human nature, noting the failure of any previous owners of the gun to check if the gun was loaded. For Paulsen, this type of shortcoming is precisely the reason why the Rifle is so dangerous. In essence, Paulsen appears to be saying that the majority of humans are not responsible enough to have guns in existence, and that foolish accidents are always bound to happen.

What next follows is an intricate, almost Rube Goldberg-like series of events (Rube Goldberg being a cartoonist famous for drawing intricate machines that accomplished simple tasks). In setting up this mechanism, Paulsen fatally connects two people - John Byam and Richard Mesington - across centuries. Throughout, Paulsen emphasizes the random chance of the whole accident, and how if things had just happened slightly differently, Richard would still be alive. The conclusion of this emphasis on random chance, in keeping with Paulsen's anti-gun stance, is that guns cannot be properly contained or accounted for. Guns, as instruments for killing people, cannot ever be fully stripped of that lethal capacity. Guns indeed kill people, and Paulsen mocks the pro-gun bumper sticker slogan, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" in his prose.

To drive home the tragic nature of Richard's death, Paulsen lists the exact number of sunsets, movies, career accomplishments, etc., that have been robbed from Richard because of the fatal gunshot. Again, specificity - as provided by Paulsen's omniscient narrator - lends a kind of crushing reality to the moment.

The final line of the book is, simply, "Waiting", as in the Rifle is "waiting" in Tilson's gun case. This completes Paulsen's personification of the Rifle, via the pathetic fallacy. The pathetic fallacy lends human characteristics to an otherwise inanimate object. Realistically, the Rifle could not of course "wait", as it has no mind and no willpower. By personifying the Rifle, Paulsen's anti-gun bias is on full display, and the Rifle becomes a kind of horror movie monster, lying in wait for its next victim.

Characters

The Rifle

As the author, Gary Paulsen, consistently personifies the Rifle of the title, it seems appropriate to list the Rifle as the central character of the novel. The Rifle was created around 1768 by Cornish McManus, an apprentice gunsmith who had just opened a new store in Pennsylvania. Enamored of a special piece of "curly" maple stock, McManus set about to create his life's work, the Rifle, a masterpiece of beauty and engineering.

The Rifle features several innovations that separated it from other rifles of the time, and especially from smoothbore guns that had no rifling whatsoever. The length of the rifling in the barrel is actually close to the perfect length for the caliber of bullet chosen, resulting in remarkable accuracy. And the stock of the gun (the wooden part) was sloped in an innovative way for even more accuracy.

Paulsen depicts the Rifle as an ominous and even evil presence, as it remains forgotten through the ages, abandoned in a Connecticut home's attic. It is discovered by children, and then is passed around until it reaches the fireplace of Harv Kline. It had been loaded the whole time, and a series of tragic coincidences results in the gun firing and killing Richard in the living room next door.

In the end, the Rifle "waits" in a gun case for its next victim. Considering its foolish, ignorant owners, there is a great chance it will be mishandled and that it will kill again.

Richard Mesington

Richard, in 1993, is a fourteen-year-old typical American boy. He was born in Colorado, and spent several years of his boyhood in a town named Willow. His constant companion during this time is a border collie named Sissy, who is initially jealous of the attention Richard's parents spend on the boy, but who eventually comes to love the boy dearly and follow him around constantly.

When Richard is seven, his family moves to Missouri. Richard goes through entirely typical boyhood experiences. He changes his mind about a hundred times when it comes to deciding what he will be when he grows up, from construction worker to doctor to pitcher in the major leagues. He becomes best friends with a boy in the neighborhood, Dennis, and he develops romantic feelings for a girl named Peggy. By the time he is fourteen, his future appears to be limitless. He is hard at work at school, he loves sports, and everything is going great.

His life is cut tragically short by the Rifle and the strange quirks of destiny. The reader is told by the omniscient narrator that Richard otherwise would have lived a long and fulfilling life, and he would have even become a doctor and developed a cure for heart

disease. As it stands, Richard is certainly a tragic figure, the innocent victim of a single rifle and, in a larger sense, America's love affair with the gun.

Cornish McManus

This gunsmith fashions the Rifle of the title over many months. The Rifle is his life's achievement as a gunsmith. He later sells the gun to John Byam to help start a family. Soon after, however, he is accused of helping American rebels and hung as a traitor.

John Byam

Byam is a woodsman who trades a year's worth of pack hides to McManus for the Rifle. He is a crack shot, and given the Rifle's own accuracy, the two are an unstoppable pair, killing many British officers from afar during the American Revolution. Byam dies of dysentery from drinking dirty water.

Sarah

Sarah takes the Rifle from Byam's belongings after Byam dies. She intends to give the Rifle to her sons, but they both die in war. Despondent, Sarah takes the Rifle to her Connecticut home and places it in the attic, where it remains for many decades.

John Waynewright

Waynewright is a master gunsmith, and the master to Cornish McManus prior to McManus opening his own shop. While Waynewright is technically proficient, he lacks the vision or passion to craft a "sweet" rifle.

Tim Harrow

Close to the present day of the novel (1993), Harrow inherits the Rifle from a gun show, and trades it to Harv Kline in exchange for fixing the fuel pump on his motor home. A "gun nut", Harrow loves weapons, is a member of the National Rifle Association, and is a fervent defender of the second amendment of the Constitution.

Harv Kline

Kline is a mechanic at a gas station who inherits the Rifle from Tim Harrow after fixing the man's fuel pump. Kline thinks nothing of the consequences of having a rifle in the home, and pays the price when the Rifle fires, killing his next-door neighbor Richard. Blaming himself, Kline becomes an alcoholic and dies a few years later in a drunk driving accident.

McNary's Rangers

These volunteer militiamen were American rebels who fight against the British and eventually join the proper army in the American Revolution. Byam joins these men.

Peggy

Peggy is Richard's childhood sweetheart, who agrees to become Richard's girlfriend. At the time of his death, Richard is smitten with Peggy.

Tilson

A man identified only as Tilson fishes the Rifle out of the river after Harv Kline threw it off a bridge in disgust. Tilson is a gun enthusiast, and he cleans the gun up and puts it in a case. By the end, Tilson is considering loading the Rifle to see how it fires, and it is clear the Rifle may continue to wreak havoc.

Objects/Places

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Cornish McManus establishes his gun shop west of Philadelphia in 1768.

New York

Byam and McNary's Rangers join General George Washington as the American army fights the British during the American Revolution.

Curly Maple

McManus fashions the stock of the Rifle from curly maple, a type of maple that features flame-like striations. Curly Maple is prized for its beauty.

Bainbridge Farm

Byam sees his first action with the Rifle at Bainbridge Farm, where Mr. Bainbridge is being hung for stashing cannon powder for American rebels. From a great distance, Byam shoots and kills the British officer presiding over the hanging .

Elvis-on-Velvet Painting

Harv Kline is not quite convinced by Tim Harrow to fix Harrow's fuel pump just for the Rifle, so Harrow offers him an Elvis Presley painting in addition to the Rifle. Kline accepts, being a rabid Elvis fan.

Connecticut

Sarah stores the Rifle in her home in Connecticut after the American Revolution. It remains abandoned in the attic of that home for many, many decades, until discovered by the children of an editor.

.40 Caliber

McManus chooses to make his Rifle a .40 caliber rifle. Most other contemporary rifles feature larger calibers, but McManus knows that a smaller caliber means more accuracy.

Christmas Candles

Harv Kline brings Christmas candles from his work to his home, and places them on the mantle below the hanging Rifle. When lit, one of the candle's flames melts the wax placed in the hole of the Rifle between the charging plate and the powder, setting the scene for later tragedy.

Willow, Colorado

Richard Mesington spent several of his youngest years in the town of Willow, Colorado, exploring the nearby wilderness with his trusty border collie, Sissy.

Missouri

Richard Mesington and his family (along with Harv Kline) reside in Missouri (town not specified) at the time of the fatal accident with the Rifle.

Themes

Guns Kill People

With The Rifle, author Gary Paulsen takes aim - pun definitely intended - at right-of-center Americans who argue passionately for gun rights and advocate for the Constitution's second amendment, the right to bear arms. Paulsen directly quotes the National Rifle Association (NRA) bumper-sticker slogan that "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" in order to refute that sentiment. The entire narrative trajectory of the novel, with its intricate physics and chance encounters, seems to stress that guns are perfectly capable of killing people with no more than purely accidental human intervention.

Paulsen reserves much of his venom for the hapless character of Tim Harrow. Paulsen gives Harrow several characteristics of the Midwestern American conservative - he is an evangelical Christian, he is a member of the NRA, he attends gun shows and has a passion for firearms, and he is suspicious of government and resentful of taxes. Paulsen then exaggerates this portrait to prove his point and mock this lifestyle and political philosophy, with Harrow so suspicious of government that he travels around in a motor home so he cannot be tracked. And, naturally - in Paulsen's view - Harrow is a simpleton who wrongly conflates conservatism and guns with Jesus Christ, as with Harrow's belief that "Jesus would not want us to pay taxes" (p. 55). Meanwhile, Paulsen's narrator takes a break from his usual objectivity to express exasperation that someone like Harrow could somehow reconcile his seemingly contradictory set of beliefs. Similarly, the novel bears no understanding or empathy for "gun nuts" who foolishly cling to lethal weapons for no good reason.

Gun As Art

Despite an ultimately strong anti-gun point of view, The Rifle devotes many early pages to the artistry of gunsmith Cornish McManus and to the quality and beauty of the Rifle itself. McManus is clearly characterized as an artist or at least an artistic soul, a daydreamer who is scolded by his much more sensible master Waynewright for sketching visions of the perfect rifle. McManus' moment of inspiration - his discovery of a perfect piece of curly maple in an otherwise unremarkable bundle of gun stocks - is painted as a magical moment typical of artistic inspiration. And it is evident that McManus' skill - in rifling the barrel or slotting the barrel into the stock or shaping and polishing the stock itself - does indeed reach artistic levels. The Rifle is a once-in-a-generation masterpiece, and an artist's life work.

This early "gun as art" theme, as it relates to the overall anti-gun message, can be interpreted in several ways. It could be interpreted as a counterbalance, and Paulsen's attempt to offer multiple perspectives to the issue of the gun rights debate. The theme could be viewed as lending even more tragedy and irony to Richard's fatal accident,

insofar that so much beauty and artistry was devoted to a killing weapon. Lastly, the "gun as art" theme could be seen as a misstep on Paulsen's part that conflicts with and detracts from the anti-gun message. The conclusion is left to the opinion of the reader.

The Changing Nature of Guns

As in keeping with anti-gun advocacy, a portion of Paulsen's message is that the nature of guns in America has changed profoundly, to the point that the second amendment to the Constitution bears little relevance to our modern life. When Cornish McManus crafted the Rifle in 1768, he did it for purely artistic reasons. He wanted to craft a perfect gun, the ideal combination of form and function. Thus, one might say the Rifle's creation was devoid of malicious intent.

Furthermore, John Byam inherits the gun for similarly pure reasons: he is a woodsman who depends upon shooting animals for food and for a living. In fact, as Paulsen implies, guns made during this period were essential tools for survival. But Byam's righteous role in the American Revolution begins to creep into a gray area as far as the survival aspect of firearms. For example, at Bainbridge Farm, Byam believes he is saving Mr. Bainbridge by shooting the British officer, but he succeeds in actually killing Mr. Bainbridge by spooking the horse he was sitting on while hanging by his neck. So even here, gun use for non-survival purposes starts to become messy, unpredictable, and tragic.

However, the fullest condemnation of non-survival gun use occurs in the modern day, where American gun culture, in the form of gun shows and men like Tim Harrow, has proliferated firearms as a purely decorative or hobby item. Harrow's bartering of the Rifle, alongside a corny picture of singer Elvis Presley atop a white horse, emphasizes the notion that the Rifle persists in a kind of senseless existence. Modern people no longer have to shoot animals to survive; rifles are now only owned because they are handsome conversation pieces or cool toys, hung without a thought above fireplaces. It is within this atmosphere of ignorance that the Rifle causes a death.

Style

Point of View

Author Gary Paulsen chooses a third-person, omniscient narrator to tell the tale of the Rifle. This is necessary for several reasons. The Rifle's "life" spans several centuries, and Paulsen is interested in how the Rifle changed hands over the years and how it ended up in Harv Kline's living room. Therefore, he must adopt an all-knowing narrator who is able to achieve a "bird's eye" perspective to track the Rifle's journey.

Additionally, Paulsen's narrator is able to evaluate the tragic series of events leading up to Richard's death on an almost subatomic level. This is important to understanding just how arbitrary as well as unique the Rifle's killing of Richard was. The narrator describes individual sparks coming from the log that Kline accidentally pulled out of the fireplace, and how a single spark managed to find its way inside the Rifle to the powder, and how the spark just barely managed to ignite a grain of powder, creating a domino effect that sent the bullet off to kill Richard after ricocheting off. An appreciation of the "domino effect" could not be obtained without a narrator who is able to see all and know all.

As for the author's own point of view with respect to guns and American gun culture, Paulsen presents a slightly nuanced view that nonetheless ultimately condemns "gun nuts" like Tim Harrow and a culture in America that deifies guns. Paulsen may have written The Rifle as a direct response to the right-of-center, NRA bumper-sticker slogan, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." The Rifle definitely killed someone, and people were decidedly hardly involved.

Setting

The Rifle spans several centuries, beginning in 1768 in western Pennsylvania with gunsmith Cornish McManus, just prior to the American Revolution. The eventual owner of the Rifle, John Byam, becomes caught up in the American fight for independence, and this section of the novel ties the fictional story of the Rifle to a larger nonfictional historical event the reader is undoubtedly familiar with, as is common in historical fiction.

For many decades, the Rifle lays dormant in a Connecticut home's attic, until it is finally discovered by the children of a New York editor. A variety of locations helps to emphasize the overall sense that the Rifle's journey is an incredible one. It is a tragic twist of fate that Harv Kline and the Mesingtons happened to be neighbors, or that Mr. Mesington happened to have a job transfer that necessitated the family's move to Missouri, etc. It is thus remarkable and tragic that the Rifle just happens to be where it was to kill Richard Mesington.

The Rifle continues to the modern day, in this case 1993, when the author wrote the novel. The novel then changes directions (and settings) to speak about the boy, Richard Mesington. Mesington, as "The Boy," is an archetype, and the sleepy Midwestern places

he grew up in (Colorado and Missouri) help to emphasize Richard's status as a typical American boy.

Language and Meaning

Author Gary Paulsen's prose style is spare and detached, and sometimes because of this he is able to make use of a certain dry irony. For example, the narrator notes with characteristic matter-of-factness that Tim Harrow, who spent his entire life convinced that ownership of guns was essential to individual liberty and self-defense, was in the end the victim not of a burglar or mugger, but of stomach cancer, a villain that guns can do nothing against. Similarly, the narrator painstakingly records the long journey of the Rifle and how many people after John Byam handled it, and then simply notes that no one ever checked to see if the Rifle was loaded.

The level of vocabulary and narrative complexity points to the fact that Gary Paulsen is a writer for children and young adults. The novel is probably most appropriate for older children who are able to read independently, at the junior high level.

On a similar note, as Paulsen is writing for a young modern reader, the novel often takes care to clearly explain difficult concepts, or concepts which would be foreign to a reader in the 1990s. This would include the construction of the flintlock rifle, the nature of gun powder, and the special and innovative accuracy of the Rifle in contrast to British smoothbore guns or other American rifles at the time.

Structure

Beginning with the sentence, "It is necessary to know this rifle" (p. 3), The Rifle starts with a section called simply "The Weapon", placing narrative importance squarely on the titular Rifle. The novel begins shortly before the "birth" of the Rifle, with the weapon's creator Cornish McManus deciding to break away from his master John Waynewright to open his own shop in Pennsylvania. Many pages are devoted to the step-by-step process of McManus's building of the Rifle, again due to the Rifle's central importance to the narrative as well as for the benefit of the modern reader curious about how early guns were made.

With "The Weapon" ending at the point where the Rifle hangs on the fireplace of Harv Kline, the novel then backtracks a bit and explains "The Boy", Richard Mesington. This parallel construction - The Weapon, The Boy - provides an air of detached, almost scientific observation on the part of the narrator, like the accident was the result of a mere chemical reaction or unknowable whim of the universe. The Boy and The Weapon collide in "The Joining", the third section, which describes in great detail the fatal accident that kills Richard. The last section is called "The Rifle", which acts as a brief epilogue describing the aftermath of Richard's death.

The deliberate ending of the novel, in which the Rifle "waits" in a gun case for another unfortunate and chance accident, speaks to the author's conviction that guns are inherently dangerous and that, unlike the NRA creed, guns do kill people.

Quotes

"Now and then, with great rarity, there came a blending of steel and wood and brass and a man's knowledge into one rifle, when it all came together just ... exactly ... right and a weapon of such beauty and accuracy was born that it might be actually worshiped."
The Weapon, pp. 4-5

"The barrel was beautiful. The grease coated and soaked into the color of the steel to make it seem deep and rich, so that [McManus] could look into the steel itself [...]"
The Weapon, p. 13

"It was not love at first sight. Clara was too practical for that. She came with her father to pick up his fowling piece that Cornish had repaired. Cornish could not take his eyes off Clara and when he smiled at her and nodded, she smiled back in a way that meant so much."
The Weapon, p. 26

"Byam did not think about what he was doing except to know that somehow he could not let Bainbridge be hanged. The rifle snapped up, almost by itself; the tiny blade of the front sight settled on the officer sitting on his horse nearby, the sight raised slightly to compensate for distance, and the rifle cracked - one clean, smacking slap of sound across the clearing."
The Weapon, p. 35

"Staggering amounts of information concerning weapons and their use swirled through [Tim Harrow's] head, and with it there were certain aspects of the Constitution and history and a large measure of Christ and Christianity as he thought of it so that it all rolled into one philosophy in some way he could not define but knew, was absolutely certain, was the only right way to view things."
The Weapon, p. 54

"But if Tim was ignorant of the value of the rifle, Harv wasn't. In a backward kind of way he understood the value of the rifle, or at least hoped the rifle had worth that would grow. In truth, he was looking for something, anything that he could put money or work into that would grow and maybe help to save funds for his children when they went to school."
The Weapon, pp. 64-65

"[Richard] began to think dog in those days and sometimes, even until he was four, if he was in the yard and smelled a new odor or one that might be from a good taste, he would stop and turn his head to catch the smell on the wind the way a dog does it, trying to see in the direction of the odor, using the smell like a beacon."
The Boy, p. 71

"He was much like his father, who worked hard all the time but moved from one thing to the next as he learned of them and was devoted and intensely loyal to each of the things as he did them before moving on to the next one."
The Boy, p. 76

"It is strange that in all the time of the rifle after John Byam's death and through all the people who looked at it and touched it and handled it, [...] that nobody, not once in the life of the rifle, did anybody ever think to check to see if it was still loaded."
The Joining, p. 83

"And more bends and twists, turns in time to make it clear when it was done but not before, easy, so easy to see backward but as soon as the vision is moved to the present and then just slightly to the future it fogs and blurs and becomes impossible."
The Joining, pp. 89-90

"The entire time lapsed from the spark entering the touchhole of the rifle to Richard dropping dead to the floor was 1.43 seconds, so that Harv still stood, his wife's mouth was still open, his children's eyes were still wide, Richard's parents still sat at the kitchen table, bits of glass were still falling from the broken windows, and Richard was dead, all in less than one and one-half seconds."
The Joining, pp. 97-98

"And there [the rifle] rests now, and would stay that way, except that Tilson read an article in a gun magazine, entitled "Don't Shun That Old Smokepole," about shooting with black powder, and he has been thinking seriously about getting some black powder and balls and maybe loading the rifle. Just to see how it shoots. And in the meantime the rifle sits in the gun cabinet. Waiting."
The Rifle, p. 105

Topics for Discussion

Who or what is responsible for the death of Richard Mesington?

Why does Harv Kline agree to fix Tim Harrow's fuel pump?

What is the difference in skill and temperament between John Waynewright and Cornish McManus?

Why does John Byam become a well-known figure in the American Revolution?

What were the consequences of Richard Mesington's death?

Describe Richard Mesington's childhood, including his dreams and aspirations.

Why was the Rifle so "sweet"? What does being a "sweet" rifle mean?